



## Stanford eCorner

### Funding Artistic Activism

Michealene C. Risley, *Fresh Water Spigot*

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Video URL: <http://ecorner.stanford.edu/videos/2009/Funding-Artistic-Activism>

How do you raise awareness and still pay off investors? And how do you motivate your audience to action? These are the challenges of activists and documentary filmmakers Michealene C. Risley and Anand Chandrasekaran, and they talk about viral innovations in fundraising in the field, like IndyGoGo.com, and the appeal of offering fundraising architecture that's both non-profit and for-profit.



#### Transcript

One of the things we also talk about, besides the opportunities and asking those three questions about what project what we do, is we ask some challenges and we'd love to talk a little bit about the challenges we've had raising money for this. So under challenges we talk about raising money. How do you talk about an issue like this that makes people so uncomfortable? And how do you move them from discomfort to action? And the social consciousness aspect versus commercial liability, again that's another - how do you make a film that can raise awareness but can still create a profit? So Anand, do you want us to talk about raising money a little bit? Yeah. We should probably be out raising money. Yeah, well, one of the things that again speaks to the earlier idea is that when we went out to raise money for this project we met people all over the entire spectrum - from people who are doing a 100% social entrepreneurship projects and they work for charity, all the way to someone who invests in romantic comedies and, you know, in horror films, purely with the intent of making money. And so we met everybody on both extremes and everywhere in between. And I think the biggest question and for me, every project that I had raised money for or taken out to raise money for before *Tapestries*, you could fail, obviously, but you could look the investor in the eye and say, "Well, if we did well, you could make money off of this." But really if - there were two or three investors who said, "Well, I totally trust you. You're doing a great job with this documentary but can you look me in the eye and tell me that I will make money out of this documentary?" And the honest answer is I don't know. If you want me to say either yes or no, I'll say no but the honest answer is I don't know. And that raised a whole bunch of challenges for us in terms of saying, who are we? When we get this movie done, are we going to go the commercial route, or are we going to go the social entrepreneurship route.

And many films have taken one and the other very successfully, but I think that we saw a lot of successes in both fields where they had left a lot of opportunities unexplored because they hadn't thought about it completely. An example is we got a chance to meet a couple of people very closely involved with this movie, this documentary called *Born into Brothels* which some of you may have seen. It came out in 2004. It was a very competitive year and those of you who are Oscar nominee fans and documentary movie fans, you'll know that 2004 was probably one of the best years in the past 20 years or so for documentary films. But this movie came from behind, to just win the Oscar that year. But what they did really well from a film standpoint, they set an amazing story and they told a very powerful story. But when people watched the movie and all the attention that they got, they weren't able to translate someone watching the movie and going, "I'm inspired by this, I'm moved by this, what can I do to help?" There wasn't a very straightforward way to say here are the three things that you could do that could make a difference. You don't have to go and get yourself arrested, but you could do something. And you know, what

Anand says here is probably the most critical mistake people make either in profit or non-profit in terms of what can I - when I get people inspired, how can we give them a step to take? Yeah. So that's probably the biggest challenge that we're facing but I think we're trying to solve a problem that we're solving from multiple angles, and so there aren't too many case studies that you pick up and say, "This is how you do it." And so a lot of the trade offs that we are facing are trade offs largely because something like this has not been done in this context before.

And so there are a lot of people who, you know, for instance when we spoke in Tom's class late last year, a couple of people came up and said, "Well, I'm actually moved by Africa, but I'm not moved by Zimbabwe." "So what would you like me to do? Would you like me to still donate to your cause or get involved? Tell me what you would recommend that I do." And the honest answer is that if it moves somebody to donate to some cause that is worthy, I think we may have already accomplished as much or more than we started because the key is to get people to say that even though this may not be what I think about everyday, I can still play a little part in doing something about it. If someone who sold wireless software for a living can do this, anybody can easily get involved. So that was our biggest challenge - raising money and the trade offs with social consciousness versus the commercial saleability. And I want to add a couple of things. So, we realized that we had a tough challenge raising money so we did a couple of things that were critical. We actually set up a non-profit and a profit so people could - who were interested in looking at ways to do a simple donation that they could get a write-off for. And the other part of it is people who'd say, "Jeez, you know what, I'm willing to take a risk on you and I'd love to get involved in the upside." So we gave two opportunities. And then in addition what we decided to do is there's a - how many of you know IndieGoGo at all, anybody? Okay. There's a number of new models or new prototypes to raising money for films or projects to create social change. And IndieGoGo came to us actually back in December and said, "We've heard about your film and what you're doing and we'd love to participate with you." So what they did is, we just created a link to them and we talked about what we were doing, and as of today in the three or four week, maybe four weeks we've been involved with them, we've raised \$20,000.

Which, I didn't know if you knew today, we hit our second mark. So what we found is instead of going to the traditional distribution models we've gone right out to the people who - it's not about picking the movie to watch, it's picking the movie you want to see made. And I think that that's helped us a lot. And we're always looking for that. The viral aspects of Facebook have been great to get awareness out there. Even the Stanford relationship has helped us in many ways. *American Idol* is a perfect example of, wow what a great way you can create, you know, raise a lot of money, but I think it's a very different *American Idol* is a very different example because it's such a powerful audience. It's such a powerful show. And I have not seen a lot of viral efforts create money. You can create viral efforts but where do you get the funds raised?