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Around the World in Six Days: An INPUT 2005 Wrap-Up

New ideas, new partnerships and new solutions were all in the works at the INPUT 2005 conference. Michael Fox reports.

Ray Wood plopped his plate of chicken skewers on the table and looked around the buzzing hotel ballroom. The gregarious Floridian, in production on his first documentary, didn't know a soul attending INPUT 2005. But he had arrived in San Francisco with a clear game plan for his initial public television conference, beginning with this opening reception.

"The biggest part is to meet people and learn the language," he said. Of the dozens of American producers and directors attracted to the first INPUT to be held in the United States since 1999, Wood was one of the few who didn't hail from either New York or the San Francisco Bay Area. But his cross-country excursion was nothing compared with the trek undertaken by executives, programmers and filmmakers from countries such as Russia, South Africa and China.

The annual international public television conference, which first convened in 1978 in Milan, brings together program directors and commissioning editors from public television networks around the world, as well as production companies and independent filmmakers who create works for public broadcast.

They grapple with the challenges that face public television at the moment, trading anecdotes, frustrations and solutions. Primarily, though, they watch and discuss the best 90 or so programs of the last year, culled by 18 of their peers at a marathon conclave in Berlin in February.

INPUT 2005, which was hosted by ITVS, took place in San Francisco May 1 through 6, and drew thousands of attendees from around the world.

Shopping for Fresh Ideas

Samuel Mpherwane, a commissioning editor with a year at the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), was knocked out by his first INPUT. "It's a revelation," he said. "When you're in your own



Gary E. Knell, president and CEO, Sesame Workshop
Usha Bhasin, director programmes Broadcasting Corporation of India

[INPUT] has allowed me to call on filmmakers from around the world for advice, and that is precious to me.
—Ray Wood, independent producer, United States

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country, there's a specific constructed point of view through which you tell a story. That ... is informed by your cultural, ideological and religious background. So in a sense it becomes limited in terms of the quality of the storytelling. When you come to an event like INPUT, you open up your horizons. Through the diversity of the stories told by different people from different countries, you see that yours is just one small particle within a broad universe."



INPUT co-founder Sergio Borelli with conference attendees

Television New Zealand commissioning editor Jude Callen, attending INPUT unexpectedly in place of her overcommitted boss, echoed Mpherwane's comments. "It is just helpful to step out of our little world—particularly New Zealand, at the bottom of the world—and see what other storytellers are doing and how they're telling their stories," she remarked.

Heaton Dyer, veteran program director of Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's (CBC) *Newsworld* and one of this year's 18 INPUT curators, or shop stewards, considers INPUT both a refueling stop and a working vacation. A typical jam-packed workweek affords little time to watch the tapes he brings home from the office, but INPUT provides him with a five-day swath during which he can view the cream of the recent public television production crop.

"For me, always, INPUT is learning and development," declared Dyer, reveling in his fourth conference. "It's an incredible growth opportunity as a person and a programmer." Above all, he's interested in new formats and innovative programs that other public broadcasters have had success with. "When I'm giving feedback to commissioning editors [at CBC] about the kinds of risks I'm willing to take, it encourages me to encourage them," Dyer said.

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—Samuel Mpherwane,
commissioning editor,
South African Broadcasting Corporation

Kwame Akuffo-Anoff, supervising producer in charge of program development and quality control at Ghana Television and an INPUT shop steward attending his third conference, also wants to inspire his producers back home. But his focus in San Francisco went beyond programming per se. "Public television [in Ghana] is trying to reconfigure itself in terms of its role and in terms of its relevance," Akuffo-Anoff explained. "Our public system is in a state of flux for some time now. It's state run, and for a Third World country like mine, you need to break away from the [government's] stranglehold on editorial decisions. We have moved a very big way from that. My interest is to find out how other systems fared in similar conditions."

Linkages and Partnerships

To that end, Akuffo-Anoff frequented the evening panel discussions, including "Creative Audience Engagement in Public Service Media Production" (which might be translated as "New Programs, New Audiences"). But he also was drawn to the panel "Are We Getting the International News We Need?" As his nation and viewers develop, he recognizes that it's time to replace BBC or CNN reports with

homegrown perspectives. “We need to get our own correspondents in the field for international news,” Akuffo-Anoff said, at the same time acknowledging the impact on the budget.

At the “Indigenous Media: Journalism or Identity Politics?” panel, James Mather, CEO of Maori Television in Auckland, New Zealand, provided another way to give an international story a local spin. Preferring the rubric “indigenous journalism,” Mather recounted that his network broadcast a standard-issue report on the death of the pope, complete with biography and accomplishments, then followed it with segment in which Maori Catholics commented on the pontiff’s passing.

The conference’s efforts to be more inclusive met with Mather’s approval, and Akuffo-Anoff was encouraged that INPUT reached out so aggressively to Africa this year. As Frank Blythe, the Lincoln, Nebraska-based executive director of Native American Public Telecommunications (NAPT), noted, “The new thing at INPUT is for the indigenous broadcasters to have more of a presence on the agenda and to show some of their films.”

But although screenings of works such as *Dhakiyyarr vs. the King* (by Tom Murray and Alan Collins of Australia) attracted enthusiastic crowds, the panel on indigenous media was sparsely attended. (Its competition that evening was “Current Affairs in a Changing World” and “Are We Getting the International News We Need?”) When one attendee angrily lamented the absence of executives from the larger established public television stations, Blythe wryly replied, “I’ve done these kinds of panels over the years, and we always seem to be preaching to ourselves.”

Taking advantage of the conference’s U.S. location, NAPT sponsored 12 Native American producers as a way of exposing them to what’s happening on both the national scene and the international scene. Blythe noted that PBS typically airs 10 to 12 hours of Native American-themed programming a year, but that “there is a huge interest in Europe in Native American culture.” Although Blythe hoped to build relationships at INPUT with European public television executives—“It’s a market we’ve gotten to sporadically,” he admitted—he was finding his most receptive audiences at networks like Sami Radio, the outlet for Sami (perhaps better known as Laplanders), with outposts in Sweden, Norway, Russia and Finland. “We started networking with the indigenous groups that were here,” Blythe said.

Indeed, a number of proposals and deals took shape behind the scenes, away from the panels and screenings. The SABC met with Egyptian Television about working at Cairo’s Media City, an arrangement that would cut the SABC’s production costs in half. Ghana Television and the Washington, D.C., office of the Goethe-Institut initiated development of a program about W.E.B. Du Bois. And the first Public Broadcasters Global Media Summit on HIV/AIDS, which was held at INPUT 2005, led to 23 public television systems’ signing an agreement to share programming to combat the pandemic.

For his part, Wood met some fellow documentary makers from the U.S. South, and their discussions laid the groundwork for a future southern filmmakers coalition. “I am not sure if INPUT will lead to co-productions,” he wrote in an email after the conference, “but I think in some way it has allowed me to call on filmmakers from around the

world for advice, and that is precious to me.”

World Views

The ancillary initiatives that spring out of INPUT may be its longest-lasting legacy, but the heart of the conference remains the all-day screenings and discussions. Even for a respected veteran filmmaker like Patrick Jeudy of France, who was invited to present *Robert Capa: The Man Who Believed His Own Legend*, it was a valuable opportunity to see how his risk-taking documentary played beyond his borders. “We don’t make films usually for international broadcast,” he pointed out. “[Here] you can see where your level is.”

Meanwhile, a disturbing refrain was being repeated at many of the post-screening discussions by the Americans in attendance: “This could never air on PBS.” As former *P.O.V.* supervising producer Douglas Chang, now a Los Angeles-based independent producer, said, “We’re having lots of discussions about the ways that American public TV works well and doesn’t, so here was a great opportunity to see how some of the more healthy versions of public TV work and what we could learn from that.”

Akuffo-Anoff naturally saw the issue slightly differently. “It’s been very, very inspiring to watch all kinds of programs that you could never put on your network because they are too targeted,” he effused. He was excited about the prospect of re-imagining various types of programs for his Ghanaian viewers. Rhetorically, he asked, “How can I export this kind of program to my audience?”

The final session of INPUT 2005, dubbed “Prime Time Challenge,” pointedly posed that question with a pair of programs that challenged notions of public television by mimicking commercial programming. *The Empire* (by Joachim Brobeck and Rolf Sohlman of Sweden) is a *Survivor* clone set in a medieval castle that has supposedly kindled some interest in history among younger viewers. *The Pyramid*, directed by Danko Volarich of Croatia, presents debates on social issues as a fast-paced blend of wrestling match, game show and telethon. Three public figures (politician, journalist and pundit) verbally spar while handheld cameras zoom in and out at Dutch angles, and viewers call in to vote for their favorites. INPUT attendees were split between those who found it a provocative way to reach people who tune out traditional public-affairs shows and those who saw it as a gimmick that generated a lot of heat but little light. *The Pyramid* was an instant hit at home, reportedly.

The session elicited strong opinions from programmers, who have to compete with commercial television on an hourly basis without losing their existing audiences or sacrificing their mission. These days, their challenge often consists of maintaining some entertainment value while remaining informative and relevant.

The independent producers in the crowd, committed to telling compelling stories, represent one solution. “This is a very, very good spot to meet people in a relaxed way, and people are very receptive to your project,” reported Mauricio Gallego, a Colombian independent producer based in New York who was attending his first INPUT.

Other filmmakers, such as New York-based Tami Yeager, attended the conference to learn rather than to pitch. “As someone making my first independent documentary, events like INPUT are a lifeline in the murky waters of public television,” Yeager said. “Without the

connection, those of us who are new to this world wouldn't know how to make it through." Most helpful to Wood, who covered as much ground as anyone at INPUT, "was the chance to talk to producers like Gordon Quinn [of Chicago-based Kartemquin Films] and to other working producers. These are the models I am interested in." Like most of the attendees at INPUT 2005, though, Wood came away with more than tips, advice and business cards. "The conference refreshed my feelings toward humanity and toward what I do for a living," he confided. "All of these caring people from all over the world. Very cool!"

Michael Fox is a San Francisco journalist and critic whose work has appeared in more than 40 regional and national publications.

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