



PROJECT MUSE®

Introduction: A Festschrift in Honor of George Stoney

Barbara Abrash, Cara Mertes

Wide Angle, Volume 21, Number 2, March 1999, pp. 3-7 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/wan.1999.0021>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/36249>



George C. Stoney. Photo courtesy the George Stoney Personal Collection (GSPC).



Fig. 1. George Stoney, leading a Documentary Tradition class with Portuguese translator Estella Santos, recording a “video letter” addressed to students in Brazil. Ca 1995 (GSPC).

Introduction: A Festschrift in Honor of George Stoney

by Barbara Abrash and Cara Mertes

*"IDEALLY, [MEDIA] FOR SOCIAL CHANGE IS A DEVICE FOR PROMOTING
UNDERSTANDING AND ACTION... YOU ARE COLLECTING EVIDENCE; YOU
ARE ENCOURAGING WITNESS; YOU ARE EMBOLDENING ORDINARY
PEOPLE TO 'GO PUBLIC'."*

GEORGE STONEY, TURN ON THE POWER¹

George Stoney, in a career that spans more than sixty years, may be said to be an embodiment of the documentary tradition. Though we were familiar with his career, nothing quite prepared us for the complexity of his work or the extent of his influence, which was revealed as we culled through manuscripts, documents, and the many responses to our calls for original material. Again and again, we were struck by the range and depth of his friendships, as well as by his enduring commitment to media in all forms, for the community, and by the community. Teacher, media maker, and activist, he has long been a familiar and dynamic presence, from Brazil to Ireland, from the Flaherty seminars to local public access stations. What is less evident in this very visible life is his enduring contribution to the institutions, practices, and programs that sustain alternative media.

Stoney is a paradox. Not an academic, he is a distinguished faculty member of New York University's Tisch School of the Arts.² He does not call himself a scholar, yet he is the subject of significant media scholarship. He does not answer

Barbara Abrash is Associate Director of the Center for Media, Culture and History at New York University, where she teaches in the Public History Program. Cara Mertes is Executive Producer of P.O.V./American Documentary.

to the description of *auteur*; yet he is the director and/or producer of over fifty films and videos. “A very happy collaborator” is George Stoney’s description of himself. Our challenge has been to create a journal as multi-faceted as he is; one that reflects his unique combination of theory and practice, individual commitment and community involvement, and that respects his insistence that it takes many voices to tell the story. In this spirit, what you will find here is a gathering of voices that evoke the work, principles, and web of relationships that comprise a portrait of the man.

George Stoney, a man who still writes letters on a manual typewriter and eschews email, has nonetheless been working across “multiple media platforms” all his life. As a journalist, photographer, broadcaster, filmmaker, and videomaker, he has boldly taken up technologies—from typewriters to radio to cameras to digital video—for social communication. His work has been shown on 16mm film in church halls, on Hi-8 video in the jungles of Brazil, and on national television. His documentaries, *All My Babies*, *VTR St.-Jacques* and *How the Myth Was Made*, stand as influential markers in the history of documentary film. His search for noncommercial public venues for expression and exchange led to



Fig. 2. George Stoney in Dublin, Spring 2000. (GSPC)

the creation of public access television. It also informed the production and outreach campaign of *The Uprising of '34*. His is an astonishing legacy that reaches across a century of communications revolutions.

Stoney's approach to the uses of media may seem idealistic in these cynical, corporate times. At the same time, it is entirely appropriate in a globally interconnected world in which activists are using old and new media to advocate for human rights, HIV treatment, labor issues, and anti-globalization efforts. Basic issues of fairness and equity, classic concerns of documentary films, have been placed on the international agenda. "Letting people speak for themselves," George's deceptively simple but powerful motivation, is an increasingly radical proposition.

Dirk Koning, manager of the Grand Rapids community media center, shares this story about George: "I call this," he says, "the Stoney Factor. Last year, George got on an elevator I was on at the 11th floor. He said, 'Dirk, I need you to do something for me.' I said, 'Sure George, what's up?' He said, 'There's a Brazilian delegation in the lobby that asked me to speak at a national organizing conference for community television, but I'm preparing to go to Ireland and I think it would be better if you go.' I said, 'Sure,' and he stepped off at the 4th floor. Between last year's conference and this year's [2000] I have been to Brazil four times helping with the development of community media."

The "Stoney Factor" is the final reason for this issue of *Wide Angle*. George Stoney's influence has bridged generations and continents, demanding through its sheer tenacity and vibrancy some attempt on our part to capture its dynamic and decidedly nonlinear contours.

In searching for an organizing principle for this issue, we could find none better than George Stoney's own life. Each section charts the development of what Lynne Jackson, citing Thomas Waugh, has called a "committed filmmaking," aimed at radical social and political transformation, and making an intervention in the process of change itself.³

Section One traces the early years of journalism, social research, and sponsored filmmaking, through Stoney's departure for Canada in 1968. In "O Lucky Man!

George Stoney's Lasting Legacy," Deirdre Boyle provides a career overview. In his essay "George Stoney, Writer: The Early Years," Leonard Rapport details the launching of a writer whose vision, even then, was marked by a concern for lives and life chances of ordinary working people. Rapport identifies Stoney's keen awareness of racism in America, particularly in his *Survey Graphic* articles and research for Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and American Democracy*. Lynne Jackson, in "George Stoney: A Commitment to Social Values and Racial Justice," expands on this theme and shows how, in the nineteen-fifties, Stoney broke the color barrier with films like *Palmour Street*, and *All My Babies*.

Section Two covers 1968 to 1979. Deirdre Boyle, in "O Canada! George Stoney's Challenge," tells of his years at the National Film Board of Canada's Challenge for Change unit, which was instrumental in the development of Stoney's distinctive practice of socially engaged video production in community settings. Faye Ginsburg's essay highlights the production and impact of *You Are On Indian Land*, a landmark Challenge for Change project, which was an inspiration to the emerging indigenous media movement. At Challenge for Change, Stoney saw how the new portable video could work for community-based media. This concept was at the heart of the Alternate Media Center (AMC), which he co-founded in 1970, when he accepted an invitation to head the Undergraduate Film and Television Department at New York University.⁴

When cable television appeared in the early seventies, Stoney immediately grasped its potential as a "people's channel," and the AMC became the launching pad for the public access cable movement. During this busy period, Stoney also returned to filmmaking. Brian Winston writes about *How the Myth Was Made*, Stoney's retracing of Robert Flaherty's 1934 documentary, *Man of Aran*, in light of the truth claims of direct cinema.

In Section Three, we see the fruition of George Stoney's approach to media that "has work to do in the world." In "Radical Attractions: *The Uprising of '34*," Jane Gaines expands upon her concept of "political mimesis," and describes *Uprising* as evidence of a revitalization of radical social documentary. Barbara Abrash and David Whiteman trace the process of making and circulating *Uprising*, a vivid demonstration of techniques of mediamaking for community engagement. The

section also includes Patricia Aufderheide's 1999 keynote speech to the Alliance for Community Media, the organization that gives institutional permanence to the public access movement that began at NYU in the early seventies. For this publication, George Stoney has written a preface to Aufderheide's remarks.

Commentaries by many of the people who have been influenced by Stoney's passion and purpose are interspersed throughout the issue, which also includes the speech by the late Erik Barnouw, presented on the occasion of the International Documentary Association's Film Scholarship and Preservation Award to George Stoney in 1998. We end with the first complete filmography of George Stoney's work.

For their participation in this effort, we must first thank the contributors. That they agreed to write articles in the face of demanding schedules is, in itself, a tribute to George Stoney. We are also grateful to the many individuals who responded with funny, telling and powerful stories of his impact on their lives. Patricia Thomson, then editor of *The Independent Film and Video Monthly*, graciously granted permission to reprint Deirdre Boyle's article, "O Lucky Man! The Legacy of George Stoney," which appeared in the October 1997 issue of that journal. George Stoney, with typical generosity, opened his collection of photographs to us. Ruth Bradley at *Wide Angle* supported the idea of this project from the very first conversation. Copy editor Sarah Muir guided us into compliance with *The Chicago Manual of Style*. Our co-editor, Lynne Jackson was a wonderful collaborator and contributor. Finally, special thanks to Faye Ginsburg, director of The Center for Media, Culture and History at New York University, which was our institutional sponsor and provided the facilities, editing support, and research which made this volume possible.

Notes

1. New York: Educational Video Center, 2000.
2. Stoney is Paulette Goddard Professor in Film, Tisch School of the Arts, Department of Film and Television.
3. Thomas Waugh, *Show Us Life: Toward a History and Aesthetics of the Committed Documentary* (Metuchen, N.J. and London: Scarecrow Press, 1984).
4. He held this post until 1972, when he chose to step down from administrative duties to join the NYU faculty.