Lights, camera ... action! Telling institutional stories through video

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By Lucas Laursen

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Video is suited to certain kinds of storytelling. It's a great way to convey emotion and excitement — so an enthusiastic grad student might make a better interview subject than a jaded professor, Blouin suggested. Action and adventure translate well, too. Video is a particularly handy way to show a process. Blouin, director of science and research communications at the University of Arkansas and an instructor at the University of California at Santa Cruz science communications program, shared a clip of scientists analyzing ice cores in a lab where the thermostat is set to a permanent -35 degress. No shoes, no shirt, no ice room. And of course, animal behavior is always a hit.

It's not so easy to transmit dense data with video because the audience can't review it at their own pace as they can on a printed page. Since you only get one pass you must use simple, plain language. Blouin likes to read her scripts aloud to ensure she isn't tripping over unusual word combinations. But you don't always have to talk: with video, you can show things you would have to describe in writing in a print publication.

Blouin outlined her production process. During "pre pre production," she tries to define her audience, her budget and who the sources will be, among other details. She puts together an audio/video script, with a sketch of the video in one column and a few words that represent the audio track. The next step, a visual storyboard, serves as a useful planning guide — and as a way of selling the idea to potential partners.

Audience members wanted to know what to buy, and Blouin gave some quick bullet points: buy as sturdy a tripod as you'll carry, and make sure it has a fluid head. Ideally use a separate microphone to avoid picking up camera noise. All told, basic accessories may run several hundred dollars.

While shooting, use the tripod. Resist zooming and never use digital zoom. Roll the camera for a few seconds before and after the main content so you have handles for the editing process. And if you've bought that expensive microphone, make sure you wear good, ear-covering headphones to monitor sound levels. Blouin referred further technical questions to some community websites: the LA Final Cut Pro users group, DVinfo.net, creativecow.net.

Happy with the product? Now you need to reach an audience. Jeff Nesbit, director of legislative and public affairs at the National Science Foundation, shared the many partnerships the NSF has created with video wire services, traditional outlets such as US News and World Report, and universities. They have developed a dedicated studio that will cooperate with any NSF-funded research to create short videos for distribution on the web or via B-roll databases such as TheNewsMarket. The NSF is experimenting with various ways of distributing video and Nesbit invited public information officers to get in touch for more information on collaborations.

Lucas Laursen has never shot video. He has written for Scientific American, Nature, and Science from Cambridge, England.

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