Robert Salyer and Appalshop
Profile

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> *My advice is not to get into political theory at all: just let the people tell their stories. Keep the voices of the people in the forefront, that's where the power is. The artist has to be willing to become invisible.*
> —Robert Salyer

Robert Salyer grew up in southwestern Virginia with the eclectic sounds of WMMT-FM, Appalshop's radio station, playing in the background of his childhood. He did not know Appalshop was also an award-winning film and documentary center, only an hour's drive away, in Whitesburg, Kentucky. Founded in 1969 during the national "War on Poverty," Appalshop is a non-profit, multi-disciplinary arts and education center in the heart of Appalachia that produces original films, video, theater, music and spoken-word recordings, radio, photography, multimedia, and books. Core to Appalshop's work are media training programs, such as the Appalachian Media Institute (AMI), which is for central Appalachian youth, and the Community Correspondents Corps (CCC), which trains local people of all ages to gather news. Appalshop provides the tools for documenting local stories: equipment, materials, and knowledge of the basics of interviewing, recording, and editing. Both AMI and CCC connect people to the means of media production and build media literacy: "even if their stories don't get on the air, they become less likely to accept whatever they see."

When Salyer decided to study film in earnest, he was attracted by the basic Appalshop premise of empowering people with information resources. Appalshop had just played a major role in a successful state referendum opposing the exploitive "Broad Form Deed." Anne Lewis's film *On Our Own Land* (1988) was used by Kentuckians for the Commonwealth (KFTC) as an education and advocacy tool: over 82 percent of Kentucky voters approved an amendment to the state constitution that abolished this deed, a practice that had allowed corporations to extract Kentucky's mineral wealth without considering the rights of the land owner.

Salyer adopted Appalshop's basic documentary methodology. Among other things, he learned that "you don't have to be literal-minded about taking a stand: keep it very specific, tell very local stories, and let the viewers find the connections to the larger picture on their own." In 2000, a couple of years after he began making films at Appalshop, one of the largest toxic waste spills in U.S. history (306 million tons or 30 times larger than the Exxon/Valdez spill) occurred in nearby Martin County, Kentucky. A massive reservoir of coal waste collapsed into an underground mine, polluting nearly a hundred miles of waterways. Salyer arrived with the first—and only—camera on the scene.

For the next four and a half years, Salyer interviewed the community's residents, documenting the damage to homes, health, land, water, and general welfare. In the resulting documentary, *Sludge* (2005), he has the people speak for themselves: "They are the experts in their own lives. If you want to know what the water quality is, don't ask a hydrologist, ask someone who's been living next to the stream all their lives."

The documentary also chronicles the case of "whistle-blower" Jack Spadaro, a mine safety expert and a key member of the federal team investigating the cause of the disaster. The charge from the U.S. Mine Safety and Health Administration was clear: find out what happened and pull no punches. The investigative team hired an independent engineering firm and began interviewing witnesses. Then, in January 2001, soon after the Bush Administration assumed power, the investigators were told to wrap up their work in a matter of weeks. In the final report, the federal government cited the coal company for only two violations and levied a token fine of $110,000. Spadaro refused to sign the report and spoke out publicly, stating that the investigation was a "whitewash." Salyer turned his camera onto Spadaro's struggle to keep his job, a fight that eventually resulted in an early retirement package and a return to private life. *Sludge* interweaves Spadaro's story with the stories of the damaged communities to reveal the hidden cost of coal production.

Salyer's most recent project, now in post-production, is *County Judge*, the story of Letcher County Judge-Executive Carroll Smith, a 13-year incumbent from the long Kentucky tradition of progressive Republicans. "County Judge-Executive" is a misleading term: the position does not entail any judicial duties, but involves balancing the budget and overseeing measures to protect the citizens of the county. Democrats had supported Judge Smith through three re-elections, largely because of his nonpartisan approach to solving the county's major problems, such as inadequate sewer and water systems. When first elected, he began to hold meetings in the evening, when working people could attend, and started each meeting with Citizen Delegations—any citizen could speak about any manner, for any length of time. Salyer observes, "If you really want democracy, then you need to understand it's messy, cumbersome and time-consuming." Judge Smith also routinely introduced a living wage ordinance, even though he knew it would not pass, because he wanted people to keep talking about it. As he saw it, "Victory is not passing the law, but having people understand the issue with compassion."

After *Sludge*, Salyer has stated, "I felt I needed to make a film about democracy and local government. A lot of us feel that the state and the federal governments have turned their backs on us, and the county government is the only line of defense against the multi-national corporations, which, among other things, are destroying clean drinking water." So, for over a year he filmed every monthly meeting of county officials. "My strategy for getting local people involved in county government would be to bring them on a shoot—hold a microphone, learn the basics of film/radio production." The cameras also changed the way magistrates voted, because they knew that voters would know where they stood on a issue. Having cameras in the room was a way of holding the

magistrates accountable. What began as a film about Judge Smith and his re-election campaign became a film about the exercise of democracy in Letcher County, and beyond.

Although Judge Smith was defeated by a small margin in the fall of 2006, election irregularities galvanized the mountain community. One week after the election, Salyer stepped out of his Appalshop role, drew on his experience with the Virginia Organizing Project, and convened a gathering for people to talk about their concerns and fears, particularly regarding the gas and coal companies, which had heavily backed the winning candidate. Following a "great turnout," people organized themselves into a County Watch and committed to attend every county meeting and to report back to each other. Salyer is also hoping that the *County Judge* film, when completed, can be used as part of civic participation organizing prior to the 2008 election.

Salyer notes that there is often rhetoric about "empowering people to tell their stories," only to have those stories edited by others. In his work with CCC and AMI, he holds to the philosophy that community reporters must maintain editorial control, honoring the principle of "first voice," without outside interpretation. But he is also successful working in a distinctly different manner of traditional film-making, where the hand of the artist is visible, even if lightly. "I have to walk out the room when someone starts talking about 'objectivity' in making films. Even if you don't edit the people's stories, *you* point the camera; *you* choose who you are talking to. We do have a point of view. *Sludge* was not a 'balanced' film—it's not a balanced situation. It's good to tip the scales somewhat, toward justice."

As an arts activist in his early thirties, Salyer wants to connect with like-minded folks from earlier generations. "There needs to be some common language, or a way of talking about this work, we need to find a way to talk about what we do. There's an unwritten history of artists working underneath the system, working in communities—we need to make this history known to other artists, as well as to the public—especially the public who doesn't understand what we do, who might have no connection to it."

Although Appalshop provides intergenerational mentoring as a matter of course, it has embarked on a three-year project to facilitate the systematic and intentional transfer of leadership and knowledge within the organization. The Strategic Transformation Project (STP) includes conscious identification and removal of organizational barriers (such as knowledge of financial management, planning, funding, and funders), ongoing evaluation, and continuous mentorship from Appalshop founders. In preparing younger staff members to be the community cultural workers of the future, STP may serve as a laboratory for leadership transition and organizational learning.

Postscript: Appalshop was a stop on Senator John Edwards's 2007 Road to One America tour, which retraced Robert Kennedy's 1968 poverty tour. AMI interns organized a youth forum to share with Edwards the concerns of young people living in central Appalachia—the prescription drug addiction epidemic, high rates of unemployment, minimum-wage economies, few opportunities for youth development, and struggling

schools—as well as the reasons why they want to continue to make the coalfields their home.

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