

The Akvo Video Strategy

About This Document

This document combines two separate streams of thought: how Akvo can work with video at a strategic level, and the practical framework for producing films. Detailed technical content will appear in appendices, as will template proposals for various kinds of film projects. It may be worth tearing these two levels apart later, but right now – until we have a clear “house practice” on video with a few dozen films behind it – it seems important that everybody producing film has a shared understanding of how and why we make films the way we make them.

Planning, shooting, editing and distributing films has to be done with one eye on the strategic goals. Every film is global communication, and we can never guess what the internet will publicize. In particular, I want to build in-house understanding of media as a global process in this context – that we are not making films primarily for consumption in our own culture, but as part of a long-term approach to global goals and a global audience. Anything we do could be seen by a head of state. It can be casual, but it must not be wrong!

On Success and Failure

To succeed fully, Akvo must involve tens of thousands to tens of millions of people in its process. At the software level, Akvo could be understood as a structured mass communication platform, enabling international cooperation between different groups to execute business processes. However, the format of those communications - short messages to limited distribution groups - is closer to the “facebook / twitter” end of the spectrum than to email. Part of what goes along with that, and the multilingual nature of the groups communicating, is a likely increased reliance on photography and film-making to enrich the communication stream. Enhanced understanding through selective use of richer media is likely to lead to increased participation in the process.

In general, video moves people like nothing else other than personal experience. The Hexayurt Project and Open Source Ecology both used a video-heavy strategy for communicating their ideas and successes and it appears to have significantly differentiated both projects from the general background of open source appropriate technology projects. This is not simply about marketing, it is about making project progress visible, and improving the credibility of the solutions through filmed demonstrations. All of these factors play into the ways that Akvo can use video.

The video strategy is a success if it accomplishes three things:

- 1> It is at least financially self-sustaining, and preferably generates revenue and support for further research and development into communications approaches.
- 2> It directly and measurably furthers the core objectives of Akvo as defined by metrics like completed projects that video helped to fund.

3> It supports the wider goals of Akvo's communications strategy, including generating broad-based public awareness and engagement in Akvo's activities, and cross-over with mainstream media.

On the Role of Technology, and Avoiding Technophilia

Film-making is a creative process. The video strategy exists to harnessing the creativity of the Akvo community through the new activity of film-making to further the goals of Akvo as a whole.

The video strategy is not a technology strategy, but a communications strategy. It is critical that we do not define making films as a technical activity, although our technical execution is a major focus. Success at a technical level is a necessary prerequisite to succeeding at a communications level.

The medium of film is technically demanding but we must be clear that creative vision is at the heart of the Akvo video communications strategy: we want film-makers to speak, on our behalf at times, but always with their own voices. The technical platform exists to enable storytelling.

The key enabling technology for Akvo's involvement in film is cheap video cameras, cheap video distribution, and moderately priced video editing. The technology is in flux and as the price/performance ratios and available distribution channels continue to evolve. It is important to stay off the bleeding edge, attempting to always operate in known-good "sweet spots."

It is also important match the production system used for each film to the expectations for the film. One cannot make broadcast-quality films by buying expensive cameras and handing them to inexperienced crews. Similarly, very little web video requires a \$1000 per minute budget. A film as effective as a big budget production might often be produced for \$200 – or \$20.

The challenge is to evaluate continuously and dynamically the price-performance ratio of the different film-making and distribution formats available to us. It is not a uniform space, it is a series of best-guesses about fitting the mode of production to the desired effect.

On Audience: Exploration and Dialogue

*Most of the things that Akvo wants to film
have never been filmed before and
will not be filmed unless we do it.*

There is simply no generally-available of Karamta Village, Gujurat other than what Mark shot in India. Those faces, and their story, are invisible to the global audience. A few hundred people know the wells were built, perhaps more if the local NGO is communicating effectively. But once that story is recorded in a video that can be linked globally, those people and their village become part of the global discourse on water, on development and on poverty.

The confluence of forces that took Mark Charmer out there are rare in the world, and the films are special by virtue of their existence. To an extent we owe it to the world to document at least some of the unique circumstances we are creating and experiencing.

We value the little documentation we have of historically significant events like the first flights of heavier-than-air craft and the collision of the internet and the poor is clearly a major turning point in human history, in which we are players.

Why Are People Watching Our Films?

The first is motivation is exploration – of exotic locations, of new possibilities, of unknown technologies. The desire to learn and experience what is possible and to see new horizons is deep in the human psyche, and the Akvo project is laden with these horizons for all parties. The westerners are exposed to the developing world and its exotic locales and fascinating people. The developing world groups are exposed to new technologies and new potentials, and we should not forget that India is exotic from Mexico.

The second motivation is dialogue - people who are interested in understanding our work might want to come round to the office and talk for a couple of hours, but we are not always available, or they live far away. By watching our recorded conversations with each other, and our explanations of ourselves and our work, we build a dialogue. It may start as a chance to listen in to a conversation, but people with something to say can call us and join the conversation on their own terms. This is not simply about transparency, it is about learning from watching others, conversational learning, about sharing internal models freely. How much would we benefit from a regular stream of dialogues from groups like WaterAid or Arghyam?

Style and tone are very different for these kinds of films, and the emotional register of these two motivations is different, although both are grounded in learning. Exploration, done well, is exciting. Dialogue, done well, is intimate.

Our Film Audiences

The Villagers* Themselves

This is a many-fold process of engagement. For people to see themselves and their projects as media-worthy - to be encouraged to tell their stories to a global audience - is a powerful act in its own right. Horizontal viewing - villagers looking at water project films made by villages just down the river is one component. Collaborative media production does not mean distributing movies to the west! There are a lot of different directions to this exchange.

The villagers are unlikely to be translating much of their footage, lead to exclusive, local video ecologies. A little might be translated by third parties, some films might be shot by field partners who have English skills, but my bet is that the bulk of the camphone-video will be people talking about their water projects in their native language with the intended audience of their countrymen, neighbors and friends. Automated metadata context becomes increasingly important for identifying and managing these films in the long run, so that we can find and use footage shot for one purpose for other purposes. A parallel would be trawling Youtube to find films which mention a product, and using those clips to assemble reviews.

In what way are these our films? My suggestion is that part of the long-term function of Akvo's video effort is to enable discovery of films in the local language referring to specific technologies or partners. We can expect to be managing and distributing films we have scant contact with.

* the ANSI-standard NGO term for these people is “beneficiaries,” a term that I regard with the same fondness as “consumers.”

Various Groups in the Business Process

Conducting normal business processes with a video component is part of Akvo's business culture. Conferencing happens all the time. It is likely that we will export this by example. The difference between an email-and-brochure world and an iChat-and-Youtube world is very real and important. Where possible we use the whole signal.

Rendering the real stories of the process visible to everybody involved (funders, partner groups, Akvo internally, other NGOs, governments) needs video. This is bidirectional communication: taking films of the Akvo team to the villages we deal with on keychain drives or DVDs, and showing them the faces and offices of the people on the other end of the wire may be invaluable in building a sense of this as a collaborative, conversational enterprise. It is not just that we watch their reports – they watch ours!

Nearly all of the groups in the business process have similar perspectives and needs, at least when compared to the other groups we are making films for. Simply being part of the aid process puts people in at least a partially-shared understanding and context. We cannot rely on this too much, but it is probably still a useful advantage in producing films for this audience.

These films are “trade journalism” if they are general audience, or technical artifacts of communication if they are reporting videos. Production might be extremely simple because the core is about making the human beings involved in doing the work visible as human beings, rather than roles and job descriptions.

The important distinction between the films for this audience and other audiences is that we are doing business by video. That is not particularly common, might take some explaining, but is very powerful.

The General Internet Public

The people of the internet want to help. They also like shiny things. The Evolution of Dance got something like 110 million views and had a production cost of approximately nothing – it is one person dancing in front of an audience to a series of songs. While we cannot expect or make sure that Akvo ever has a hit like that, what we are doing is inherently interesting and we must remember that this potential is always there.

It is also important to remember the Orkut Effect. Orkut is Google's answer to Facebook or MySpace and it failed almost entirely in their initial English-speaking target markets simply because the people were signed up to competing networks already. In Brazil and the rest of South America, however, Orkut became the de facto standard social networking site and has around 100 million users. The parallel is that we have to be aware that 15 million middle class

Indians or Brazilians watching our videos is probably has more impact on our long term goals than a similar number of western viewers. This has implications for translation of our texts around films, for dubbing and subtitling, and several other areas of the production and distribution pipeline. This is a slightly different issue from translation issues for villagers because the middle-class internet audience has significantly different expectations based on longer media exposure. This begins to get into “explaining Akvo to the Brazilian middle class.” Lots of challenges, lots of potential.

Of course our certain projection is that the villagers and the general internet public are going to meet and fuse in a way which will leave a lot of people wondering what happened. But in the long run we have to contextualize our work as being viewed directly to the villagers who are our customer's customers now, and perhaps will be our direct customers later. Right now there is an open question about the shape of this transition – will it be a mass adoption of western media mores, or a washing out of the taste and style of the relatively few westerners in the influx of other cultures arriving en masse on the internet.

This stuff seems abstract now but the postcards, with their loud cries of Mission Rope Pump and The Woman Who Built Herself a Toilet directly speak to this transition in future years. It's important that we stay savvy to this, and it may be important to focus early on building diversity inside the Akvo network to make sure that we are not committing faux pas and wiring in misunderstandings in the seed culture. India office, Africa office, South American office. One approach to this is outsourcing some services to those areas specifically to bring diversity into the workflow – more on this later.

Whatever facet of the global culture we are communicating with, the basic rules of video for this audience are fairly clear: short videos, not over-produced but demonstrating expertise, well publicized in blogs, with upbeat tone, and not asking people to think too hard. Videos with those properties are the ones most likely to spread virally to mass audiences, as each person who found it good passes it to their friends.

Figuring out what kinds of engagement we want to generate from these audiences is an open question. What can they do for us?

Mainstream Media

The purpose of all television shows is to make you sit through the adverts.

Television shows exist to sell advertising as surely as animals exist to reproduce. The same is true of print media, although there it is partially tempered by journalistic culture. But fundamentally we must understand that outside of the feature film industry, the mainstream media is an advertising supported industry.

There is an inherent tension between the extremely and radically “horizontal” Akvo model and the us-them messaging which comes around in every single media story on the developing world.

Another angle on this was provided to me by an economist in The Hague, who said

“200 years ago, the term New World meant exactly what

Developing World means today”

Akvo has an implicit understanding of this reality – that the developing world is a radical, fast-moving place with nearly unlimited possibilities. We understand that we largely exist to facilitate these people getting organized to get what they want and need out of life. While the immediate business model is to support NGOs that are helping these people, we all share an implicit understanding about who our fundamental customers are.

This presents a very clear “off-message” problem when dealing with mainstream media, who have only the vaguest notions of human life in the poorer areas of the world.

The emotional language of the mainstream media message about the developing world is filled with the kinds of things we point scorn at in our private conversations: sad children looking into muddy holes and helpless natives waiting for help. This probably implies that there will always be problems moving the “standard” Akvo content into mainstream media through channels like television news, documentaries and “big push” aid extravaganzas because it is profoundly “off message.” The picture we paint – *The Woman Who Built Herself a Toilet* – breaks the frame. Even positive stories about the developing world carry deeply-ingrained assumptions about western cultural superiority. We need to build and maintain an awareness of these kinds of issues in our communications, not just in terms of what we put out, but in terms of the biases of the organizations we hope will amplify awareness of our activities or carry our messages.

Cognitive dissonance about what kind of place the developing world is right now is going to be a major issue.

There are also technical issues about shooting footage that might wind up being used by mainstream media: it needs to be better quality than our typical camera equipment supports unless it is going to be used for very, very short clips. We also need to pay close attention to licensing issues and have an awareness of what footage we want to be free for mainstream media use, and what we wish to restrict to (say) non-commercial use to keep it off the telly. Jonathan Sanderson has an extensive understanding of the technical and rights issues for crossover content and can brief us.

Reliability and Quality: Pro/Am distinctions in video

Cameras and bandwidth are on a similar curve to computing. There are a few more glitches in that process (mechanical components like lens focus assemblies) but, at an abstract level, the world is in the early stage of being flooded with cheap broadcast-quality internet-connected cameras.

What it is not being flooded by are skilled camera operators and video editors, never mind capable directors and producers. As some of us saw in the 1980s, a desktop publishing program does not make people into graphic designers: it equalizes potential, not manifest reality. We are in the position of being professionals in other trades coming to an interface with video as part of our work. Video literacy is similar in importance to being able to operate a DTP program was 20 years ago: those who can get through the basics without embarrassing themselves have added a significant new capability to their repertoire, but an

important part of that understanding is knowing our limits - when to hand off to a professional, what to not even try.

There are two critical distinctions in the technical ability to get stuff on video.

The first is the ability to reliably get results in marginal cases – poor light, noisy environments, distant locations or other hardships.

The second is the ability to reliably get “broadcast quality” results – white balance, color grading and goodness knows what other factors which matter if you want to generate suspension of disbelief or other deep-rooted psychological responses, but are irrelevant to “I can see that guy and hear what he is saying” type video productions.

These limits define what semi-professional video production staff can hope for: non-broadcast quality films taken in not-too-difficult conditions.

Now, this is not to say that people cannot get results in tough situations – Mark Charmer's video from the desert has some great bits. But getting everything or at least absolutely reliably getting the vital bits under those circumstances would require a professional crew who were dedicated to just managing the video. There's always a large element of chance involved with guerrilla video. Similarly, under ideal conditions with a slightly better than average camera, maybe a semi-skilled camera operator can produce something that could be use in broadcast, but there's certainly no guarantee of it: there could be problems with the footage I do not even know the names for.

These two constraints, reliability and quality are very deeply engraved in the professional film and television industries. Because when one is operating in a big budget environment, a single error can require re-shooting, which can cost obscene amounts of money, industry professionals have very, very low failure rates. Complex systems relying on many components each of which must work perfectly to achieve the result desired typically feature very, very high levels of integrity in each sub-process.

So, in the Akvo context, this generates a simple rule of thumb:

“if it MUST work, or it might wind up on broadcast media, hire a professional”

This leaves the semi-professionals and amateurs with a clear operating domain: shooting in good conditions, where failure is an option and sub-broadcast quality is acceptable.

It is vital to the long-term success of Akvo as a video production house to understand what can be done by amateurs, what can be attempted by trained semi-professional videographers, and what requires professionals. A clear language for this: “how good does it have to be?” along a defined spectrum of quality, and “how much do we need this footage to be usable?” with a clear understanding of the probability of failure matters a lot in terms of streamlining our internal video production processes. The ability to absorb risk not by spending a ton of money to minimize it, but cultivating a culture which permits failure, do-over

and we'll-get-it-next-time is key to enabling people to produce low-cost video without constantly comparing it to broadcast performance.

The bottom line is that a TV studio is the smallest, cheapest system that can reliably produce broadcast-quality television. Everything they do, they do for a reason. Every place where we differ from studio practice reflects either a loss of reliability or a loss of quality, and more frequently both. But with our production costs at a few percent of studio costs, we can afford to try, fail, learn as we go, and work with serendipity and fortunate circumstances.

Who's Holding The Camera?

The dream is that we are going to be able to get ultra-low cost video produced by “crowdsourcing” video production down to the lowest cost players in the game – villagers with cameraphones.

For that dream to exist, we have to start talking about minimum acceptable quality for given audiences.

This concept is at the heart of re-engineering the economics of video production to let us talk about doing the impossible with video.

The Economics of Film Production (and Distribution)

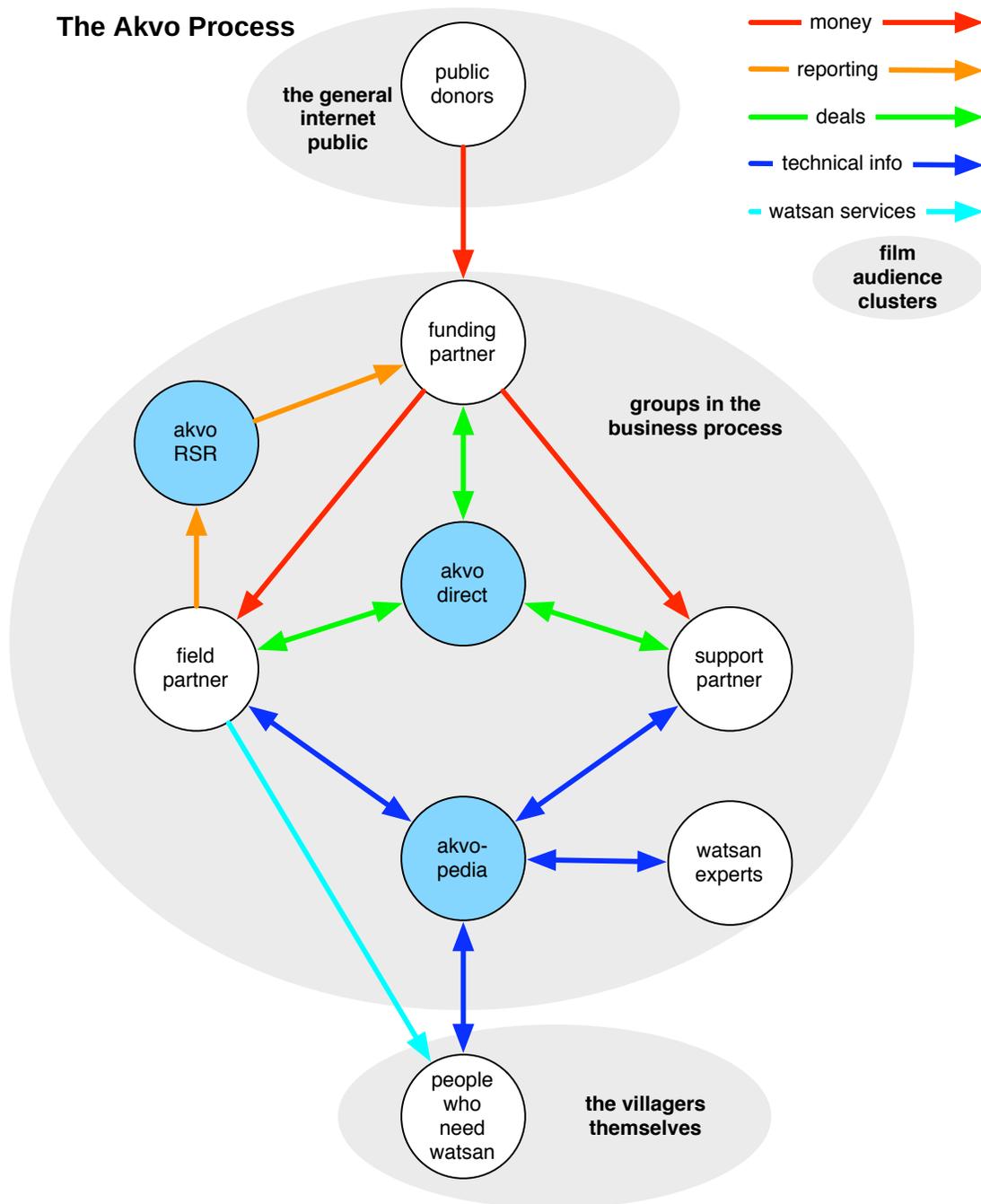
In many cases, the value of professionally-shot footage exceeds the costs of obtaining it by many orders of magnitude. In even more cases, there is no way to pay for that footage even if we want it. Our mission is to identify which corners to cut, maximize the capabilities of semi-skilled and amateur videographers, and make it work in cases that it should not be possible.

On the distribution side, there is no question that the primary distribution mechanism for our films will be internet video, closely followed by thumb drives in the field and villages. In the future there may be room for devices like cheap handheld DVD players shipped with a stack of how-to DVDs.

The Four Kinds of Films We Produce

Understanding the Akvo Process

The Akvo Process

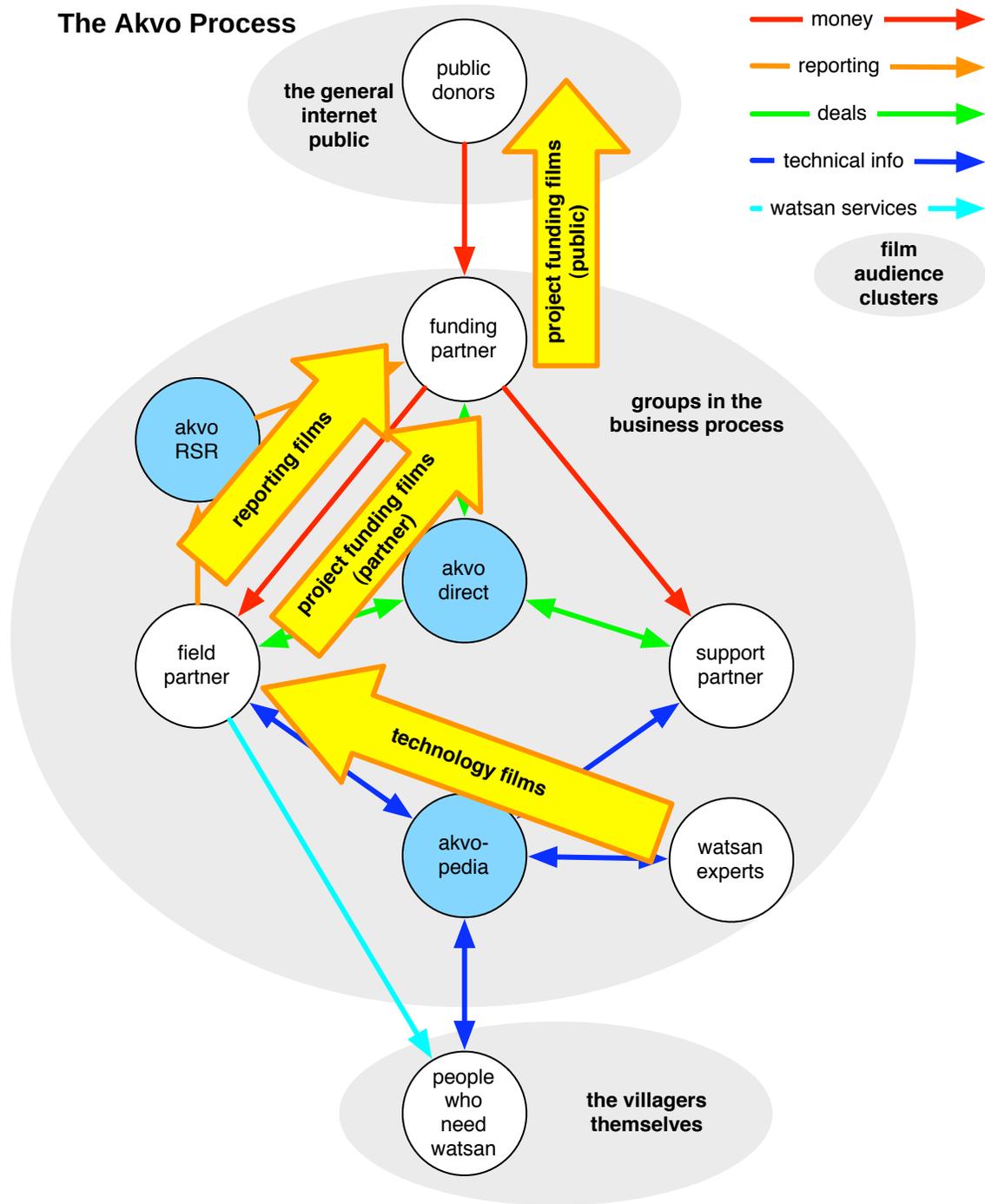


This diagram of the Akvo process maps our audience groups on to the Akvo business process. To summarize, the core funding cycle is as follows:

1. The general public gives money to funding partners, including donations, taxation and other mechanisms.
2. Funding partners, support partners and field partners make deals using Akvo Direct.
3. Funding partners transfer funds to support and field partners to carry out the project.
4. Field partners carry out the project.
5. Reports are sent to the funding partner using Akvo Really Simple Reporting.

6. All parties can use Akvopedia to communicate about the watsan technologies being implemented at any point in this process.

The four kinds of films we are most interested in fit directly into this business process model as follows.



Technology Films

Technology films fit directly into the Akvopedia template. There are (at least) two classes of technology films in this process. The first is films showing the use or generality of a specific technology, such as ZenRainMan's youtube videos or some of the footage which came back from the December 2008 trip to India. The second is in-depth how-to documentary film intended to help technologies replicate.

Technology Shorts

Description

These films are primarily show use cases for a given technology. They could be as simple as a few minutes of camera phone footage of a pump in operation. Some project reporting videos could be repurposed for this use.

Who Produces?

Most of these films will be made by volunteers and technology advocates in the long run. In the short term it may be necessary to supply some seed funding to produce set of films which define the style and presentation format for later films, and prime the pump. Professional film teams who are covering specific projects may make short films of this kind at the same time as they are making more in depth features. In general the level of complexity is low enough that a usable film can be produced by nearly anybody, and outstanding films are likely to feature local personalities and complex environmental cues (how a specific technology works *in this village* vs. a bare technology film.)

Who Watches and How is the film Distributed?

These films would mostly be accessed through the Akvopedia. Users seeking information about a specific technology would be presented with one or a range of films showing the technology in use around the world. Although viewing numbers are likely to be fairly low at first, it is quite conceivable that as we see greater access to internet video in the field, some of these films could become Orkut-effect hits which become popular outside of the US / European sphere. Films which spread rapidly in this way may become critical gateways to Akvo as a source of water and sanitation data for large groups of people, some of whom might sign up with the service to implement the technologies they had seen online. In this case, we have moved outside of the simplest scenario for these films (viewing mainly by potential field partners and the like) into directly publicizing technologies to the people we are trying to help. This needs to be conceptualized as part of a wider communications strategy for addressing direct conversations with the villages. We may have a few years before this becomes an urgent issue.

There may be secondary distribution channels through keychain drives or projects like a "water technologies DVD" which could be produced and distributed.

Who Pays?

Anticipated production costs are extremely low. Partners which an interest in a specific technology might provide funding to get films made about the technology they are representing. Groups like Potters for Peace or Solar Cookers International might hire an Akvo-sourced team to show off their technology. Other films would be tacked on to existing

project budgets and funded alongside the main project as a subsidiary goal. Akvo might also request additional funding for Akvopedia to be seeded with films of this kind, working from the existing funding base for Akvopedia.

Who has Creative Control?

Akvopedia editors have creative control of any films to be presented on Akvopedia. Further than this, because of the diverse nature of the filmmakers involved and the multiple distribution channels, it becomes a question of selecting the films we like and pushing them forwards rather than attempting to exercise tight creative control of amateur film-makers in the field. This is a “filter” approach to creative control, rather than an executive management approach.

What’s the Goal?

These films exist to spread broad public awareness of these technologies globally, in all sectors from the general public through to the villages. Ideally motivated and interested parties would follow up on the films they have seen and participate in whatever way they can in deployment of these technologies in the field including simply learning how to implement the technology for themselves using a how-to documentary.

How Do We Measure Success?

Unusually, simple viewer figures might reflect the usefulness of these films relatively accurately. Statistics on conversion to active involvement in water issues would be extremely interesting, but potentially hard to come by.

Technology How-To Documentaries

Description

These in-depth films attempt to communicate as much information as possible about how to implement a given watsan technology. In ideal scenarios these films would enable a person skilled in the art to implement projects successfully without further training, although this is to be understood as the exception rather than the rule. More frequently films would be used in conjunction with training courses by providing overview material, something to use as a refresher in the field, and so on. Films would likely be between thirty minutes and two hours, although there may be a special class of essentially unedited end-to-end project films which would record every step in near real time. These films may be considerably longer, although they are likely only of interest to skeptical engineers considering deploying the given technology themselves.

Who Produces?

These films will be shot by professional documentary film crews who have experience in this kind of technical work. It is extremely unlikely that fully useful films of this type can be made by amateur film makers, and quality and completeness are extremely important for this kind of permanent reference material. The goal is to produce films which are suitable for use on broadcast television.

Who Watches and How is the film Distributed?

These films are likely to be distributed using DVDs and keychain drives because they are primarily of interest to field partners who likely do not have strong bandwidth. However, internet distribution will be available as always.

Who Pays?

These films would be funded directly by groups financing water infrastructure deployments as a way of accelerating the global roll-out of the technology described in each film.

Who has Creative Control?

The entity funding the film would collaborate with the film-makers closely.

What's the Goal?

Ideally, to enable people to become expert builders of a specific water technology without further training, as a way of implementing water projects globally. Realistically, these films would contribute a lot to awareness of solutions and training, but large scale direct implementation remains a possibility particularly for simpler technologies.

How Do We Measure Success?

Success is likely to come from viewing figures and, especially anecdotal evidence about specific projects which were completed using the videos in support of that project. It is unlikely we will be able to comprehensively track access to these films globally, or identify the global uptake of a given technology because of the extremely complex path between the information being made available and finished projects using that technology live in the field. Tracking viewer numbers for the films being used as part of a training activity should be considerably easier and might provide particularly valuable feedback ("2000 engineers in Brazil were trained using this film.") The same is also true of broadcast television use of these films.

Project Funding Films - Funding Partner

Description

These films are video proposals made by field partners to attract funds from funding partners. They may be used alone or alongside conventional written proposals. They are likely to involve clips of the project team, film of the proposed location and the people of that area, plus stock footage of the technologies involved or film from other projects using the technology completed by the same team.

Who Produces?

These films will be made by field partners or by local film crews associated with the field partners.

Who Watches and How is the film Distributed?

Funding partners have internet, so films will be presented online for the most part. Use in presentations also seems likely. Films are likely to be primarily distributed through Akvo Direct although youtube etc. are obvious secondary venues.

Who Pays?

These films could be financed in a variety of ways, ranging from zero budget features made on phone cameras, through to slightly expensive project proposal support films made with the expectation of recouping costs when a project or series of projects are funded. There is some room for entrepreneurial risk-taking in the financing of these proposal films, with associated questions of integrity. Akvo might prime the pump but probably wants to steer clear of funding these kinds of proposal films.

Who has Creative Control?

The field partner making the film.

What's the Goal?

To convince a funding partner to fund a given water project.

How Do We Measure Success?

Individually, success is measured by getting a given project funded. Statistically, success is measured by comparing rates of funding success between comparable projects with and without video proposals.