

FCC Media Workshop, April 30, 2010
“Public and Other Noncommercial Media in the Digital Age”

Good morning, my name is David Fanning, Executive Producer of the PBS investigative documentary series, FRONTLINE. Thank you for inviting me to this workshop.

FRONTLINE entered the digital era early, in 1995, when we were making a documentary about the tragic confrontation with the Branch Davidians at Waco. Of all the research and interviews we’d gathered, the audiotapes of the negotiations between the FBI and David Koresh were most interesting. But they’d been reduced to fragments in the final documentary, for reasons of time. Someone in our office, still unknown – it was probably the intern – said we can put them on the web. I asked what else we could put up – the interviews? The transcripts, the documents? Yes. The whole film? Not yet...

In that moment, everything changed for us as broadcasters. Where before, the film went up in the air to the satellite on a Tuesday night, on the chance that someone would tune in at 9 o’clock, we knew that we were now going to be able to hold it for future audiences. Not only that, but in revealing the primary sources of our research, we were making our journalism transparent.... Anyone who wanted to, could test our conclusions against those sources, those interviews. And from then on we built a web site for every FRONTLINE. They were among the first deep-content sites in history.

By 2000 we were first streaming video from FRONTLINE, and there are now 85 complete films to be viewed on our website. In 2008, a film called [Bush’s War](#) received over 6 million video views on our website. With it was a [Timeline of the Iraq War](#), drawn from over 40 hours of FRONTLINE documentaries – 175 video stories, 3-5 minutes in length, arranged chronologically, and connected to key commentary from the over 400 interviews conducted by our producers over the years...

(web visitors)

Not long ago I received a letter from the Editor of Foreign Affairs, Gideon Rose, who is writing a book about American wars over the last century. He wrote that in recent conflicts like the Gulf War and the Iraq War, where there is little archival material available, “the oral histories preserved on the *Frontline* Web sites (are) extraordinarily helpful in filling that gap...the range, depth and quality of the interviews the *Frontline* journalists have produced is unique, invaluable, and absolutely essential resource for any serious student of the conflicts in question.”

Today, every FRONTLINE lives in a matrix of curated content. Not just our primary materials, but it includes timed, embedded links to other significant sources – articles, and websites and databases. The documentary is the bright line of narrative we’ve chosen to draw through this intellectual landscape. And now, our film can be seen not just on our website, but can travel out, as an artifact, our video player embeddable in anyone else’s website, or blog. With it, and this is really important, it must carry its armature of related links and source materials. Not just a single documentary, but a complex intellectual ecosphere...

This new digital publishing platform has inspired innovation.

Eight years ago, we began to publish new reporting and shorter documentary stories on international subjects on our companion site, FRONTLINE/World. Designed to attract a new, younger generation of digital journalists, it was an experiment using small amounts of seed money to leverage their energy, intelligence and enthusiasm, with the promise of being featured on our website. The best of their work had a chance at getting to broadcast. We gathered together enough important stories and dispatches and revealing stories that I was told at a dinner party by a gentleman from Pakistan, “FRONTLINE is well known in Islamabad!”

On FRONTLINE’s website, you’ll find [TehranBureau](#) a rich and authoritative source of reporting, videos and opinion started by an Iranian journalist who had previously worked on a FRONTLINE film on Iran. Kelly Niknejad started it in her parents’ living room in Boston. We’ve given her a home, and produced a film, called [Death in Tehran](#), as a companion to her site, and will do more films and reporting in collaboration with TehranBureau.

Even our investigative work is being transformed in the digital age. Today, on our website, you’ll also find [Law and Disorder](#), where FRONTLINE has joined forces with the nonprofit investigative project ProPublica and the *Times Picayune* newspaper to investigate a series of deaths involving the New Orleans police in the days immediately after Hurricane Katrina. Together we now have 5 reporters working the story, and it may not be coincidental that within weeks of launching our website, major breaks began to occur in the story, including admissions of serious police misconduct.

Our producer works in the ProPublica newsroom. He has shot over 35 hours of material, some of which has already been published online, and we’ll produce a film for the 5th anniversary of the hurricane in August.

In fact, it is this symbiosis between the website and the film -- the megaphone of national broadcast – and the ability to drive viewers back to the online reporting,

that gives public broadcasting an enormous potential for influence and audience in the age of new online journalism ventures.

New partnerships have come about because of this. When we found out that Adam Davidson of NPR's *Planet Money* was reporting in Haiti at the same time FRONTLINE was producing a film, we assigned a producer/videographer to create two video stories with him. They ran on our website, as well as NPR's, and Adam's reports on *Morning Edition* and *All Things Considered* were connected to, and drove audiences to, our FRONTLINE broadcast [The Quake](#).

Last week when we launched a new investigation with FRONTLINE, ProPublica, and The Investigative Reporting Project that Lowell Bergman runs at UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism, NPR's investigative team was part of the planning. This is happening as much because of the new necessities of collaboration in journalism, as it is the possibilities of joint publication on our respective digital outlets.

The public has never been more involved. There's a new level of intellectual transparency. The comments in response to our films are rich and textured, and passionately argued. On *Law and Disorder* we are asking for the public's help in investigating the stories we're uncovering. With our colleagues, we're starting to try to figure how crowd sourcing can support our journalism.

When we broadcast [Digital Nation](#), a year-long project that started as a rich website publishing video throughout its production period, our correspondent Douglas Rushkoff gathered the "experts" in the film on the night of air to respond immediately, online, to what they thought of it. It was so successful that we've taken his Roundtable live on the road, to venues like the South By SouthWest Festival, and the Paley Center in New York. Out of that conversation will come more ideas for films in the future.

What is most exciting about all of this activity, is that it is so true to our mission in public media. These projects are not going to be done by our commercial colleagues. They are, in the best sense of the word, noncommercial. This work is a profound and serious obligation to the intellectual commons, and to our civic life and debate.

Of course it takes time, energy and money. At FRONTLINE we have leveraged our budget from PBS and the stations with Foundation grants and these complex co-productions. We expect more from our producers and reporters for the online efforts. In the end, though, we will collectively need more resources, not just for this kind of public journalism, but to support a robust digital infrastructure. Just as public broadcasting once threw up that satellite system we depended on, so

we need public support to “pay for the pipes”, so that we don’t find ourselves depending on a commercial, ad-based, system of “monetization” on our websites to pay for it. In the end, that will not just threaten our legacy, on air and online, but go to the heart of who we are as independent, public, noncommercial media.

Let me just close with one small personal encounter. Recently I spoke at my local Rotary Club breakfast. Afterwards, the pastor for the Congregational Church came up to thank me. He had been called, out of the blue, by an old college friend, who it turned out had been in the ATF – Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms. He was haunted – he’d been involved in that tragic shootout in Waco, Texas. He was looking for counseling from the pastor, who told me that he’d first searched the web to learn more about what had happened. The best source, he said, was FRONTLINE’s website – [*Waco: The Inside Story*](#) – our very first, still there, since 1995.

Thank you for your attention.