

Film Festivals with Guts: Security and Censorship

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Introduction

In many places, film festivals are facing forms of censorship. A festival may face obstruction and opposition as a result of restrictive laws and regulations that limit event organisation and the screening of certain (types of) films. For a number of festivals, opposition from national or local authorities is a major problem. Constraints may also be rooted in cultural or religious reasons; some topics are simply taboo and therefore cannot be mentioned or discussed openly in society. Screening films about sensitive topics can thus lead to resistance from the audience or opposition groups. This resistance can even take violent forms, as we have seen in various cases. Some festivals need to operate with great caution to ensure the safety of their teams and visitors.

Side by Side is the LGBT festival located in St. Petersburg, Russia. Despite an increasingly repressive climate for LGBT rights, the festival continues to be

organised by a courageous team. In 2013, the festival faced five (false) bomb threats and hostilities from right-wing extremist groups. During the festival some venues withdrew their support and many foreign guests had concerns about participating, one even pulling out only a couple of weeks prior to the festival start. By the end of the festival, one of the organisers said: “We’re just a festival, but there’s the sense we’re running a military operation”.¹

In 2013, the Ecuadorian government dissolved the organisation Fundación Pachamama. Fundación Pachamama organises Ciné Amazónico, a travelling film festival that draws attention to the rights of people in the Amazon. According to the authorities, Pachamama would interfere with political affairs and disturb the peace. One of the organisers commented: “We are peaceful, we defend human rights and we have never promoted or supported violence”.² Despite this opposition, they continue preparations for the next festival.

There are many more examples that show the courage and perseverance of festival organisers who keep the discussion about human rights and freedom of expression going by screening human rights films. This chapter is derived from their experiences.

Government Censorship

In most countries, organising a cultural event does not in itself pose major problems. Problems may start when the content of these cultural events is considered sensitive, critical or potentially inflammatory. In many countries, films that will be distributed, broadcasted or screened must be presented to a “Film Censorship Board” for licensing. The board views and evaluates the content of these films. Productions with content that is considered to be possibly “harmful for the population” can be censored or even banned. Usually, “sensitive” topics include political, racial, sexual or religious issues. Authorities enforce these laws when films are screened to an audience in a public space.

In Belarus, the organiser of a film festival with short films on human rights related themes commented that a censorship board can create a lot of work for the festival team. For their last festival, the organisers had to translate all films for the censorship board. Long discussions followed. Many venues cancelled their cooperation due to pressure from the KGB and local government. That was mostly due to the bureaucracy of the censorship board and the need for different kinds of permission. Some of the films were prohibited from being shown in the cinema, while others were censored as category 21+. Nevertheless, the festival showed most of them in underground or independent venues. They were also able to organise many free and open discussions, but they also

note, “We didn’t shout about what we think on the streets. We didn’t disclose censorship issues widely in independent media, we just did not stop trying to find a space for dialogue with everyone. We didn’t radicalize relations with officials, and as a result we were able to have success, even in our work with the government”.

In 2013, the Freedom Film Fest in Malaysia was under pressure. One of the organisers, Lena Hendry, was charged for violating the Film Censorship Act of 2002. She was one of the organisers of the screening of *No Fire Zone: The Killing Fields of Sri Lanka* from director Callum Macrae in July 2013. This documentary is an investigative documentary about the final weeks of the Sri Lankan Civil War in 2009 and shows war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by the Sri Lankan army against the Tamil population. Even though the screening was not accessible to the general public, Lena Hendry and a colleague of hers were arrested during the screening. It is the first time that a person was charged for exhibiting a human rights film in Malaysia. The outcome of the case is still pending.

Bir Duino, the human rights film festival in Kyrgyzstan has faced many difficulties and opposition in the past years. In 2010, the festival was prohibited by security services to screen the documentary *The 10 Conditions of Love* which tells the story of the well-known Uyghur activist Rabiya Kadeer. On the same day the film was supposed to be screened at the Historical



Audience at Bir Duino Kyrgyzstan Human Rights
Film Festival. Photo: Archive of Movies that Matter.

Museum in Bishkek, State Security Service officials from the Department of Terrorism and Extremism requested the director of the museum not to screen the film due to its potential to incite inter-ethnic conflict.³

Two years later, in 2012, state officials and religious groups opposed the screening of *I Am Gay and Muslim*, claiming the film was a threat to the religious identity of Muslim people living in Kyrgyzstan. Only a few hours before the screening was scheduled, the Bishkek Court ruled that the film was banned. Subsequently, festival director Toleskan Ismailova was targeted with a defamation campaign in the media. She was also charged for extremist acts and intent to incite public riots, meaning that she could face imprisonment if the festival continued to screen the film publicly. The organisers of the festival (at that time known as Human Rights Centre “Citizens Against Corruption”) and film theatre received threats.⁴ As a result of this, the film screening did not take place.

Pressure can also be instigated by business interests. In 2011, filmmakers and cultural organisers in Peru protested the Peruvian government’s censorship of films documenting mining conflicts. Six documentaries were removed from a film event. The award-winning documentary *The Devil Operation* by Stephanie Boyd about the protests of the farmers against an American mining corporation was removed from a series of regional films on TV Peru for (unproven) technical difficulties. The concerned filmmakers and cultural organisers criticised representatives of mining

and oil companies for using their power and influence to impede the circulation of these films.

Security Analysis

When you suspect that your activities might have security risks, it is important to make a proper security or risk analysis outlining the potential risks before, during and after the festival. Possible risks that human rights film festivals have identified over the last years are: opposition from certain groups in society; disruption by authorities; or subtle censorship measures that are difficult to trace.

Film screenings can be disrupted by opposing (often conservative) groups. Such groups may communicate information or disinformation about the festival, which may also reach the media, portraying the festival in a negative way. If this happens, you can use media attention to share your story and present the real objectives of your festival.

Be aware that opposing groups can also threaten the team and visitors or protest outside the venue. In some instances, you will need to take into account the risk of groups even attacking the venue. In your security analysis, you need to consider the risks for your organising team, but also for your (international) guests and visitors.

The risks can also concern digital risks, like email threats, or websites or Facebook accounts that are

hacked. If you suspect you face digital threats, please check the Digital First Aid Kit by Hivos at <https://digitaldefenders.org/digitalfirstaid/> or Security in a Box by the Tactical Technology Collective and Front Line Defenders at <https://securityinabox.org/>.

On a few occasions, events have been disrupted by authorities or the police force. In 2011, the first edition of the Yaoundé International Human Rights Film Festival was suspended by the Cameroonian authorities. The opening ceremony was cancelled only thirty minutes before its start in the presence of its audience, guests and journalists.⁵

Sometimes, censorship measurements are more subtle. Screenings are sabotaged by sudden power cuts or other technical problems that prevent the continuation of the programme.

The 2010 Side by Side Film Festival held in Kemerovo in Siberia came up against such opposition. After all original venues had to pull out after threats from the authorities, an alternative cinema hall was located in a large local shopping complex. Once news got out concerning the new location, the authorities threatened to cut the power supply to the entire the shopping complex.⁶

Some festivals take place in locations that are insecure due to crime, political instability or conflict. While the festival and its activities might not be specifically targeted, it is also important to make a security anal-

ysis in order to come up with a security plan for the team, public and guests.

In all instances, it is worthwhile to get advice from local partners, lawyers or journalists who might be able to help you to assess the security situation. The security analysis and the plan can be combined into a crisis plan or table that can guide your team both to prevent and deal with potential security crises.

This handbook does not offer a blueprint for carrying out a risk analysis. However, some suggestions include:

- Organise a brainstorming session with your organisational team, experienced people or other like-minded people mentioned above.
- Note all undesirable things that could potentially happen.
- Categorise risks based on the likeliness (frequent, likely, occasional, seldom, unlikely) and the effects (catastrophic, critical, marginal, negligible) of those occurrences if they were to take place. Like that, you can filter out all risks that are likely to occur and have a serious effect on the festival or its visitors, which may help in deciding on which risks to focus upon primarily in your mitigation plan.

Crisis Planning and Mitigating Risks

After a thorough security analysis, the next step is to come up with a security plan to mitigate risks.

Measures vary widely; sometimes hiring security personnel or informing the local police will suffice, while in other cases it is wise to formulate a detailed plan in case of crisis.

Side by Side has an extensive crisis planning strategy. They work with alternative back up venues in case local authorities or nationalist groups stop festival proceedings. They hire security services, inform local partners of any potential threats and problems and use online screenings in case visitors consider their own physical attendance too risky.

Some initiatives actively seek support from foreign embassies or other international organisations to provide them with a certain level of protection. In Colombia, Fundepaz always informs public officials responsible for the protection of human rights, such as the regional ombudsman office or the regional Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, about their activities. For Active Vista in the Philippines, the threat of rebel groups and military groups is the biggest risk. The festival tries to connect as much as possible with local organisations to mitigate risks.

Naturally, it is important to choose festival dates carefully, in order not to coincide with events like elections or otherwise politically tense times. According to the organisers of the Bamenda Human Rights Film Festival in the north western part of Cameroon, the political situation was an important reason why the festival in Yaoundé was suspended. It coincided with moves

by government and resistance by opposition parties to change the constitution. The festival in Yaoundé was seen as an opposition move to instigate violence. Therefore, Bamenda Human Rights Film Festival now takes place in July, when the Parliament has its recess.⁷

For festivals taking place in insecure settings, it is wise to come up with a security protocol and share it with team members, partners and others involved in planning. This plan should also include guidelines for the public and guests from outside the community. Guests must be aware of the situation and be advised on how to avoid putting themselves at risk unnecessarily. (For instance, in insecure neighbourhoods or locations you might advise guests to avoid walking alone at night or engaging with strangers.)

It could be helpful to develop a diagram, indicating the risks, prevention or mitigation measures, responsible team members, relevant institutions and contact details of potential partners or experts to ask for assistance.

Such a diagram does not need to be very detailed and sophisticated, but can actually be quite simple. This will help the entire team get a clear overview of security risks and responsibilities. Consider in advance under what conditions you will decide to change, or even cancel, (parts of) your event, and discuss this with your team beforehand. In the heat of the moment, you may be taking unnecessary and irresponsible risks.

Risks may also involve health-related problems, if your festival takes place in a location that has issues with water, sanitation and/or infectious diseases. In that case your plan also has to include advising guests on vaccines and preventative health measures. For instance, the international film festival FiSahara, which takes place in the Sahrawi refugee camps in the desert, sends guests and the international public a detailed health and security form, and its team includes a group of volunteer doctors. Other potentially relevant risks are related to fire safety and crowd management. For screenings in cinemas or other indoor locations, there is often no easy exit. It is advisable to consult experts, or at least organisations or individuals with experience in these matters.

Self-censorship

Self-censorship is also a relevant issue to discuss here. Topics that are considered too sensitive are sometimes avoided in order to keep other important topics on the agenda and build support.

For the first edition of Karama Human Rights Film Festival in Jordan in 2008, the organisers adopted a form of self-censorship: “It was our first edition, so we had to be very careful about which films we presented to the authorities. I think we were still very daring, but we didn’t want to be too provocative in order not to have a good initiative be nipped in the bud. So we have chosen films that we thought were acceptable to the authorities. Not that I’m not happy with these

films, on the contrary. They are controversial and treat human rights issues in Jordan seriously. Next year we will be even bolder. But taboo topics are religion, homosexuality and the king. These are the no-go subjects”.⁸

The question whether a film can be screened is not always easy to answer though; it often depends on the assessment of the organisers. Recently, Ciné Droit Libre in Burkina Faso presented a film about LGBT rights in Africa. One of the organisers commented: “These films remain controversial here in Ouagadougou. A snappy and sharp-toned discussion followed after the screening during which the festival was accused of screening ‘immoral films’. Next to films dealing with politics, this is one of the most contentious issues in Burkina Faso, but we keep trying. However, we will not screen these films outside the capital, during our travelling festival, because it could be a reason for the local authorities to prohibit the screenings”.

Another example of self-censorship is the difficult choice made by the Human Rights Human Dignity International Film Festival in Burma during its second edition in 2014. The festival cancelled the screening of a documentary dealing with anti-Muslim violence after social media users criticised the film for being too sympathetic to the plight of Burma’s Muslims. The festival received requests from authorities and cinema owners to withdraw the film. The film, *The Open Sky*, follows a woman who visits her Muslim aunt whose house gets burned down during the



Promotion poster of Memoria Verdad Justicia Festival in Guatemala. Photo: Archive of Memoria Verdad Justicia.

outburst of anti-Muslim violence in March 2013. Min Htin Ko Ko Gyi, the festival director, said that the festival decided to cancel the film's screening because it appeared to have inflamed lingering Buddhist-Muslim tensions in Rangoon. "We are not holding the film festival to create conflict. We can't let any conflict come in the way, so we removed the film from our list. I feel really sorry about the decision to remove the film. It hurts the feelings [of the filmmakers] and also the dignity of the film festival. But there is a possibility that [the film] can bring conflict and now the country is in a very sensitive state",⁹ he said. The organisers also feared for the security of the characters in the film.

Only a few months later, the festival organisers managed to successfully screen the film in the capital city. Afterwards, Buddhist and Islamic religious leaders took part in a panel discussion about the film, hate speech and possible solutions to prevent potential ethno-religious riots. The three filmmakers got the chance to speak to the media. The film was also screened at one of the universities for 800 students.¹⁰

Self-censorship can be a way to prevent extreme tensions and mitigate risks. In relation to that, it can sometimes be more effective to screen a film about a sensitive topic if the film is situated in a totally different context and country. The touchy issue can still be presented, or even discussed, without pointing too sharply to the imperfections in one's own country. This can prevent the highly emotional or even aggressive responses that would otherwise disrupt the debate completely.

Self-censorship can also come into play when festival programmers fear that certain scenes, language or issues can alienate the audience due to cultural sensitivities. A great film might fall off the schedule due to a single scene or word. FiSahara is continuously evaluating what is appropriate to show a mixed audience. While Sahrawis are more accepting of some scenes in the privacy of their own homes, in a public setting these same scenes would be considered inappropriate. The line is sometimes so fine that programmers must pre-screen to many different Sahrawis to get a consensus.

Invitation-only & Online Distribution

Invitation-only screenings can be a way to get around censorship boards. For the distribution of *The Act of Killing* in Indonesia, the filmmakers chose not to present the film in regular Indonesian cinemas, as the censorship board would most probably have prohibited the screenings, and in that case, it would be punishable to own a copy of the film. Instead, they provided DVD copies of the film to a wide network of NGOs, enabling them to organise invitation-only screenings. The documentary has since been screened thousands of times.

Before DVD copies were widely distributed, several screenings were organised for journalists only. This led to ample media coverage in both the Indonesian and the international press. In the beginning, almost all the screenings were invitation-only. But over time, more and more public screenings began to take place. The

film received a lot of national and international media attention. The filmmakers stated: “It seems that people have more courage to screen the film openly for the public. So far, there were only two public screenings that were cancelled because of the government’s pressure and there was only one public screening facing opposition from a nationalist group”.¹¹

The filmmakers also made the film available for free in Indonesia – another way around the censors. It now has been downloaded millions of times. The film has also been seen hundreds of thousands of times on YouTube, where the filmmakers have made the film available without English subtitles.

Also Callum Macrae, the filmmaker of the controversial film *No Fire Zone* on the bloody final days of Sri Lanka’s civil war made the film available for free online in India, Malaysia, Nepal and Sri Lanka following a ban on its public screenings in these countries.¹²

Publicity Strategy

Festivals can also adapt their publicity strategy to mitigate risks. Some film festivals avoid using the term *human rights*. The festival in Ethiopia avoids the term primarily due to the resistance it would otherwise arouse from authorities. The director of FreeZone in Belgrade does not use the term in order to avoid scaring potential visitors and sponsors away. According to him, human rights have taken on a negative connotation since the Balkan conflicts in the 1990s.

The wide variety of creative and strong festival names from all over the world clearly show that a festival does not need to include the words *human rights* in its name to express its dedication to human rights and social justice. Watch Docs, Truth Cinema, Movies that Matter, Active Vista and Freedom Film Fest are just a few examples of festival names expressing the dedication of their programmes. In communicating about the festival or the films, you can choose to use certain words to prevent opposition; you can convey a similar message with a different discourse.

A few festivals, like the Tripoli Human Rights Film Festival in Libya, deliberately choose not to invite foreign guests because they cannot guarantee their security or do not want to attract unwanted attention. Other festivals, like Side By Side, choose to invite a renowned international guest, in the hope that the attention will improve safety. In their case, film director Gus van Sant was invited.

When Many Human Rights International Film Festival in Uganda bravely decided that they wanted to screen *Call Me Kuchu* about LGBT rights in Uganda on their festival in 2013, they took up a very challenging task.

The documentary portrays David Kato, one of the first declared homosexuals in Uganda, a country in which homosexuality is a criminal offence. The film follows the courageous and determined activist Kato in his last year before he was killed.

The film festival took place from 10–14 December 2013. One week later, on the 20 of December, the Parliament of Uganda passed the Anti-Homosexuality Act. This new law broadens the criminalisation of homosexual relations in Uganda, as a result of which a Ugandan same-sex couple faces life imprisonment. It is widely believed that the new law is not only the result of, but has also exacerbated, homophobia in Uganda. This law caused widespread concern by international governments and organisations. This was the context in which the festival director decided that the film should be screened in the capital city, Kampala. But how? The publicity strategy proved vital in this regard.

First, permission from the filmmakers was needed. However, the filmmakers were reluctant to give approval, out of fear for the security of the people from the LGBT community portrayed in the film. After four days of extensive contact with the Ugandan LGBT community, the filmmakers approved. The next question was where to screen the film. The organisers decided that one of the festival spaces in particular would be the best spot. This space is a small and popular arts event space with a capacity of about forty people. The organisers knew that this place would not attract as much attention as the main festival venue. The festival's strategy about this film was to keep a low-profile campaign. This would then mitigate the risk that the screening, or even the entire festival, would be closed down by the state officials. This was also the main reason why the screening took place on the second last day of the festival at 9 pm. Still,

formal permission from the Media Council was needed. Somehow, there were no restrictions to hinder the screening of this film because the state agency was not equipped enough to follow up such an activity.

Finally, the organisers managed to include the film in the festival programme. To prevent any problems, it was essential that the film description in the publicity material did not contain provocative information. For example, the description did not refer to the “anti-homosexuality bill”, but instead used the word “bill”.

On the day of the screening, when everybody got inside, the doors closed for security reasons. The organisers were nervous as they realised they were risking the festival's future, but also wanted to give a floor to these sensitive issues for discussion. Why would the Ugandan people not have the chance to watch this film that caused huge debates and awards at film festivals all around the world? Fortunately, everything went smoothly.

Main Tips

- Be informed about the laws regarding film screenings in your country.
- Make a proper security analysis with input from your local partners, lawyers and journalists.
- Develop a security plan to mitigate risks.
- Be careful in the composition of your film programme. Consider what effect films about sensitive topics can have.

Filmography

The 10 Conditions of Love (dir. Jeff Daniels, 2009).
The Act of Killing (dir. Joshua Oppenheimer, 2012).
Call Me Kuchu (dir. Malika Zouhali-Worrall and Katherine Fairfax Wright, 2012).

The Devil Operation (dir. Stephanie Boyd, 2010).
I Am Gay and Muslim (dir. Chris Belloni, 2012).
No Fire Zone: The Killing Fields of Sri Lanka (dir. Callum Mcrae, 2013).
The Open Sky (dir. Kyal Yie Lin Six, Lynnsatt Nwe and Phyo Zayar Kyaw, 2013).

¹ Victoria Lomasko (2013) "Homosexuals and Homophobes: Victoria Lomasko on the Side by Side LGBT Film Festival", *The Russian Reader*. (<http://goo.gl/DF3Y0r>)

² Mercedes Alvaro (2013) "Ecuador Shuts Down Environmental NGO", *Wall Street Journal*. (<http://goo.gl/Wn0eCc>)

³ (2012) "Violation of freedom of expression by the interim government must stop", *FIDH*. (<http://goo.gl/f65xGf>)

⁴ "Kyrgyzstan: Defamation campaign and threats against human rights defender Ms Toleskan Ismailova", *Frontline Defenders*. (<http://goo.gl/G3izKP>)

⁵ (2011) "The first edition of the Yaoundé International Human Rights Film Festival suspended by the Cameroonian authorities", *Festivals Internationaux du Film des Droits de l'Homme*. (<http://goo.gl/kAJTE4>)

⁶ Manny de Guerre, director of Side by Side, Russia, in response to the first draft of this article on 28 July 2014.

⁷ Gwain Colbert (Director of A Common Future), application for the Bamenda Human Rights and Arts Festival (Cameroon, 2012).

⁸ Interview with Ayman Bardawil (Programmer Karama Human Rights Film Festival) by Mira Zeehandelaar (in Dutch) (Amsterdam: Wordt Vervolgd, April 2011).

⁹ San Yamin Aung (June 18, 2014), "Festival Cancels Film on Anti-Muslim Violence After Social Media Criticism", *The Irrawaddy*. (<http://goo.gl/k1kAj0>)

¹⁰ Press release 13 August 2014 by Human Dignity Film Institute.

¹¹ Personal email contact between author and producer of *The Act of Killing*, July 2014.

¹² News article (February 22, 2014) 'No Fire Zone' documentary to air online for free in Malaysia, India", *The Malay Mail Online*. (<http://goo.gl/eAayB6>)