

# BURMA VJ

Undercover Video Journalists (VJs) in Burma keep up the flow of news from their closed country despite risking torture and death. Their material is smuggled out and broadcast around the world. During the Saffron Revolution in 2007, government intelligence learns the power of the camera, and the VJs become their prime target.

## WHAT THE CRITICS SAID

"Watch this and you will long remember Burma - and briefly join a revolution." *The Times*

"*Burma VJ* is a rich, thought-provoking film not only because of the story it tells, which is by turns inspiring and devastatingly sad, but also because of the perspective it offers on the role that new communications technologies can play in political change." *New York Times*

**"COMPELLING AND,  
FOR ANYONE WHO  
VALUES TRUTH,  
ESSENTIAL."**

EMPIRE MAGAZINE

## WHO SAW IT

The film offers a unique insight into high-risk journalism, dissidence in a police state, and the urge to witness and inform, while at the same time providing a thorough documentation of the historical and dramatic days of September 2007, when the Buddhist monks started marching in Burma.

The film helped to draw international attention towards Burma. Through partnership organisations they were able to ensure the film was seen worldwide as well as distributed illegally throughout Burma. This film shines a light on a closed country and promotes the importance of democracy, civil liberties and human rights both within Burma and around the world.

### **102** FESTIVALS

Festivals worldwide including Sundance, Berlin, Human Rights Watch Film Festival and across ASEAN region including Jakarta International Film Festival, Bangkok International Film Festival

### **30M** ESTIMATED TELEVISION AUDIENCE

30 million

### **16** CINEMA

The film was released in 16 countries

### **100** BROADCAST

The film has been broadcast in 100 countries

### **118K** ONLINE TRAILER

118,897 YouTube views

### **9K** SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

5,770 Facebook Likes

2,453 Twitter followers

IMDB, 8/10 (1,127 votes), User Reviews Average

Rotten Tomatoes, 97% Critic Aggregate,

Average 7.7/10, 58 Reviews



## THE CAMPAIGN

The film team were in the process of researching Burma; exploring how a regime could be successful in effectively disappearing from international attention - but then the Saffron Revolution happened. Several months after the 2007 uprising that captured the world's attention, the film team began to receive incredibly powerful footage that had been smuggled out of Burma. The initial motivation to make *Burma VJ* was the obligation to ensure this footage was seen.

However, when they screened the film to a test audience it became clear that their film was "bigger than the event itself, and would have something to say to people in similar circumstances all over the world." So, the film team added a secondary motivation: to inspire civil action for democracy.

## CAMPAIGN AIMS

The campaign revolved around three asks

- 1) Free the *Burma VJ* Prisoners: *Burma VJ* tells the story of the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) and their role in the battle for a free and democratic Burma. The DVB and individual activists in this film took a great personal risk to get this story out to the world – as a result of this project, a number of them are currently incarcerated.
- 2) To donate money to the Democratic Voice of Burma, Burma Campaign UK and FilmAid International.
- 3) To encourage people to join human rights organisations, such as Amnesty International and the Burma Campaign UK.

## HOW THE CAMPAIGN WORKED

The shared motivation of the filmmaking team and the participating VJs and monks was to “create awareness and inspire civil action for democracy”.

Their strategy focused on ensuring that the film reached both key political decision-makers and the widest audience possible. The film team achieved this through their marketing activities, which created an awareness of the film, allowing them to reach politicians whilst the critical acclaim the film received secured audiences world wide.

This is a fairly traditional model but the film team were very aware that the film needed to be seen both in Burma and in other countries not reached through traditional distribution. In order to achieve this they gave the film away for free to be widely disseminated by any organisation working around human rights and Burma issues and disseminated the film illegally within Burma through the DVB.



## CAMPAIGN IMPACT & ACHIEVEMENTS

*Burma VJ's* campaigning success is notable both for the way in which it re-established awareness around Burma on the international stage and for the engagement with grassroots organisations which ensured the film got to places traditional distribution couldn't reach.

Impact can be looked at in terms of awareness inside Burma and internationally.

### **INSIDE BURMA**

Inside Burma, the goal was awareness of the democratic movement. Due to the government's control of media, people have very few sources of information, but the Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB) established an illegal network to counter the regime's propaganda.

A partnership was established between the filmmakers and the DVB who not only helped them to secure footage for the film itself but who worked tirelessly to ensure that the film was seen in Burma. The DVB illegally broadcast the film across Burma and secretly distributed DVDs widely across the country.

The estimated audience within Burma is unknown but the DVB do have anecdotal markers of success that they have attributed to the film:

### **MORE VJS**

The DVB have said that the film has inspired many young journalists. Following the film the DVB network has expanded from 25 in 2007 to 100 in 2011.

### **FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION**

The DVB have said that audiences within Burma now clearly understand how the work of VJs has the possibility to go around the world within a matter of hours.

### **REDUCED CASUALTIES AND ACCOUNTABILITY OF HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS**

The regime are aware of clandestine VJs monitoring their actions, which has meant that their response to civil disobedience, whilst still brutal, has been less extreme than in the past.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF THE REGIME**

As a result of the film, official controlled media

within the country have attacked the work of the DVB in print describing them as “instigators of social unrest.” The DVB believe that the fact the government controlled media felt compelled to publicly discredit them is an indication both of the impact of their work and that of the film.

The film team have also received other feedback from Burma

## **MESSAGES OF SOLIDARITY**

The film team have been very touched by secret messages from arrested monks and VJs saying that the film and its worldwide recognition has helped to keep their spirits up.

## **SENTENCING**

The film may also have influenced prisoners' situations in a more concrete way, as some of the prison sentences handed out – although extremely harsh – were not quite as harsh as expected.

## **AUNG SAN SUU KYI**

The film team do not claim any connection between her release and the film. However, her long overdue release is a result of international political pressure, and pressure grows with political awareness and public opinion. Indeed on the very night of Aung San Suu Kyi's release her brother-in-law called her to inform her about the film.

After her release the team received a message from Joshua, one of the VJ's:

*“Aung San Suu Kyi's brother-in-law called [her] on the night she was released and he talked about Burma VJ to her. She said she will see it when possible. It is undeniable fact that the documentary we all did together made a significant change on Burma's political landscape.”*

## **INCREASE IN FUNDING**

The DVB have said that they saw a spike in their funding following the film, although they did not specify by how much.

## **WORLDWIDE**

### **POLITICAL INFLUENCE**

As a result of growing momentum around *Burma VJ*, the film team were able to ensure key political figures could see the film.

*Burma VJ* was the first film ever to be officially screened at 10 Downing Street at the invitation of Sarah Brown, the then-Prime Minister's wife to mark Aung San Suu Kyi's birthday.

The film was also seen by Hilary Clinton and Gordon Brown.

It was screened at the UN as well as at numerous Human Rights conferences.

### **MEDIA COVERAGE**

Burma Campaign UK have said that the film allowed them to encourage media to re-focus on Burma. The film and the extraordinary footage it contains was newsworthy in itself and they are sure that the film increased international awareness.

### **DEMOCRATIC INSPIRATION**

The DVB were invited to share their experiences with fellow exiled journalists on how to set up underground networks in hostile situations.

### **GRASSROOTS CAMPAIGNING**

This film team felt compelled, without funding, to continue the grassroots campaigning for Burma in a range of ways:

Educational support at schools and universities from many countries

Press: the film team have written numerous articles on Burma issues and in support of DVB, and facilitated press coverage of the VJs

Asylum support: The film team worked with lawyers to build cases for the VJs and monks in the film, in an effort to get them asylum abroad

Footage: the film team have allowed clips from the film to be used in relevant news coverage ie. The Burmese elections and Aung San Suu Kyi's release

The filmmakers stated in their application that *Burma VJ*, “despite being our biggest success, has ironically also been the film that brought us closest to bankruptcy, because of its impact potential and the enormous amount of work that followed in its wake.” The team wished to continue but had been working on the campaign for free for several years, were financially unable to continue and wrapped up their outreach in Autumn 2010.

## **CAMPAIGN NUTS & BOLTS**

### **CAMPAIGN BUDGET**

The film’s distributor contributed to the costs of traditional distribution and other partners gave in-kind support but there was no formal campaign funding.

### **PRODUCTION BUDGET**

€1,007,090

### **LENGTH OF CAMPAIGN**

Autumn 2008-Autumn 2010

### **OFFICIAL CAMPAIGN PARTNERS**

DVB, People in Need, IMS, Reporters without Borders, Movies that Matter, The Cooperative,

Dansk Burma komite, various Burma campaigns including Burma Campaign UK and Amnesty International.

# CONCLUSION



This critically-lauded and Oscar-nominated film was seen across the world with an estimated global television audience of 30 million.

Aung San Suu Kyi once famously said: *"Please use your liberty to promote ours."* *Burma VJ* and the campaign surrounding it did exactly as she asked.

In partnership with organisations including Amnesty International and Burma Campaign UK and with public endorsements from high profile campaigners such as Richard Gere, the film reached both key decision-makers and a huge global audience.

Partnership organisations were given permission to use the film for free to promote their own campaigns and this in turn helped the film to gain audiences, awareness and was a unique voice for the struggles of the people within Burma.

Measuring the impact of this film is difficult but it is certain that it shone a light on the regime. Whether the film will help in Burma's struggle towards democracy is impossible to say, but as an advocacy tool it has been extremely effective.

# TEAM BIOGRAPHY



## DIRECTOR

Born in 1965 in Copenhagen, ANDERS ØSTERGAARD trained at Central Television, London in 1988 and graduated from the Danish School of Journalism in Aarhus, Denmark in 1991. Østergaard has worked as a copywriter and strategic adviser at Jersild & Co., an advertising agency specializing in social and political campaigns, and as a freelance researcher and assistant director for the documentary units of DR TV and TV 2/DANMARK.

In 2003, he directed the international film, *Tin Tin and Me*. His break-through film, *Gasolin*, which opened March 10, 2006 in Denmark, is currently the country's most successful theatrically released documentary and one of the top Danish releases of the year. It tells the story of the famous Danish rock band Gasolin. In 2008, he directed *Burma VJ* which won more than 50 festival prizes across the world. *Burma VJ* has been shown in 120 countries worldwide.

# AWARDS & PRIZES

This film won a massive 50 awards internationally, and an Oscar Nomination.

**OSCAR NOMINATION 2010**, Best Documentary Feature

**CPH:DOX 2008**, Denmark, Amnesty Award, DOX Awards

**AMSTERDAM, IDFA 2008, HOLLAND**, Joris Ivens Award, Movies that Matter Human Rights Award

**SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL 2009**, USA, World Cinema Documentary Editing Award

**BERLINALE 2009**, Germany, Cinema for Peace International Human Rights Film Award

**BODIL (DANISH GOLDEN GLOBE) 2009**, Denmark, Best Documentary

**BOULDER INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL 2009**, USA, Grand Prix

**THE ROBERT - DANISH FILM ACADEMY AWARD 2009**, Denmark, Best Long Documentary

**ZAGREBDOX 2009**, Croatia, Movies that Matter Human Rights Award, Special mention

**ONE WORLD 2009**, Czech Republic, The Vaclav Havel Special Award, Student Jury Award

**11TH THESSALONIKI DOCUMENTARY FESTIVAL**, Greece,  
Audience Award, Amnesty International Award

**FULL FRAME DOCUMENTARY FESTIVAL**, USA, Anne Dellinger Grand Jury Award, Center for Documentary Studies Filmmaker Award, (Sponsored by the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University. This award honors a documentary artist whose work is a potential catalyst for education and change.), Full Frame / Working Films Award

**ITS ALL TRUE - 14TH INTERNATIONAL DOCUMENTARY FILM FESTIVAL**, Sao Paulo, Brazil, Best Documentary

**AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL'S MOVIES THAT MATTER FESTIVAL**, Holland, The Golden Butterfly, Amnesty International's A Matter of ACT documentary award, MovieSquad ALLRights Award

**SAN FRANCISCO INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL**, USA, Investigative Documentary Feature Award

**PLANETE DOC REVIEW 2009**, Polen, Amnesty International Award

**MOUNTAINFILM IN TELLURIDE 2009**, US, Moving Mountains Prize (TIE)

**GRAND PRIX INTERNATIONAL DU DOCUMENTAIRE D'AUTEUR 2009**, URTI, Monte-Carlo, Silver Medal

**GOLDEN APRICOT 6TH INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL**,  
2009, Armenia, Golden Apricot" main prize

**JERUSALEM INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL**, 2009, Israel, The "In the Spirit of Freedom" Awards in memory of Wim van Leer

**ODENSE FILM FESTIVAL 2009**, Denmark, Best Danish Documentary

**I WILL TELL FILM FESTIVAL 2009**, Ndindasawapanga award (I WILL TELL)

**BRANCHAGE JERSEY INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL 2009**, Matter Documentary Award

**FESTIVAL PERSPEKTIVE NUREMBERG, GERMANY**, Open Eyes Youth prize, Audience Award

**OURENSE INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL**, Spain, Best Director

**GRIERSON 2009**, The British Documentary Award, UK, Best Cinema Documentary (UK Film council award)

**DOKMA 2009**, Slovenia, Triangle Muscle Award – Best feature Length

**VERZIO 6 HUMAN RIGHTS DOCUMENTARY FILM FESTIVAL**, Hungary, Audience award

**4 SCREENS EUROPEAN FESTIVAL**, France , Grand Prix, Youth Jury prize

**NATIONAL BOARD OF REVIEW**, US, Freedom of Expression Award

**CINEMA EYE HONORS**, US, Outstanding Achievement In Editing,  
Outstanding Achievement In An International Feature Film

**MIFF: 2010 MUMBAI INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL**, India , Best Film Of The Festival Award

**GENEVA FESTIVAL INTERNATIONAL DES DROITS DE L'HOMME**,  
FIFDH 2010, Grand Prix, Prix du Jury Jeunes

**PARIS FESTIVAL INTERNATIONAL DU FILM DES DROITS DE L'HOMME 2010**, France, Grand Prix

**DOCUDAYS, THE 7TH INT. HUMAN RIGHTS DOCUMENTARY FILM FESTIVAL**,  
Kiev, Grand Prix , Festival de Cine Pobre, Cuba, Best International Documentary

**AMNESTY MEDIA AWARDS**, UK, Best Television Documentary and Docudrama

**INSIGHT AWARDS / NADFMA**, California US, Direction Documentary, Editing Documentary

**PEABODY AWARD, 70TH ANNUAL**, US, Documentary