Challenge for Change/Société nouvelle was a community filmmaking project created by the National Film Board of Canada in 1967 to initiate positive social change and combat poverty in Canadian communities.

Through Challenge for Change and its French-language counterpart, over 190 films and videos would be created from 1967 to 1980 across the country, from rural outposts to big city neighbourhoods, with the participation of citizens in every region.

Challenge for Change would become a model for community media, thanks in large measure to a method of participatory filmmaking that NFB filmmaker Colin Low would pioneer in Fogo Island – one that would become known the world over as the Fogo Process.

Today, as digital and mobile technology gives everyone the capability to create and share media, the NFB carries on the spirit of Challenge for Change with the multi-award-winning Filmmaker in Residence online documentary, the interactive documentary GDP – Measuring the Human Side of the Canadian Economic Crisis and other participatory media projects now in development.

When documentary pioneer John Grierson founded the NFB in 1939, he did so with the goal of using documentary film to improve people’s lives. Challenge for Change and the Fogo Process changed the way documentary films were made and continues to serve as a model for community media creation in the digital age.

An idea is born

Challenge for Change was still in its infancy in 1967 when the NFB began a partnership with Memorial University on what would become known as “The Newfoundland Project.”

Low was first informed about the work being done by Memorial University of Newfoundland in combating rural poverty by NFB colleague Michael McKernerey. Low, himself raised in a small rural community in southern Alberta, was interested and travelled to Memorial. There he met Donald Snowden, Director of the Extension Department, who had been active in community media for years and had an idea for a film series that would help rural Newfoundlanders address the challenges they were facing.

Working with Snowden was field officer Fred Earle, born and raised on Fogo Island, and keenly aware of the community’s problems. Earle would go on to appear in many of the Fogo films as the on-camera facilitator.

Low visited a number of communities in Newfoundland before deciding on Fogo Island. He chose Fogo Island because of the range of issues it faced and because there was a chance to effect change, as government policy was still being formulated. What’s more, Fogo Island was large enough to offer problems in inter-community communication between its ten villages, yet it was a geographical entity: a microcosm of the province as a whole.

At a meeting of the Fogo Island Improvement Committee, Low introduced the idea of filming on the island, describing a project that would assist communities in identifying common problems and most critically, help islanders to work together to find solutions.
Filming and feedback

With the endorsement of Fogo Islanders, the Challenge for Change director, George C. Stoney, gave the final go-ahead for what was known as The Newfoundland Project. In the summer of 1967, as Canada celebrated its Centennial at Expo 67 in Montreal – which featured the ground-breaking multi-screen production In the Labyrinth, co-directed by Colin Low – Low was back in Fogo Island, interviewing and filming island residents. Observing alongside Low and Earle were Memorial University students recruited to apprentice with the NFB’s film crew.

Fogo Islanders identified a number of key issues during filming: the inability of island communities to organize, the need for better communication, resentment towards resettlement and anger that the government seemed to be making decisions about the community’s future with no consultation. In all, over 20 hours of material would be shot on Fogo Island that summer, forming the basis of 27 films, including such titles as Billy Crane Moves Away and The Children of Fogo Island.

What happened next was crucial for the success of the project and in defining the essence of the Fogo Process: the NFB conducted 35 community screenings in Fogo Island to solicit reactions and feedback, with the total number of viewers reaching 3,000. What was revealed at screenings and subsequent discussions was that while residents in this tiny community were not always able to discuss issues with one another face-to-face, they were comfortable explaining their views on film. So it was through the mirror of documentary cinema – by hearing themselves and their neighbours on screen – that islanders began to realize they all faced similar problems. This sparked a community-wide dialogue.

This dialogue reached all the way to the provincial capital. After cabinet ministers watched the films, the provincial government asked the NFB if it could respond on camera to the islanders. The filmmakers agreed, creating a remarkable two-way cinematic exchange between the often-overlooked Fogo Islanders and their government in St. John’s.

Legacy

Local fishermen formed a cooperative, which helped keep profits on the island and reduced unemployment. The provincial government focused on helping people to stay on Fogo Island, rather than relocating. The Challenge for Change films were a catalyst for continued changes, providing residents with the knowledge and confidence they needed to work for the future of their community.

Shortly after Low’s Fogo Island experience, he travelled to the U.S. to participate in several rural and urban participatory media projects for the Office of Economic Opportunity. George C. Stoney would co-found the Alternate Media Center in New York City, training citizens in the tools of video production for a brand new medium, public access television. Donald Snowden would go on to apply the Fogo Process internationally.

At the NFB, The Fogo Process became the model for Challenge for Change in communities large and small across Canada. Shortly after the Newfoundland Project, Challenge for Change would also begin to incorporate community video; revolutionary portable video technology would enable residents to become media makers in a way that was impossible with traditional film.