DR CHRISTOPH BAUMER FI’04
research of petroglyphs of Saudi Arabia

DR. ROBERT R. GRIFFITH MN’16
following the rhinoceros, from Africa to Asia

CAPT. RICK SABER MN’01
in the eye of a viral storm

JOAN BOOTHE MN’07
travels with Opal

DR MARK SPENCER FI’97
a challenge for explorers

MARK TERRY PHD FI’08
the Geo-Doc, explorations in digital media

Elephant poacher patrol emerging out of an early morning mist, Chitwan National Park, Nepal. Photo: Robert Griffith
Communications is one of our most valuable commodities. How we use it can begin and end wars; it can inform and misinform millions of people; it can confirm and deceive; it can educate and suppress knowledge. Often, communication is taken for granted and only missed these days when we can’t get a Wi-Fi signal. Social media has made communicators worldwide. What I did not anticipate, however, was the value placed on my films as data delivery systems by the United Nations.

After inviting my film The Antarctica Challenge: A Global Warning to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in Copenhagen, December, 2009, a relationship developed that would see me produce similar documentary films on climate research around the world each year for the annual COP conferences. My documentaries were no longer just educational or entertaining, they were now in a position of informing and influencing policy on a global scale. Keeping up this annual pace of production and the volume of international representation of data became a challenge.

My graduate studies at York University in Toronto provided some intriguing theoretical alternatives to documentary film production and exhibition incorporating geospatial data that would accommodate these unusual demands. As a result, the Geo-Doc was born. Conceived as a multilinear, interactive, database documentary film project, it is presented on a platform of a Geographic Information System map of the world. Each pin on the digital map contains a stand-alone documentary short film along with a myriad of metadata related to each film’s content. Relevant data such as location, dates, photographs, links to scientific reports, research institutes, government programs, NGO websites, virtually anything on the web related to the film subject, makes the Geo-Doc a robust and dynamic multimedia communications tool intended to bridge the gap between science and policy.

As I write this in March 2020, we find ourselves in the midst of a global pandemic, one in which we struggle to understand and find reliable information. The Geo-Doc is designed to provide “visible evidence”, a hallmark of the documentary film, through its film units and to provide such evidence on a global scale. Along with its unlimited supply of related metadata, a Geo-Doc project is specifically designed to speak truth to power on global issues like the coronavirus and climate change.

One of the unique aspects of this digital architecture is the Geo-Doc’s ability to reveal new data that is evident in the implicit narratives that emerge from relating the film units to each other. An early multimedia film concept, the Korsakow System, presents multiple film units in the same digital space allowing the user to select the one they want to see in whatever order they want. This ostensibly eliminates the role of the editor in this documentary film project. Critics of the system have pointed out that when the film units are all related to one narrative, there exists the possibility of seeing scenes “out of order”, thereby potentially rendering the story confusing or incomprehensible. With this in mind, I conceived the participating film units to be stand-alone documentaries, linear storylines related to the film subject, making the Geo-Doc a multimedia communications tool intended to bridge the gap between science and policy.

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The destination of discovery begins with a journey of exploration. In these difficult times when travel has been curtailed like never before, we need to find new areas of exploration and new methods of getting there. Using new digital communication tools like the Geo-Doc may enable us to reach those destinations in altogether new ways.