

Lessons Learned and Thoughts Regarding *Contact* Filming at the VLA

Assessment of *Contact* Experience

The impact of the filming on our personnel and operations was bigger than we anticipated when we agreed to permit the filming. One NRAO person was designated as liaison/point of contact, and that person, over a six-month period, spent more than two full work months on this project. Many others, including one deputy assistant director, the business manager, the VLA scheduler, and numerous people at the VLA site, also devoted considerable amounts of time to answering questions, considering studio requests, gathering information, gathering materials requested by the studio, and other preparations for the filming.

There was a not insignificant administrative burden associated with negotiating and drafting the contract, obtaining approval therefor, establishing procedures for tracking expenses to be billed to the studio, and preparing the invoices.

As studio personnel arrived at the VLA site preparatory to the filming, the impact on site operations grew. NRAO personnel were assigned to escort and assist the studio work crews. The studio frequently requested use of NRAO equipment and vehicles. This impacted work schedules at the site.

During the filming, the impact on site operations was enormous. The studio crew numbered 150-200, plus extras. The studio brought a large amount of equipment and many vehicles, for which space had to be found. Work on the array had to be scheduled around the filming, to avoid intruding into camera fields of view. Because of bad weather, the observing time allocated to the studio was increased, causing disruption to astronomical observers. VLA operators were rescheduled at the request of the studio.

The presence of a big-name director and actors caused predictable effects on productivity at the site. Also, there were manifestations of jealousy regarding access to the movie crew by NRAO personnel.

In spite of the large impact on NRAO operations, the overall experience remained positive. The *Contact* crew, from director on down, was an extremely professional group of people. They had a genuine dedication to making the film as realistic as possible, within the confines of their artistic license. They were reasonable to deal with, and made a real effort to understand our operations and why we had to impose the rules we did.

To a very large extent, *Contact* can be considered a special case. Carl Sagan is not only author of the book, but also was a co-producer and exercised some control over the script, even during the filming at the VLA. The VLA was a central part of both the book and the screenplay, and the story revolves around radio astronomy. If there is any movie that should have elicited a high level of cooperation from us, this is the one.

Additional impact on us will come following release of the film, when the exposure and publicity surrounding the movie trigger added tourism at the VLA. Additional media interest also

can be anticipated. This will have to be evaluated after release of the film. We may wish to prepare a special display at the Visitor Center about the filming.

Contracts and Fees

The initial contract with WB was negotiated early in 1995. This contract had to be approved by NSF, and was in place prior to the first WB shoot in May of 1995. This 1995 filming session was done by a second unit of *Contact's* initial crew, under director George Miller. After the 1995 filming, which included ground and aerial motion-picture and still photography, Miller left the project and *Contact* went on hold for some time.

Early in 1996, the movie got underway again, with Bob Zemeckis as director. With him came a new Location Manager, Paul Pav, who was unfamiliar with the negotiations and reasoning behind some of the provisions in the contract. Because of the need for NSF approval, we did not want to renegotiate, and so had to engage in extensive explanations to make Pav comfortable with the existing contract.

Under the contract, WB reimbursed us for expenses incurred by us in support of the filming. This included items such as labor of employees, use of vehicles, materials, services performed, etc. Our usual overhead was applied to such expenses. WB had to agree to provisions holding NRAO, AUI, NSF and all government entities harmless.

In addition, in a "side agreement" documented by a letter from WB, the studio committed to making a donation to us for educational purposes, above and beyond any other reimbursement. In 1995, they pledged \$100,000 to cover both the second-unit visit and the first-unit visit later. They asked to pay it in two installments, the first prior to the second-unit visit and the second prior to first-unit filming. They paid \$50,000 at the start of the May 1995 filming. When the project went on hold after that, we feared we might never see the other \$50,000. This experience led to our demand, when the film was revived, for a \$100,000, up-front, non-refundable payment at the start of their 1996 activity, in August 1996. After much complaint, they finally agreed to this provision. The \$100,000 was paid with the understanding that, after a date certain, it would no longer be refundable. Thus, we received a total of \$150,000 in donations in the two years.

The reimbursement invoices for the three filming expeditions came to: nearly \$6,200 for May 1995; more than \$2,700 for July of 1996; and more than \$20,000 for September of 1996.

Some Specific Lessons from *Contact*

During filming, the studio personnel impose radio silence on whatever part of the site is designated the set. When we have NRAO personnel on the set whom we may need to reach (e.g., EMTs), we need to have a mechanism for doing so during periods of radio silence. Earphones for the radios may be one solution.

To improve the effect of the filming on staff morale, we should insist on allowing our people to visit the set, on a noninterference basis. A schedule could be established for providing such access. Also, we should seek to have the director or a leading actor speak to the staff in a

formal setting. The *Contact* publicist insisted that we should use no cameras at the site during filming. However, numerous studio crewmembers shot photos. We should insist on a reasonable photography policy during the negotiation phase.

We closed the VLA site to the public during the filming of *Contact*. This seemed to work this time. It must be considered in future cases.

Considerations for Future Cases

Filming a major movie is a big operation. We don't want to do it very often.

In the case of a future request, we should consider whether it is worth such a major effort. We should look at the following:

The Script/Storyline: Is there enough connection to NRAO and our mission to make the effort worthwhile? What will be the effect on the public perception of NRAO?

The Price: Did we undercharge *Contact*? What is the going rate for location fees for major films? We should keep in mind that our location is not like any other; they can always find another bakery or city park -- they can't find another VLA.

The Director, Cast and Crew: Do we know enough about them to feel comfortable in having them portray us and our mission? Will they be reasonable to work with? Final judgement on this should come after face-to-face dealings in a visit or two.

The Specifics of the Filming: Its total impact on our operations both before and during filming.

The Precedent to be Set: As mentioned above, *Contact* can be considered a special case. For any future request, we must consider whether we are opening the door to other, less desirable requests later. In any case, what will be the reaction of our user community both to the specific film and to any precedent we set?

Sources of Assistance and Documentation

Other entities have far more extensive experience in this area than we do. In future cases, we may want to draw upon their advice. Attached is an article from *Air Force* magazine describing the history of the movie industry's relationship with the Air Force. This article also refers to extensive Department of Defense guidelines on cooperation with film projects. In a telephone conversation with Chuck Davis, of the Air Force's Public Affairs Western Region Office, I found that many contractual provisions that we came up with on our own are in fact covered in DoD documentation. He handles all film requests for the Air Force, and has provided the relevant Air Force and DoD instructions, copies of which accompany this memo. These include sample forms that will be useful. We should not hesitate to consult with him or his counterparts at other agencies if we have concerns about proposed filming in the future.

Dave Finley
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