



PHOTO: NO TO RAPE/DAVID S. LIU

Organisations are using short films and uploading them on YouTube to spread their cause

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**S**hort, sweet and sharp – catchy videos have become a commonplace tool in social activists' arsenal over the past three years.

Singapore director Boo Junfeng's short film *Someday*, produced for pro-gay movement Pink Dot, has garnered more than 42,000 views since it appeared on YouTube last month.

Pink Dot, which is on again this Saturday, was an early adopter of the trend with its slickly produced *Red + White = Pink* during its inaugural event in 2009.

Its short film *Support The Freedom To Love*, also by the creative team 28-year-old Boo helmed, has had 326,000 eyeballs – more than any other local campaign on YouTube – since it was uploaded in May last year.

Other non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are also harnessing the power of viral videos for change.

The Animal Concerns Research and Education Society protested in May last year against Resorts World Sentosa's exhibition of captive bottlenose dolphins with *The World's Saddest Dolphins*, a jingle which received 23,500 YouTube views.

Transient Workers Count Too has also produced short films in conjunction with local undergraduates doing community service.

*Unsung – The Invisible Workforce Behind This City*, an eight-minute mini-documentary uploaded by a team of Singapore Management University undergraduates in March this year, has close to 50,000 views so far.

Mr Benjamin Chia, 22, one of the students behind *Unsung*, says: "It was extremely heartening to see the empathy



Videos such as *No To Rape* (above left) and *Someday* (above) use a general storyline, while *Unsung – The Invisible Workforce Behind This City* (above right) is a documentary to spread an organisation's message.

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poured out to these Bangladeshi workers that we so often make fun of."

A montage of user-submitted clips pledging support for the HIV-positive community has had almost 61,000 hits since Action For Aids uploaded it to YouTube in January.

Even statutory boards are getting in on viral video campaigns.

Since last year, the Health Promotion Board has screened two short films on free-to-air television – *Ah Kong*, about living with senile dementia, and *Kaki*, promoting colorectal cancer testing.

The full versions of these films, directed by Royston Tan, are available on the board's YouTube channel, where they have received about 100,000 views in total so far.

The board's corporate and marketing communications director Vernon Vasu says online platforms, such as Facebook and YouTube, are used to complement traditional media such as bus stop posters, "as it allows for greater engagement among our target audiences".

In the past, social agitation used to be relegated to talks, discussions and the occasional petition, but videos are proving to be an effective tool for reaching out to those not yet in the various movements, say activists.

So far, these campaigns have helped to ramp up the debate and, in some cases, get results.

Action For Aids released a 10-minute YouTube documentary on anonymous HIV testing facilities in 2010. Produced

in-house, it features a walkthrough of the HIV clinic to demystify the testing process. That video received more than 11,000 views. A pared-down, one-minute version appeared last month.

Last week, *The Straits Times* reported that the number of people seeking anonymous HIV testing has risen to 560 a month so far this year – up from 503 a month last year and 480 a month in 2010.

Executive director Donovan Lo, 37, says that viewers have told Action For Aids that the video "boosters the credibility and confidence of the test site".

Similarly, the *No To Rape* campaign launched three online advertisements in 2009 to call attention to the fact that spousal rape is not yet a crime in Singapore. One advertisement featured Singa-



PHOTOS: PINK DOT SG, TEAM LUMOS, SMU

poreans speaking out against sexual violence, while the remaining two were short films showing a woman in an abusive marriage.

The one-minute *I Do/n't*, produced by film-maker David Liu, received more than 20,000 hits.

*No To Rape* scored a minor victory in February this year. In the same parliamentary debate which deleted the section of the Evidence Act that allowed rape survivors' sexual histories to be used against them, Law Minister K. Shanmugam said their arguments for the criminalisation of spousal rape were "worth looking into".

*No To Rape's* video cost \$50 to produce, using volunteers for their cast and crew.

Yet, even with some of the slick, professionally produced NGO clips, costs are kept minimal, with marketing companies stepping in to help pro bono (in the case of Acres' dolphin video) or for a lower-than-market rate (*Action For Aids'* documentary).

With more people owning smartphones and tablet computers and using them to stream media, videos for social causes are becoming easier and quicker to share.

Dr Carol Soon, visiting fellow at the National University of Singapore's communications and new media studies department, cautions that the "information clutter" on the Internet may mean that such video campaigns can attract only scattered viewership that fails to snowball into a movement.

She says: "It will be increasingly difficult for NGOs to garner a critical mass in an increasingly fragmented cyber-public."

Director Boo says his film-making style for Pink Dot has been tweaked, as the movement grows, from individual stories to community tales of acceptance.

He says: "Through storytelling in the videos, we are able to break barriers and inspire empathy. It bridges different cultures and connects our humanity."

"Sometimes, that is all we need."

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