

Strategic Media Making and Impact Producing

By Larry Kirkman

Question: How do you help students choose the most effective way to reach and engage an audience?

More and more, our documentary students are embracing expectations for the social impact of their work. They want to take on issues of critical public importance, to tell the stories, portray the characters, and provide the evidence and testimony that drive public debate and promote solutions to social problems.

We tell them: whatever your purpose – to shift public dialogue, motivate behavior change, equip activists for advocacy and movement building, or change government or corporate policies – think of your role as an “impact producer.” Define your mission, articulate your goals. That’s the starting point.

There is a wide spectrum of narrative strategies, but compelling stories and characters are at the center of social documentary. Because great filmmaking delivers impact, engages audiences, leads to action, to results.

Framing and timing are crucial in making mission-driven media. What is the state of the issue? Is it widely known and debated, or neglected and marginalized? Assess the opportunities for impact, whether it’s changing the conversation or changing the world. Is the time ripe for policy change? Or, is it the time to build awareness and elevate the issue? Who are the intended audiences? Is the goal to consolidate the base or reach beyond the choir? At every stage, the filmmaker needs to be goal-oriented and user-focused.

For example, environmental groups and children’s health organizations worked together to promote tougher air pollution standards. In focus group research, they found that target audiences opposed to federal regulations on principle responded to stories of childhood asthma. They had all seen children use inhalers on the playground and in that context they accepted the argument that air pollution travels across state borders and requires federal regulation. The coalition framed the issue as a children’s health crisis and used the heads of Children’s Hospitals as spokespersons with their local emergency rooms as a backdrop.

In the digital environment people more easily migrate from the personal to the social/political, from individual needs to collective solutions and public good, from empathy to action, from volunteering to systemic change. Audiences are surprised by how much they can know and how much people like them are doing.

This migration challenges our theories of change in social campaigning. Is the focus on influencing decision makers to change policies, in a legislature or corporate headquarters? Or, is the focus on grassroots social mobilization? Some films can do both.

Many documentaries encompass a spectrum of impacts. For example, *Escape Fire* takes on the whole medical industrial complex, advocating both corporate and government policy changes. It shaped Congressional action on Defense funding for the Veteran's Administration. But, one of its key impacts was in professional education, including a tour of medical schools and most importantly as part of the curriculum for continuing medical education for doctors and nurses.

The Invisible War's exposure of rape in the U.S. military and the failure to prosecute rape led to extensive Department of Defense and Congressional policy changes. It was aimed at elite decision makers, but it also helped empower a community of rape survivors to sustain the struggle.

The House I Live In was produced to help end the war on drugs, end mass incarceration and reform sentencing policies. Its primary target has been lawmakers and law enforcement, but with a goal of shifting public attitudes, reframing drug use as a public health problem, and the war on drugs as a war against US citizens, not Narco States. The film significantly contributed to successful state-based campaigns: against California's Three Strikes Law and for Connecticut's Juvenile Sentencing Reform. Distributed theatrically and broadcast on Independent Lens, it also reached large audiences through partner organizations. 80,000 people watched the film in over 500 churches in 34 states. There were over 200 professional screenings. And, it was screened at both 2012 national political conventions and the White House to put the drug war on the policy agenda.

American Promise did not start out with an impact strategy to improve educational outcomes for black males. It wasn't until after the filmmakers finished the 2 hour and 14 minute film that a series of focus groups conducted by Active Voice identified opportunities with target audiences. In a panel at Center for Media and Social Impact's Media that Matters annual conference, co-director Joe Brewster explained how they have produced 40 different versions of the film to meet the needs of users, including a half hour adaption for young leaders. The take action campaign includes discussion guides, lesson plans, a reading list, a partner toolkit, directions on how to organize an event, and a professional development curriculum for educators. The campaign has created a grassroots network of parent groups, the Promise Clubs. It's had screenings on Capitol Hill to influence policies to support black male achievement. It's worked with hundreds of partner organizations, from the United Way to Mocha Moms. The 2014 BRITDOC case study reported 650 community screenings organized by partner organizations.

In 2013, I proposed “water” as a School-wide focus that ultimately involved over 20 courses in Film and Media Arts, as well as courses in Strategic Communications and Journalism, and the *Center for Environmental Filmmaking* and *Center for Media and Social Impact*. Students were inspired by Jessica Yu’s documentary *Last Call at the Oasis*, which covers the totality of the worldwide water crisis, from scarcity and overuse to sanitation, pollution and toxic contamination, through the stories of compelling frontline advocates and scientists.

One student was interested in the conflict between farmers and environmentalists over phosphorous standards for the Chesapeake Bay. Another wanted to promote a campaign to promote tap water instead of bottled water. A third wanted to help build awareness that 2.6 billion people don’t have toilets. A fourth was passionate about changing agricultural groundwater management policies.

Here are highlights of my advice to these students:

You can create powerful media with deep human stories, while deploying tools and techniques of strategic communication, including: goal setting, message research, audience targeting, partnerships for outreach and audience engagement, media relations, online and mobile communications, and monitoring and evaluation.

Get smart about the issues. Map the landscape of knowledge and action on water. Hundreds of water organizations, coalitions and campaigns provide information, policy goals and analysis. Read the best investigative and explanatory journalism. How are water issues covered in daily news -- mainstream and alternative, print, TV and online? Who are the leading experts on water? What studies and reports do they recommend?

Tap into public opinion research -- polling and focus group results. Do your issues strike a responsive chord, and with what audiences? What about diversity: race, ethnicity, age, and geography? What are the barriers we face in getting people to listen, to care, to act? Are there deep-seated attitudes? Is there a conventional wisdom that we need to address?

Assess the on-going public education or advocacy campaigns related to your issues? What problems are they trying to solve? Who are the stakeholders and change agents? Target audiences? What is their opposition? What media and materials have they produced/are producing, for what distribution? Where are the gaps in their media strategies?

Use the Nature Conservancy's report on the "Language of Conservation," a strategic summary of ten years of public opinion research. The results show that safe drinking water is the top concern. While, the urgent forecast of water depletion is much less of a concern. But, the legacy question -- "Will my children and grandchildren have clean, safe water?" -- elicits very strong emotions. In all water communications, the next generation is a central theme.

So, if you take on the overuse of water by agribusiness, then you have a difficult challenge and may have to take the measured approach of the Redford Center's documentary *Watershed* – profiling local leaders with solutions to the depletion of the Colorado River. But, if it's a public health story, the HBO documentary *GasLand* may be your model. *GasLand* is a personal quest to expose fracking and it holds corporations and politicians accountable. *GasLand* strikes a responsive chord in audiences ready to believe the worst of corporate greed and congressional inaction.

Form pivotal partnerships. Partners can bring knowledge, networks and public trust to a project. Get help at every stage. Map the ecosystems of change: advocacy organizations, government agencies, socially responsible corporations, journalists, scholars and scientists, media partners. Which organizations have well-developed policy goals? Which have conducted research? What is their online presence, website and social media. Are they trusted sources of information? Can they help identify stories, find characters and broker places for production? Do they have the capacity to help with outreach and promotion and media relations? Can they help produce take-action toolkits, discussion guides and educational materials? Can they set up screenings with decision-makers? And, do they have the capacity, the network and field based partners, to provide a legacy platform to sustain the work for years to come?

Build a team that reflects your production, distribution and engagement goals.

Design production to reflect plans/opportunities for distribution, promotion and outreach, and audience engagement, movement building and policy change.

Think in terms of a constellation of media products and platforms. It's all about dynamic content -- appropriate forms for targeted audiences -- not just a single documentary film or TV special. Think about multiple versions from the beginning, positioned in a landscape of knowledge and action.

In impact producing, engagement doesn't wait until the film is finished. It starts in pre-production -- building a network of stakeholders, through social media and events, through crowd sourcing and crowd funding. Each stage of distribution requires specific strategies for media relations, targeted audience engagement, and partnerships, for example, as a long-form film rolls from festivals to theatrical release, to broadcast then Netflix, VOD and DVD.

Build in outreach and engagement from the beginning. Don't wait until post-production to begin development of a website, media relations strategies and social media platforms. Use emerging media. Crowd-sourcing. Crowd-funding. Impact producers have to be flexible and nimble, always prototyping, testing and revising. While the film is in progress, get feedback on themes, stories and characters. Build a community before the film is released. Organize community screenings. Test lesson plans, discussion guides and media messages.

Measure impact through collaboration. Assessment is a collaborative process. Get your partners and stakeholders together. Find the expertise and support in web staff, consultants, academics, and nonprofit service organizations.

Tap into resources, tools and case studies online. The Fledgling Fund papers at thefledglingfund.org include *Assessing Creative Media's Social Impact* and *Distribution to Audience Engagement*. Case studies of *Blue Vinyl* and its *My House is Your House* campaign are in the impact paper and *Made in L.A.* in the distribution paper, both provide comprehensive models. BRITDOC'S *The Impact Field Guide and Toolkit* is an extensive set of resources from planning to evaluation with a wide range of case studies at <http://impactguide.org>. For a broad survey of impact assessment theories and techniques, read *Social Justice Documentary: Designing for Impact* at cmsimpact.org. Case studies and impact strategies and tools are also available at Active Voice Lab, ITVS, Participant Media, and Working Films. Brave New Films and Not in Our Town are excellent models of engagement.

At American University, we are exploring how to develop this new role of impact producing that has emerged in social documentary. We agree that it is a role that can both be embraced by a filmmaker or fulfilled by a professional partner. With what knowledge and know-how? With the skills to build a coalition of organizations, connect to grassroots communities, design public events, use public opinion research, manage media relations, move a story through social media, work with media partners, and plan for the legacy of a film. And, with an understanding of how art affects culture and politics. We are asking, how can universities become laboratories for this role, creating new models for training, and producing research across professions and academic disciplines?

Old Words of Wisdom for New Impact Producers

“What will you do when the lights come up?” - George Stoney

"Here's the camera and the microphone. Now it's your turn to tell the bastards what it's like to live in a slum." – Ruby Grierson

“...accuse and show the way.” – Joris Ivens

“I promised them that as long as they were fighting, we would never stop fighting too.” – Jon Alpert

“Everybody needs history but the people who need it most are poor folks - people without resources or options.” – Henry Hampton

“So if I'm making a big movie about the vinyl industry, there still has to be something that's human, and personal, and heart wrenching.” – Judith Helfand

“They aren't characters (personages)—they are people (personnes).”—Agnes Varda

“I want to address the viewer in a critical state” – Alain Resnais