

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.

Framing is key 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. Is the time ripe for policy change? Or, is it the time to build awareness and elevate the issue? Who are 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.

Another example of assessing and researching what works is the movement to provide public pre-school. The frame is critical. If it’s called childcare, it’s limited to warehousing kids. If it’s framed as early childhood education, different expectations are set, different policies and resources required. Stories showing the benefits of early childhood education motivate parents to find tools they can use -- a checklist for a family friendly workplace, approved childcare services, best practices in early childhood education. But, they also find proposed standards, news about legislation, polling results from a coalition affirming public support. They are surprised by how much they can know and how much people like them are doing. They migrate from the personal to the political.

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, as well as our [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 water management policies.

Here are highlights of my advice to these students:

You *can* create powerful media with deep human stories -- Critic Roger Ebert called documentaries "empathy machines" -- *and* deploy 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, 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 their stakeholders/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," which draws on ten years of public opinion research. The results show that safe drinking water is the top concern in the U.S. Water depletion is much less of a concern, but the legacy question -- "Will my children and grandchildren be able to enjoy nature?" -- elicits very strong emotions. 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* - local leaders with solutions to the depletion of the Colorado River.

But, if it's a public health story, the HBO documentary *GasLand* on fracking may be your model. In all water communications, the next generation is a central theme.

Form pivotal partnerships. 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.

Build in outreach and engagement from the beginning. Don't wait until post-production to begin development of a website and social media platforms, or discussion guides, toolkits, and media relations strategies. Build a community before the film is released. While the film is in progress, get feedback on themes, stories and characters.

Use emerging media. Crowdsourcing. Crowdfunding. Crowdfeedback. Impact producers have to be flexible and nimble, always prototyping and testing, getting feedback and revising.

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, 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, ITVS, Participant Media, and Working Films. Brave New Films and Not in Our Town are excellent models of engagement.

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