

From Distribution to Audience Engagement - Social Change Through Film

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FROM DISTRIBUTION TO AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

INTRODUCTION

What comes to mind when someone mentions independent film “distribution”? You can probably define that fairly easily – the selling and delivery of these titles to audiences through any number of means: theatrical, DVD sales, festival release, broadcast and perhaps even online streaming.

What if someone said “outreach” or “audience engagement”? Can you define and distinguish those terms as easily? We have found that these two terms are often used interchangeably – creating confusion within the social issue independent film community, and in our own conversations. We hope that this paper creates a more standard definition for the terms and infuses a new understanding of the importance of each of these distinct components and how they work together to spark social change. From our perspective, distinguishing these terms is critical because they are key components of the work we do at The Fledgling Fund – supporting creative media that inspires social change.

We can use The Fledgling Fund grantee *Made in L.A.*, an Emmy-award-winning character-driven documentary film that profiles the lives of immigrant garment workers in L.A., to briefly illustrate each component. When Robert Bahar and Almudena Carracedo set out to make *Made in L.A.*, they knew their jobs as filmmakers would not be complete upon securing sales agreements with traditional distributors for the film. They recognized that the film would have the potential to change hearts and minds and to ignite social change around the issues of immigration reform and immigrant working conditions by connecting both traditional and non-traditional audiences to the personal stories behind an often impersonal and policy-heavy issue.

Beginning in 2008, *Made in L.A.* was distributed comprehensively: over 85 film festivals, broadcast on PBS POV and Spanish National Television, self-distribution of home/community DVDs, educational distribution to over 620 universities through California Newsreel, and over 460 community screenings, and counting. The in-person screenings brought *Made in L.A.* directly to an estimated 30,000 people. In addition, 139 of these *Made in L.A.* events featured local activists who could connect the issues in the film to local struggles with direct action potential, and over 100 events catalyzed conversations within faith-based communities. These strategic screenings, in partnership with non-profits and NGOs, focused on stopping sweat shops and improving immigrant workers’ rights, would never have been organized by a traditional film distributor; it was Robert and Almudena’s commitment to non-traditional audiences that brought them what was by many measures their most critical and measureable successes. In addition, significant online outreach and engagement brought the filmmakers’ message to over 250,000 people and three high-profile Washington, D.C. events, including a screening on Capitol

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Hill, put the film in front of policymakers as they prepared to confront immigration reform. The outreach and strategic communications work the filmmakers did began long before the film was complete and involved building meaningful partnerships with over 20 national and international organizations. The filmmakers worked closely with these partners to identify target audiences and reach out to them at key points to spread the word about upcoming screenings and related events. Once these audiences had seen the film and were eager to begin or deepen their involvement with the immigration reform movement, the filmmakers and their nonprofit and faith-based partners focused on audience engagement by encouraging four actions: Learning more about immigration reform and contacting elected representatives, fostering community-based conversations about immigration often with a local action component, being more conscious consumers to avoid goods made in sweatshops, and getting involved with community organizing and social justice events. These actions were, and are, directly connected to the film's narrative, tangible, doable and impactful – hallmarks of a well planned audience engagement campaign. While the challenges featured in the film are still not solved and the work continues, the *Made in L.A.* team was able to spark new conversations and debate, grow the movement for reform and inspire real tangible actions from audiences around the world.

Made in L.A. is just one example of a documentary film inspiring social change by using the tools of distribution, outreach/strategic communications and audience engagement. It is important to note that every film has a unique path to achieving their social change goals. That said, “distribution”, “outreach and strategic communications” and “audience engagement” are key processes that, based on our experience with our grantees, seem to be nearly universal for success. Throughout this paper, we will outline The Fledgling Fund’s definitions of these terms and how they support our work of inspiring social change through creative media in a unique way. We will then connect those three components to our *Dimensions of Impact*, which were described in a previous Fledgling Fund paper. Lastly, this paper will outline the four primary questions that filmmaking teams should address as early as possible in order to maximize their film’s social impact. This paper is intentionally and solely focused on social-issue independent documentary film, as that is The Fledgling Fund’s primary interest.

DEFINING DISTRIBUTION, OUTREACH AND STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS AND AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

In the *Made in L.A.* example above, distribution, outreach/strategic communications and audience engagement were all key factors in achieving social impact. The film itself is the foundation for success - a strong character-driven story is a critical component in inspiring social change with film. As funders, we often see multiple films on a very similar subject or with a similar social change goal in each funding round. As filmmakers know all too well, there are literally infinite ways to tell the same story. Within that range of storytelling, some methods truly speak to an audience by sparking real emotions – hope, sympathy, rage, sadness, inspiration, connection, frustration, empathy, joy, pride, etc. – and others do little more than entertain or inform. It is that emotional connection with a film that we believe creates the building block for substantive audience engagement and social change. So, as we discuss the definitions and functions of distribution, outreach/strategic communications and audience engagement, we are assuming that we are starting with films that are of exceptional quality with the emotional connection that facilitates the rest of this process. What follows are definitions and related examples - “snapshots” – of projects that we have supported and from which we have learned a great deal.



Distribution

In this continuum, distribution is probably simultaneously the most and least well-understood term. The independent film distribution environment is changing faster than most of us can reasonably keep up with – making the definition highly elusive. So, this paper will not attempt to outline the complex and shifting methodology behind successful independent film distribution. Instead, we will simply define what distribution is and what it is not in broad terms. Distribution is the process of placing a film in (online or offline) venues to make sure that it is accessible to audiences. Traditionally, this involves securing a theatrical release, national and international television broadcasts, a festival run or DVD sales. In addition, we can now add to that list various non-traditional online screening portals and the growing number of community screening venues that side-step the cost, complexity and other entry barriers of traditional methods. The distribution process, as defined above, is often long and usually begins early in the life of a film. From our experience, wise filmmakers are thinking about appropriate and realistic distribution methods far before their film is actually complete. Many have even secured broadcast, festival or theatrical release before completion. Concurrently, depending on contract terms, they are thinking about how to leverage these traditional opportunities and link them to a comprehensive community screening or online streaming strategy to supplement those outlets. A number of filmmakers are now successfully bypassing all the traditional pathways of distribution and pursuing nontraditional approaches. While not easy, these non-traditional strategies can still reach high numbers of viewers with sometimes better financial returns for the makers. For a much more comprehensive overview of the new and old “worlds” of distribution, please see [*Welcome to the New World of Distribution*](#). Peter Broderick’s paper on the subject, which provides an excellent description of the ways in which distribution has changed and is continuing to evolve. So, with that definition of what independent film distribution is, we now turn to what it is not. Distribution does not involve the process of letting people know about a film or getting them to attend a screening or seek it out in any of the venues or channels where it can be accessed. All of those activities fall under outreach and strategic communications.

DISTRIBUTION SNAPSHOT

Population Action International’s (PAI) film, *The Silent Partner*, about the complex issues associated with sex within marriage, extramarital sex, violence within marriage, HIV, and women’s empowerment in Sub-Saharan Africa provides a good example of highly strategic distribution. This film was intended for use by PAI’s colleagues around the world, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa, to connect to policymakers, media and activists to convey key messages that will help protect women from HIV infection. PAI held screenings in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, the United States and Canada with audiences that included prominent media, policymakers, and community members, and distributed nearly 1,000 copies of the film both through participation in international conferences and by responding to requests for copies made by partners around the world. Screenings were also held at U.S. college campuses as part of PAI’s University Tour Initiative, which provided the opportunity for young people to become more engaged in these issues. While a theatrical or festival run is often seen as prestigious and desirable, PAI recognized that they could have the deepest social impact with the film by going straight to their target audiences with its distribution. Sometimes, it is equally as important to determine the wrong venues for the film, as determining the right venues.



Outreach and Strategic Communications

Once the film has been made available and accessible through various platforms and distribution channels, the next question is how to let people know about it and feel attached enough to the film, the filmmaker or the subject to actually watch it. In the non-independent film world, this process largely falls under the publicity and advertising categories - and occasionally those terms are used to describe this phase of independent film distribution as well. This step is critical in making social change. If your film is out in the world, but nobody hears about or sees it, your chances of making a real social impact disappear. Even more so than distribution, outreach and strategic communications must begin well before the film's completion. Under the old models, tactics to reach audiences were timed right before or upon the film's release. Now, we know it needs to happen long before that. Luckily, the growing field of online social networking tools makes this efficient, easy, and inexpensive.

In short, "outreach and strategic communications" is the way that filmmakers tell the world about their film. This is largely determined by how the film fits into the social movement, how the movement itself has connected with the film, embraced it and worked with the filmmaker to understand the message it conveys, how it fits into the needs of the social movement and how the members of this movement can see it. In order to do this effectively, film teams (made up of filmmakers, outreach and engagement coordinators, movement builders and/or leaders/organizers) have to think critically about how and where the film's message should be conveyed. Here are examples of how this might be accomplished:

- Online social networking tools (Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, YouTube Channel, etc.)

OUTREACH & STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

With a laser-like focus on policy-change for women in combat and veterans, the *Lioness* filmmaker team, led by Directors Meg McLagan and Daria Sommers, knew how important their outreach strategy would be to the success of the film. In order to facilitate that success, they established pivotal partnerships with two organizations, the Center for Women Veterans and Disabled American Veterans (DAV). Both partnerships provided *Lioness* with further credibility and access to military and political leaders and organizations. The partnership with the Center for Women Veterans has led to *Lioness* becoming institutionalized as an educational and clinical component of women veteran care at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). DAV's expertise provided *Lioness* with insider knowledge of the legislative process and ongoing advice on how to navigate the subtle politics involved in bringing a project like this to fruition. *Lioness* also partnered with DAV in order to execute its Capitol Hill Screening in 2009. That screening helped launch the women veterans bill, which was included in S. 1963, The Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act of 2010. On May 5th, 2010, President Obama signed into law this comprehensive bi-partisan legislation to prepare the VA for the influx of women veterans who will access care there in the coming years. The law will address many of the unique needs of female veterans, particularly those returning from Iraq and Afghanistan. Without the thoughtful outreach work of the *Lioness* team that established these critical partnerships, it is possible that this legislative success would still not have happened.



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- A website dedicated to the film
 - Radio stories, newspaper articles, magazine or television coverage, blog coverage or other ecommunications
 - Mutually beneficial partnerships with non-profit organizations, corporations, religious bodies or educational institutions
 - Word of mouth
 - Speaking engagements
 - Public stunts or other creative methods that are focused on making a splash that attracts media and public attention

While this list is only a broad sample of the ways that independent social-issue filmmakers get the word out about their films, they seem to currently be the most common and fruitful categories. And, importantly, we often find that the most successful campaigns come from those teams that think outside the box on outreach and strategic communications – connecting with potential audiences in new and surprising ways.

One of the real assets that independent social-issue filmmakers can tap into for their outreach and strategic communications work is that, in most cases, there are already organized social movements with which their films can collaborate. If mutual benefit (as described in more detail in the next section) is established, managed, and communicated effectively, filmmakers can create partnerships with leaders of corresponding social movements to create synergistic relationships. These relationships can make or break the outreach and strategic communications of a film. The most effective partnerships often start before the film is complete with time for the filmmakers to tap into the needs of the movement, build authentic relationships, get to know organizers, and target audiences and help them feel invested in the film's completion and distribution. For outreach and strategic communications, relationships with these partners may look something like this:

- Filmmaker and organization link to one another's respective websites - especially useful are "Take Action" steps (as described in more detail below) hosted and co-branded with NGO and non-profit partners).
- Filmmaker and organization blog, tweet and send out other communications about one another.
- Organization lists and promotes upcoming screenings to local, regional and national target audiences.
- Organization hosts or organize their own screenings that they promote extensively to their membership.
- Filmmaker and organization discuss each other's work during press opportunities.



Audience Engagement

The Fledgling Fund loves audience engagement – the first and primary point at which we can begin to detect and measure real social engagement and change. Viewing a social issue film can, despite the importance of the issues, be a profoundly passive activity. Emotions can run high, but an audience member may not be interacting with the issue in any substantive way before or during the screening. But, when a film ends and audience emotions are tangible, the filmmaking team, with the support of its partners, has a real opportunity to move the audience from passive to active. That small but critical window of opportunity – high emotions, a captive audience, a pressing social issue and collaborative partners – are the right ingredients for inspiring audiences to begin or strengthen their engagement with the social issue.

After seeing a powerful documentary film, we have found, and filmmakers have confirmed, that the most common question people ask themselves, their peers, the screening host or the filmmaker is, “What can I do?” It is a shame when there is no answer to that question. When people feel compelled enough to go from passively viewing a film to asking how they can become active with the social issue, that is the real gift to the social movement. Filmmakers can deliver new energy and passion to the movement if they know how to answer that question immediately, while the emotions and connections are still fresh AND before that window of opportunity closes.

“The Fledgling Fund loves audience engagement - the first and primary point at which we can begin to detect and measure real social engagement and change.”

Filmmakers can maximize that intense and fleeting energy in the following ways:

- Suggest an immediate action - signing a petition, making a donation, pledging to volunteer or host a screening.
- Sign up for the film’s mailing list to learn more.
- Connect the audience directly with partner organizations who are working locally, regionally, nationally or internationally on the issue and have already created concrete ways to involve people.
- Drive the audience members to the film’s website where they can learn about how to engage with the issue, either through partner campaigns or unique film-initiated campaigns. This can be done through text messages, having a computer on-site, having the URL on the screen or handing out post-cards or other takeaways that have the film’s website details.
- Encourage the audience to form local action committees right after the screening that will continue to organize around the issue.



- Initiate a discussion with the audience to help them learn more from each other about what is happening locally on the subject; this is an important method of helping people share their emotions and feel supported.
- Ask the audience to spread the word about the film, and more importantly, about the issue through their personal networks, professional circles, local press and their blogs or social networking sites.

An important factor in each of these categories of “asks” is having strong partner relationships, as mentioned in the outreach and strategic communications section. During audience engagement, these relationships become even more important. “Asks” have to be generated in collaboration with the social movements. The social movement (as represented by non-profit organizations, student groups, individual activists, religious bodies, etc.) can use the film to:

- Energize their base audiences.
- Bring new people to their core to participate in actions related to the issue.
- Raise money for their work.
- Educate more people about the often complex issues represented.
- Connect the movement with personal stories, emotions and real lives that represent the issues.
- Tell untold stories that help to shape the structure and intensity of the debate around the issue.

AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT SNAPSHOT

The Recruiter, a film by Edet Belzberg, continues to accomplish its audience engagement campaign goals. Beginning with a well-defined target audience – high school students, and especially those in areas with highly active military recruitment – they are creating spaces in classrooms for interactive and thought provoking discussion about the recruitment process and the facts about military service. The filmmakers use a curriculum created for the film designed to encourage students to think critically about these issues. For example, after a screening of the film at Wilson High School in Washington, DC, the students decided in the middle of the lesson that they wanted to question their high school’s own Army recruiter and invited him into the classroom right then and there. This opened up a very frank and respectful discussion about the military’s presence on high school campuses. This is just one example of how the film is encouraging the students to apply what they see in the film into their own lives. In order to share this learning with other students, educators and parents, the filmmakers film these interactions and post them on their website.



The filmmaking team benefits from these partnerships because the social movement or the networks of people they represent will very likely:

- Offer issue-area expertise that is critical to the legitimacy and public palatability of the film.
- Help connect the film with local, regional and national policy makers who can be influenced by the story represented in the film.
- Have existing well-crafted “asks” that will help audiences easily transition from passive to active around the issue.
- Support the filmmaking team in creating, or making accessible, viewer’s guides, fact sheets, school curricula or other online tools that help people to organize and stay involved.
- Act as the liaison between the filmmaking team and the activist community so that the film team does not have to start from scratch in establishing these relationships.

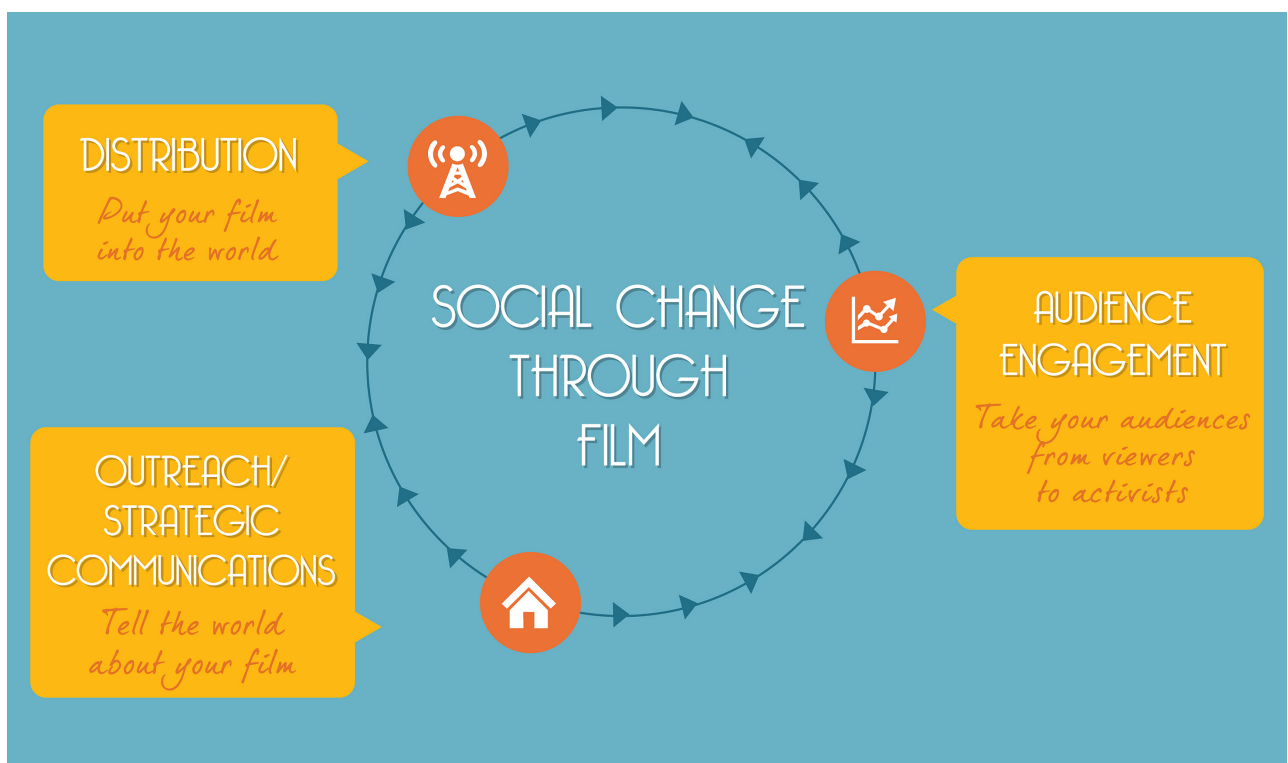
In short, audience engagement is the process of moving a film’s audience from passive viewing to active involvement with the issue represented. It is what happens after audiences see the film and want to use their energy, resources, ideas, connections, or time to make a difference. This piece is the most fulfilling for The Fledgling Fund because we can begin to see concrete examples of how a film is facilitating social change.



HOW COMPONENTS WORK TOGETHER

We hope the definitions and examples above have made these three terms more distinct. However, we also recognize that while each component has a unique methodology and outcome, they often overlap and support one another. The chart below illustrates this synergy:

Figure 1





These three phases are typically not linear. For example, sometimes audience engagement work happens before a film is complete and distributed. Potential audiences learn of the film, and the issues represented via a comprehensive film website, shorts made from the film's early footage or through early outreach and strategic communications. The filmmaker and organizational partners can then drive these new potential audiences to action before they even see the full film. And, outreach and strategic communications often (and preferably) begins before distribution. It is also important to note that a social issue documentary film's life can be as long as demand is generated. Often, that demand waxes and wanes as the issue flows in and out of news cycles, political priorities and public consciousness.

It is also critical to understand how each of these phases supports the success of the others. For example:

- Strong outreach and communications work leads to eventual audience engagement but also may spur additional distribution opportunities as demand rises for the film in new markets and distributors recognize the potential of the film based on the large base of support already built.
- Robust audience engagement work often serves a dual bottom line: the social issue is bolstered and the filmmaker or distribution company sells more DVD's or theater tickets as word spreads, creating more revenue.

These reciprocal relationships are sometimes overlooked by distributors or others with a focus on the financial bottom line. While The Fledgling Fund's bottom line is social change, we also are concerned about the financial health of the films and filmmakers we support, who dedicate so much to their success. So, while we see the outreach and audience engagement phases as critical for achieving social change with film, we also recognize that they serve a second purpose – to help build a financially sustainable model for filmmakers.

MULTI-COMPONENT SNAPSHOT

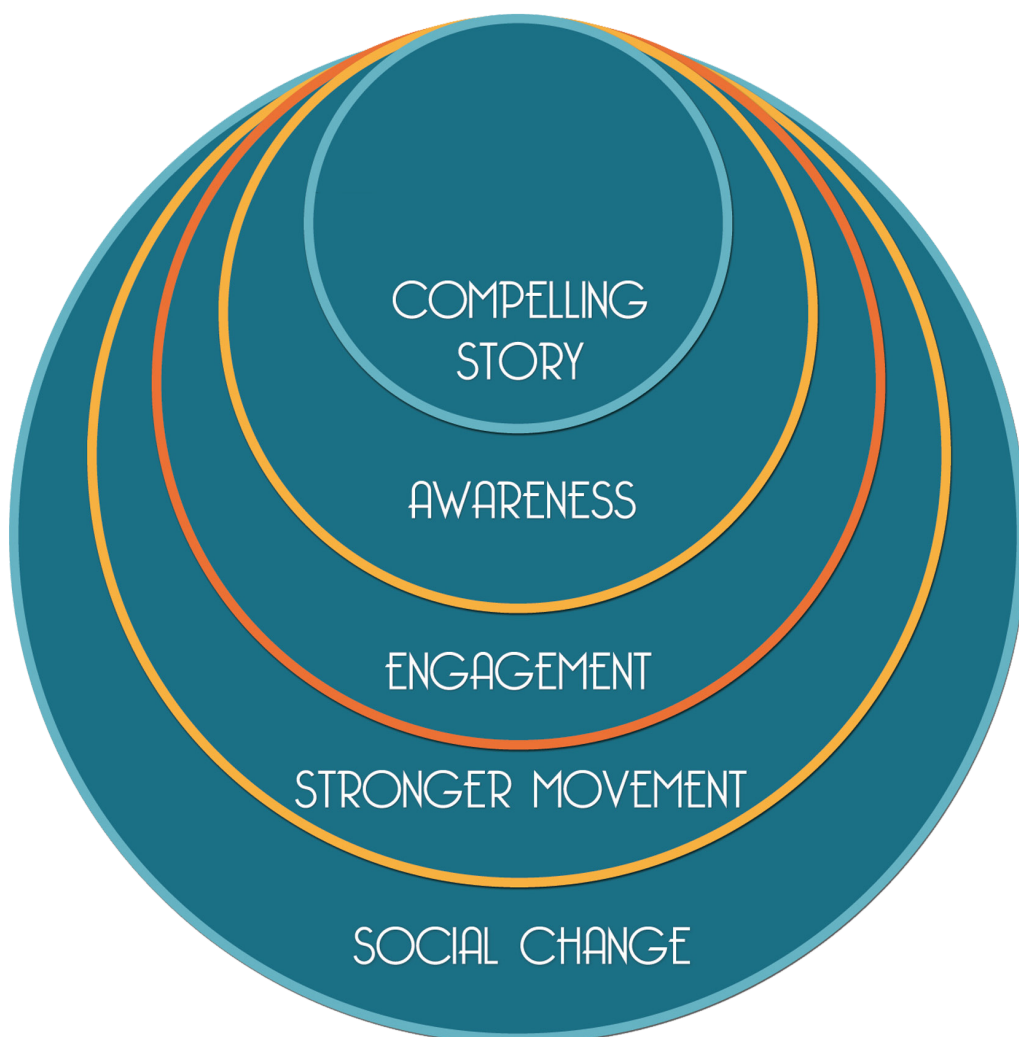
The Waiting Room provides an excellent example of how these phases all support each other. *The Waiting Room* is a film, currently in production as of this writing, which tells the story of patients as they pass through a hospital emergency waiting room in Oakland, CA. Before the film is complete, the filmmaking team, led by Director Peter Nicks, is spending tremendous energy on an interactive video-based blog that introduces potential audiences to the powerful and unique stories of people passing through emergency rooms. In addition, *The Waiting Room* team is developing an interactive storybooth that will be placed in the waiting room of the Oakland hospital (and others to be determined) that will allow emergency room visitors to share their stories, hear the stories of others and learn about the project. This project's simultaneous production, outreach and audience engagement will contribute greatly to the content of the film, the potential for widespread distribution and the success of the social change goals the project embodies.



DISTRIBUTION, OUTREACH AND STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS AND AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT AND HOW THEY CONNECT TO THE FLEDGLING FUND'S CREATIVE MEDIA DIMENSIONS OF IMPACT

The Fledgling Fund is committed to assessing the social impact of the projects that we support, and subsequently our own work. We do this by using our Dimensions of Impact. For a more detailed description of how we use this framework, please see our paper on the subject, [*Assessing Creative Media's Social Impact*](#).

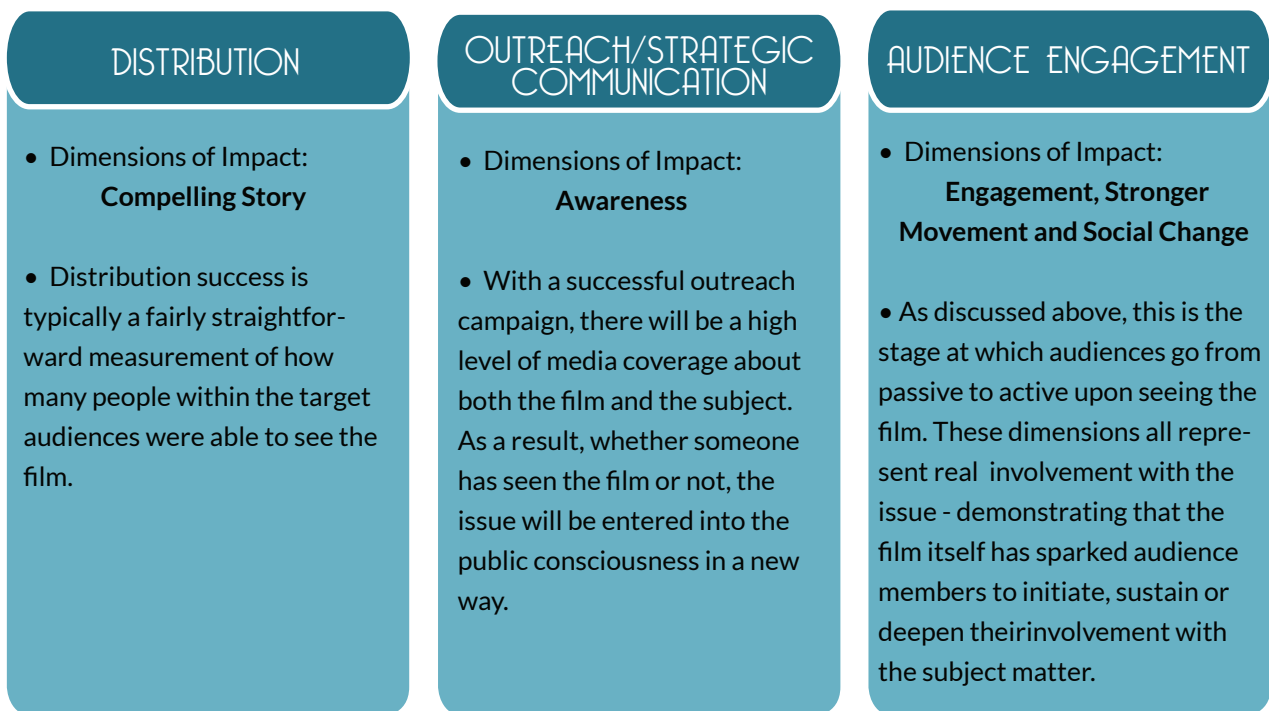
Figure 2 - Dimensions of Impact





Distribution, outreach/strategic communications, and audience engagement are the processes that lead to the outcomes represented by our *Dimensions of Impact*. As stated above, the foundation for all of this work is a powerful film, as represented by the first dimension - Compelling Story, which enhances a film's ability to secure distribution and makes outreach and audience engagement easier. Outreach and strategic communications are linked to a film's ability to raise awareness about the issues, and a well-crafted audience engagement plan moves the public to increased engagement, strengthened social movements and ultimately leads to social change.

Figure 3



GOING DEEPER WITH OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT

Each of these three phases requires early and sustained planning. It is important to note that there is no single “magic bullet” for creating social change with documentary film. Every film’s strategy is unique and must be specifically tailored to the film and the film team’s social change goals and the needs of the social movement. Long before a film’s completion, we suggest that film teams (including partners from the social movement) ask and answer four critical questions to help guide this process:



What is the Overarching Social Change Goal?

Before thinking about a plan of action, there must first be an overarching social change goal, based on the subject and nature of the film. It is important that this goal is tangible, realistic and measurable. For example, a goal of “world peace” or the “end of poverty” are noble and desirable, but they are, sadly, not realistic (certainly not in the short-term or with one film). Instead, something more focused such as “encourage college students to think about a career in international development or peace studies” would be more productive. In order to determine this goal, film teams should research what the most important avenues for securing change are. For example, does the issue require high-level policy change? Local policy change? Grassroots activism? A corporate culture shift? A change in consumer behavior? More microlevel change, such as individual mind or behavior change or altering family practices? By identifying the most impactful avenues for change, the film team then has a strong foundation for planning.

When determining the overall social change goal, film teams should be aware of the “tipping point” for the issue and where the issue currently sits within the political, social and cultural environments. Are people already highly aware of the issue, but don’t know how to solve it? Is it an issue that has received little or no attention up until now? Has there already been large or small-scale movements around the issues that were unsuccessful?

SOCIAL CHANGE GOAL SETTING SNAPSHOT

We can look at the film *Two Angry Moms* to demonstrate the process of determining a social change goal. As the film’s title suggests, the film follows two mothers on a mission to improve the way America’s children eat while they are at school. Their overarching social change goal for the film was to create a tool for parents and other advocates to learn how they can get real, whole, good food into schools and reverse the Centers for Disease Control prediction that this is the first generation in our nation’s history that will live shorter lives than those of their parents. As mothers, they had observed that there was typically little recourse for parents who were upset about their children’s school food. The film highlights best practices around the nation and follows changes at one school over a single school year, offering concrete steps for audiences to follow. Throughout the process of making the film, the lesson they learned was that this goal was not only important, but was absolutely achievable. That message is articulated in a digestible and non-intimidating way, allowing the audience to imagine themselves participating in similar change in their own cities.

Why? Is the issue at a tipping point – meaning, is it so close to achieving change that your film and its audience engagement campaign may be what would push it over the edge and solve the problem? These are all preliminary questions that must be answered before determining a realistic overall social change goal for the film. Once that is determined, the film team can then turn to identifying the target audiences.

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Who are the Target Audience(s)?

For every film, there must be a more specific target audience than “the general public.” Such a broad focus rarely succeeds. Filmmakers should segment their target audiences in a variety of ways such as age, political affiliation, gender, geography, opinion about the represented issue, religion, income level, or social status, and then reach out to the segmented groups in distinct ways.

Filmmakers and funders in this field often wonder how to reach “beyond the choir” with their films. While it is obviously most desirable to change the hearts and minds of the biggest opponents of the issue, it also is important to remember that strengthening the choir is important to social movements as well. Even the most staunch and active believers in the message of a film may need new tools to help spread the word, a new emotional connection to the issue or updated information about the state of the movement. Even choirs need practice, so we shouldn’t under-estimate the importance of reaching this group.

In addition, there is an incredibly large and vital group of people who reside “just beyond the choir” – if asked, they may agree with the film’s message in principle -but have never been compelled to get involved - or they have been unsure about the film’s subject and a powerful film could push them over the edge to being a true believer in its message. This “middle” audience is essential to social issue film success as there is a real possibility of moving those people from armchair activists to real leaders in the movement.

TARGET AUDIENCE SNAPSHOT

Many filmmakers define their primary audience and perhaps secondary, tertiary or additional audiences based on the subject of their film. We can use the film *Sin By Silence*, a compelling film about the extreme consequences of domestic violence, and its corresponding outreach and audience engagement work, to demonstrate this. One of the primary audiences for the *Sin By Silence* campaign is college students - often a target of social issue film audience engagement campaigns due to the organized structures that exist on college campuses, the malleability of student minds and the space created on campuses for debate and critical thought. The film targeted both males and females on campuses around the country and especially at more conservative-leaning schools or schools that had little or no domestic violence prevention programming. Olivia Klaus, the film’s Director, also targeted women in shelters or those who were former domestic violence victims. While these two audiences are potentially at very different ends of the spectrum on their understanding of the issue, each was equally important and impactful. When the film screened on college campuses, the film team’s goal was dating violence prevention and they engaged the students in highly informative discussions about spotting the signs of abuse in their own relationships and those of their peers about how to escape those potentially dangerous situations. When the film was screened in shelters with domestic violence victims, the film team focused on using the film as a catalyst to make sure those women were equipped with the emotional and physical support they needed to stay removed from abusive relationships. By having these two separate events in the same local area, the film’s team was able to create a bridge afterward that connected a young cadre of advocates with their neighborhood shelter for further education and volunteerism to help expand the local impact for this vital cause.



What are the Goals for these Target Audiences?

The next step is to create an “ask” or goal for each target audience – delivered in the audience engagement phase. For example, it is important to have different goals for those that are already part of the “choir”, those just beyond the choir and even for those far beyond the choir. Those that are already believers in the film’s message may be ready to engage on a far deeper level with the issue than those groups that have only begun to change their mind after viewing the film.

A critical component when assessing the goals for different target audiences is to work with strategic partners within the movement. Often, these are nonprofit organizations that are entrenched in the issue and have their fingers on the pulse of the political, social, and educational happenings around the movement. These organizations may be locally, regionally, nationally or internationally-focused. Filmmakers should begin forming these partnerships as early as possible, as described above in this paper. These non-profit partners typically already have pre-defined asks for different population segments and many filmmakers adopt these asks for the film’s audience engagement work in order to most effectively support the work of the organization and to maintain coherent messaging around the issue.

These partnerships are particularly important when the issue represented in the film plays out differently based on geography. It is nearly impossible for a filmmaker to know the complexities of the issue in each city where a film may screen. However, there is likely a local or regional organization that does know all of these details and can guide audiences to the most impactful local actions after they view the film and, importantly, continue following up with these audiences long after the film has screened.

The most important component when crafting the message for a social issue film is to know the film’s audiences and understand how they can potentially contribute to social change. After defining and researching the audiences and choosing the message for each of those audiences, the next step is to create a method for reaching and engaging those audiences.

TARGET AUDIENCE GOALS SNAPSHOT

The *Gasland* audience engagement campaign provides a great example of segmented audience asks. Because this film is based on the health and environmental consequences of natural gas drilling, one of the ways that the *Gasland* team, led by Director Josh Fox, divided the target audiences was into those directly affected by the drilling and those not yet directly affected, based on where they live.

Gasland focused their outreach on the areas in New York and Pennsylvania that the drilling industry was targeting; driving rural and urban audiences to see the film and take immediate action. One piece of their localized outreach was a billboard campaign, which they pulled together with local partners. For those in affected areas, an important message was to urge people to understand the consequences of the drilling, share their stories with their neighbors, tell how they had personally been affected, and participate in designated local actions, organized by the film’s non-profit partners. The film team also worked with non-profit partners in each screening area to understand the political environment and guide concerned film audiences to their local representatives who were strong on the issue of natural gas drilling regulation or banning. *Gasland* also used their community screenings to begin to build a national registry of stories from people affected by drilling, picking up where the film left off. The asks for this target audience were about becoming informed, getting involved in local actions, voting for local representatives who believe in the film’s message and sending e-mails to those representatives who were not strong on the subject.



How Can a Film and its Outreach and Audience Engagement Strategies Effectively Reach Audiences?

After defining the different target audiences and goals, the next step is to assess the best ways to reach and activate those audiences during both Outreach and Audience Engagement.

The first message that needs to be delivered is always “see this film” in the outreach and strategic communications phase. In order to deliver that first message, filmmakers should find ways that each of the defined target audiences communicate with and among each other and then find ways to share information about the film via those means. For example, if the target audience is college students, filmmaking teams would be wise to reach out to student groups, fraternities and sororities, professors, sports teams, or other existing groups that all communicate with specific subsets of students. Of course, if the film has partnered with an NGO or non-profit that already has campus or student chapters within its structure, this is much better than attempting to reach out “cold” to student groups, which may take a lot of effort without much of a return.

CREATIVE AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT SNAPSHOT

Jesse Epstein is creating an interactive experience based on her series of shorts called *Body Typed*. One of the shorts, *Wet Dreams and False Images*, takes place in a barber shop where she engages the male staff and clients in a discussion about women’s bodies and the false reality of perfection. For her audience engagement campaign, she is taking that experience off the screen and into people’s lives by hosting screenings at barber shops and continuing the discussion around body image that she began in the film. She is also creating a game, to be played online or on mobile phones, that will allow people to test their ability to identify photo re-touching in magazine images.

In addition to outreach, filmmakers also need to focus on creative audience engagement. This process can be as unique as the filmmaking team’s (and their partners) imagination allows. Creativity allows the film’s audience engagement campaign to stand out in a sea of media, advertising, social messaging and other communications. Other examples of audience engagement methods include interactive websites that allow audiences to continue learning and connecting with the issue after they have seen the film. Some include more intensive experiences like interactive games or offline events that allow people to connect with each other and create a real community that did not exist before they

saw the film. The real key to this step is to find a way to connect with the existing social movement so that the film’s campaign is not re-creating any wheels and is able to reach new people in new ways with the film’s message.

Or, if the film is targeting on servative-leaning families, it might be beneficial to reach out to conservative bloggers, right-leaning educational institutions, and other known socially conservative groups. Given the barrage of media that people face every single day, it is no longer enough to put a good film out into the world and trust that the right people will see it. This outreach and strategic communications phase is now critical to achieving social impact.



REACHING YOUR AUDIENCES SNAPSHOT

No Impact Man, a film about a writer in New York City who conducts a one year experiment in which he tries to live with a net-zero impact on the planet, created an impressive platform for a creative audience engagement campaign, organized by the *No Impact Project* and their many non-profit partners. One of the target audiences was the “armchair environmental activists” who believe in the science behind climate change, but who have likely taken very little personal action other than recycling or perhaps donating to an environmental organization. The message of the campaign was that 1) we have to take personal responsibility for environmental degradation and 2) we have to begin to lower our impact by making simple behavior changes, which should not be construed as a punishment – but rather as a path to a more fulfilling and healthy life. The primary program of the campaign was the *No Impact Experiment*. The *No Impact Experiment* engaged over 10,000 people in a week-long experiential learning program where participants gradually reduced their environmental impact to discover the many personal benefits of green living. This immersive experience didn’t simply tell people the message, it allowed them to live the message for a week and build community with other participants from around the world who were also doing the experiment. Essentially, this program took the film’s story off of the screen and into people’s lives in the most tangible way possible and allowed them to learn these valuable lessons for themselves.

CONCLUSION

Clearly, there is much for social issue filmmakers to think about to maximize the social impact of their projects. And, it often begins right in the middle of the heavy-duty development and production of the film. That is exactly why, like most creative pursuits, social issue filmmaking is typically a highly collaborative process, right from the beginning. The partnerships described in this paper are essential to achieving social change and should not be overlooked. The Fledgling Fund has learned an enormous amount from our grantees, who with passion, innovation and real strategic thinking, have used their films to affect social change. Our goal with this paper is to share some of the lessons that we have learned from them and others in the field. It is our hope that we have effectively defined the differences among distribution, outreach/strategic communications and audience engagement, and showed how they work together to maximize social impact. Our grantees have taught us that effective distribution, outreach/strategic communications and audience engagement can lead to the most fulfilling outcome possible – a film that you know has changed hearts and minds, a film that has inspired action and, armed with passionate storytelling, has contributed to a movement that will achieve the kind of social change that was envisioned when the film was created.