DOCUMENTARY DISCOVERY AND ADVOCACY: A CONTEXTUAL AND
CREATIVE PERSPECTIVE

BY

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ABSTRACT

John P. Hepler

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The thesis project described in this abstract fulfills the requirements for a master of arts in liberal studies. The project consists of two required components: an original creation and a contextual analysis to inform the creation. The purpose of the original creation, a documentary short film, is twofold: to gain introductory experience in film production as well as to lay the groundwork for a more professional subsequent film. The documentary short introduces the world of medical research trials as well as the challenging relationship between medical academia and pharmaceutical companies. The filmmaker's point of view is that drug manufacturers can potentially influence scientific findings to increase profit.

The contextual analysis highlights the subgenre of advocacy documentaries, much like the original documentary short described in this abstract, and examines the film’s strategies and impact potential. The analysis informs the project by identifying proven strategies for social change such as partnering with experts to hone the narrative as well as enhancing the filmmaker's understanding of public consciousness concerning the issue. The nuanced subject matter of the documentary short is not widely recognized or understood. With the understanding that social reform is unlikely, the goal of this initial project is to simply bring awareness and clarity to a little known topic in an engaging manner. The short will then be used as a means to solicit funding and engage nonprofit partners, as outlined in the contextual analysis, for a potential feature-length film and outreach efforts.
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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Documentary film has a long and robust history anchored in an effort to disseminate, on regional, national, and international scales, "truth" concerning topics of public interest. Not all nonfiction films have an ultimate goal of direct social change, because the subgenres of this category systemically range from poetic and expository to performative and participatory (Nichols 99). Empirical measures regarding the efficacy and social impact of catalytic documentary film have been elusive because concrete evidence is difficult to appropriate and quantify. Early efforts in the 1940’s by Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) Documentary Research Unit attempted to gauge documentary film impact by using panel interviews before and after broadcasts. “For the function of such broadcasts is to inform, clarify, and impart ideas and each documentary is produced in the knowledge that its success will be measured by these yardsticks” (Wilson, 19).

More recently, nonprofit organizations and enterprises have acknowledged the expanding need for formulating a methodology to measure the impact of advocacy subgenre films on society, politics, and business. Some of these include, but are not limited to, Harmony Institute, Lexalytics, the Ford Foundation, the Wolfensohn Family Foundation, the Pacific Foundation, and the Fledgling Fund. Methodologies vary across these organizations and will be examined in greater detail in the section pertaining to measuring narrative effect.
In line with progress related to effectiveness, the evolution of broadcasting media changes the possibilities of social interactivity, impact and subsequent social reform. The roots for broadcasting began in radio and then grew into television, which led to limitless possibilities for reaching attentive and international audiences using audiovisual programs. Throughout most of the twentieth century, the medium of television concretely defined the rules by which documentary film was funded, created, and distributed. As technological advances introduced the World Wide Web, personal computers, mobile devices, and the ability to deliver digital video virtually for free, the production and distribution model for documentaries began to change. This variability impacts not only how films are produced and distributed, but also how potential viewers are engaged and equipped to take practical action as it relates to the subject matter. One example of technology transforming engagement is webdocs or microdocs, which are short documentaries aimed predominantly at the mobile platform. Filmmakers are able to market their film more directly via the Internet and form strategic partnerships with other sources and sponsors. The Internet also fosters educational outreach by engaging strategic partners who create content around issues linked directly to films posing questions to audiences who will want to learn more.

As with all advances, there are caveats. Technology not only streamlines and expands the distribution model for documentaries, but also allows for a more far-reaching audience and shrinks production cost. Technology also makes more individuals potential filmmakers regardless of the fundamental disciplines of effective writing, cinematography and directing. The end product is simply a greater quantity with potentially inferior quality material. Through the onslaught of commercial advertisements,
news feeds, social media, and instant information on virtually everything, media
inundation incubates social empathy and self-selectivity. This phenomenon further
minimizes the impact of conventionally powerful films because they get lost in the blur
of the media and noise. Self-selectivity also parallels the problem of viewership
accessibility. According to Dr. Patricia Aufderheide, “It can be frustratingly hard for
viewers to find even award-winning and critically praised public affairs and social-issue
documentaries after a brief airing on television or at film festivals” (5).

The question then is how do filmmakers get the necessary exposure for their
social documentary in a way that will engage audiences and motivate societal change.
One potential avenue is through partnering with nonprofit organizations that can help
with film direction and distribution. Partnerships should be a mutually beneficial
relationship: the documentary can help clarify and give voice to the nonprofit cause with
a “creative treatment of actuality” (Grierson 12) and the nonprofit can contribute with
exposure, networking, and potential funding, and message direction.

Documentary case studies can show how various production techniques,
directorial styles, nonprofit partnering, and audience engagement have worked well in
some cases, and not so well in others. Socially conscious advocacy films such as Judith
Helfand’s Blue Vinyl and Davis Guggenheim’s Waiting for “Superman” were created to
inform audiences of potential wrongs as well as to stimulate change, which they both did.
In comparison to advocacy films are participatory oriented films such as Michael
Moore’s Fahrenheit 9/11, where a predisposed position is promoted to guide the viewers’
perception of contemporaneous events, leaving them questioning the validity of the
evidence presented. Moore ends his film with a direct call to viewers to join his effort but
leaves them uncertain as to specifics. Ambiguity in this type of film creates further misperception and polarization on its subject matter, which is debatably the opposite of the capital “T” truth that documentarians assert to disseminate.

The final section of this paper profiles the thesis project’s accompanying documentary short film as well as film script describing the author’s structural and aesthetic approach as filmmaker. The short introduces the domain of medical research trials and examines the challenging, and sometimes unbalanced, relationship between medical academia and pharmaceutical companies. The filmmaker’s point of view is that drug manufacturers can potentially influence scientific findings by exploiting inherent weaknesses in the trial design and process: for example, limited size and duration of research, problematic detection of rare, late, or unexpected adverse events; selectivity of participants, and research sponsors with fundamental conflicts of interest. Manipulation of any of these weaknesses can potentially result in the emphasis of drug benefit and suppression of undesired drug safety data, creating public health concerns.

Story strategy and production structure are informed by the analysis addressed in this paper concerning effective partnering with experts, selection of distribution models, understanding of the documentary genre and audience proclivity, and framing of the filmmaker’s claims to truth.
CHAPTER 2
DOCUMENTARY EVOLUTION

Documentary film was instituted for the purpose of instructing and maintaining historical record and was shot on heavy, expensive cameras using equally expensive film stock. Although innovative in nature, early film was limited in scope to showing a single-shot event, or “actuality,” such as a train entering a station or factory workers leaving for the day, and was typically less than a minute in length. Soon thereafter, medical doctors such as French surgeon Eugéne-Louis Doyen and Romanian neurologist Gheorghe Marinescu adopted this burgeoning media to not only document medical practices but also to correct errors performed during various procedures.

Advances in the early part of the twentieth century made travel more possible and fostered interest in foreign societies and culture, giving rise to travelogue or “scenic”, films. An early notable example is the 1909 *Moscow Clad in Snow*, a four-part film introducing Russia to domestic audiences. A contemporary comparison would perhaps be the BBC productions *Planet Earth* and *Planet Blue*. A particular film that highlights the transitional nature of this era, as well as audience perception, is *In the Land of the Head Hunter* (1914). This film presents itself under the pretense of a scenic that reveals the primitive and exotic world of Native Americans. What the audience does not know is that the “actual” events are essentially staged re-enactments. The celebrated filmmaker Robert J. Flaherty furthered this association of romanticism and documentary with his films *Nanook of the North* (1922) and *Moana* (1926), both of which were heavily staged to show how subjects once lived rather than how they were currently living. Films of this
nature have more recently been categorized as “docufiction” a neologism referring to the cinematographic combination of documentary and fiction.

Shortly thereafter, romanticism gave birth to politically based propaganda films, made with the explicit purpose of persuading an audience of a particular point of view. One of the most notorious examples is Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* (1935), which was commissioned by Adolf Hitler to chronicle the 1934 Nazi Party Congress and Convention. Within the same time frame, American films were being created that supported Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal included Pare Lorentz’s *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936), and *The River* (1938) and Willard Van Dyke’s *The City* (1939). These productions presented not only governmental propaganda but also multifaceted aspects of social and ecological awareness, a topic of deeper examination in forthcoming sections. Under similar governmental motives, the Canadian Film Board was founded by John Grierson to create psychological warfare pieces countering enemy propaganda. In Great Britain, Grierson, together with several notable filmmakers formed what was ultimately known as the Documentary Film Movement, which blended propaganda, factual material, and education with a more expressive and appealing approach to documentary. Films involved the amalgamation of various media such as literature, poetry, and music into a more comprehensive cinematic experience. Some of the best-known films of the undertaking are *Coal Face* (1935) and *Night Mail* (1936).

A similar contemporaneous challenge in marrying various resources for greater impact occurs with merging diverse strategies including nonprofit partnering, technological distribution and proven documentary storytelling to once again create a richer film experience. Documentary film continued to evolve through the combination
and exploration of disciplines leading to the next developmental stage, called cinema-verité. Although different in respect to filmmaker involvement, cinema-verité is also referred to as direct cinema or cinema direct in the United States and is a style that includes following a person during high-tension moments with a portable camera to capture more intimate reactions. Until this time, this could not be done because of heavy equipment, which was always anchored to fixed structures. In cinema-verité, accidental and spontaneous filming results in high volume of footage, or shooting ratios, giving the editor freedom to discover and sculpt the story from within the footage rather than at the time of capture. In many ways cinema-verité can also be seen as a reaction against studio production restrictions, which excluded independent filmmakers from taking advantage of promising technologies such as lightweight cameras and on-location sound syncing.

Documentary film is ever evolving by employing proven principles and techniques as well as determined innovation to create an abundance of nonfiction works ranging in style, form, and purpose. Because of documentary film's continual expansion, it is necessary to divide the genre into subgenres.

American film critic and theoretician Bill Nichols defined six modes of documentary from which the subgenre of socially conscious films develop and intersect. The first is the poetic mode, which is a transformation of historical material into a more abstract, lyrical form “reassembling fragments of the world” (Nichols 101). Expository mode or “direct address” assembles social issues into an argumentative frame, mediated by a voice-of-God narration. The observational mode, gleans in part from the cinema-verité tradition, using technological advances as cameras became smaller, lighter, and able to document life in a less intrusive manner. In this style, less control is required over
traditional studio parameters such as lighting, which leaves the social actors free to act and the filmmaker free to record without the two interacting. The participatory mode encompasses the encounter between filmmaker and subject, as the filmmaker actively engages with the situation being documented, asks questions of the subjects, and shares experiences with them. The reflexive mode demonstrates consciousness of the process of reading documentary, and engages actively with the issues of realism and representation, acknowledging the presence of the viewers and the modality judgments at which they arrive. The final category is the performative mode, which recognizes the emotional and subjective aspects of documentary, and presents ideas as part of a context, having different meanings for different people.

Nonfiction films typically are hybrids of the various modes, not fitting neatly into one specific category. A film such as Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11* is certainly participatory in that a clear affect and alteration of situation can be seen from Moore’s presence and interaction. In parallel, the film also has a definitive expository bent, seen through strong rhetorical argument and point of view that attempts to persuade the viewer. Advocacy documentaries in general span the various modes but share a commonality of education and reform through filmic interaction. The difficulty this subgenre faces is two-fold: how to create audience interaction or participation, and how to empirically measure efficacy. The following section focuses on the first problem of how to engage audiences beyond the initial empathic responses of edification and entertainment.
Since the introduction of cinema-verité in the 1960s the nature of documentary film has been expanding to allow filmmakers and subjects to foster more intimate relationships. Intimacy can distort the boundary between documentary and narrative, producing very personal works that allow audiences to connect deeply with the subject matter. Attempting to understand the relationship between film and audience, Patricia Aufderheide, director of the Center for Social Media at American University, analyzes documentary media for public knowledge and subsequent action. The center, through nonprofit partnering, supports numerous academic and network-based initiatives, such as the annual conference “Making Your Documentary Matter: Public Engagement Strategies That Work.” Best practices and strategies center on social impact, public engagement, and the trend of social media for collaboration. It is generally agreed that media producers and nonprofit organizations have to partner early in the production process to develop the broadest social impact. Conference founder and filmmaker Robert Greenwald says that media producers are responsible for starting these partnerships by asking nonprofits how their film can help their cause. Partnerships lay the foundation for outreach strategies, goals, and even film direction, which in turn involve individuals in the productions and screenings that build community and heighten potential social change.

As with most collaborative efforts, challenges are introduced, including competing goals between diverse groups and within organizations. Greenwald also
allows that incongruent groups commonly come together to overcome these challenges and to open lines of communication under such joint efforts. Another caveat concerns creative direction: “producers must choose between shooting a film intended to win theatrical release and Oscar nominations, and creating a documentary to spur social change. By partnering with organizations, producers will be required to make very different decisions than if they are targeting the festival circuit” (Schuler 2).

Documentaries that are becoming proficient in the area of partnering with activist groups, nonprofit organizations and public broadcasters are further developing a methodology for community engagement or what is known as participatory media. Broadly defined, participatory media is the practice of giving the target audience an active role in various aspects of the production and outreach efforts. But beyond the target audience, it is also reaches across group ideals to diverse and contrasting communities. “Stretching ‘beyond the choir’ and across borders of opinion, outreach efforts are developing digital tools to attract, engage and mobilize increasingly diverse publics” (Abrash 1). Documentary film is leading the way as an innovative platform, setting new standards for public interactivity in the areas of availability, involvement, and inclusivity.

Filmmakers and nonprofits have had great success in turning their potential viewers into co-producers, which impacts all aspects of the production and community involvement. With the drastic reduction in equipment costs in recent years, some organizations are leveraging the ability to supply and train partners and subjects with cameras to capture footage that might otherwise be lost in a more established shoot. One such example is capturing human rights abuses that can be used as evidence. These
videos can then be uploaded via a website hub from around the world. Other organizations use participant-driven videos to create unity among subjects, turning documentaries into effective lobbying tools. These involvements show that individuals can be the best representatives for their own causes and that putting media production capabilities into their hands offers them a powerful voice and ownership of the social issue. In this scenario it is important to have an experienced architect who can help guide technological efforts as well as create a safe venue for people to foster transparency in relation to their stories. Another facet of participatory media is using digital stories to enable communal relations and to help conflicting factions empathize with one another. Reaching across cultural and class divisions help to unite members of the community in a way that will potentially create productive efforts.

As briefly touched upon, important tools in the arsenal of media effectiveness, along with traditional means of communication and participation, are digital technology and social media. Technology is rapidly creating new and ever changing platforms to distribute film and interact with audiences. These advances and the ubiquitousness of broadband offer both challenges and opportunities to filmmakers and partnering organizations. Many organizations that fund films increasingly seek innovative media makers using web-based strategies to involve their audiences in the development and production of the project. Along with community involvement, the emergence of novel digital distribution options not only provides multiple channels for distribution, but also allows filmmakers to tailor their films for various audiences in diverse settings. These new channels allow for and encourage interactive collaboration with viewers, thus
enabling ideas and narratives to be amplified and shared more easily than through traditional channels such as theatrical, broadcast, and local screenings.

Mobile phones are quickly joining television, movies and computers as being considered the “fourth screen” (Schuler 1) of content delivery. But closer in relation to computers, mobile technology opens possibilities for participatory, or reciprocal, conversations about short videos, urging filmmakers to think about how media is produced and who should be considered content generators.

In a negative light, because readily available media is overly abundant, it is difficult to feature films above the din that is battling for their viewership. Americans are increasingly able to tailor their news and media to their own specific interests and to filter out much of the media noise in a process of self-selectivity. Flexibility also becomes paramount to best use various outlets such as YouTube, Vimeo, iTunes, and mobile technology. Producers must be ready to reformat their films into trailer-length clips and to reconfigure distribution formats for various audience delivery means. Although digital distribution opens many social networking and community engagement opportunities, it still is not a sustainable option for many filmmakers as a way to release full films online. Online releases are impractical in large part because of limited control over charging audiences, necessary for covering even basic production costs.

With all changes and burgeoning methodology comes the opportunity to leverage and innovate in ways that add heightened value to productions. An example previously discussed, supplying audience equipment to film, is a prime example of how changes can lead to greater interactivity and depth of material. Barbara Abrash conveys the innovative
spirit of collaboration where documentary, nonprofit and technology converge for social change:

Projects like these forge new tools, pipelines and circuits of circulation in a multiplatform media environment. They help to create sustainable network infrastructures for participatory public media… This work is made possible by a dynamic but fragile support web of broadcasters, funders, nonprofit groups, service organizations and citizens – all contributors to an emergent “public media 2.0,” which aims to enable publics to recognize and understand the problems they share, to know each other, and to act (1). As noted by Abrash, the parameters of sustainability and measures of efficacy are still elusive and awaiting further scrutiny. It is therefore fitting to examine, both quantitatively and qualitatively, the attempts to date to empirically measure efficacy.

As previously mentioned the CBS Documentary Research Unit attempted to measure the impact of films on their viewers by conducting panel interviews before and after broadcasts. The unit's methodology consisted of outlining the producers’ intended objectives of the documentary along with an “intense” script content analysis to obtain an framework of the major informational and ideological points. The unit’s research psychologist frequently participated in the actual structuring of the broadcast, which would be highly unusual today considering the editorial control and budgetary constraints common to most projects. The outlined points were then converted into a series of questions of fact and opinion, which were administered to the audience panels both before and after viewing the film. Comparison of the two responses was considered the measure of effectiveness. According to Elmo Wilson, “from such research it is possible to analyze wherein the program did a particularly influential job, and where it fell short of
the aimed-for objectives” (20). Figure 1 presents a results example of “overall effectiveness” from the documentary, *The Eagle’s Brood*, a one-hour film examining the underlying causes of juvenile delinquency and the existing inadequacies of dealing with the problem.

**Figure 1. Overall Effectiveness (CBS)**

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<tr>
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<th>Before</th>
<th>After</th>
<th>Change</th>
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<tr>
<td>Excellent or Good</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>-5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairly Good</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>-19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poor or Very Poor</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>+24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>100%</td>
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The report claimed that of the panel, 42% declared that they were *very much more concerned*, and 30 percent were *somewhat more concerned* after viewing the film.

A second, larger table (Wilson 12) displayed an “effectiveness ratio,” with 100% being maximum, representing the varying degrees of success the film had in conveying specific points to the audience. The ratio was calculated as a percent of viewers with “wrong” opinions before viewing of a documentary's point of view shifted to “right” opinions afterward. Even though these measures were innovative in regards to documentaries of the time, they are now antiquated both in their methodology and outcomes. One caveat is efficacy over time; the audience “effectiveness ratio” was an immediate and perhaps emotional response and not an indicator of permanent or ongoing change in perception. Another limitation of the findings is the subjectivity of the measures placing the documentary point of view as the benchmark for absolute “right” and “wrong” opinion.
A recent effort by the Fledgling Fund, a funding organization for film and other creative media, shaped a more comprehensive approach to understanding and detailing the use of documentary films that are being linked to coordinated outreach efforts as change agents. Documentary, in relation to other forms of commonly used visual medium such as advertising, does not play by the same rules. “We assume that if ads can sell products, visual imagery linked to a social justice narrative can sell social action, or political conviction… In fact, however…it can be surprisingly difficult to make a firm connection between the power of a film or other media and social change” (Barrett 1). Enduring change in audience perception, which can lead to social change, is also the absent measure noted in the previous CBS panel-interview approach.

The report goes on to note that even though not all documentaries are intended to be agents of social change, the question remains if films can even have the kind of impact that changes minds, inspires action, and ignites social change. The measure of impact begs a more comprehensive definition of “impact” in this context. David Whiteman contends that, “we might do better to think of the film as one point of a continuum, with a life before broadcast and a life, perhaps quiet a long life, after broadcast” (52). In other words, the actual process of making the film may change opinions and positions, which are then cultivated by screenings and lead to increased awareness of the issue and community involvement.

To give concrete evidence, as opposed to causal relation, to the new definition of impact, The Fledgling Fund identified several key points. The first is thinking of film success beyond box office numbers, and more in terms of overall impact such as how many people understand the issues presented in the film. Secondly, since hard outcome
measures are not always feasible, it is important to utilize a wide array of data sources to create a holistic assessment, including not only anecdotal data such as survey results and case studies, but also output and outcome measures such as number of screenings and what happened as a result of the screenings. It is necessary to understand the state of public consciousness concerning the issue and then to set realistic expectations for impact. “It is not reasonable to expect broad social change if there is little public awareness that a problem exists. In some cases, just getting audiences to see the film, connect with the story and better understand an issue is enough” (Barrett 2). The final key point is to work collaboratively with essential stakeholders to develop project goals and an assessment strategy.

In an effort to give relevant pragmatism to these key points, The Fledgling Fund then identified “Dimensions of Impact” (See Figure 2) cast into an applicable framework. Each ring of impact builds upon the previous dimension and is therefore compounding in nature. The core dimension requires a quality film with a compelling narrative as foundational to all other successful measures. From this starting place consideration is given to the project’s propensity to raise awareness around a particular issue because, as previously discussed, public awareness is critical for both individual and broader public transformation. Next, public engagement, or the transition from inactive awareness to practical action, and the outreach campaign are assessed for guidance concerning the film’s call to action. The final two dimensions move away from individual awareness and engagement to broader social support and change, such as strengthening the previous work of key advocacy organizations and supplementing large-scale social movements.
Other groups, more geared to the commercialization potential of efficacy analysis, have developed methodology into a marketable business strategy. One example is the Harmony Institute, a research center examining the influence of media on social transformation. Although similar in approach, looking beyond box office and audience size as well as harvesting diverse data sources, Harmony Institute then creates more dramatic narratives based on the data as a deliverable end product to illustrate the target media’s influence. The process begins when evaluators approach key target audience considerations such as size and characteristics, knowledge pertaining to issue, attitudes
and behavior toward the issue, belief in their ability to influence change and whether the project influenced the audience’s position. Going further, Harmony Institute developed a framework with some flexibility to be tailored to individual projects. Similar to the Fledgling Fund’s “Dimension of Impact,” the Harmony Institute also created a visual representation of the ripple effect (See Figure 3) to assess immediate and secondary outcomes.

**Figure 3. Ripple Effect**

![Figure 3. Ripple Effect](image)

During the assessment phase, the project’s goals are evaluated to see how they align into three broad categories of “narrative effect”: comprehension, attitude, and response. From these categories, filmmakers determine their primary concerns to develop a case study that accurately reflects measure of their project’s influence. In relation to narrative effect, the area of comprehension focuses on measuring the film’s reach and
ability to communicate definitions, sources, and solutions. The area of attitude measures the emotional and cognitive effect of the film and how it impacts opinions. The area of response measures shifts in collective and individual engagement as well as how subsequent behaviors affect the topic.

With effective impact as the goal of socially minded films, a road map of certain determinants comprising a successful film and campaign is suggested. A clear goal must be framed that is both realistic and relative to the story narrative and needs of the social effort. A specific plan must be formulated that is based on an understanding of key target audiences and how to best reach them. Project flexibility is also advantageous in allowing new opportunities and partnerships to be leveraged during production. Building on outreach efforts and film direction, appropriate levels of partnership should also be established with key groups that already have knowledge of issues addressed and existing relationships with potential audiences. To accommodate ongoing efforts of the outreach campaign, adequate expertise and resources will also need to be allocated, including administrative, procedural, and monetary. A defined timeline reflecting different stages of the project can clearly outline key success points, such as release dates, pre- and post-broadcast activities, or continuing campaign efforts. Finally, a plan to track impact as previously discussed is important to link specific goals of the campaign to viewer action and any policy change.

Putting all the pieces together can be daunting when coupled with the logistical difficulties of actual film production. Even though countless films have fallen short of these lofty ambitions, other films have risen to the occasion, creating not only individual illumination but also social reform. Two notable projects are Judith Helfand’s *Blue Vinyl*
and David Guggenheim’s *Waiting for “Superman”*, each of which can be examined to
determine the successful components, both common and unique to each project.
CHAPTER 4
CASE STUDIES

Blue Vinyl took an early lead in understanding the power of partnering with nonprofit organizations to hone narrative, leverage established organizational resources, and successfully create authentic change. The film’s co-director, Judith Helfand, has established herself as an effective front-runner concerning creative activism and strategic grassroots organizing when coupled with the medium of documentary film.

The film’s thrust is to reveal the poisonous life cycle of PVC plastic, through the example of outwardly innocuous blue vinyl siding on her parents’ home. Using as an example the blue vinyl siding on her parents' house was particularly effective because it personalized the story of an individual fighting a corporate system, a key to a successful social filmmaking. In a 2003 interview with the Center of Social Media’s Patricia Aufderheide, Helfand spoke to this guiding principle for creating social change: “there has to be a relationship at the center. Whether it’s the center of our narrative or your story or you film, or it’s the driving force of an organizing campaign” (Aufderheide). In the film, Helfand took on a participatory role standing in the place as a representative consumer against the vinyl industry, and giving “relationship” to the film through her and her parents’ personal journeys.

Going a step further, Helfand explains that the created relationship must also have a multi-faceted “heart” in jeopardy of being metaphorically broken, with the film’s goal of either saving or repairing the heart. “This relationship has to be something that is real, insistent, dynamic and personal. 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… if you have that, and if you follow that, if that leads your story, whether you’re a filmmaker or an organizer, I think you will have the tools that you need to actually make a difference” (Aufderheide).

Blue Vinyl partnered with a nonprofit organization Working Films, co-founded by Helfand. The partnership fostered an accompanying campaign effort titled *My House Is Your House* composed of several outreach components. Early in the production process when *Blue Vinyl* was still being researched, producers reached out to Coming Clean, a collaboration of organizations leading health and environmental justice advocacy efforts. Through a series of feedback screenings of the preliminary trailer as well as the rough-cut and final project, members of the collaborative helped to direct the story narrative to more closely complement the organizational goals. Working Films then organized and facilitated a two-day strategy summit, bringing together film producers with Coming Clean activists, environmental health advocates, green builders, and scientists to more acutely hone the fine cut of the film and outreach strategies.

The summit identified key campaign issues and target audiences as well as established an opportunity timeline in relation to the impact distribution would have on continued outreach efforts by various organizations. Five strategic constituencies emerged for the *My House Is Your House* campaign: Sundance and HBO viewers, design and building professionals, colleges and universities, affordable housing providers, and household consumers. For each constituent, a plan was formulated to take advantage of the film’s impact beginning with its premiere at the Sundance Film Festival and continuing through its HBO broadcast. An early outreach effort targeted Intimate Brands,
the parent company of Victoria’s Secret and Bath and Body Works, and achieved clear results. At the Sundance premiere, audience members signed and sent over 1,500 "Greetings from Sundance" postcards to the company; in partnership with Greenpeace, they resulted in 6,000 emails. Almost immediately, Intimate Brands made a commitment to completely phase out PVC from its packaging.

Apart from specific instances such as this, the overall goal of the film’s ongoing campaign is to support the burgeoning movement to reform the PVC industry so that it is no longer a source of persistent pollutants threatening humanity and the ecosystem. The central message to viewers is that there is no such thing as “cheap” when the veiled costs of a toxic life cycle are considered. The film has been utilized to stimulate demand for alternative building materials, which in turn lower costs, and has proven to be a valuable ongoing resource for health and environmental justice organizers and sustainable building proponents by allowing them to translate scientific data with pop-culture appeal.

The Ford Foundation funds various programs, such as media and the arts, through educational and charitable grants. In 2010 it commissioned the Harmony Institute to evaluate the impact and influence of Waiting for “Superman”, a feature-length documentary depicting the status of public education in America. The six-month assessment examined the storyline effect of the film on audience and institutions, and the degree to which it swayed opinions and programs on education reform. In contrast to the analysis of Blue Vinyl, the commission was interested in immediate effects of the film on viewers’ beliefs rather than on the film’s long-term impacts. Using Harmony Institute’s aforementioned methodology, the analysis included press coverage, focus groups, an online survey, online trending reports, and comprehensive interviews.
The evaluation concluded that *Waiting for “Superman”* significantly influenced audience perceptions of education in the United States and that “the film increased general understanding and elevated concerns over a number of problems plaguing public education.” (Cleverly) The film ranked 20th in all-time national earnings among wide-releasing documentary films, grossed an estimated $6.4 million and generated 294,000 pledges from people to view the film and support education reform efforts. The report describes the film’s campaign as one of the most expansive communication efforts known regarding the American education system.

However, the evaluation found several potential exceptions in the narrative and outreach. Viewers complained that even though the film had clear calls to action, such as "get involved in your child's education," it did not offer specific ways to carry out these actions. This is similar to Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11* in that Moore directly asks the audience to “join the fight”, but only in a vague context with no suggestions for action. Audiences also felt that *Waiting for “Superman”* “failed to discuss many of the larger social issues that contribute to low-performing student and schools.” (Cleverly) One viewer offered that equal responsibility lies not only with bad teachers and bad unions, but also with poverty, parenting, resources, and curriculum. Other viewers also felt that the role of charter schools was overemphasized. Directors and nonprofits have to choose the path of “truth” presented in their visual project, not every nuance can be presented, but a balance has to be struck to convey a sense of impartiality and fairness. Otherwise, audiences can be keenly aware of imbalances and draw conclusions that potential undermine the entire project.
On the other hand, audiences were receptive to the characters portrayed in the film and found that charter school lottery a compelling metaphor for the current state of public education in the United States. The film generated a clear difference in reaction between two distinct groups: educators and the general public. Largely, the press and general public reviewed the film in a favorable light, giving it four out of five stars. In contrast, teachers felt the film portrayed them and unions unfairly and too simplistically.

Harmony Institute then weighed the film in relation to the ripple effect (See Figure 3) it had on various organizations affiliated with the film’s outreach. Two organization affiliates showed a measurable impact as a result of the film. Through association with the film, the United Way established itself as a central player in the education world and changed the way it engages local communities. The online charity DonorsChoose.org saw an increase in individual users by 75,000 around the release of the film and generated $2.1 million in pledges to support classroom projects across the nation. Filmmakers took away that “gathering early support from reputable affiliates currently working on a social issue can greatly assist both parties.” (Cleverly)

The evaluation noted an interesting paradigm that goes against traditional assumptions regarding box office success and large social media following. Even though the film grossed $6.4 million and generated over 149,000 Facebook followers, it was still unable to stimulate a national conversation among those not previously engaged in the education reform debate. As noted earlier by Abrash (2), a key concept to social film success is not just “preaching to the choir”, also creating bridges that reach across the frames of belief to diverse and contrasting communities. However, the film was
successful at reinforcing a commitment to teaching among those already engaged in the educational profession.
CHAPTER 5

DOCUMENTARY SHORT

The proposed documentary short is titled *Safe and Effective*. It focuses on clinical trial weaknesses that pharmaceutical companies can exploit, which in turn leads to public health concerns. Experts shed light on these weaknesses and efforts to regulate drug safety. The log line, or short description, of the film is as follows: A seasoned academic scientist acts as watchdog over the pharmaceutical industry’s encroaching commercial interests.

The documentary short introduces clinical trials as well as examines the challenging, and sometimes unbalanced, relationship between medical academia and pharmaceutical companies. The filmmaker and protagonist's point of view is that drug manufacturers can potentially affect scientific findings by taking advantage of inherent weaknesses in trial design and practice. Limitations covered in the film include limited size and duration of research; problematic detection of rare, late, or unexpected adverse events; selectivity of participants; and research sponsors with fundamental conflicts of interest. Manipulation of any of these weaknesses can potentially result in the emphasis of drug benefit and suppression of undesired drug safety data, creating public health concerns.

During the discovery process of making a film, several strategies were researched related to making an impactful story. Formulating all the facts and expert opinions were paramount to story structure. As covered in the analysis, connecting with experts and understanding previous efforts by nonprofit organizations would not only help inform the
story but also craft the story in an informed manner. Beginning with these established analyses, research continued with a thorough review of print materials such as magazine articles, books, journals, reports, and archives related to the core topic. Field research, such as scouting shot locations, and preliminary interviews further developed the story into a more holistic approach.

Although impactful, metaphorical and metonymic devices were deemed potentially obstructive at this point as the narrative could become too compacted with information in the limited time frame of the documentary short. These devices make for strong visual elements to help audiences connect to story in an engaging manner and will be incorporated in subsequent development. To foster audience connection, it is necessary to not only establish the facts of the film, but also the heart or emotional center of the story. An elderly lady plays the role of “anyone’s grandmother”, creating a relatable introduction to the plot points outside of dry, expert facts.

As in all advocacy films, a challenge or source of advocating needs to be founded. In this case the film is advocating for public safety in the face of corporate interests. The challenge is if this is feasible given the breadth and reach of industry, as one seasoned academic scientist attempts. The story structure has a more anti-plot style open ending in that corporate power will always have a high propensity for exploitation when it is possible to increase profits. It is a story of human nature to which no one is immune and to which all can relate. It is a story of a scientific David and corporate Goliath, hopeful to resonate in many.

Following is the two-column documentary film script. The first column contains the visual elements while the second column contains the audio elements:
DOCUMENTARY SHORT FILM: SAFE AND EFFECTIVE (6 minutes)

(EXT WS) AN ELDERLY LADY AND HER DAUGHTER ARE ON A SPRING-TIME STROLL
(DISSOLVE TO MWU) OF LADIES
(FADE OUT)

(FADE IN) TEXT CARD: “Half of all Americans take at least one prescription drug.”
(DISSOLVE) TEXT CARD: “One in six take 3 or more.”

(FADE IN MCU) ELDERLY LADY IN KITECHN DESCRIBING HER BLOOD PRESSURE MEDICATIONS

(DISSOLVE MS) LADIES AND GRANDCHILDREN IN PORCH SWING

(DISSOLVE) TEXT CARD: “Americans trust their prescriptions to be safe and effective.” (FADE OUT)

(FADE IN) DISSOLVE BETWEEN FOUR NEWS BITES ABOUT MAJOR DRUG RECALLS
(DISSOLVE) NEWS CLIP 1
(DISSOLVE XCU) ROTATING BLUE PILLS
(DISSOLVE) NEWS CLIP 2

(DISSOLVE) NEWS CLIP 3
(DISSOLVE XCU) ROTATING WHITE PILLS
(DISSOLVE) NEWS CLIP 4

(FADE IN MCU) DR. FURBERG WORKING DILIGENTLY AT HIS DESK WRITING
(FADE OUT)

Birds chirping
Fade in folksy guitar music

Cozaar, for blood pressure…one at night.

(VO) Topal, I take a’half of one in the morning for blood pressure.

(Fade out folksy music)

(Fade in ominous background music)

…after a senate committee this weekend released a report on the safety of the company’s diabetes drug Avandia.

…that the drug has an increased heart risk, 43% to be exact…

Eli Lily pleading guilty to criminal conduct…

…alleges the company had earlier tried to conceal Avandia’s risks.

I mean, I think what’s more important for, people to know is what is going on.
Drug data should not be secret. And that really highlights the issues, that the companies have the option of deciding what is being released to the public and to the medical profession.

You can’t just look at selected pieces of studies that favor the company’s view.

(VO) Herb quit smoking with Chantix and support. Talk to your doctor about Chantix and a support plan that’s right for you.

Serious adverse events picked up through the MedWatch program. So we saw a dramatic increase just a year after the drug was approved. It ranked number three of all the drugs in the U.S. in terms of serious adverse events. The next quarter it was up to the leading position, so the worst drug on the U.S. market.

I had to quit smoking, that’s why I asked my doctor about Chantix.

(Audience laughter)

(VO) Some people have had changes in behavior such as hostility, depressed mood, and homicidal thoughts and actions while
taking Chantix. If you’ve noticed changes in behavior such as a powerful, overwhelming desire to kill the person you love most, call your doctor right away.

(Fade in ominous background music)

We had one article on violence, and presented a series of cases on unprovoked violence against others. And it's just very, very striking.

The company knew before it was released that it cause neuropsychiatric symptoms, but they never revealed that.

We have to understand and accept that trials are designed and conducted to show a benefit, so the drug can be approved. And safety is secondary.

(Fade in ominous background music)

So for pre-approval trials we don’t have complete information, far from it.

There are a limited number of patients that are studied.

Many of the studies are not powered; they don’t have the ability to detect rare events. For example suicides.

If you study 3000 patients you might find one suicide and that’s not enough to contribute that to the drug.

You can only find what you look for. There’s a tendency in the pre-approval
(DISSOLVE SFX) GRAPHIC OF ICONOGRAPHIC PEOPLE WITH SEVERAL PEOPLE SLOWLY FADE AWAY.

(DISSOLVE SFX) ALL PEOPLE QUICKLY COME BACK

(DISSOLVE SFX) SEVERAL PEOPLE TURN RED INDICATING DEATH

(FADE OUT)

(FADE IN) DR. JOSHUA SHARFSTEIN LECTURING AT MEETING

(FADE OUT)

(FADE IN) MONEY FALLING SLOW MOTION

(DISSOLVE MCU) DR. FURBERG IN HIS OFFICE

(FADE OUT)

(DISSOLVE SFX) GRAPHIC CHART SHOWING 5 CHECKMARKS FOR ONE DRUG, THEN THREE FOR THE OTHER.

(DISSOLVE MCU) DR. FURBERG IN HIS OFFICE

(FADE OUT)

(FADE IN) TEXT CARD: “A review of 192 large clinical trials revealed that reporting of drug safety was considered inadequate in 61%.”

(FADE OUT)

(FADE IN MS) FURBERG WORKING AT HIS DESK READING PAPERS AND EXAMINING DATA

(Fade in ominous background music)

You like to enroll those that are young, have no other conditions, taking no other drugs.

And when the drug gets on the market, you’re giving it to everyone.

All of the sudden there’s like an explosion of bad news, indications of harm.

We’re very interested in this issue of regulatory science, the field of regulatory science. And by regulatory science we mean the science of figuring out whether something is safe and effective.

(VO – Dr. Furberg) Drug companies have a way of getting positive results. The most striking example is nine trials comparing the same two drugs. And one would expect similar results…no…

The five trials all sponsored by one company showed that that company’s drug was superior. The four other trials, three of those showed that the other company’s drug was superior, and one trial was neutral.

(Fade in ominous background music)

So it just illustrates the tremendous biases that creep into science.

(Ominous music gets louder)

(VO – Dr. Furberg) We have developed something called QuarterWatch. We are looking at every quarter, and as I said, which drugs are causing problems, we rank trials to focus on healthy people.
Approximately 100,000 fatal adverse drug reactions occur among U.S. patients each year making it the fifth leading cause of death.

Many of these deaths are avoidable. – Dr. Curt Furberg

For more information on efforts to regulate drug safety, please visit: www.ismp.org/quarterwatch www.fda.gov/drugs/drugsafety

I think we probably have to live with our incomplete system.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

The media of documentary film is anchored in a rich and highly evolved tradition of craft and tested principles. Films have the power to advocate and inform as well as persuade and even mislead. Audiences trust is naively given by some and staunchly withheld by others and often open to restoration or degradation based on how “truth” is handled by filmmakers. Advocacy films bear a particular burden in that they stand in as a voice for a weaker or innocent party being theoretically exploited.

By its very nature, documentary film is a compelling power of truth. The evidence of this power is not lost on communal interests as a vehicle for provocation and change, as seen in the numerous organizations attempting to formulate and maximize the outreach and impact of films. Combined with the global and instantaneous reach of technology, the intimate connection of documentary can be a strong catalyst for individual, social, and political change. Success in fostering awareness and change is evident in the case studies for both Helfand’s Blue Vinyl and Guggenheim’s Waiting for “Superman”.

The documentary short Safe and Effective has been crafted as a foundation for fostering subsequent partnerships and funding. Consideration of the film production process and discovery through the contextual analysis has revealed that ensuing partnerships and funding is essential to success for advocacy films of this scope. Above all, the analytical lessons learned and film production experience gained have proven that creating an effective advocacy film is a daunting and multifaceted undertaking that is at the same time immeasurably challenging and rewarding.
WORKS CITED


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EDUCATION: B.F.A. - Bachelor of Fine Arts in Graphic Design
University of North Carolina at Charlotte, 1996

M.A. - Master of Arts in Liberal Studies
Wake Forest University, May 2012
Magna Cum Laude
Graduate Honor Council Representative

EMPLOYMENT: Analyst/Programmer - 2002-Present
Wake Forest University School of Medicine
Public Health Sciences, Winston-Salem, NC
• Primary responsibilities include design and development of web-based data management systems.
• Develop and test multiple large and small study data systems
• Design and develop national award-winning departmental website

Contract Designer/Developer - 2000-Present
• Design and development video and web-based projects.
• Responsible for all design, animation, interactivity, programming, filming, post-production and output of projects.

Designer/Developer 2002-2002
Nuklias Software, Inc., Greensboro, NC
• Responsible for project management and client control
• Design and develop multimedia and web-
based projects, including audio and video production.

- Company dissolved

Designer/Developer - 2000-2001
Spin Communications, High Point, NC
- Responsible for project management and client control
- Design and develop multimedia and web-based projects, including audio and video production.
- Company acquired

Designer - 1999-2000
Graphica Design Firm, Greensboro, NC
- Design Assistant
- Web development

PROFESSIONAL INTERESTS:
Web-based Data Management Systems
Interface and Interactivity
High-Definition Video and Special Effects
Audio Production

CURRENT GRANTS:
Action to Control Cardiovascular Risk in Diabetes (ACCORD)
Lifestyle Interventions and Independence for Elders Study (LIFE)
Claude D Pepper Older Americans Independence Centers (PEPPER)
Search for Diabetes in Youth (SEARCH)
Type 1 Diabetes Genetics Consortium (T1DGC)
Less Lethal Weapons (LLW)
Critical Care Clinical Trials Group (CCCTG)
Geriatric Psychiatry Outreach Program (GOProgram)

PROFESSIONAL MEMBERSHIPS:
Society for Clinical Trials (SCT)
Charlotte Macromedia Users Group (CMUG)
Adobe Users Group (AUG)