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New Research From the Center For Media & Social Impact Measures Direct Influence of Documentaries on Audiences, Public Discourse, Culture and Grassroots Movements

New research from the Center for Media & Social Impact reveals the nature and scale of impact that six documentary films—addressing social topics including immigration status, disability, environmental justice, transgender representation, incarceration and opioid addiction—had on communities across the country. While most documentary impact research to date has employed a case-study model that tallies the number of viewers, press hits and other standard measures of reach, this four-part series employed rigorous social science investigative tools to gain a deeper understanding—and gather tangible evidence—of the influence that a documentary film can have on its audiences, the communities it reaches, and culture more broadly.

“Independent documentary storytelling has a unique tradition of being a mode of community-led storytelling that comes from outside commercial media systems,” said Caty Borum, executive director of the Center for Media & Social Impact. “These studies help tell the story about why and how nonfiction filmmaking is a vital part of shaping democracy.”

While each study provides a wealth of new data, select findings from the series include:

- In **“More Like *unseen*: A Study of Accessibility and Representation in Documentary film,”** authors found that the story of Pedro, an openly undocumented student with a disability, caused the vast majority of audience members (83%) to “think differently about an important issue,” regardless of whether or not they identified with Pedro’s lived experience. The study also revealed how a majority of nondisabled audiences underestimate the interest that audiences with disabilities have in film.
- In **“Transforming the Narrative: An Evaluation of the Strategic Impact of *Disclosure* on Public Discourse about Transgender People,”** authors analyzed a set of nearly 80,000 tweets over a 3-year period and employed methods such as social network analysis,

topic modeling, and sentiment analysis to understand the ways in which the social media campaign for the film about trangender representation in Hollywood affected public discourse on transgender topics more broadly.

- In **"*The First Step*: Stories of a Documentary in Coalition Building, Social Change, and Pushing for Progress After the Credits Roll,"** research on 50 screening events across 17 states revealed the ways in which local-level actors in grassroots movements around the U.S. discovered a documentary about criminal justice reform and used it as a vehicle for their own organizing interests and needs.

- In **"Films Are Like Alarms: The Cultural Impacts of Three Environmental Justice Documentaries,"** authors explain how three films that employed co-creation practices with participants during production affected the cultural impact of the film after its release. As the report's findings note: "Co-creation practices can help make filming less extractive, ensuring documentaries add more to communities than they take away. For instance, some protagonists are now filmmakers themselves with the tools and resources to tell their stories on their own terms and nurture new generations of journalists, documentarians, and artists."

As documentaries face shrinking opportunities for distribution via mass-media platforms such as streaming and broadcast, filmmakers and funders face unprecedented struggles to reach their audiences. CMSI's long-running **State of the Documentary Field study**, which recently released its 2026 reports, reveals dramatic challenges filmmakers face in freedom of expression, funding, censorship, and more.

The six impact campaigns featured in this series demonstrate effective ways to reach audiences, as well as to help those audiences make additional connections between the films and the issues facing their communities. By engaging audiences as civic actors, these films achieve impacts beyond the screenings, reaching into the larger spheres of civic dialogue and change.

"The Documentary Influence" research series will launch today during a public webinar "Making the Case for Impact," co-hosted by CMSI, the Global Impact Producers Alliance (GIPA), Media Impact Funders, and the Perspective Fund. Webinar moderator Vanessa Cuervo Forero, Head of Latin American programs for the Doc Society, spoke to the importance of the findings in securing the financial support necessary to run successful documentary impact campaigns.

"In a landscape where filmmakers are struggling to find impact funding, these studies are incredible tools to demonstrate that supporting cultural strategy is truly effective for long-term social change. For those who are supporting and funding impact campaigns, we need to keep sharing these findings with other philanthropists to ensure some sustainability for this ecosystem of change."

Prior to today's launch, early findings from **"The Documentary Influence"** were discussed at two international conferences in 2025. In Los Angeles in June, during a surge of federal

immigration enforcement in that city, panelists discussed the audience impact of Set Hernandez's film *unseen* at the Disability and Immigration conference at Loyola Marymount University's Coelho Center for Disability Law, Policy and Innovation. In November, on the eve of COP30, the 2025 United Nations Climate Change Conference, two panels at the Global Artivism Conference in Salvador, Brazil, discussed the relationships between films and social change. Study author Ros Donald and *The Territory* impact producer Marianna Olinger joined community partners in Brazil to discuss how that film's campaign influenced culture and legislation around deforestation, especially on Indigenous lands. "I continue to be amazed that four years after The Territory premiered, and two years after its impact campaign wrapped, the film continues to create real impact for the film participant communities and the broader movement they represent. That kind of lasting reach is a testament to what storytelling can achieve when it's given the opportunity to go the distance." said Marianna Olinger, lead impact producer for *The Territory* and currently senior impact strategist for Earth Alliance. A panel of leaders in transgender justice discussed how the film *Disclosure* reverberated throughout public discourse about transgender issues over the course of several years, due to an effective social media campaign.

Ultimately, the studies in "The Documentary Influence" shed important light on the shifting landscape of documentary distribution, as well as the trends among documentary impact campaigns, which have evolved in recent years to center the expertise and concerns of directly impacted communities and audiences. The research highlights opportunities to continue to advance field practices in this quickly-evolving media landscape.

To access the full study, visit: https://cmsimpact.org/documentaryinfluence/

About the series

"The Documentary Influence: A Social Science Investigation of Film Impact Campaigns" applies various research methodologies to examine how a documentary film can have an impact on both an individual and societal level. In each of four studies in the series, researchers looked at select film campaigns and measured their impact on one of the following areas: audience experience, public discourse, cultural influence, and grassroots movements. The result is an unprecedented look at the specific ways that documentary impact campaigns can catalyze social change.

Audience Study
MORE LIKE *UNSEEN*: A study of accessibility and representation in documentary film
Researchers conducted a survey of more than 350 audience members who attended screenings of the film *unseen*, one of the only films in the last decade that centers an openly undocumented person with a disability as its main protagonist. The results highlight the transformative effects that a film by and featuring previously-underrepresented voices can have on audience members of all backgrounds.

Public Discourse Study

TRANSFORMING THE NARRATIVE: An Evaluation of the Strategic Impact of *Disclosure* on Public Discourse about Transgender People

"Transforming the Narrative" analyzes over three years of social media posts and news media coverage to evaluate if – and more importantly how – the impact campaign for the documentary film *Disclosure* was able to drive and shape public discourse about transgender people. Using social network mapping and influencer analysis, along with content and sentiment analysis of posts, the study surfaces key lessons for practitioners of digital impact campaigns.

Cultural Influence Study

"FILMS ARE LIKE ALARMS": The cultural impacts of three environmental justice documentaries

In-depth interviews with protagonists, film teams, and impact producers of three films featuring Indigenous environmental justice communities reveal strong connections between campaign practices and the resulting cultural impacts. *Thank You For the Rain*, *The Territory*, and *Delikado* each employed practices of co-creation in their production and impact campaigns, which the study concludes were critical to the long-term impact of the films as agents of change.

Grassroots Community/Partnerships Study

THE FIRST STEP: Coalition Building, Social Change, and Pushing for Progress After the Credits Roll

This study investigates more than fifty examples of interested community members and organizations who learned about the criminal justice-reform documentary *The First Step* and subsequently organized a screening for their community. What results is an in-depth portrait of how communities are using and finding value in documentaries to advance local social change efforts.

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About the Center for Media and Social Impact (CMSI)

The Center for Media & Social Impact (CMSI), based at American University's School of Communication, is a creative innovation lab and research center that creates, studies, and showcases media for equity, social change, and social justice. Focusing on independent, documentary, and entertainment media, the Center bridges boundaries between scholars, producers and communication practitioners across media industries, social justice, public policy, and public engagement. The Center produces resources for the field and academic research; creates original media; convenes conferences and events; and works collaboratively to understand and design media that matter.

About the Documentary Power Research Institute

Based at the Center for Media & Social Impact, the Documentary Power Research Institute produces public research and convenes topical conversations to investigate and strengthen the role and power of documentary storytelling in democracy, social change, and justice. With seed funding from the Perspective Fund, the multi-disciplinary Institute grapples with the field's most urgent challenges and works to expand access to timely learnings, needs and tools of documentary-centered research in order to serve academic and practitioner communities interested in the role that documentaries can play in community building and fields of social impact, justice and change. The Institute also spotlights the legacies and present-day work of impact producers, activists, filmmakers, and organizations who are committed to leveraging documentaries for social impact.