FILMMAKING AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL IMPACT: MODELING

DOCUMENTARY TO CREATE CHANGE

by

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ABSTRACT

Documentary filmmakers increasingly challenge the boundaries of form and access by creatively incorporating diverse distribution options. For films intending to create social impact, emerging guides and resources can steer the production to effectively reach target audiences and measure the film's influence. Using *The End of the Line*, *Girl Rising*, and *Bully* as case studies, I posit that the increased analysis of a film's influence can guide the creative process to craft a more successful and targeted project, when success is defined as an actionable change. Specifically for films exploring polarized issues, new research from the Cultural Cognition Project suggests audiences are more willing to incorporate differing views when perspectives are presented in a way that allows them to grow identity, rather than challenge and demonize firmly held beliefs. I will apply the identified techniques to shape my creative process and measure the impact of my film, *Red Wolf Revival*, with the goal of depolarizing a contentious wildlife debate, increasing cultural cognition regarding red wolf recovery program in North Carolina, and motivating audiences to communicate their stances to decision-makers.

INTRODUCTION

Documentary film connotes a broad category of film that encompasses an increasing number of forms and styles, each allowing the medium to reach different audiences, uniquely exploring truths, challenging ideologies, or even motivating social change. In addition to the traditional feature-length format screened in theaters and television, short form and advocacy films are now categories of their own. New media forms adapted for online audiences or small groups of empowered individuals continue to grow (Zimmerman 287). Filmmakers have more considerations than ever before regarding the presentation of their story in order to engage their target audience. Emerging models for films aimed at making social impacts examine the influence of these choices and can provide filmmakers guidelines to understand how their creative decisions can effectively reach the audience in a way that motivates change.

Film theorist Robert Stam describes the connection of new media and form as "an uncanny affinity between the new media and what used to be regarded as avant-garde practices." (Stam 322). This relationship inevitably leads to an exploration of form and purpose, moving documentary into uncharted territory. Filmmakers should consider how creative decisions and distribution impact the audience experience so that social change may be more intentional and targeted rather than coincidental. In order to understand how different methodologies can lead to measurable impacts, I will examine the emerging models of film assessment and explore how films claim to incite social change and achieve their goals of shifting mindsets or policies. Finally, I will use these models to

guide the production and assessment of my own film, *Red Wolf Revival*, in order to potentially create social impact.

From its inception, documentary films have strived to tell a truth. The form challenges the audience to explore "what they know, how they know it, and what more they want to learn" (Bernard 3). Though documentary usually is seen as authority of truth, it is sometimes exploited, as exemplified in Errol Morris' *Thin Blue Line* (1988) and propaganda films such as *Triumph of the Will* (1935). Still, audiences typically approach the documentary form as an accurate depiction of history, science, sociology, or any other subject the film may address. In the 1980s, the American public expressed a growing interest in independent documentary, presumably because it offered an alternative to repetitive and reductive news stories, offering depth and focus to niche topics (Nichols 1).

Concurrently, environmental considerations were gaining momentum as social and political issues, in large part due to the growing environmental movement established in the late 1960s and 1970s. Environmental decision-making in the United States increasingly relied on public participation, as concerned citizens often brought clean water issues, wildlife habitat protection, and climate change policies to their elected officials, urging their representatives to act (Cox 83). The growth of independent documentaries and the strengthened agency for citizens to participate led to a natural relationship, in which documentary films could convey complex environmental issues to the general public or politicians, and advocate for behaviors and laws to address them. Environmental journalism and media evolved into a distinct sub-field, with the growth of

environmental communication journals such as *Environmental Communication: A Journal of Nature and Culture* and alternatives to network television through online platforms (Cox 17). These new avenues for conversations have a greater potential to increase the cultural cognition for environmental concerns, which may ultimately lead to behavioral changes that address identified problems.

Prior to the technological shifts implicit in the Internet age, environmental stories were usually restricted to news reports. Distinct journalist styles determine the presentation of nature and environmental issues by featuring stories that factor in prominence, timeliness, proximity, impact, magnitude, conflict, oddity, and emotional impact. The resulting reports are often restricted to a specific, confined event (for example, an oil spill) presented as dilemmas, stylistically matching political stories. This narrative pits environmentalists against oil companies, climate scientists versus skeptics, and landowners against conservationists (Cox 161). The growth of alternative media sources in the early 2000s, however, allowed for a more nuanced look at complex issues that incorporate more thorough framing of an issue and with a multitude of perspectives, replacing dichotomous ones. Online blogs, news sites, research centers, and video platforms are among the many ways individuals can now control their own discourse and introduce ideas into a public sphere without journalistic gatekeepers deciding which stories are told. By 2007, surveys suggest 346 million people worldwide were commonly visiting blogs, indicating the rapid growth in production and consumption of information on the Internet (Cox 168). The widespread adoption of these outlets created international communities that tend to be more first-person and more interactive than traditional

environments for film and media distribution. The content is primary and removes publication restraints often found in traditional distribution models.

New, viable outlets for film allow documentary filmmakers to craft films that may reach international audiences defined by Internet communities. In many instances, these audiences can be agents of behavioral and political change. In order to make claims about a film's ability to create change, though, one must assess a documentary's quantifiable measurable impact. Isolating a film's impact on a subject is complicated as it often contributes to existing knowledge and cultural ideas in a manner that can only be confirmed anecdotally or historically. The emerging models, in contrast, offer indicators for a film's role in cultural and political realms. Ultimately, objectively measuring the impact of documentaries is a new endeavor but an increasingly important one as more documentaries advocate for direct action.

DOCUMENTARY AS A TOOL FOR SOCIAL IMPACT

Documentary filmmakers often tell stories expose social and cultural issues in order to motivate the audience to shift attitudes toward a specific new perspective that alters behavioral patterns, cultural values and social norms. The sum of these changes is effectively the film's impact. Feature-length documentaries like Barbara Kopple's *Harlan County* (1973) exposed the dangers of working in coal mines and, according to some, inspired updated worker rights (Hot Docs 11). Some argue that Frederick Wiseman's *Titicut Follies* (1967) led to the closing down of the mental hospital depicted in the film (Hot Docs 11). While the films likely influence cultural understandings of a topic, the direct impact is debated in part because the results show correlation rather than causation. In order to understand specific impacts, assessments must isolate the film's influence on a subject through measurable indicators, rather than relying on chronological assumptions.

With increased accessibility to documentary films through new distribution models (including a range of Internet outlets) and more tools to evaluate a film, there is a geometric growth of new media and short form documentaries in addition to feature-length and broadcast content. These developments allow filmmakers to reach targeted audiences that open up new forms of storytelling that did not exist with prior models of film distribution along with new forms of feedback to know how the media influences a specific perspective. Many films now take a transmedia approach, producing a theatrical film while also producing short or interactive content for different viewing contexts, each building upon the story to create one cohesive project. This allows filmmakers to create a central film with peripheral content building upon the same story but expands and

diversifies its reach. The diversified storytelling also gives audiences agency to interact with media in new ways, often times incorporating their voice in the storytelling process. The expansion of form and feedback allow for a more nuanced approach to collect information and encourage participation.

Racing Extinction (2015) is one example of a production using transmedia to distribute content, all surrounding a central story. The film presents the alarming extinction rates caused by humans and challenges audiences to protect wildlife by modifying behaviors. In addition to the theatrical version of the film, the production team developed separate short pieces shown at political meetings, multimedia projections that publicly "performed" the content to communities defined geographically, all contributing a common story. In this instance, the goal is well-defined while the audience is broad. To reach their goal, the production team created peripheral content directing the viewers back to the original mission of communicating the urgency of the extinction crisis. Since the film urges for direct action, *Racing Extinction* also incorporated hashtags (for example, #justonething) that encourage audiences to participate in solutions. This also allows the production team to track the film's influence.

Cultural Cognition

"People's grasp of scientific debates can improve if communicators build on the fact that cultural values influence what and whom we believe." – Dan Kahan

Before creating media that may inspire a change in attitude, one must first understand the baseline of the audience's beliefs and cultural values. When a filmmaker understands their target audiences' environmental ideologies, they can craft the film that better incorporates an audiences concern and culture. Though there are many variables in defining ideologies, research suggests that geographic, economic, political, sociological, and religious factors can broadly form and characterize a community's perspective of the environment and wildlife (Corbett 84).

In most cases, environmental ideologies can be categorized along a spectrum; at one end is anthropocentrism, which positions humans at the center of a circle and values people more than other life, separating us from the natural world. At the other end is ecocentrism, which removes hierarchy and instead considers the environment as a series of interdependent relationships in which no one species has value over another (Corbett 28). Between these two views, a multitude of ideologies exist, including conservationism, which separates humanity from other species, yet usually does not claim humans to have value independent of other species. Another common view is a utilitarian outlook on nature. This view is common amongst many developed and developing nations, regarding environment as a resource to be exploited for farming and consumption. The majority of the American public since colonization fall into this category. This belief likely stems from historical conceptions of nature arising from early American concepts, such as "Manifest Destiny" and a need to tame the wild along with a largely Christian influence of Man's responsibility for other species (Corbett 27). These perspectives vary

geographically, intellectually, and generationally, but the spectrum serves as an important framework for a broad understanding of an American environmental ideology.

"Cultural cognition," a term coined coined by Professor Dan Kahan of Yale University refers to the perceived tendency that individuals will conform their beliefs and perceptions of risk about controversial issues to values that define their cultural identities (Cultural Cognition Project). His research posits that cultural cognition shapes reception to scientific consensus and ultimately informs specific populations' decision-making. This idea is important for those documentary films that are challenging their audiences to make ideological shifts by absorbing new information that might modify their view of a disputed or controversial issue, such as climate change or evolution. For example, a religious individual may reject evolution by natural selection as a concept if it is presented as a direct challenge to their faith. It does not mean they do not observe the scientific evidence, but, if accepting this scientific idea conflicts with their religious identity, they will reject it. Applied further, if the information is presented in a way that does not challenge their identity, an individual may be more willing to accept the scientific concepts and instead expand or modify their identity (Kahan 296). If issues are presented as an invitation to pick sides, the audience will pick the side that better encapsulates their identity, regardless of the facts presented. If the audience can identify with the voice asking them to consider shifting their mindset, however, they may be more likely to engage. If a film's goal is to create a conversation with the audience about a specific topic, the filmmaker should be cognizant of how audiences define their peer groups and cultural identity in order to present the information in a method that

encourages them to incorporate new perspectives rather than abandoning their values. A film that directly challenges the audience's view on a controversial subject can actually limit the possibility of successful impact by asking the audience to take sides and giving them the opportunity to polarize their views.

One example of a film that re-enforced a controversy rather than de-mystify it is *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006). Though the film occasionally presents peer-reviewed science as evidence for climate change, a polarizing individual, Al Gore, presents the information. As a politician who lost a contested election shortly before the time of release, it is not surprising that some people denied the science simply because he presented it. It formally attached climate science to a Democratic political view and allowed the audience to use its political views to shape their understanding of climate change:

> "…a remarkable number of people saw the documentary and were moved by it… But viewers also tended to be liberal Democrats with higher education, to be women, and so on… But for every person the movie engaged, there were at least as many who turned off because they disliked Al Gore long before *An Inconvenient Truth*… And we still see that in our research today: Many 'Dismissive' – when they think of global warming, they think of Al Gore, feel intense dislike, and thus disregard his message."
> – Anthony Leiserowitz (Nordhaus & Shellenberger 3)

Interestingly, a person's scientific literacy is not an indicator of whether or not they deny climate change. In fact, groups identified as having proficient scientific literacy are amongst the most culturally polarized on climate change, indicating that there are other factors that define someone's stance beyond an understanding of science (Kahan et al 732). Another study showed that respondents that read articles about nuclear energy and geo-engineering as possible energy solutions had less polarized views, since the

articles did not frame the issue as a climate change debate (Kahan 296). Therefore, when producing a film about a controversial subject, understanding the cultural cognition of an audience is an important consideration in order to de-polarize the story and ask an audience to modify behavior or ideology based on scientific information.

This is not to say that these films did not inspire any impact, as *An Inconvenient Truth* is also cited as a reason for a growth in environmental awareness that created mainstream conversations about ecological concerns (Fadiman and Tony 220). Simply put: *An Inconvenient Truth* inspired one type of change, while having an unintended polarizing response, limiting its potential audience and motivating political polarization against scientific discourse.

When looking to environmental stories, media traditionally presents a dichotomous view of issues. Articles present landowners at odds with environmentalists, while environmentalists label landowners as close-minded. An article from the Missoulian titled "Montana Landowners Can Kill 100 Wolves a Year Under New Rule" and an article "Local Ranchers Voice Opposition at Wolf Reintroduction Presentation" from the Aspen Daily News set a tone that landowners are on one side and environmentalists are on the other. Extrapolating from Kahan's findings, other landowners are likely to agree with vocal landowners because of a shared and defined landowner peer group perspective, rather than on a basis of scientific rational for having wolves on the landscape. Media aiming for social change should break down these identifiers so the audience is not forced into an identity that does not allow them to consider new information. In reality, the American public has a significant variety of

environmental perspectives and over-simplifying those views, even if perceived, puts the

audience at risk of disregarding the facts a filmmaker might hope to convey.

Models for Measuring Social Impact Media

Though many documentaries claim to create a change, the field of statistically

studying a film's impact to understand that change is surprisingly new. A variety of

emerging tools, organizations, and models are now available to documentary filmmakers,

each offering suggestions and tools to engage an audience deeply in the subject and

provide a methodology to assess the film's success by understanding its impact. The

Harmony Institute created "Story Pilot," which offers case studies and metrics for more

than 500 documentaries in 16 social issue subjects designed to help filmmakers

understand a film's impact (Harmony Institute), while organizations such as BritDoc

provides independent impact reports analyzing films according to emerging impact

models. Other organizations, such as the Fledgling Fund, Hot Docs, and the Center for

Media and Social Impact offer frameworks and pro-active models that explore how

filmmakers can create a social impact and how to assess a film's ability to achieve their

goals. While BritDoc and the Harmony Institute offer keen insight into this subject, they

are designed as an evaluation of existing media projects rather than putting forth a

structural model. I will next provide examples of how the impact can be measured by

using these parameters.

Fledgling Fund's Creative Media
Social Impact Continuum

Assessing a film's ability to create social impact is a difficult task as there is no academic or industry standard model for making these evaluations. One of the emerging models comes from The Fledgling Fund, a private organization that focuses on the social impact of multimedia projects. The organization developed a continuum that may help films move from simply a media project to successfully creating social change by considering a variety of key dimensions. These dimensions are also helpful in assessing the success of a film's ability to create social change.

The continuum begins with the simple premise of having a quality media project. This is a project that has clearly defined goals, flexibility to allow for a project to be malleable to new opportunities or changes in the story (for example, if the story changes because of introduced legislation), effective partners that can help carry the message to their established audiences, and a defined timeline. These baseline elements will allow a project to be firm in its perspective while allowing the media to be part of a conversation that may adopted to eventually cause a social change (Barrett 16).

The next dimension is that the project should increase public awareness. Particularly, it should diversify the audience, meaning it can cross political, geographical, age, and racial identities. Ultimately the project should reach more than a core audience and introduce the idea to new sectors of society (Barrett 16). Documentary films often run into the problem of "preaching to the choir." Though this can be useful to re-engage advocates of a certain perspective, social change usually requires changing attitudes, which can only happen if a film's message reaches an audience that is not part of the

"choir." The development of transmedia and the diversification of distribution are the most common ways filmmakers address this component.

Another dimension to consider is increasing public engagement. The project must encourage people to ask the question, "What can I do?" More importantly, it must be able to answer this question (Barrett 16). Films presenting systemic or cultural problems without answers have the potential to disengage an audience rather than inspire. If the aim is to create change, the film must give the audience agency to participate.

A less precise dimension is a film's ability to create a stronger movement. This can range from screenings with decision makers to incorporating viewers as part of the movement. Often, an indicator is the number of advocacy groups utilizing the film. Finally, there must be social change. This usually comes in the form of policy changes, measurable behavioral changes, or a shift in public discourse (Barrett 16).

This model creates a guideline for how successful films consider the various aspects necessary to create a social change. Other models, outlined below, build on this basic outline to add evaluations and implementation.

Hot Docs Documentary Impact Report

In 2014, Hot Docs, a leading documentary film festival, released a report titled "Documentary Impact: Social Change Through Storytelling" that outlines key factors in creating and implementing an impact strategy. It builds upon the Fledgling Fund's model and outlines the same key dimensions as important considerations for any media project hoping to inspire social change.

In addition to supporting the model, Hot Docs proposes that though a film's influence cannot be completely foreseen according to a formula, there are minimal indicators that can help a filmmaker understand a film's impact. Rather than looking to box office numbers, films can look to the public awareness around the film's release, viewership of the film, philanthropic support generated directly from the film, and how the film enters dialogue in relevant settings (Hot Docs 15). As success can be qualified differently for each film, there are no hard rules to guaranteeing any of those factors. Instead, a film should strive to set goals and evaluations that can indicate successful change. They suggest that evaluation should look at reach, engagement, and influence. Evaluating reach will address how many people saw the film, and define the audience. Engagement considers the reaction to the film; did people simply interact with the film on social media, did they participate in a Q&A at a screening, or did they participate in a direct action as a result of the film? Lastly, evaluating influence considers whether or not there was a change of opinion in key communities that could make a difference on the issue (Hot Docs 10).

Center for Media and Social Impact

The Center for Media and Social Impact (CMSI), based in American University's School of Communication also builds upon the premise outlined by the Fledgling Fund's Creative Media Social Impact Continuum, and offers specific research methods to understand a media project's success. CSMI organizes research questions into four main categories: Digital and media engagement metrics, audience impact, content and cultural impact, and institutional impact. Each category can be assessed by a variety of factors,

including press coverage, test audiences, or reaching key individuals or organizations

(Center for Media and Social Impact).

While many films have claimed impact by simply looking to engagement metrics,

CMSI outlines more comprehensive evaluations that can decipher short-term and long-

term social impacts of the film by surveying target audiences and evaluating a film's

influence on a policy that positively impacted the subject. In order to create a film that

will have fewer unintended consequences CMSI suggests that filmmakers employ focus

groups, experiment on presentations of information to audiences, and conduct

ethnographic research (CSMI 11). Each offer feedback on different aspects of the film

that can help determine effective methods to reach the targeted audiences rather than

assume interpretations of a film.

With an understanding of cultural cognition as a framework to understand

controversial decision-making, the Fledgling Fund's continuum for social impact, Hot

Docs impact report and CMSI's research parameters, filmmakers are finally developing a

language and toolkit to understand not only how films have influenced society, but how

to intentionally incite change through film.

Each model contains commonalities: first, that the campaign attached to the film

is equally as important as the film itself, and second, the film must be actively presented

and encourages an immediate response. I chose the following films to examine as case

studies, as each demonstrates a different form, audience, and goal, but their impact can be

understood according to these models.

CASE STUDIES

The End of the Line

Rupert Murray's film, *The End of the Line* (2009) details the dramatic effects of overfishing and makes the case for urgent and drastic action to move the fishing markets to a more sustainable and regulated industry. The crew spent two years in production filming with policy-makers, fishermen and scientists to produce an investigative journalism-style film to show the audience the gross negligence and damage caused by the large-scale fishing industry. The film is expository and presents facts, metaphors, and shocking footage to convince the audience of its message. Effectively, it sticks to the "voice of God" narration style, which helps the problem seem global, authoritative, and fact-based, leaving the audience little room for interpretation.

Unlike other films that match this style, however, the team had other goals: mobilize public opinion, change consumer behaviors to demand a preference of sustainably-harvested fish, motivate political action (including protection of bluefin tuna and the creation of new marine reserves), and encourage positive changes in corporate culture (Britdoc 12). Though the general public could view the film, the filmmakers employed a transmedia approach to diversify its audience. For example, classrooms would be able to access additional information connected to ecology curriculum, special edits were shown to political leaders, and the team created an app to help consumers utilize the information when purchasing food in supermarkets. The various indicators of

success informed their distribution to provide the appropriate contexts to diverse
audiences.

The Channel 4 Britdoc Foundation conducted research on the film and outreach of
The End of the Line and used the Fledgling Fund's continuum to provide a framework for
the assessment. Though the film was released worldwide, for the purposes of their study,
they examine the UK impact exclusively. The Britdoc Foundation administered surveys
in supermarkets before the film's release to assess public awareness of over-fishing
issues. Additionally, entry and exit surveys gathered data on audiences' reaction to the
film. Multiple assessments measured public awareness of the film and content retention
months after airing, while Google Analytics and Neilson ratings indicated internet and
broadcast reach. These methods offered a full picture of how the film created waves in
the fishing industry compared to the filmmakers' intent (Britdoc 11). The study provides
filmmakers with an example of how assessment can effectively demonstrate where a film
succeeded and failed at changing conversation, policy, and behavior.

Specifically, the Britdoc Foundation evaluated awareness of the film by looking at
analytics (20 million trailer views, 1.2 million watched the film), commissioned research,
and national press coverage. Ultimately, the study found the film was successful on this
front, as the studies determined that British society at large was aware of the film, even
though only 2% of the population watched the original broadcast. (For each person who
watched the film, 510 more knew about it) and had constant attention on its social media
activity indicating a general interest in the subject and the film (Britdoc 31).

According to the exit surveys, the audience felt informed on over-fishing issues and 84% of the audience committed to buying sustainable fish. In established focus groups twelve months after viewing the film, where audiences could articulate problems in overfishing identified by the film (Britdoc 36). Independently, Waitrose grocery stores indicated a 15% increase in sustainable fish sales and claim that customers frequently ask about the seafood sources (Britdoc 37). Interestingly, the surveys also identified barriers to social change; people felt embarrassed to ask about their seafood, and many thought about food choices in restaurants but did not extend the knowledge or questioning to restaurants (Britdoc 39).

As the goals were to inspire corporate change in addition to consumer changes, the filmmakers also screened the film to executives at organizations selling seafood products. In addition to changes made at Waitrose, a British supermarket, Whiskas & Sheba cat foods began sourcing their food according to Marine Stewardship Council recommendations and credited the film's message as their motivation for changes (Britdoc 47). Additionally, Pret A Manger, an international fast food franchise, also announced drastic changes in their policies to source fish after a preview screening of the film inspired the founder to screen the film to senior management (Britdoc 50).

Lastly, the film aspired to create political impacts. The filmmakers met with the Labour and Conservative parties and screened portions of the film to each, which inspired both parties to support the Marine Bill in 2009 (Britdoc 57). The film was not successful, however, in banning bluefin tuna sales.

Clearly, the film was successful in several of its objectives. This was, in part, because it employed screenings in classrooms, created versions for political leaders, formulated a cohesive campaign surrounding the film, and ultimately, partnered with the Britdoc Foundation to attain quantitative research to understand what aspects were successful and to what degree. The film successfully addressed factors such as increased awareness, increased engagement, a social movement, and finally a social change by a demonstrated change in attitude and some successes in created and enacting policy at a national level.

<p style="text-align:center"><u>*Girl Rising*</u></p>

Richard Robbins' 2012 film *Girl Rising* is a feature-length performative documentary that is divided into nine short segments, each focusing on injustices facing girls around the world. Each shows how access to education improved their lives and empowered them to create change in their own lives, and in some cases, their communities.

Since the film defines its actionable change as increasing access to education for girls internationally, the goal is broader than *The End of the Line*. Rather than a specific indicator of policy change, such as the end of consumption of bluefin tuna, the film was targeting a cultural change, which is often more difficult to decipher. In order to demonstrate success, however, *Girl Rising* defined its goals by looking to engagement and influence indicators. The film aims to bring awareness to injustices in women's

education worldwide, inspire communities to act, and drive resources to partners that are able to sustain change on a community level (Girl Rising).

Unlike many distribution models, *Girl Rising* is not rooted in wide theatrical or broadcast release. Instead, it focuses on community and classroom screenings. Most community screenings include panels following the film, identifying organizations and actions addressing girls' education locally. For educational use, the production team developed curriculum to pair with the film that elaborates on many of the issues explored in the film. Ultimately, these tailored screenings ensure that the film is malleable to the audience, rather than a static experience. This distribution model also encourages local partnerships with non-profit organizations that can sustain the film's messaging. As a result, thousands of communities have hosted their own screenings of the film around the world. To date, there have been over 20,000 screenings around the world (Girl Rising Global Impact).

From the perspective of understanding the production's impact on direct action, several corporations, such as TD Ameritrade, cited the film as an inspiration to financially support education projects for girls (Ojewumi). The production team also worked to address access to education in the communities highlighted in the film by creating community programs designed for girls to access education. For example, the film identifies transportation to school as a serious limitation for girls in the developing world. Using portions of the over $6.6 million raised from film screenings and donations, the *Girl Rising* team worked with communities to donate bikes to girls that otherwise

could not attend schools. In some communities, attendance in schools went up almost 30% after bikes were distributed (Girl Rising).

Girl Rising is successful in part because the distribution is primarily dependent on localized screenings. Inspiring companies, schools, and communities to find value in the film increased their influence, as seen by the global adoption of the film. The filmmakers can demonstrate further success by other metrics, including establishing a "Girl Rising Network" of high-profile ambassadors of the film, including UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, Hillary Clinton, USAID, CNN, Peace Corps, Queen Rania of Jordan, and others. These individuals have hosted screenings of their own, reaching policy-makers and communities around the world. The production team also measured success by reaching over 3,500 educators with their curriculum, screenings for Presidents and Education Ministers, and Congressional leaders (Girl Rising Global Impact).

Bully

Lee Hirsch's documentary film, *Bully* (2011), explores the ongoing challenges of bullying in schools. The film documents five personal stories of how harassment affected kids and their families, showing not only the experience of the victims, but how school administrations were absolving responsibility in addressing it.

Bully outlines specific goals for the film (Hot Docs 13):

1. Influence public policy: Support educational program that address the cause of bullying.
2. Shift culture: No more "kids will be kids" rationale. Make bullying unacceptable. Promote a "safe schools" culture.
3. Get the film in front of one million young people.
4. Raise public awareness about the scale and negative effects of bullying.

5. Reframe the issue, putting the "bullying crisis" on the agenda.
6. Advance programs that change school climate and reduce bullying.

Though bullying may be an ongoing problem, the film sets out to have a specific influence on the subject. Like *Girl Rising*, *Bully* screened in communities and schools in addition to being released in theaters and worldwide. The production team adopted a transmedia approach that included social media, modified films for policy-makers, and curriculum for schools to use in conjunction with screenings. Surpassing several of the production team's goals, the film became an pivotal documentary that inspired significant change to bullying on several fronts. The filmmakers hoped to reach one million young people, and instead reached an estimated 3.2 million students to date (Hot Docs 15).

Beyond the film's reach, *Bully* led to social change indicated by several specific factors: the film was screened at the White House in 2012, where President Obama announced support for student non-discrimination and safe schools improvement acts. Additionally, an anti-bullying caucus cited the film in its formation. The Bully Project, formed by the film's team, has become part of the curriculum at thousands of schools across the nation (Bully Impact 7).

The production team achieved these goals through a variety of means, in part because it allocated its resources between two categories: the production and the campaign. The production was the strong story element, but the campaign introduced a petition, surveys, an anti-bullying summit, and formed a toolkit for educators (Bully Impact 7). Effectively, the film was a vehicle for the campaign to reach the goals of developing an anti-bullying movement.

RED WOLF REVIVAL

"Those who control the discourse on risk will most likely control the political battles as well." – Plough & Krimsky (Cox 189).

Red Wolf Revival is a 24-minute documentary film that examines the current state of red wolves (*Canis rufus*), a critically endangered species in the United States that is facing biological, cultural and political challenges in North Carolina. At the time of production, no other films focused on the species, providing an opportunity to see how a film on the subject could impact the public discourse of the red wolf.

During pre-production of the film, I researched the story by reading news articles, books, press releases, federal reports, and hunting forums. I also reached out to scientists and North Carolina residents to gain a better understanding of the story and controversy surrounding it. Heeding the results from Kahan's research with the Cultural Cognition Project, I first needed to understand the controversy and why people held their cultural views before entering the conversation.

Background

The presence of wolf species is an historically contentious issue in the United States. Theodore Roosevelt, a championing environmentalist, characterized wolves as "the beast of waste and desolation." Many Americans see wolves as destructive and threatening, ultimately becoming synonymous with harm and danger. This attitude led to an effort to eradicate them from the landscape in the 18th and 19th century, mainly led by trappers.

Deforestation, colonization, and urbanization are among the key factors that continued the path toward extinction by the early 20th century (Beeland 137). With only seventeen individuals remaining in the wild in the 1970s, the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) decided to remove the species from their remaining habitat and declare them extinct in the wild, breed the individuals in captivity, and find a suitable re-introduction site to place them back in the wild (Beeland 145). As a species listed and protected under the Endangered Species Act of 1973, it was an obligation of the USFWS to ensure its survival. In 1987, the USFWS re-released wolves into Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge (ARNWR) in Eastern North Carolina, making it the first time in history a predator was re-introduced into the wild. This rural and conservative region of North Carolina relies on row crop farming and hunting as its two major sources of income and has private farmland bordering ARNWR. Naturally, the red wolves occasionally moved off the refuge land and onto private land, where many landowners tolerated their presence. Red wolves were decimating nutria, an invasive species, and helped manage the growing white-tailed deer population.

Over time, however, the tone shifted away from tolerance. Ultimately, it became a conversation about separating the federal government from private land rights. A few vocal landowners took to a forum in 2013 starting a thread entitled "Red Wolf Restoration Scandal" and shared their experiences and understanding of the impact of red wolves, coyotes, and the federal program (Red Wolf Restoration Scandal 1). While voicing frustration, contributors framed the federal government and conservation groups on one side of the issue, while landowners, or locals, were on the other.

The USFWS, meanwhile, remained publicly silent on the issue, allowing this conversation to develop into an effort to shut down the program as an overreach of government on private landowners. The contributors of the "Red Wolf Restoration Scandal" forum began controlling the public conversation about red wolves.

In 2014, the USFWS held public forums that allowed residents within the red wolf recovery range to voice their opinion. During these forums, citizens voiced disdain for the species and for the USFWS management of the program, and expressed an interest in eradicating the species. In 2015, North Carolina's Wildlife Resources Commission released a resolution asking for the United States Fish and Wildlife Service to shut down the red wolf program and declare the species extinct in the wild (Resolution to Declare the Red Wolf Extinct 1). This request claims that the red wolf program has been poorly handled and has violated landowner rights by restricting coyote hunting on their property as red wolves were accidentally shot because of their similar appearance (Resolution to Remove Red Wolves 1). This request to actively declare a species extinct was the first of its kind and yet the press seldom covered the story. With limited dedication from non-profit organizations and few tourists visiting the red wolf recovery region, the red wolf story is often overlooked with little national attention.

The Film

In response to this heightened tension and polarization of the species, *Red Wolf Revival* sets out to create a dialogue that is less volatile and encourages viewers to engage in the story based on facts and an understanding of opposing perspectives. There is an

added challenge in that few outside of the controversy know this species exists.

Ultimately, the goal is to introduce the species to the general audience to diversify the

engaged stakeholders while also encouraging those interested in protecting the species to

enter a more thoughtful and less polarizing conversation. According to a study by the

National Research Council, public participation and engagement "improves the quality

and legitimacy of a decision and can lead to better results" (Cox 17). As a result, the film

is intended to be a part of a conversation aimed at bringing perspectives to the table

respectfully, rather than pushing a specific legislation or policy to protect red wolves.

Using the Fledgling Fund's Creative Media Social Impact Continuum as an

assessment tool, I considered each dimension in how I would structure the film and

design the outreach. The primary component is having a central solid story. The premise

of my film is examining the conversation surrounding the potential intentional extinction

of a species, so while there is subjectivity in the film's quality, the foundation is a unique

conservation story that has received little media attention.

I designed the film to give an overview of the history, the timeline of the

controversy, and the concerns of the people living on the same land as red wolves. I also

introduce ideas to move the story forward in a way that might include red wolves on the

landscape. Based on Kahan's findings with the Cultural Cognition Project, I aimed to

depolarize the story by including voices that each perspective would identify with as a

way of communicating ideas. An individual that does not trust scientists is not likely to

listen to a scientist's case to change perspectives and support the red wolf recovery

efforts, and scientists frustrated with landowners are not likely to identify with a landowner's concern.

I apply this concept in a few ways throughout the film. First, I offer a history of the program that is stripped of controversy and political views to provide context. I include voices of landowners and biologists to outline the history so it is presented as an agreed upon summary of events from multiple perspectives. Next, I include landowners that had positive and negative perspectives with red wolves and the program. This approach allows a skeptical public to not only identify more with individuals but also allows me as a filmmaker to explore perspectives with less judgment and gain trust that I am legitimately interested in the conversation. Additionally, the film includes commonalities amongst all perspectives; a love for the regional landscape, a desire for a more controlled coyote population, and an interest in wanting to have goal-oriented dialogue. Finally, I offer context to the negative reactions to red wolves to build empathy for differing views, which is intended to engage the scientific and conservation communities to enter a dialogue that understands differing opinions, rather than belittle opposition. Setting up the problem as a difference in perspective rather than delineated "sides" allow the audience to engage with components that align with their thoughts, rather than adopting one of two polarized identities.

The Fledgling Fund also calls for increased public awareness. This is an ongoing component, however I incorporated certain key components to build early public awareness. I partially funded the film using Kickstarter, not solely to raise production funds but also to build a community surrounding the film so that backers may feel

encouraged to share the story and ensure that others know the story. The film received

donations from nearly two hundred individuals and received social media attention from

Defenders of Wildlife, the Endangered Species Coalition, the New York Times,

Wildlands Network, and various zoos and nature centers across the country. The audience

built over Kickstarter and social media may serve as a foundational audience at the time

of release. Several educational organizations expressed interest to host their own,

including the North Carolina Science Teachers Association.

The public engagement component lies in the distribution structure of the film.

Drawing from *Girl Rising* and its efforts to organize community screenings that included

discussions on the topic following the film, I follow each screening with a panel of

stakeholders including representatives from the USFWS, landowners, biologists, non-

profit leaders, concerned citizens, and myself as producer and director of the film. Each

screening allows for the half-hour film to be followed by an hour-long discussion

amongst people not ordinarily in the same room, having a respectful conservation with

the same background information presented in the film. The idea is to give structure and

tone to the conversation differing from aggressive forums occurring prior to the

production of *Red Wolf Revival*.

Presenting the film in conjunction with discussions allows me to accomplish a

variety of goals, such as creating an event that encourages participation, rather than

passive viewing. It brings together a diverse panel that provides a vehicle for their

research, updates, and perspectives not encapsulated in the film. Further, the screenings

invite oppositional voices to attend and engage them in the discussion.

I conducted three test screenings to see how this concept might work in real time.

The first was in November 2015 in Columbia, North Carolina (a location within the red

wolf recovery area). It is geographically in the center of the controversy, and, ultimately,

is the region with the highest polarization. I invited a member of the USFWS, a biologist,

a landowner, and a representative from the Red Wolf Coalition to sit on the panel

following the film. Prior to the screening, contributors to the "Red Wolf Restoration

Scandal" forum made comments indicating their thoughts on the screening: "The partners

(USFWS, RWC, DOW[1]) obviously have no problem promoting their scam at wine and

cheese propaganda film screenings or in the court room to take away private landowner

rights in order to keep their cash cow alive" (Red Wolf Restoration Scandal 363). The

screening was already portrayed as a polarizing event. Rather than asking the audience to

pick sides in or after the film, however, we had a moderated discussion about what the

USFWS is planning to do to keep its obligation to protect the species, listened to several

concerned landowners express their frustration, and ultimately had a tempered debate

about the merits of the program. Several audience members voiced that they have not had

this respectful of a discussion about the topic, while still including strong disagreements.

Further, a few residents opposing the red wolf recovery efforts approached the

panelists following the film and expressed a shared interest in wanting to eradicate

coyotes. Though not everyone agreed with a desire to protect red wolves, there were

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[1] United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), Red Wolf Coalition (RWC),
Defenders of Wildlife (DOW)

components of the presented information that deconstructed polarized identities and promoted commonalities.

I held two more test screenings, one in Durham, North Carolina, and another in Washington, D.C., in order to see how people not familiar with landowners in the region might respond to their perspectives. Each panel discussion focused on different themes determined by audience questions. The Columbia screening focused on working with landowners, the Durham screening focused on addressing the state of North Carolina to protect the species, and the Washington, D.C., screening was a conversation about how non-profit organizations could become more involved with the issue. While the screenings are anecdotal, the questions asked will help me build resources online that can go out with future screenings to help answer audience questions and provide next steps.

As the USFWS has yet to determine their preferred course of action regarding the future of the red wolf program, the panelists encouraged audiences to write to decision-makers in the USFWS, regardless of perspective. This information is not formally included at the film as the solution may be different when the USFWS announces new plans for red wolf conservation in Summer 2016 (Rumsey).

The last dimension outlined by the Fledgling Fund is to develop a stronger social movement. Again, this will be indicated by assessing the film over a longer period of time, but early indicators suggest that there is potential with this film. The Natural Resources Committee Democrats in the US House of Representatives, for example, held a predator meeting and used customized clips from the film to present red wolves as a case study for a predator issue in the United States. This is an early step to put the film in

front of the appropriate decision-makers that can influence the outcome of red wolves.

Additionally, the USFWS team assessing the future of red wolves intends to include

portions of the film in its presentation to the public as they collect information about the

human dimension of the program, suggesting that the film has value in creating

productive dialogue. Additionally, each zoo and nature center involved in the red wolf

captive breeding program will receive a DVD of the film so they may easily use it in

educational settings. Considering the tools outlined by the Center for Media and Social

Impact, I asked each facility to administer a survey to track responses from their

audience, indicating which portions of the film present new information, the perceived

urgency of the issue, and if they intend to write relevant policy-makers expressing their

views. These will provide better indicators to how people are reflecting on the film's

content and better assess their engagement after viewing the film.

I designed the film to create a conversation about how to protect the species by

engaging the public. By involving diverse panels and making the film available to a

network of zoos and nature centers working with red wolves, the film has the potential to

promote a thoughtful, solution-oriented conversation about the protection of red wolves

in the wild. Each test screening had a different theme defined by the conversation

following the film, indicating that the experience is malleable and capable of maintaining

relevance in a variety of discussions related to red wolves.

Though the film must be screened further to fully determine its impact, I

incorporated a structure that will allow me to understand potential impacts after several

months of screening the film. Early interest in the film indicates that the film is successful

in creating a depolarizing narrative, exemplified by the USFWS, non-profit
organizations, the US House of Representatives, and educators expressing interest in
utilizing the film to generate a productive conversation. Through surveys collected at
future screenings, I will be able to understand how audiences react to the film, assess
conversations generated from the screenings, and measure their engagement with
regional and national policy-makers regarding the future of red wolves in the wild.

CONCLUSION

Documentary film has the ability to affect an individual on several levels, whether that is through influencing ideologies or by motivating an audience to create actionable change. Identifying all aspects of a film's impact on a society may not always be quantifiable as it coalesces into cultural knowledge, however there may be quantifiable changes that indicate its influence. Emerging models offer refined tools to measure quantifiable changes, and can help filmmakers craft more impactful project if the subject is a cause imploring a call to action.

Ultimately, the pursuit of understanding if and how a documentary film can influence its target audience is an important development in the evolution of the medium. Rather than producing a film and releasing it through traditional outlets, filmmakers advocating for a change should consider the diverse forms and distribution models that now exist and understand how each can promote the desired impact. Further, a variety of metrics now exist that determine the effectiveness of the project, which can inform additional steps to create change.

In the case of *Red Wolf Revival*, these tools guided my filmmaking process by offering structure that shaped the creative direction in order to reach my target audience. The emerging models influenced how I framed the issues, the characters I chose to include, and how I will present the film for future screenings. There are several other indicators that influence the perception of red wolves, such as press, independent conversations, and policies enacted by state and federal agencies. Understanding these models may produce data that indicates how the film itself contributed to the desired

impact. It also provided a framework to identify early indicators, such as establishing

educational partnerships and organizing test screenings. These considerations allowed me

to focus on tangible impact, and I will continue to pair the film screenings with panels

and collect data in order to gain a clear understanding of the long-term impact.

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