

# Social Impact of Audiovisual Media

Opening Remarks for Discussion Session 'Strategies and  
Ethics of Impact' at end of Day, 12 August 2021

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Hello. I'm very pleased to have attended today's sessions and listened to the four papers. Like you, I have previously seen only the abstracts.

I make my comments as a series of points, first of all 5 points in general as they emerge from the session and then very briefly in respect of each of the 4 presentations.

1. It is clear that the idea of 'impact' with its unavoidable sense of **physical collision** and its history in **marketing**, presents many of us with continuing problems, as the literature of usage around documentary clearly shows (Nichols' and Winston' reservations here). Usage has to be wary of its history and unhelpful connotations. It is essentially a metaphor about 'significant causal change' and in trying to define and measure it further we have to remain aware of its rather loose, figurative status as a term.

2. There is a clear sense in which traditional ideas of documentary **effectiveness**, assessed in terms of 'evidence' and of 'argument' (particularly when gauged entirely by textual reference) have become inadequate. There is a need to connect with broader audiences who are engaging with a changing generic range and to recognise how the new salience of fakery and **misinformation** is creating new kinds of audience 'suspicion', new 'filters' for being 'effective'.

3. A part of what is now a very diverse range of documentary output is locatable as ‘advocacy’ work, or ‘campaign’ work, connecting very strongly with broader streams of publicity and marketing (as the extensive use of the word ‘strategy’ suggests).

This has raised questions about ‘**documentary ethics**’. A contemporary project to make these ‘purer’ has been complicated by an interest in importing new, ‘impure’ ‘**instrumentalist**’ elements in the desire to be *effective*. This is a debate which will go on. Projects with a strong ‘grassroots’ profile do not avoid this problem even if they change its character.

4. ‘**Measurement**’ (including pre-production and in-production assessments) of course remains a key issue, particularly given the strong suspicion of ‘quantitative’ modes. Demonstrable shifts in people’s *perceptions* and, crucially, *their actions*, remain a key indicator, even if causal links with specific media projects cannot be easily established.

Producers need to be on guard against presenting overly positive accounts of audience response. The relationship between ‘textual response’ and ‘social action’ needs constant attention lest a *misleading equivalence* is established. *Some* kinds of quantitative indicator will remain valuable.

5. Issues of ‘**scale**’. Just how big and demographically broad an ‘audience’ is perceived to be in relation to the scale of a specific issue (ie. local, regional, national, international) should clearly affect expectations/assessments of its ‘impact’ performance.

Some quick points from the four earlier papers (see programme)

**Bettina’s paper** – This paper presented us with a clear sense of the need for planning and the need to assess the kinds of change which AV material might bring about. It reinforces the need to focus on ‘outcomes’ much more seriously than perhaps many documentary producers have done in the past.

**Frederic’s paper** – This took us right into the production process and the varieties of strategic and tactical perspectives that are introduced at different stages. It offers a useful distinction between short and long-term consequences and introduces the idea of an ‘integrated’ approach

**Patricia's paper** – valuably emphasizes shared viewing and co-creation, drawing on lessons from the pandemic. The idea of 'new structures' is discussed along with the emergence of a new documentary 'ecosystem'. Offline/Online interaction is examined.

**Angela's paper** –this presents a critical account, with examples drawn from her own work, of documentary within democracy. It usefully looks at advocacy as a documentary mode and the ways forward for collective organisation. It considers the 'unforeseeable' conditions within which AV texts often circulate.

**So, some really excellent issues to discuss further.**