

“Social Impact of Audiovisual Media’ online symposium, Film University of Babelsberg/University of Bournemouth, Germany/UK, 12/13th August 2021

Audiovisual media, from the George Floyd murder video to documentaries like “An Inconvenient Truth” (D: Davis Guggenheim) and fiction films like “I, Daniel Blake” (D: Ken Loach), have increasingly influenced social, political and environmental discourses. Simultaneously, a growing number of media professionals explicitly proclaim their work to strategically generate *social impact*, be it as part of the production process that aims to raise awareness for certain topics, or through publishing specific impact guides and toolkits.

How to understand and measure ‘social impact’ and its several dimensions, however, is still a matter of debate. Aside from earlier attempts to conceptualise impact with regard to a specific genre (e.g. Nash and Corner 2016; Finneran 2014), the notion is either used as an umbrella term, or discussed within an academic context, or sometimes even rejected as bold but meaningless marketing slang for superficial change (Nichols 2016). The online symposium “Social Impact of Audiovisual Media” thus aimed to provide a space for contextualising the concept, as well as for a general exchange between media practitioners, researchers, activists, and impact professionals. Correspondingly, the online format allowed bringing together speakers and attendees from a broad range of places and time zones such as Australia, the USA, UK and Germany.

Under the title “Strategies of Impact”, the first symposium day discussed different approaches to conceptualise and generate impact. As **Jens Eder** and **Catalin Brylla** from the organising team pointed out in their introduction, films that want to create social impact under contemporary media conditions, face several dilemmas. While they have to assert themselves within increasingly contested and commercialised attention ecologies, they also have to meet epistemic criteria of truth and truthfulness, ethical criteria of respecting their protagonists and viewers, and corresponding aesthetic criteria. To guide the following discussion beyond a single understanding of impact, Eder and Brylla identified a set of recurrent binaries from the respective literature: production/reception, individual participants/collective spectatorship, reach/significance, change in attitude/behaviour, targeting beneficiaries/mediamakers, positive/negative impact.

The first panel then dealt with different “Conceptualisations of Impact”. In her opening presentation, **Bettina Kurz**, Senior Analyst and Consultant for the non-profit organization PHINEO, introduced insights into why and how social impact orientation should be implemented in media projects. Based on the ‘impact cycle’ model, Kurz differentiated between the three levels *output* (outreach to target groups), *outcome* (lasting changes in the target group’s behaviour), and *impact* (societal changes) to point towards different dimensions as well as complexities of planning, achieving, and measuring social impact.

The following presentation by **Frédéric Dubois**, journalist and researcher at the

Humboldt Institute for Internet and Society, introduced a framework for a ‚maker-inclusive understanding of impact‘. In opposition to traditional impact models, Dubois argued for a multilayered impact concept that includes the experiences of film makers, with useful distinctions between strategic and tactical impact, product and process, short- and long-term impact.

The second panel looked at “Impact Strategies: Reaching Audiences, Working with Communities”. **Patricia Finneran**, founder of Story Matters, discussed how the Covid pandemic has both challenged and strengthened the global network of impact filmmakers. Using examples such as “The Bully Project” (Hirsch, 2011), Finneran also showed how different communities (e.g. experts, people affected, online/offline) can be included in the filmmaking process in a participatory manner.

Angela Aguayo, Associate Professor at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, focused on participatory documentary productions in a historical perspective. Aguayo suggested an impact framework that includes four distinct modes of social change in documentary film (representing, speaking for, collaborating with, engaging social change) and emphasised the need as well as the potential of documentary film to establish communities for long-term social change (and to thereby correct typical tendencies like problematic ‘tourism’ and surface level transformation).

The day closed with a discussion introduced by **John Corner**, Visiting Professor at the University of Leeds and Professor Emeritus of the University of Liverpool. Corner identified five overarching topics in the first day’s panels: the potentially misleading connotations of the impact term and how to be aware of them in further defining the concept; the inadequateness of traditional ideas of the effectiveness of documentary in times of broader audiences and new challenges, such as the spread of misinformation; questions about documentary ethics in light of increasingly instrumentalist perspectives on social impact films; the problem of how to measure impact and how to avoid misleading equivalences between audience responses and social action; issues of scale concerning a film’s topic, its audience, and its correspondingly expected social impact.

The second day entitled “Forms of Impact” focused on questions of how different audiovisual media forms can generate impact through their specific affordances. In the opening presentation, **David Knight**, filmmaker and Course Leader for the BA Film and Television at London College of Communication, gave insights into what he called the “pedagogy of impact”, i.e. teaching film students to understand the aims of impact production, work collaboratively, and utilise storytelling for societal change. Knight further showed how anti-torture campaign videos can generate sensorial and emotive reactions in public and stakeholder audiences to motivate debates and changes on different political levels.

The following panel focused on “Non-Fictional Forms and Impact”. **Florence Ayisi’s**, Professor of Transnational Documentary at the University of South Wales, film

“Zanzibar Soccer Queens” (2007), which portrays a Muslim women football team, illustrated how documentaries can foster long-term and growing social impact by transforming their protagonists’ social roles and by initiating multi-dimensional partnerships across the world.

Sue Sudbury, Associate Professor of Media Practice at Bournemouth University reflected on the production process of her participatory documentary “Village Tales” (2017), which included the portrayed Indian women in the production process by letting them individually decide what to film and how to film it. Sudbury highlighted the importance of qualitative, small-scale impact effects and of including impact evaluation right from the beginning of a filmmaking process.

Dan Jackson, Professor of Media and Communication at Bournemouth University, presented his findings on disability representations in Channel 4’s broadcasting of the Rio 2016 Paralympics. Jackson used audience research to show how Paralympic coverage by Channel 4 has been promoting progressive forms of disability representation, but also how it raised critical questions concerning the so-called “Hollywood treatment” of Paralympians.

The last panel discussed “Fictional Forms and Impact”. **Naima Alam**, media scholar at the University of Tübingen, analysed animated ‘explainer videos’ from the Bangladeshi NGO BRAC to demonstrate how customised narrative strategies in development communication can be used to connect to local audiences in communicating topics like human rights and gender equality.

Samantha Iwowo, Senior Lecturer at Bournemouth University, discussed her research-led fiction film “Paint Brush” and outlined her use of Critical Race Theory to deconstruct dominant subjectivities and to thereby provoke discussions among stakeholders about decolonising their identities and the audience gaze.

The final speaker, **Peter Hartwig**, film producer from Babelsberg, reflected on the impact of his fiction film “System Crasher” (2019), which has raised awareness of problems in the German childcare and therapy system. As Hartwig revealed, the movie’s impact developed both organically through its huge international audience success and strategically through cooperating with an agency that specialises on targeting decisionmakers, educational institutions and other stakeholders.

The closing discussion identified overarching tendencies of the two days. It became clear that impact depends on several factors (e.g. attention, variety, community), it can unfold on multiple levels (e.g. behaviours, attitudes, organisations), and it can be conceptualised with different modalities (e.g. direct/indirect, positive/negative). To move towards a common, nuanced, and informed understanding of impact, further research, exchange, and cooperation between filmmakers, academics, strategists, and policymakers will be required.

References

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