Caty Borum Chattoo, **Story Movements: How Documentaries Empower People and Inspire Social Change**, New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020, 298 pp., $125.00 (hardcover).

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After nearly a century in which the genre was often at the creative and cultural margins, documentary film burst into broader consciousness in the 21st century, as technology empowered new authors to reach new audiences through new platforms. There are few scholars better positioned to write on this topic than Caty Borum Chattoo. As both an "impact producer" of advocacy documentaries, such as *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price,* and as the current Executive Director of American University's Center for Media and Social Impact, author Borum Chattoo straddles the worlds of activism, filmmaking, and academics. In **Story Movements: How Documentaries Empower People and Inspire Social Change**, an engaging volume that should appeal to scholars and practitioners alike, the author focuses on what she calls "contemporary social issue documentary" (p. 5). This subgenre is distinct for its editorial independence, its commitment to truth and ethics, its broader civic motivation, and importantly, its entertainment value.
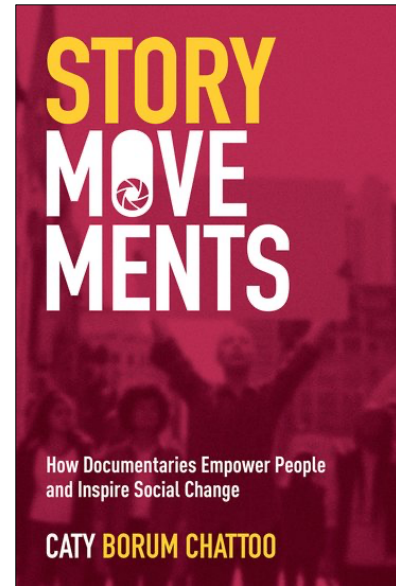
To fully understand the book's focus, it may be useful to make explicit what it is *not* about. The book is not an exhaustive history of documentary film or even of the subgenre of social issue documentary. While social issue documentary is put into historical context, particularly in chapter 2, the focus of the book is quite explicitly on films and film practices since 2010. The book is also not concerned with advocacy documentary's most commercially successful subgenre of the 21st century, which the author describes as "partisan-essay documentaries" (p. 49). This includes the work of filmmakers like Michael Moore on the left and Dinesh D'Souza on the right, where ideological arguments take center stage. Rather, the book focuses on documentary that is personal and narrative, that features the lived experiences of its subjects, and that involves the communities and individuals who are documented onscreen.

In this sense, social issue documentary stands apart from earlier forms of reform-minded documentary, beginning in the New Deal era with films by the likes of John Grierson and Pare Lorentz. The author notes that these can be understood as "prosocial propaganda" that are well meaning but that portray their subjects as objects of pity that lack agency (p. 34). Instead, producers of social issue documentary, or "impact producers," trace their lineage back to the mid-20th-century direct cinema movement and the community media of the 1970s (p. 87). They are independent storytellers who produce outside the official employ of media institutions. This allows them to highlight voices, issues, and perspectives not often centered in the mainstream media system. The book argues that social problems are not political abstractions but the

lived experiences of individuals and marginalized communities, and that the social impact documentary offers a sympathetic and powerful tool for telling their stories and creating larger change.

While the book is squarely centered on the last decade, it is not a treatise on technology's transforming role. Indeed, while the case studies in the book are contemporary, the form of organizing at the heart of social issue documentary harkens back to a predigital era in which documentary took center stage, literally, at in-person community screenings in noncinema settings such as schools, churches, jails, and community centers. The book returns to this theme time and again, that grassroots or community screenings are essential to the representation and interaction that give social impact documentary its power. This in-person dimension is not inconsistent with what the author describes as the "participatory networked media age," in which publics connect through social media and other online communities (p. 5). Rather, it reinforces the reality that the offline and online are connected and that physical gathering leads to digital organizing and vice versa. So, while platforms proliferate, particularly in the era of streaming services like Netflix and HBO, legacy media such as traditional cinema, broadcast television, and community screenings abide and amplify social issue documentary's causes across media.

At the heart of the book are its case studies, and at the heart of those are interviews with many of the filmmakers responsible for them. A few of the films profiled include *13th, Bully, Charm City, Citizenfour, The Feeling of Being Watched, Heroin(e), Private Violence,* and *Southwest of Salem.* These films explore a range of issues, from intimate partner violence to environmental degradation, to the opioid crisis, to race and representation. What cuts across them is that each represents in its own way the need for teams of "documentary story-centered movement builders" that combine civic connectors, funding and enabling institutions, impact strategists, and the filmmakers themselves (p. 81). It is this additional component that is necessary to turn a movie into a movement.

An entire chapter (chapter 5) is devoted to the 2013 documentary *Blackfish* and to the so-called "Blackfish Effect" (p. 101). The film critiqued the keeping of orcas in captivity through the story of a single whale named Tilikum. In the Blackfish Effect, documentary storytelling aids social change by combining emotional narratives with online and offline activism, public relations, multilayered distribution of media, and a very clear call to action. In this case, the film, aided by broader civil society campaigns and public outcry amplified by the press, eventually led to the loss of corporate sponsorships, declining attendance, lost revenues, and ultimately resulted in SeaWorld canceling its orca shows.

This change is not just confined to civil society but takes place at a policy level as well. Chapter 7 explores how social impact documentary can have a direct impact on policy by forming "policy sub-networks" that include legislative staffers, filmmakers, researchers, advocacy groups, and often policymakers themselves (p. 144). The emotional and intimate stories portrayed in social impact documentary become tools to move beyond dry policy positions and motivate change that can sidestep partisan gridlock. The book explores the films *The Invisible War*, *Sin by Silence*, *Semper Fi*, and *Playground: The Child Sex Trade in America* as four examples where policy and documentary intersect.

The book also focuses on the conflicts and contradictions of the current media environment and what this means both for social issue documentary and for the storytellers who create it. Chapter 8 explores the

way in which "creative investigative documentary" has largely stepped up as traditional investigative journalism has declined (p. 165). Freed of the bonds of large media organizations, documentarians can move beyond the myth of objectivity and pursue issues that they are passionate about in a truthful manner. But they also lack the backing of powerful institutions and face challenges of access and legal protection that traditional journalists would not be burdened by.

The book is closely concerned with issues of inclusion and representation. Freed of the limitations of celluloid cinema, documentarians come from more diverse backgrounds and can portray less traditional communities and issues while still reaching broad audiences. But the book notes and quantifies the fact that the vast majority of these projects fail to recoup their costs, let alone turn a profit. Documentary filmmaking remains a precarious endeavor, even if it is practiced with more diversity than in the past. One area that subsequent scholars might build on is to take a more critical look at the mechanisms that fund and curate social issue documentary. The book makes repeated reference to the philanthropic and institutional supporters of this genre without closely examining the systems of power and privilege that underlie philanthropic giving.

All in all, the book will be of interest to scholars and students of contemporary documentary and nonfiction film. But it will also be useful to activists, advocates, and others interested in actively designing social justice campaigns that utilize media for social change. The case studies and interviews function as a useful playbook for those engaged in the process of creating and leveraging this form of documentary. Highlighting strategies and lessons learned from past campaigns can lay the groundwork for story-centered movements yet to be built.