

## A Working Guide to the Landscape of Arts for Change

A collection of writings depicting the wide range of ways the arts make community, civic, and social change.

## MEDIA FOR CREATIVE CHANGE: The Role of Popular Media in Advancing Social Change

By Sarah Ingersoll

Popular media in the form of film, television, celebrity, games, and online videos is a powerful way for the creative community to depict critical social issues and engage the grassroots. The purpose of this paper is to describe some of the ways popular media can advance social issues. The focus is mostly on for-profit media in partnership with nonprofits. In particular, the paper focuses on films, television shows, celebrities, games, and online videos that are making a difference.<sup>1</sup> While popular music is a powerful force for social change and has a long history in this regard, it is being covered in another paper in this series.

Socialization in America has changed over the last decade. The way we learn customs and values from generation to generation has been transformed. In the past, the primary socialization agent was generally believed to be the family, with schools being a distant second. Today, though, the media and other forms of entertainment have emerged as an additional socialization powerhouse. Popular media's reach, along with its consolidation and expansion into new platforms through technological advances, has made it a powerful influencer of the public's consciousness of social issues.



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Popular media particularly influences young people, as they tend to consume more of it than their parents. According to a study by the Kaiser Family Foundation, the amount of time young people spend with entertainment media has risen dramatically, especially among minority youth. Today, eight- to 18-year-olds spend an average of seven hours and 38 minutes a day using television, video games, or computer entertainment media (more than 53 hours a week). Much of this time is spent multitasking across multiple forms of media.<sup>2</sup> Adults, however, are also increasing media consumption and media multitasking.<sup>3</sup> For example, social media, such as online videos, is a powerful way to reach baby boomers. What makes popular media popular is that it has the capacity to bridge generations through its mass appeal. It takes the creativity and artistic talent of producers, directors, writers, designers, actors, and others to produce appealing content that engages a broad spectrum of tastes, life styles, geographic perspectives, and beliefs. When this creativity and reach is combined with a social change agenda, popular media can have a powerful impact.

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## ISSUES & GOALS

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Popular media that has a social change agenda can address a range of social issues. Not surprisingly, it tends to focus on issues that are current. Common issues addressed in popular media are the environment, voting, education, children, health (especially cancer), war, and emergency relief. Issues such as the justice system, human rights, economic disparity, or international relations are less commonly addressed.

Each form of popular media also tends to gravitate around certain types of issues. For example, disaster relief is more likely to be addressed by celebrities and online videos because of the quick turn around in developing these forms. Television shows have been effective in breaking barriers around issues of race and sexuality.

There are a number of ways popular media can make a difference on these issues. Most popular media that has a change agenda wants to “do well and do good.” That is, it wants to earn money *and* have a social impact. [Participant Media](#) is a prime example. Participant is a for-profit film and television production company founded by millionaire Jeff Skoll (one of the founders of eBay) that has as its mission an explicit focus on this “double bottom line.” As its mission states, “The company seeks to entertain audiences first, then to invite them to participate in making a difference.”

The most basic objective of all popular media for change is *reach*, that is, the number of people engaged as measured through box-office revenues, online views, and the amount and frequency of media and press coverage received.

Depending on what content is covered and how it is tackled, popular media also creates opportunities to provide information and education on issues through its reach, and can bring an issue into public focus and awareness. Popular media can result in increased **knowledge of or discourse around** issues. Awareness and knowledge are measured through surveys and polls for the amount and nature of public response.

A popular media project may influence broader **attitudes and values**. Iconic television shows such as *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *The Cosby Show*, and *All in the Family* are now pointed to for having helped break down barriers around race, gender, and sexuality.

Popular media for change may also produce **short-term action** (e.g., registering to vote or voting, signing a petition, lobbying for legislation, donating money) and influence shifts in behavior. Many public service announcements, such as those developed with the Ad Council, focus on longer-term **behavior and participation** (e.g., addressing health symptoms, recycling). These impacts are more difficult and expensive to track and measure.

Finally, popular media may aim to change **systems, policies, or conditions**—legislation passed, a candidate elected, carbon emissions decreased. Examples to follow include the films *An Inconvenient Truth* and *Super Size Me*.

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## STRATEGIES

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Popular media can achieve social-change intentions in a couple of ways. The most common strategy is through a **message**; that is, what actors or celebrity spokespeople say about the issue. This tends to influence awareness, knowledge, and dialogue.

Another way popular media can address social issues is through **narrative**, how the story—fictional or documentary—frames the issue.<sup>4</sup> Narrative is a unique capacity of art and includes genres such as comedy, drama, and satire. Narrative is influenced by style of shooting, color choice, angles, form (such as animation), and other creative techniques. Narrative choices can provide nuance to issues that are often portrayed in black and white extremes, and humanize issues, fostering empathy and motivating people to become more informed or to act on an issue.

The third way popular media achieves social change is through cultural **tactics**. While messages and narratives generally impact awareness, tactics often have a greater

influence on action. Tactics may include:

- tabling (i.e., having a table outside of a film screening or exhibit so that audience members can sign a petition)
- text messaging at events to capture e-mails
- online petitions
- house parties organized around a social issue film or event
- fundraising for the issue

When effectively combined into an outreach campaign, media messaging, narratives, and tactics can begin to influence behavior and support broader-systems reform.

This paper focuses primarily on popular media examples that combine social message, narrative, and outreach tactics into intentional strategies for promoting or achieving change. It is worth noting, however, that in comparison with the nonprofit realm of arts for change, in which the public or targeted communities are often engaged to inform and even to participate to create art, even the most creative of popular culture campaigns are not engaging the public in their production. Instead, campaigns focus on community at the point of distribution (i.e., viral marketing a video). There is room for popular media to tap into the public's creativity. Nonetheless, these are innovative efforts that combine art, commerce, and technology toward effecting change, and provide examples for the vast amount of media that has not yet considered a social change agenda.

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## FILM

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Feature films have demonstrated some truly innovative approaches to addressing social change. The social action campaign approach to marketing is a relatively new phenomenon that gained popularity in early 2000 as the entertainment industry was losing its market share, and the online world of Meetups and social networking was growing. The film [\*Fahrenheit 9/11\*](#) benefited from this phenomenon and from the anti-President-Bush sentiment that was seeking an outlet. This film, produced by independent filmmaker Michael Moore, connected with the MoveOn Political Action Committee and became a box-office hit when more than 100,000 MoveOn members pledged online to see it on opening weekend.

As a result, the film was the most popular film in America in its first five days of release, seen by almost six million people. Ultimately, it was seen by tens of millions around the world and grossed \$120 million in the United States alone (nearly five times as much as the next highest grossing documentary feature). It also became the subject of intense media coverage, sparking debate and discussion about President Bush. A Harris Poll conducted in July 2004 found that 89 percent of Democrats and 70 percent of independents agreed with the point of view expressed in *Fahrenheit 9/11*.

The outreach campaign also resulted in community involvement and short-term actions. Local volunteers handed out flyers at the screenings inviting moviegoers to Turn Up the Heat: A National Town Meeting the following weekend. More than 30,000 members participated in an online town meeting that featured guest speaker Michael Moore on a national conference call. Many attendees volunteered to hold or attend phone-banking parties on July 11, during which 14,000 new voters were registered in battleground states.

The film was timed to influence the 2004 elections; there is no polling data to ascertain its precise impact. Although George Bush still won that election, anecdotal evidence suggests that the film was tremendously powerful in branding the Bush administration in a negative light and had a strong impact on organizing the base of Democrats against Bush. Through community engagement, it influenced both short-term action and behavior, but also long-term attitudes.

Participant Media is a for-profit company that has made the social action campaign core to its mission. For each of its films, Participant Media teams with social-sector organizations, nonprofits, and corporations that are committed to creating an open forum for discussion and education and that can, with Participant, offer specific ways for audience members to get involved. These include action kits, screening programs, educational curricula and classes, house parties, seminars, panels, and other activities. Its ongoing legacy programs are updated and revised to continue beyond a film's domestic and international theatrical, DVD, and television windows. To date, Participant Media has developed active, working relationships with 156 nonprofits that collectively have the potential of reaching more than 75 million people.



Participant Media's film, [\*An Inconvenient Truth\*](#), made Al Gore's slide show on global warming one of the highest grossing documentaries ever made (\$24 million at the U.S. box office) and it became the winner of an Academy Award. The film release, managed by a public relations firm familiar with politics, was based on a tactical partnership with advocacy groups like MoveOn that promoted the film via e-mails to extensive

membership. In advance of the film's theatrical release in primary markets, MoveOn encouraged its members to make an event of going to see it on opening weekend, to gather their friends and be some of the first to see this important film. This approach led to sold-out theaters opening weekend (May 24, 2006) in New York City and Los Angeles. On Memorial Day weekend, the film grossed an average of \$91,447 per theater, the highest of any movie that weekend and a record for a documentary, though it was playing on only

four screens at the time. This initial success led to theatrical releases at other theaters and in nonmainstream cities and its continued release across the nation.

*An Inconvenient Truth's* release strategy was followed by an action kit, screening programs, educational curricula, training, house parties, seminars, panels, and a vibrant website that continues to encourage individuals to view the film long after the its theatrical, DVD, and television run.

In addition to its powerful reach, the result of the social action campaign was an increase in awareness about what had been an issue for only the science-minded. Suddenly, global warming was being covered in newspaper style pages and on entertainment shows. The film received more than four times as much media attention as the 2001 report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change. According to a national survey conducted in February 2007 by the International Communications Research firm on a sample of 1,000 Americans, almost 20 percent specifically cite *An Inconvenient Truth* as a source of increased awareness of global warming. In a July 2007 47-country Internet survey conducted by The Nielsen Company and Oxford University, 66 percent of viewers who claimed to have seen *An Inconvenient Truth* said the film had "changed their mind" about global warming, and 89 percent said watching the movie made them more aware of the problem. Three out of four (74 percent) viewers said they changed some of their habits as a result of seeing the film.

The film's outreach campaign also engaged the community, with more than 2,600 people in the United States trained to give Gore's presentation, 4 million people on all seven continents hearing the presentation, and 110,000 teachers downloading the curriculum. England, Scotland, the Czech Republic, New Zealand, Germany, and Canada incorporated *An Inconvenient Truth* into their secondary-school curricula.

In addition to increasing awareness and practices, the film also impacted policy and the issue itself. Three months after the film's U.S. release, California passed sweeping legislation to curb greenhouse gases. In the days leading up to the legislature's vote, one of the bill's co-authors hosted free screenings of the film. "For policymakers, the release of a movie becomes a focusing event, like a natural disaster," said Matthew Nisbet, professor of communications at American University.

Films with powerful messages and narratives, even without a broad-based social action campaign, can influence the public (e.g., *Erin Brockovich* on environmental hazards; *Hotel Rwanda* on genocide; *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* on mental institutions). In a *TIME Magazine* poll of 1,002 registered voters, about 30 percent of respondents said a movie had changed their mind about an issue. Films can even, sometimes, change policies. For example, *Super Size Me* got McDonalds to remove the Super Size option from the menu and to introduce salad. Likewise, the film *North Country*, which was screened on Capitol Hill, is widely credited with the successful renewal of the Violence Against Women Act.



Another Participant Media film, *The Visitor*, also applied the social action campaign model with success.<sup>5</sup> Participant funded a traditional marketing campaign that sold the film as a compelling story rather than as a film about immigration policy. This resulted in the film securing its “reach” and ranking in the top-10 box-office hits three weeks in a row. The Open Society Foundations (formerly Open Society Institute) supplemented Participant’s funding to the nonprofit [Active Voice](#) to implement the social action campaign. Active Voice is a nonprofit that uses film, television, and multimedia to spark social change from “grassroots to grasstops.” Active Voice produced events around the film in more than 30 communities nationwide. It invited partner organizations (groups like Amnesty International, Detention Watch Network, and National Immigration Justice Center) and the community into the experience (involving advocates, lawyers, funders, churchgoers,

college students, faculty, and regular moviegoers). Active Voice also created a booklet to guide discussions structured around the tough issue of immigration and detention, with specific actions to take such as visiting a detainee (there’s a map of detention centers in the guide), volunteering for a local immigrant aid organization (the guide includes a list of national organizations to contact), or helping raise bond money for a detainee (readers are directed to a group that facilitates).

In addition to raising awareness, the film built new connections between advocates, brought needed attention to nonprofit organizations working on the issue, and provided audience members with actions to take to address unjust immigration policies that target, detain, and deport immigrants—often without due process. For example, in Colorado Springs more than two-thirds of the audience signed up to take a tour of a local detention facility. O’Melveny & Meyers, an international and multi-practice law firm, produced an extensive training manual around the film and partnered with other organizations to train more than 100 lawyers.

Unlike *An Inconvenient Truth*, *The Visitor*, or *Fahrenheit 9/11*, the film *Blood Diamond* is not a documentary. It was marketed as a traditional blockbuster action film with its star, Leonardo DiCaprio. The social action agenda was not a factor in the conception and development of the film. However, when the film was completed, the filmmakers recognized the value of its message. With the public relations support of [Fenton Communications](#), hired by the studio, they engaged nonprofit human right organizations Amnesty International and Global Witness to complement the traditional marketing of the film and support an activist campaign. Through the launch of a new website, [blooddiamondaction.org](http://blooddiamondaction.org), these

organizations called on the diamond industry to make good on its promises to clean up the international diamond trade and ensure consumers that the gems they buy are not blood diamonds. They also provided information for consumers to use to ensure that any diamond jewelry they buy is conflict-free. Public pressure and the advocacy organization's work prompted the World Diamond Council to create a website, [DiamondFacts.org](http://DiamondFacts.org), that educates on the subject of conflict diamonds.

The film also motivated Russell Simmons, noted rap producer, businessman, and director of the Simmons Jewelry Co. Speaking at a packed press conference four days before the premiere of *Blood Diamond*, he announced the formation of the Diamond Empowerment Fund to direct 25 percent of the profits from some Simmons Jewelry Co. products to African charities and institutions. The [Simmons Jewelry Company's](http://SimmonsJewelryCompany.com) fact-finding mission's report on diamond mining and related operations in South Africa and Botswana was well timed to be ahead of the release of *Blood Diamond*, and it served as an effective public relations maneuver.

The reason for wanting to do good is often a blend of altruism and smart business. Numerous studies have demonstrated the value for businesses of associating themselves with a cause.<sup>6</sup> It can help with brand image, capitalize on a popular sentiment, or provide another angle for connecting with a different audience and building greater market share.

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## TELEVISION

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Today, Americans spend 70 percent of their waking hours watching television. This comes out to roughly 7.4 hours per household each day. The potential for television to make a difference on social issues is significant.

The public health field has a long history of utilizing messaging and story lines in television shows to address public health concerns. This is especially true internationally (see the work of the [Communication Initiative Network](http://CommunicationInitiativeNetwork.org) and the [Communications Consortium Media Center](http://CommunicationsConsortiumMediaCenter.org)). The [Kaiser Family Foundation](http://KaiserFamilyFoundation.org) and the [Norman Lear Center's Hollywood Health and Society](http://NormanLearCenter.org) program have taken the lead in working with television writers and show producers to incorporate health-related messages on issues such as teen pregnancy and AIDS, and they've met with great success. The message "Don't drink and drive"—intentionally inserted into popular U.S. television shows such as *Cheers*, *L.A. Law*, and *The Cosby Show*—is often cited as an example of a successful public-health communications campaign.

Interestingly, however, while television that takes up social concerns has such an extensive reach and a history of influence on social mores, it seems to be lagging behind film in terms of realizing its potential to motivate community engagement and action. Television's expansion into the realm of the Internet provides an opportunity for



television to go beyond messaging and to support individual action and build community. Interactive Internet offerings increase the possibilities for television networks to both distinguish themselves competitively from the growing number of television stations and increase the impact of their social marketing campaigns. Likewise, corporate sponsors seeking to meet their profit objectives have new opportunities to do so in supporting these programs. The potential exists to move more corporations to “doing good,” but in the world of television there is a constant requirement to balance socially responsible objectives with making a profit.

[Discovery Green](#) is a great example of the dual motivation of “doing well and doing good.” In 2008 Discovery television spent more than \$50 million to rebrand its Home channel into a new cable network, Planet Green, focusing on living an environmentally conscious life. With high ratings and a brand already focused on science and nature, the decision was not difficult, but it was shrewd, capitalizing on increased public attention on the environment

and being “green.” It was also competitive, as National Geographic acquired *The Green Guide*, a website and newsletter focused on living an environmentally conscious life, and the Sundance Channel launched [The Green](#), produced by Robert Redford. Major advertisers, including General Motors (GM), S.C. Johnson, Bosch



Appliances, The Home Depot, Frito-Lay, Waste Management (WM), and Dow Chemical, have signed on to be the initial network advertisers.

Through an advisory board of scientists and researchers and partnerships with nonprofits and environmental groups such as The Nature Conservancy and [Treehugger.com](#) (a media firm specializing in environmental issues), Discovery created new programming on its various cable channels, original web videos, an online forum for eco-focused chat, reports and tips on climate change, and other environmental issues.

The goal of Planet Green programming is to entertain and inform, but especially to add value. This is accomplished by telling inspiring stories about the environment and about passionate people that do forward thinking things. For example, the *Beekman Boys* follows a gay couple—successful Manhattanites—who decide to move to an organic farm. This show provides a delightful story, and it also offers a great teaching moment demonstrating a sustainable lifestyle.

Another show, [Blue Planet](#), airs every year as part of Blue August, a month of programming and online activities about the earth's water systems. Through a commitment to quality production values and storytelling, water becomes a majestic character. Partnerships with advocacy organizations such as Oceana, The Nature Conservancy, Natural Resources Defense Council, and Surfrider Foundation provide content for a dynamic website that offers information and action steps. Blue Planet has resulted in powerful press stories. It has also dramatically increased social networking on the site around water issues. Thousands of individuals have participated in beach cleanups.

[Stand Up To Cancer](#) is a unique and powerful example of what can happen when for-profit networks come together to address a major health concern. The goal of Stand Up To Cancer is to fund transnational cancer research projects. The initiative, spearheaded by the American Association for Cancer Research, brings together the entertainment community, major private donors, corporations, the scientific community, and the public to produce an annual one-hour television event that is broadcast simultaneously on ABC, CBS, and NBC. The primary strategy is to produce immediate actions: to drive traffic to a live celebrity phone bank and call centers, and to secure web donations.

Campaign tactics that broaden reach and engagement and serve to increase knowledge and dialogue include:

- a web site where users are able to receive updates on progress in scientific research;
- Twitter, an active Facebook page, and The Stand, a unique Facebook application where users can share their connection to cancer and a personal story;
- public service announcements, including one that aired during game three of the 2009 World Series and was broadcast live on FOX;
- a music video for youth and a library of musical entertainment including celebrities and notable leaders asking audience members to “stand up 2 cancer”;
- events including an All-Star Charity 5K and Fun Run and a charity concert;
- the capacity to dedicate a star in tribute to a loved one for as little as one dollar; and
- an online magazine with articles on cancer related to the arts, life, and cutting-edge science; an online television station; and an online store.

The reach of this creative event was significant and well documented. It won the 2009 Television Academy Honor Award for “Television with a Conscience.” The broadcast on September 5, 2008, was seen in more than 170 countries. During the telecast the web site received 354.5 million donated media impressions and was featured on all of the major portals—MSN, Yahoo, AOL, and YouTube, including abc.com, cbs.com, and nbc.com. Four billion impressions were generated from broadcast, print media, and publicity activities. Thousands of news stories promoted Stand Up To Cancer's mission. All three television

networks and their affiliates reported on cancer-related stories along with TV magazine shows. *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *USA Weekend* ran major stories and special inserts evaluating the “war on cancer”; and 80 major print magazines ran a PSA campaign reaching 160 million readers. The initiative now has 218,000 friends on Facebook, with another 230,000 members (one of the largest charities on Facebook Causes).

It also had a significant impact, raising more than \$100 million for much needed funding for historically underfunded translational research designed to get new therapies to cancer patients more quickly. Stand up to Cancer’s use of television and multiplatform outreach has been a powerful way to galvanize action around the deadly disease.

The value of television is its mass appeal. [American Idol](#) is one of the most popular shows on television. *Idol* is a reality television show that showcases a series of nationwide auditions in which viewer voting determines the winner. Through telephone and SMS text voting, viewers choose winners. It is currently the number-one program in the Nielsen ratings and is the only program to have been number one for six consecutive seasons.

*American Idol*’s early popularity led the show’s creator, Simon Fuller, to realize that he could use it as a platform for doing good, capitalizing on the reach of the show to raise funds for various organizations working with disadvantaged children in the United States and abroad. The producers of *American Idol* and the Fox Broadcasting Company established the nonprofit [Idol Gives Back Foundation](#) (IGBF) in 2008 to fulfill this goal.

Nonprofits with a track record were selected as beneficiaries, including the Children's Health Fund, Feeding America, and Save the Children, to support U.S. children and their families, and Malaria No More and the UN Foundation for children abroad.

For three years, one of the *Idol* shows has become the Idol Gives Back celebrity event. *Idol* uses a traditional website for donations, but through a partnership with the Mobile Giving Foundation, the public can also use their cell phones. By texting the word *IDOL* to 20222, a one-time donation of \$10 is added to their mobile phone bill.

The Idol Gives Back show also created the Help Me Give Back program—a website for audience members to start their own Fundraising Page or Team Page or to join an existing team, share their fundraising status on Facebook and Twitter, and help get the word out to raise more money. In addition, they created an Idol Gives Back online auction for the day of the Idol Gives Back show.



As a result of its mass appeal and use of technology, *American Idol* raised \$76 million for charity in 2007 (\$55 million from at-home viewers who called in, \$14 million from corporations, and \$7 million in matching grants from businesses and foundations). Through the passionate inspiration of music, healthy competition, and technology, Idol Gives Back has raised more than \$140 million for charity to date, funding among other things 287,000 bed nets distributed by Malaria No More, more than 100,000 medical, mental health, and dental care visits to children and families across the country, and primary care services to more than 50,000 low-income children in both rural and urban communities across the country. It is through the power of *Idol*'s up-and-coming celebrities and real celebrities that change is being made.

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## CELEBRITY

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Historians trace celebrity involvement in social issues and politics back to 1920 when Warren Harding was endorsed by many of the era's film stars, including Al Jolson, Lillian Russell, Douglas Fairbanks, and Mary Pickford. Later, Shirley Temple, Warren Beatty, and Jane Fonda became known as much for their involvement in social issues as for their films.

There is a fair amount of research on the impact of celebrity endorsements, and the results are often contradictory. The bulk of the evidence suggests that celebrity endorsements, by lending name recognition, make people more aware of the "product" or cause, especially young people. However, it is not clear whether the increased visibility is correlated with increased popularity. In some cases, and often when people report on their own inclinations, it appears that celebrity endorsements can turn people off to a product.<sup>7</sup>

The most impactful celebrities, however, move beyond an endorsement message and make their social-change concerns an integral part of their work. Through their brand image associations and outreach tactics, as well as their own philanthropy, celebrities can raise awareness, change attitudes, stimulate action, and influence policy.

Bono, musician from the band [U-2](#), is one of the most effective of celebrity change agents. Bono has used song and concerts to make a difference. In addition, Bono has used his celebrity to influence politics. He has lobbied U.S. presidents and congressional leaders, along with the heads of many other G8 nations. According to the Center for Global Development, Bono's Jubilee 2000 campaign resulted in "the most successful industrial country movement aimed at combating world poverty for many years, perhaps in all recorded history." Bono helped fuel the pledge at the 2005 G8 summit to double aid to developing countries.

Through [Product \(RED\)](#), which he launched with Bobby Shriver, Bono has also raised money. Product (RED) has an ongoing relationship with a number of iconic global brands that sell (RED)



products and that donate a percentage of the profits directly to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria.

In 2002, Bono co-founded the nonprofit DATA (debt, AIDS, trade, Africa) to raise public awareness of the issues in its name and to influence government policy on Africa. In early 2008 DATA combined operations with [ONE](#). ONE is a grassroots campaign and advocacy organization—with online and real-life components—backed

by more than 2 million people who are committed to the fight against extreme poverty and preventable disease, particularly in Africa. ONE uses Bono's celebrity (along with that of other celebrities) and online videos and pledges to hold world leaders accountable to fighting extreme poverty and to advocate for better development policies and more effective aid and trade reform. ONE has produced actions that result in real community engagement. Its interactive conference call with leading legislators on the situation in Haiti, for example, mobilized 5,500 participants and engaged more than 200,000 individuals in signing a petition urging the International Monetary Fund to drop Haiti's \$1.2 billion debt.

Angelina Jolie is another celebrity who has had a significant impact. In addition to being an Academy Award- and Golden Globe-winning actress, she serves as a Goodwill Ambassador for the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and is Co-chair of the Jolie-Pitt Foundation. Since her appointment by UNHCR in 2001, Jolie has undertaken field missions to more than 30 refugee camps, including several visits to Chad and to Sudan's Darfur region. Among many other contributions, her philanthropy has included major donations to UNHCR field operations around the world and initial grants by the Jolie-Pitt Foundation of \$1 million each to Global Action for Children and Doctors Without Borders.

In 2003, Jolie made the film *Beyond Borders* about aid workers in war-torn areas. Her real-life awakening to humanitarian issues became the material for the feature film. In the film, her character, a naïve socialite, has her life turned upside down as she abandons her job at an art gallery to work in Ethiopian refugee camps. Jolie's character works for humanitarian and human rights organizations for 10 years and eventually works for UNHCR and acts as a regional representative for the United Kingdom.

In addition to using film to address social change, Jolie published *Notes from My Travels*, a book about her experiences as a Goodwill Ambassador for UNHCR. She participated in a television special, *The Diary Of Angelina Jolie & Dr. Jeffrey Sachs in Africa*, that used her

celebrity and Think MTV's outreach initiative to educate young people about the Millennium Development Goals to address poverty. [Think MTV](#) is a social networking community established by the for-profit cable television network to give young people the opportunity and tools to make their lives, community, and world better. The issues addressed by Think MTV's programming include discrimination, environment, politics, substance abuse, faith, health, education, human rights, relationships and sex, war and peace, crime, and poverty. In addition to airing the show with Jolie, Think MTV allows people to download the show at any time after the airing. Written materials about the show are posted on the website, along with links to learn more, and an action guide for getting involved in addressing poverty and disease. Think Venture Grants of \$1,000 are offered each week to young people who are making a difference by creating and leading their own ongoing organizations, clubs, or businesses that address a need in their community.

Jolie has received wide recognition for her humanitarian work. In 2003, she was the first recipient of the Citizen of the World Award by the United Nations Correspondents Association, and in 2005 she was awarded the Global Humanitarian Award by UNA-USA. *Beyond Borders* won the Political Film Society Award for promoting political consciousness of human rights. Jolie has also donated millions of dollars to humanitarian causes. Most importantly, however, she has used her celebrity as more than just a tool for visibility and engagement, but also for leverage and influence to lobby and advocate for the world's most challenged and invisible people.

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## GAMES

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One of the more creative ways popular media has influenced social change is through online games. Games provide a platform for the best of social narrative, visual messaging through video and animation, and interactivity to really draw individuals and collectives into understanding an issue. Many of the best social change games can be found in the collection identified by [Games for Change](#) and the [Serious Games Initiative](#).

*Darfur is Dying* is one of the best examples of an online game that has taken on an issue, in this case, the humanitarian crisis in Darfur. *Darfur is Dying* is a narrative-based simulation in which the user, from the perspective of a displaced Darfurian, negotiates forces that threaten the survival of his or her refugee camp. The game offers a faint glimpse of what it's like for the more than 2.5 million people who have been internally displaced by the crisis in Sudan.

*Darfur is Dying* started off as a graduate project at the University of Southern California that forged a link to the Reebok Human Rights Foundation and the International Crisis

Group. The game then connected up with [mtvU](#), the music channel's university outreach arm. Through these connections, a more robust outreach strategy was developed. Hip-hop artists Kanye West and Matisyahu, musician Serj Tankian (of System of a Down) and U.S. Olympic gold medalist Joey Cheek were engaged to officially help launch the game. The timing, creative launch, and promotion of MTVu made the game go viral.

As of April 2007 *Darfur* had been played more than 2.4 million times by more than 1.2 million people worldwide. In addition to reach, it has generated press in both print media and television, and has won several awards. This in turn has led to action including more than 25,000 notes being sent to former President Bush and letters to Congress asking for support for the refugees. In addition, the game has inspired school children to create documentaries. The game is still available online, updated to reflect the election of Barack Obama to the U.S. presidency, and it continues to engage participants.

These games are often generated by technological innovators independent of any business or nonprofit affiliation. [Food Force](#), however, was launched by the United Nations World Food Programme. Through the *Food Force* game and website, children learn how they can help fight hunger and explore more about the World Food Programme. While playing the game's six different missions alongside *Food Force*'s team of emergency aid workers, children are faced with a number of realistic challenges—piloting helicopters on reconnaissance missions, negotiating with armed rebels on a convoy run, and using food to help rebuild villages—to quickly feed thousands of people on the fictitious island of Sheylan. Through strategic partnerships with nonprofits such as Scholastic, National Geographic, the American Federation of Teachers, International Food Policy Institute, and Internet2, the game is reaching schools. The website provides teachers with lesson plans that incorporate the game.



Within six weeks of release, one million kids in 40 countries downloaded the game. Within one year, four million players played it. Internet giant Yahoo! joined the group of hosting companies providing support to meet the unexpected high demand for the game.

Other games have also had significant reach (with, it might be assumed, related awareness building) on social issues. *World Without Oil* had 60,000 visitors and 1,800 players from 12 countries in just 32 days. One hundred thousand copies of *Peacemaker* were distributed in Israel and the West Bank. The field of games for good is in a steep learning curve, with each new game demonstrating more creative ways to engage its audience and make a difference. While there is little outcome research, more will be learned in years to come through the work of Games for Change, along with the MacArthur Foundation, which has invested \$50 million in a five-year initiative called Building the Field of Digital Media and Learning to understand how people learn, play, socialize, and participate in civic life.

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## ONLINE VIDEO

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Indeed, the online world has opened up multiple avenues for increasing awareness, raising funds, and engaging individuals. Online videos have become a powerful way for advocates to make a difference by providing a brief emotionally compelling narrative followed by an “ask,” such as a petition or donation. The best online-video marketing strategies have a live event associated with them, such as a film, concert, or exhibit. The release of the video is timed with an existing major event (such as debates on Capitol Hill or a public announcement). A website is built around the video along with materials and handouts that direct individuals to the site. Partner e-mail lists give legitimacy to the message and open access to target audiences. Bloggers and social media sites such as Digg and Reddit can also drive traffic to the video.

Free Range Studios is a for-profit graphics company committed to making cause-based viral movies. They have produced such successful videos as the *Story of Stuff* and *Store Wars*. *The Meatrix*, one of its more successful online videos, parodies the film *The Matrix* and explores mass meat production. It was created through funding from Global Resource Action Center for the Environment’s Sustainable Table Program. As part of *The Meatrix*'s







distribution plan, Sustainable Table utilized a variety of online and offline channels, including participation in film festivals, blast e-mails to organizations in relevant fields, merchandising, and social media networks.

Among other things, they posted on [www.meatrix.com](http://www.meatrix.com) and e-mailed to other organizations several web graphics of *The Meatrix's* key characters to encourage others to link the site to their websites or blogs. These graphics were also incorporated in holiday greetings cards, sent to hundreds of public figures and celebrities together with *The Meatrix* DVD and other items such as magnets, pins, tee-shirts, and coffee mugs promoting the video. More recently, a special MySpace page has been created for Moopheus (the main cow character of *The Meatrix*).

In terms of creative recognition and reach, the video has received numerous awards, including the Webby Award, Annecy International Animated Film Festival Award, South by Southwest Interactive Award, and Environmental Media Association's Best Documentary Short Film. It has been translated into more than 30 languages, with more than 15 million viewers worldwide.

In the past two years, *The Meatrix* has resulted in 97,180 individuals visiting the Eat Well Guide. In a survey conducted about the video, seven percent of youth indicated having heard of or visited *The Meatrix* website. More than three-quarters of those who are aware of *The Meatrix* have seen a video concerning animal care or meat consumption. Of those, nearly two-thirds indicated the website/video had impacted their meat-eating habits.

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## CONCLUSION

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Popular media in the form of film, television, celebrity, games, and online videos has mass appeal that can tap into popular sentiment. Accessible narratives found in popular media tap emotional and personal connections to issues through creative means as well as simplify complicated social issues for a broad public. Popular media can provide a bridge for those who are less informed, undecided, or unconverted regarding certain issues; it

can also offer avenues for getting involved for people who already have some level of awareness or engagement. Popular media is particularly effective in reaching young people who are using new media in creative ways to connect to one another and the things they care about. Where advocacy efforts of individual groups can often be unconnected, popular media campaigns have the attraction of generating potent critical mass that is missing in fragmented efforts and that is so critical to making change. The fanfare and potential public reach of these efforts can inspire collaboration and supersede small differences between advocacy groups. And, as most popular media are for-profit, they are perhaps more financially sustainable than many nonprofit ventures. When for-profits and nonprofits join forces toward shared goals, as many examples in this paper illustrate, the potential to contribute to social change is enhanced. The key is in sustaining such endeavors beyond the initial hype, with real support needed for the detailed work that must take place until the problem is solved.

#### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> Popular media is one dimension of popular culture that encompasses the totality of ideas, perspectives, attitudes, images, and other phenomena that are preferred by an informal consensus within the mainstream of Western culture. Popular culture includes art, cooking, clothing, entertainment, radio, music, magazines, sports, and style, but especially culture and knowledge passed on through mass media, media entertainment such as celebrities, films, television, and the Internet.

<sup>2</sup> "Generation M<sup>2</sup>: Media in the Lives of 8- to 18-Year-Olds," The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2010. <http://www.kff.org/entmedia/entmedia012010nr.cfm>

<sup>3</sup> Three Screen Report, The Nielsen Company, September, 2009.

<sup>4</sup> There are some great books and articles on political framing by Drew Weston, George Lakoff, and Nordhause and Shellenberger.

<sup>5</sup> From the paper, "Imagine That: How "The Visitor" helps viewers see their ways from Outrage to Action," by Paul VanDeCarr

<sup>6</sup> Cone Communications

<sup>7</sup> A summary of some of the research finds the following:

- Professor David Jackson of Bowling Green State University suggests that young people are influenced by celebrity endorsements. He believes that the endorsements influence options by reinforcing popular beliefs or making unpopular beliefs seem more palatable.

- A nationwide Harris Poll of 2,523 U.S. adults surveyed online in March 2008 shows that just over half (51 percent) say that celebrities make little or no positive difference to the issue they are promoting; just under half (45 percent) say they make a large or some positive difference. The same poll indicated that younger a person, the more likely he or she thinks celebrities are making a positive difference. Half (50 percent) of Echo Boomers (age 18–31) and just under half (48 percent) of Gen Xers (age 32–43) said celebrities make a large or some difference compared to 43 percent of Baby Boomers (age 44–62) and 38 percent of Matures (age 63 and up). The Harris Poll also found that Democrats are much more likely to think celebrities make a difference. (55 percent versus 36 percent Republicans). In this study, just 15 percent supported a cause or got more information on one because of something they heard an actor, singer, or other celebrity say or do.
- A. Trevor Thrall, University of Michigan assistant professor of Political Science, conducted a study that showed that combined star power helps charities get more attention than those that work with fewer celebrities. The researchers found that star advocacy helps in mobilizing and building social movement infrastructure.
- Commissioned by Cone, a Boston company that helps charities and corporations conduct marketing projects, a survey of 1,022 adults found that 15 percent of Americans said that they would be influenced by celebrities in deciding whether to support a charity.
- A CBS News Poll in August 2003 found that the majority of Americans believe that “Hollywood celebrities can offer a new perspective on political issues and should get involved in politics if they choose.”

**Sarah Ingersoll** is an independent consultant who connects the creative community and nonprofit organizations so they can increase their impact. For 15 years Sarah has been working in social marketing and philanthropy at the intersection of policy, politics, and media. Starting her career at the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Sarah then went to the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), where she served as Chief of Staff of the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and directed award-winning media campaigns with MTV, the Ad Council, and Saatchi & Saatchi. After DOJ she directed a national youth violence prevention campaign initiated by President Clinton that engaged the resources of Disney, CBS, NBC, ABC, Court TV, Tommy Hilfiger, and Teen People. In 2004 Sarah produced a weekly political film and fundraising series, advised Earth Day Network, and engaged celebrities on behalf of progressive grassroots causes. Most recently Sarah served as an Investment Advisor to the Democracy Alliance (a network of 80 high net worth donors) and to Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors. She also served as Director of Member Relations for Brave New Films, Robert Greenwald’s political production company. Sarah has a master’s in education from Harvard University and completed doctoral work in sociology at the City University of New York.

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