

Leveraging Opinion Leaders: Increasing the Social Impact of Social Documentaries

CAPSTONE PROJECT

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Documentary films advocating for social issues often struggle to mobilize the public around the issue. One major problem is that documentary films attract audiences who are already highly interested in the issue, while failing to attract non-engaged audiences. Documentary filmmakers therefore need to find an adequate strategy to communicate the issue to those who are not active, engaged and interested in shared issues such as climate change, healthcare or human rights. Targeting opinion leaders offers great promise in this context. Taking the role as a film marketing tool, opinion leaders can assist increasing positive word of mouth about a documentary film and recruit more people to watch it. Opinion leaders can also function as coalition partners during the film production stage and as discussion facilitators during the film promotion stage by delivering messages in the frame of the documentaries to both non-engaged publics and decision-makers. The latter opportunity allows documentary makers to use opinion leaders as a tool to increase policy action and social change.

In this paper I want to understand how exactly documentary filmmakers can leverage opinion leaders to promote their films, effectively communicate their message and ultimately have a larger social impact. I will first review film marketing literature to understand the overall role of word of mouth when it comes to promoting a film. In a second step I will focus on documentary films. After reviewing the history of documentaries I emphasize on the sub-genre of social documentaries analyzing the promises and obstacles of advocating for social change through films and looking at what previous research suggests are more effective tools to advocate for an issue. By reviewing the literature on opinion leaders I will lay out the logistics for an opinion leader component surrounding a documentary film. I will revisit the personal traits of opinion leaders as well as methods to identify, train, and engage opinion leaders. In the scope of ten in-depth interviews with experts in the field and three case studies on recent film projects I analyze to what extent leveraging opinion leaders is put into practice. Lastly, I will discuss the results with regards to the advantages and obstacles integrating opinion leaders in the process surrounding a social issue documentary film.