

# THE EMOTIONAL TIPPING POINT

Can documentary film ‘tip’ policy makers?

By Kate Stanley with Laura Bradley

## I. INTRODUCTION

Innovation has never been more important. Those who want to see social change must find new ways of winning hearts and minds. In this briefing we explore the potential for documentary film to generate social change. In particular, we look at the extent to which the social sector<sup>1</sup> could use film to influence policy-makers directly.

We distinguish between two types of documentary films that communicate social justice issues and aim to inspire social change:

1. Films that aim to inform and inspire the public. These films *may* ultimately influence policy-makers via the public.
2. Films that aim to inform and inspire policy-makers *directly*. It is these films that we are primarily concerned with in this paper:

We want to explore the idea that bespoke films can create an ‘emotional tipping point’ for policy-makers. It is now well understood that our decisions are shaped by emotion as well as rational thought (Halpern et al, 2004). Politicians and other policy-makers are just like the rest of us, and their decisions have an emotional component. Film clearly has tremendous capacity to evoke emotion. So our central question is: could custom-made film be used to evoke emotion in policy-makers in order to move them from a rational ‘in principle’ acceptance of a

policy – informed by the usual means, including data and empirical evidence – to genuine motivation to action?

The ministerial visit has performed a similar function for decades. Anyone who has spent time with Government ministers will tell you that a visit to a service or place can shift a minister from acceptance to action. One well-known example is Work and Pensions Secretary Iain Duncan Smith’s visit to Easterhouse, Glasgow, in 2002, which he says shifted his attitude to poverty:

“Going up to Glasgow was the moment,” he says. “Standing in the middle of an estate like Easterhouse, you know it was built after the war for a purpose, only to see this wrecked and dreadful set-up today, with families locked into generational breakdown, poverty, drug addiction and so on.

And that really does confront you with the thought that we did this – we built the brave new world, and look where it’s gone. It was a sort of Damascene point. It’s not that I wasn’t thinking about these things before, but after Easterhouse I saw that we had to do something about it. (Iain Duncan Smith, quoted in the *New Statesman*, 1 March 2010.)

<sup>1</sup> By social sector we mean charities, other non-governmental, non-profit organisations, and social enterprises.



However, there are only so many visits ministers and others can make. Innovations in film technology mean that film should be able to emulate the visit in an effective and sharable form. Some social sector organisations are now doing this, but so far the practice is limited and its effectiveness unmeasured.

The idea of a 'tipping point' was popularised by Malcolm Gladwell (2000), who describes it as "the moment of critical mass, the threshold, the boiling point". Tipping points for Gladwell exist for social or cultural phenomena, here we apply the idea to an influential individual or group. A tipping point is reached when they shift from assenting to an idea to acting on it. Gladwell argues that if you use the right 'frame' to communicate an idea, you can get it to 'tip':

There is a simple way to package information that, under the right circumstances, can make it irresistible. All you have to do is find it. (Gladwell, 2000, 132)

Social sector organisations should take this claim as a call to action. In this paper we want to stimulate that process. We explore how social sector organisations might consider increasing their use of film as a policy

advocacy tool that creates an emotional tipping point. We look first and briefly at the policy-making process, and then consider some examples of how film has influenced policy and how we might evaluate this impact. We take the BBC documentary *Poor Kids* as a case study, drawing on evidence from our own screening of this film in November 2011. Finally, we look at how the sector might take forward the use of film to influence policy.

## 2. INFLUENCING POLICY DECISION-MAKING

In recent years the rational choice model of decision-making has faced mounting criticism. A number of studies have shown that decision-making is a complex process and can only be understood through psychological theory. Behavioural economics has emerged as another way of understanding decision-making.

Behavioural economics includes a range of theories and evidence on what influences human behaviour. Learning from behavioural economics includes a number of insights relevant to influencing policy decisions:

### RATIONAL CHOICE THEORY

Neo-classical theorists argue that individuals undertake an analysis of the relative costs and benefits of specific options. They make a selection based on the option that would maximise their benefit and minimise their cost. This is based on the assumptions that individuals have perfect information on the options available to them and that they are equipped with the cognitive skills to weigh up their options.

Proponents of 'bounded rationality' challenge these assumptions but still argue that individuals act rationally to the extent that their information, time and cognitive skills allow. Choices made under these approaches are made unemotionally and undertaken on an individual basis.

- The way decisions are 'framed' influences an individual's choice. People tend to be loss-averse (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979). A decision concerning whether to take up an option will be affected by whether it is framed in terms of what might be lost or what might be gained.
- An individual's decision can be affected by 'key influencers', whom they like or see as expert or having authority (Halpern et al, 2004; Milgram, 1974).
- Individuals can also suffer from 'status quo bias', which means there needs to be a compelling reason or incentive for them to act to change something in their lives, but being told what to do can be demotivating. A participative approach to influencing is more effective (Kaplan, 2000).
- Too much information can actually hold back someone's motivation to act (Schwartz, 2004).

Crucially, studies show that emotions play an important role in the decision-making process. Individuals' choices are influenced by their emotional state and inherent bias towards a particular option (Hastie and Dawes, 2001; see Westen, 2007, on political choices). Research on the brain has shown that where a person is unsure about what option to take, their emotional responses provide a basis for making a decision (Naqvi et al, 2006). Experiencing highly positive or negative emotion makes the trigger that elicited that response more memorable (Isen and Shalke, 1982).

Of course, policy decisions are also situated within the context of policy-making structures, processes, trends and politics. Some have argued that the election of the coalition government in 2010 has resulted in a shift away from evidence-based policy and evaluation towards a more values-driven or ideological approach. The Minister of State for Universities and Science, David Willetts, has talked about the relationship between empirical evidence and political ideology in decision-making:

I certainly believe in evidence-based policy, and the Prime Minister does, and the Cabinet are

committed to it... Politics has more to it than simply sitting in a kind of permanent seminar looking at academic evidence... You're operating within a framework of beliefs. Part of the challenge of politics is the endless interplay of empirical evidence and what it is as a government you're committed to doing because of your fundamental beliefs and on which you're elected. (David Willetts, speaking on BBC Radio 4, 4 June 2010)

It could be argued that if a film presents information in the right way and aligns its narrative with current political values, it has great potential to tap into the values-driven element of decision-making. The Frameworks Institute in the United States was set up to explore how social sector organisations might best frame public discourse about social problems in order to achieve change. They use 'framing' to achieve communications with maximum impact. Framing refers to the selection of certain aspects of an issue in order to cue a specific response: as researchers have shown, the way an issue is framed explains who is responsible and suggests potential solutions conveyed by images, stereotypes, messengers and metaphors (see [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org)).

Of course, the Government has said that all political decisions must now be made in the context of austerity and the objective of decreasing the deficit. All calls for social change – in the form of film or any other media – will need to continue to be mindful of this for the foreseeable future.

Another policy-making trend that we want to pick out is the devolution of power to Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and to the local level. More local decision-making and accountability means that we could and should be thinking about film as it applies to local decision-makers and those in the devolved administrations. Naturally, we might also want to think about other players whose policy and practice decisions shape lives, such as service providers. Indeed, organisations such as Think Public have

demonstrated the potential for using film to open up dialogue around service delivery at the local level ([www.thinkpublic.co.uk](http://www.thinkpublic.co.uk)). However, in this paper we are focusing on the use of film at the level of policy-making in Westminster.

### 3. THE USE OF DOCUMENTARY FILM

Films that highlight particular social issues or political problems have become part of the mainstream movie landscape, with film-makers such as Michael Moore (*Fahrenheit 9/11*, *Sicko*, *Capitalism: A love story*) and Davis Guggenheim (*An Inconvenient Truth*, *Waiting for 'Superman'*) producing 'blockbuster' movies that have been watched by millions. Efforts to achieve social change increasingly use film and documentary:

Documentaries are no longer conventionally perceived as a passive experience intended solely for informal learning or entertainment. Instead,

with ever increasing frequency, these films are considered part of a larger effort to spark debate, mould public opinion, shape policy, and build activist networks. (Nisbet and Aufderheide, 2009: 450)

These films may be true stories (such as *Rabbit-Proof Fence*), feature-length documentaries for cinema release (such as *Super Size Me*) or made-for-television documentaries (such as *Poor Kids*).

Most film with a social purpose is designed to broadly inform and create relevant 'publics', that is, people who share a common problem typically caused by private or government action and who find solutions for it together. Such films alert a public to a wider problem, potentially by reframing an issue so that it connects with a wider set of values or so that it can be addressed differently (Nisbet, 2007). It has been argued that the most significant contribution of film as advocacy is in agitating and focusing already motivated groups:

### PARTICIPATORY FILM

In participatory film the subjects help to develop the film and feature in it. One of the earliest was about Fogo Island in Canada in the 1960s. Fogo's declining fishing industry and high unemployment meant the government was planning to relocate its residents. The community produced a film showing the impact relocation would have, communicating their problems and saying how they could be solved. This led the government to start encouraging people to stay on the island. A fishing cooperative was created, allowing the islanders to keep their profits. This chain of events was labelled the 'Fogo Process', in which the use of film was recognised as achieving social change.

Inspired by the Fogo Process, an Aboriginal community in Northwestern Ontario produced films highlighting the importance of having a broadband connection in remote areas. Politicians who viewed the film were surveyed afterwards. Analysis of responses showed that the film had a strong impact on the policy-making process. Participants said that video was "more powerful than traditional written testimonials" and that the screening of a film brought policy-makers together and facilitated subsequent discussions. One viewer said, "Bureaucrats have so much information coming at us, a lot of which is impressive, but you forget... video has much more lasting power" (Ferreira et al, 2009, p 33).

With the increasing popularity of documentary film, and the wide audience for films like *An Inconvenient Truth* and *Super Size Me*, the temptation might be to return to the notion that documentary films achieve their influence through mass education and perhaps even mass mobilization of the general public. However, for the vast majority of activist documentary films, much more of their impact can be revealed by attention to recruitment, education, mobilization, and framing within the relevant activist organizations and within the issue network of which they are a part. (Whiteman, 2011, p 475)

More research assessing both these forms of influence has been done in recent years, but the study of the impact of film is still in its infancy (see Barrett and Leddy, 2008 for a wider discussion). Visual communication may seem to offer a great opportunity to achieve political and social impact when compared with a lengthy report, but this is yet to be fully evidenced, as noted by one of the funders of documentary film with social purpose, The Fledgling Fund:

We assume that if ads can sell products, visual imagery linked to a social justice narrative can sell social action... In fact, however, The Fledgling Fund has found that it can be surprisingly difficult to make a firm connection between the power of a film or other media and social change. (Barrett and Leddy, 2008, p 1)

This makes current efforts to assess impact (especially lasting impact) important. Gladwell (2000) has argued that one of the characteristics of the right packaging or frame is a clear link between the information presented and the actions required in reaction to it.

For example, in the United States the Harmony Institute (2011) undertook an evaluation of the film *Waiting for 'Superman'* to assess the impact of watching this film on the audiences' attitudes and understanding of the educational system

and any ripple effect on policy, organisations and communities. It found that 80% of the audience remembered the key facts from the film. However, even though the film offered solutions, the audience didn't understand clearly how they could help to achieve change. It showed that some of the phrases and words were more effective than others in helping to communicate the issues raised in the film. For example, the terms 'lottery' and 'achievement gap' were effective in increasing the wider understanding of the film's messages. Although the film stimulated a good amount of online debate within education forums, it failed to reach forums for parenting and entertainment. *Waiting for 'Superman'* seems to be an example of a film that had an impact on its audience but did not generate a wider 'activist' or campaign response.

Other films have been shown to have a broader impact. Al Gore's Academy Award-winning *An Inconvenient Truth* was phenomenally successful. It is credited with significantly raising the issue of climate change in the public consciousness. A 2011 study sought to make a valuation of the public good of *An Inconvenient Truth* (Search, 2011). It placed the valuation at more than £73 million, giving a social return on investment ratio of 57:1.

Studies have used pre- and post-screening surveys to establish the way in which a film has influenced its viewers. Pre-release screenings of films ('forum screenings') have been used to increase their impact and to gauge reaction in a group setting. Robert West used this approach, screening *Dirty Business* at universities and film festivals to broaden its impact (see <http://bigthink.com/ideas/38345> for a discussion on forum screenings). Innovations in technology are widening the opportunities to assess impact, reach a wider audience and engage it more actively. For example, sites like [www.snagfilms.com](http://www.snagfilms.com) are digital screening theatres which show films and then transform into forums for discussion and debate as soon as the film ends. They also offer information about the film and wider issues.

Aside from efforts to evaluate impact, work is going on to try to maximise the impact of films. For example, the Britdoc Foundation and Working Films have developed sessions which help film-makers to reach their intended audience, for example, by building relevant networks and working in partnership with charities and non-governmental organisations.

If little is firmly established concerning the impact of film on activists or wider publics, still less is known about the potential to influence policy-makers. However, some tantalising examples do exist. Ronald Reagan watched *The Day After* (1983), which depicted nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union. It is widely acknowledged that the film led Reagan to shift his approach to the Cold War, becoming more conciliatory as a result (Brand, 2010). More recently, in Britain Dartmouth Films' *The End of the Line* (2009) has been credited with influencing fishing policy (see box below).

## 4. CASE STUDY: POOR KIDS

Given the limited evidence available on the power of film to influence policy-makers, we hosted a screening of the documentary *Poor Kids* (2011) to an audience of policy-makers and influencers in partnership with Save the Children and the film's makers, True Vision TV. We asked viewers to complete a simple survey before and after the screening to assess their response to the film and more broadly to the idea of film as an advocacy tool.

*Poor Kids* follows children living below the poverty line in a 60-minute documentary commissioned by the BBC. The children tell their stories of poor housing, poor health, inadequate benefits and family unemployment. A six-minute version can be viewed at: <http://truevisiontv.com/Poor-Kids-Short-Film>.

The film was watched by 2.5 million viewers when it aired on BBC 1, and almost one million more on

### THE END OF THE LINE (2009)

The BritDoc Foundation carried out an independent impact evaluation of *The End of the Line* which included assessing its political impact. Overall, the film was seen as a highly effective tool in campaigns to protect fish populations. In particular:

- It achieved good reach with politicians, including screenings at both the Labour and Conservative party conferences and in Downing Street.
- Some specific outcomes were attributed to the film. For example, it was reported that the Fisheries Minister signed up to the film's

campaign and the boycott of Nobu tuna. It also led to the creation of new marine reserves in the British Indian Ocean Territory.

The evaluation also highlighted areas where impact was lacking. For example, one of the goals of the film was to see a ban imposed on the international trade in bluefin tuna. The film was screened to European Commission members ahead of a Green Paper on the issue, but the debates that followed did not secure a ban.

iPlayer and BBC3. On Twitter, '#poorkids' started trending by mid-broadcast, and shortly after the film finished it trended number one worldwide, meaning more people were tweeting about *Poor Kids* than anything else in the world. Social media provide a new channel through which people can share their reaction and give film-makers a way to connect with their audience. The makers of *Poor Kids* reflect that a comprehensive social media campaign before the BBC screening would have maximised its potential.

Ninety per cent of our viewers rated the film five out of five as a motivation to do something about child poverty, 85% reported that watching the film had changed their view on at least one key policy issue affecting children, and 80% said they had learned something new. All the participants felt that charities and other campaigning organisations could make greater use of film to influence policy-makers.

However, there was also some scepticism about whether politicians and other policy-makers would sit and watch the film. One participant commented:

I don't think there is much chance busy MPs...are going to sit down for an hour of their own time to watch a documentary, however moving and brilliant the reviews.

Save the Children did in fact send a copy of the film to every MP, but it is not known how many watched it. It was also commented that a shorter film would be cheaper to make (a theme we take up in the next section); *Poor Kids* cost more than £200,000.

## 5. TESTING THE USE OF FILM IN THE SOCIAL SECTOR

This paper suggests film may have the potential to have a direct impact on policy, and flags up some of the potential limitations of film and some of the many things we just don't know about the use of

film to generate social change. We have suggested there are reasons to believe that bespoke film could be a useful addition to the range of influencing tools. Here we set out some of the key issues that those working in the social sector might consider as they look at new ways to win hearts and minds: quality, cost and length; building alliances; and the editorial approach, publicity and evaluation.

### Quality, cost and length

One thing that key players we interviewed appear to agree on is that the film must be of very high quality in order to have an impact on policy. It is argued that this is necessary for watchability and credibility.

This may not always be true, however. For example, a film produced by PATHS 2 had a traceable impact on health policy in Nigeria but was not made to the highest production standards. There may be a cultural issue around expectations of film quality.

If we accept the received wisdom and assume that high quality is required, there are certain significant cost implications for the social sector. In the case of larger organisations, they must consider whether it would be a better investment to work with independent film-makers rather than with in-house teams in order to achieve the best possible film. This might cost in the region of £200,000 for a one- to two-hour film, a very substantial investment in either case. This is one reason why alliances and assessing impact are so important.

It might be argued – and was argued at our screening event – that lower-budget films made for the internet could be as powerful. This has never been robustly tested but surely ought to be. There are a number of organisations that exist to use the combined power of film and the internet to inspire people to action: this is the mission of Resist ([www.resistnetwork.com](http://www.resistnetwork.com)). It would be exciting to see these people focus their creative skills on a new target audience of policy-makers and shapers.

Another option which may reduce costs and increase the likelihood of policy-makers watching a film is to make it short. A 10-minute film made by a top independent production company might cost £80,000–100,000. However, there are a number of potential issues with shorter films. First, some film producers argue that it is necessary to make films longer in order to take people through an emotional arc: you start by confirming their prejudices and then you change their minds. Others have argued that you can do the emotional arc with a short film, citing as examples Comic Relief clips or even the John Lewis adverts. Second, one producer we interviewed argued that, “you only really get the impact of these films when you get the feeling that you are getting to know the [kids], and you are seeing the impact of unfolding events. That is only possible when you get the right characters and the right set of events unfolding.” There is also the question of whether producing a short film does actually save much money: in the case of *Poor Kids*, half the budget was spent on finding the families, costs which would have been incurred whatever the length of the film.

Ultimately, the fact that policy-makers are highly unlikely to watch a film of an hour or more means the drive towards shorter films is very strong. The makers of *The End of the Line* produced a number of versions of their film for different audiences – with the shortest of all for policy-makers.

### **Building alliances**

There is a need for organisations to create alliances in order to maximise the potential of film within their work. Partnerships and network-building have been used to help organisations gain skills and bring in resources. For example, the Channel 4 Britdoc Foundation runs the Good Pitch event. This brings film-makers together with NGOs, foundations, philanthropists, brands and media around social issues to forge coalitions and campaigns that are good for all these partners, good for the films and good for society (The Good Pitch, 2010). Over the

past three years, 60 films have been presented at the event and 700 organisations have attended, bringing together expert knowledge, research and archives, membership networks and mailing lists, campaigning and lobbying expertise and access to policy-makers, production and outreach funding. The Good Pitch has leveraged \$3 million in funding in addition to brokering relationships and partnerships.

Seed funding is necessary to get projects off the ground, and there are a number of organisations dedicated to this. One of the most prominent is The Fledgling Fund, which supports innovative media projects that can play critical roles in igniting social change.

Building partnerships and drawing on support from other organisations will be essential in supporting the social sector organisations to develop expertise and capacity. This includes social sector organisations working together to pool costs and emphasise common goals.

### **Editorial approach, publicity and evaluation**

As we have seen, the framing of issues in film is crucial. It may be tempting to overemphasise policy implications and the need for change, but this may be counter-productive (see [www.frameworksinstitute.org](http://www.frameworksinstitute.org) for in-depth discussion of framing social issues). A film that misrepresents the issue or fails to present it in a clear way, with identifiable solutions and actions, may miss its moment. If it tries to push its point too strongly it may strengthen opposition to a cause rather than rally support. Attempting to shock through images may result in people becoming ‘adjusted’ to a particular problem, reducing their motivation to act.

Increasingly, innovative and clever presentation is key to evoking reaction as we are bombarded with adverts, television programmes, media and written reports telling us to act in a particular way. Often

films choose to make explicit and specific asks at the end of the film. *An Inconvenient Truth* has been criticised for having too many asks or suggestions for action; *The End of the Line* has three very clear asks at the end. *Poor Kids*, on the other hand, includes no call to action. At the very least including a small number of specific calls makes it much easier to evaluate impact.

As with written studies, there are ethical considerations in film-making. There is a risk of film being used to exploit the position of particular groups in order to gain a reaction, and participants should fully understand the nature and purpose of the film being produced and be provided with the necessary support. Given the imbalance of resources between particular groups, it may be that there are winners and losers, depending on the political and financial power of the organisation involved. Film-makers who have developed strong political and social networks are likely to be able to drum up the most attention for a particular film – and the democratic impact of this may be questioned. Where film is generated from within communities, it arguably increases democracy because it opens a window for policy-makers to connect with their electorate.

One way to get publicity is to release a film in cinema, because it will be talked about even if only a couple of hundred people actually go to see it. For example, just 300 people went to see *After the Apocalypse*, but this resulted in mainstream and prime-time coverage, which generated higher viewing figures on television than might otherwise have been the case. It was the cinema release – funded by the Wellcome Trust – that ensured the film was treated seriously and gained momentum.

Film can work as a tool for social change, but the strategy around its production and distribution and certain external factors can be as important as the film itself for generating that change.

Dartmouth Films' *Black Gold*, about the coffee trade, benefited from several factors which combined to create a real and immediate impact. MPs came to a screening because one of the stars had had a meeting with Tony Blair and they wanted to know why. The film got into the Cannes Film Festival, where Starbucks was a sponsor. Starbucks' Chief Executive went to a screening and realised the company might have a problem given its low level of fairly traded coffee. As a result Starbucks increased its fairly traded coffee from 5% to 20%. This helps to illustrate the importance of thinking about the whole package.

If film is to become a significant tool for the social sector it is important that the investments made generate a worthwhile return. Evaluation is critical to establish what works in film-making, and the social sector should seek to produce a shared set of metrics through which films' impact can be assessed. There are good examples which provide a starting point. Awards such as the Puma Creative Impact Award provide some leadership in establishing what makes a good social film.

Factors that in combination can generate a high impact are:

- a high-quality film
- a supporting written report
- screenings that are 'events'
- some event happening in the outside world
- civic groups to follow up
- publicity
- luck.

In these times of limited funds and high need, social sector organisations must find fresh ways to make their case. Film does have significant costs and the evidence base for its effectiveness is limited. However, the same is true of many of the old influencing strategies and any organisation wishing to stand out from the multitudes should be prepared to take a calculated risk on film.

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**Save the Children works in more than 120 countries. We save children's lives.  
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