



Journal of Public Interest Communications

ISSN (online): 2573-4342

Journal homepage: <http://journals.fcla.edu/jpic/>

Book Review: *Story Movements: How Documentaries Empower People and Inspire Social Change*

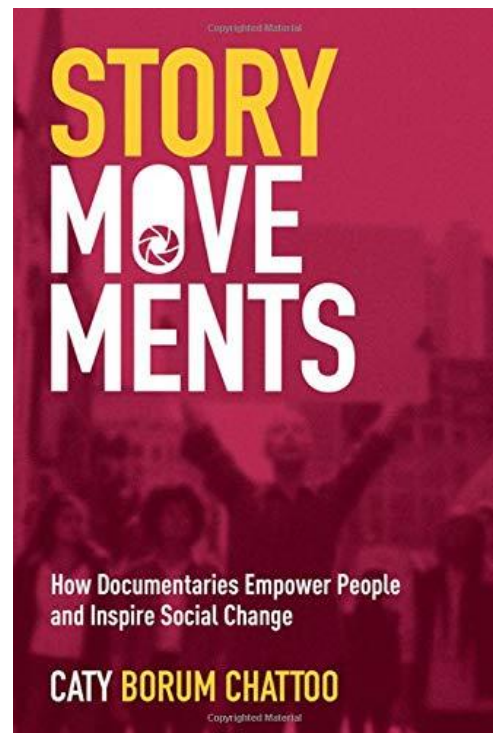
By Caty Borum Chattoo, American University

Reviewed by Jasper Fessmann, West Virginia University

Borum Chattoo, C. (2020). *Story movements: How documentaries empower people and inspire social change*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190943417.001.0001>

From the point of view of public interest communications (PIC), Caty Borum Chattoo's book, "*Story Movements: How Documentaries Empower People and Inspire Social Change*," provides deep insights into a critical aspect of PIC often overlooked: The tremendous power of documentary filmmaking in awareness building, inspiring, and mobilizing allies. Combining insightful storytelling with the analytical clarity of academic research, the book makes a compelling argument for documentaries as increasingly important avenues of supporting social change. Similar to investigative journalism, documentaries can tell in-depth, intimate, and visceral stories that can have a large impact on moving the needle on a social issue.

At its core, *Story Movements* is about stories: the story of documentary filmmaking as a profession, stories of its impact on social change, and stories of individual quests for a deeper truth to be shared with a larger audience. Borum Chattoo uses these stories to create an overall understanding of the power of documentaries for social change. The individual documentaries and their stories serve here as an American Quilt: each has a unique shape and texture but together they create an overall picture.



**Please send correspondence about this article to Jasper Fessmann, Reed College of Media, West Virginia University. E-mail: jasper.fessmann@mail.uwv.edu.*

<https://doi.org/10.32473/jpic.v4.i2.p75>

Copyright 2020 Fessmann. This work is published under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 \(CC BY-NC 4.0\) International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/).

Each story of a film is a tale of how documentary filmmakers are able to achieve sustained social change through their artistic presentation. The book shows how deeply personal storytelling, strategic outlook, and alliances with other stakeholders can have real social impact. The stories of the documentaries highlighted in the book are deeply moving and inspiring, no less so than some of the most successful PIC mass and/or social media campaigns.

Borum Chattoo captures the artistic nature of documentary filmmaking, explaining the freedom and authenticity this gives to the final film. From a narrative framing point of view, the book provides scores of examples of powerful framing at its best: the titles of the films are great examples of word-smithing, capturing in a few words the essence of the whole issue (e.g. *Black Fish*—the misery of Killer Whales in captivity at Sea World; *Bully*—a deep look at bullying; *The Feeling of Being Watched*—surveillance of Muslim communities in the United States; *Heroin(e)*—community responses to the opioid crisis).

A key theme discussed throughout is the relationship of documentaries to journalism. Documentaries can have an intimate and visceral impact that few news stories can achieve. The book outlines how in the participatory network era of mass communications—the age of streaming and social media—documentary filmmaking flourishes more than ever before, filling voids left by a declining role of traditional news media. At the same time, *Story Movements* shows how the independence from news organizations creates major hurdles for the filmmakers and can expose them to dangers from which news organizations protect their journalists. In this regard, the book highlights how PIC organizations, such as the Ford Foundation, have played a key role in funding and creating the necessary infrastructure to make the production of social impact documentaries possible.

A key difference between documentary filmmaking and journalism is that documentaries take a specific, authentic point of view. Journalists often eschew taking a point of view, trying instead to be objective, even though it is well understood that journalism can never be fully objective. The book illuminates the power of authentic, impactful stories with a clearly subjective view, but which apply the highest standards of journalistic practice with regard to accuracy and fact checking.

Beyond the obvious audience of documentary film students, the book offers insights and inspiration for journalists and all those working in communication for social good. For PIC, the book offers insight into an important strategic option available for advocacy, resource mobilizations, and alliances: working with documentary filmmakers and social impact producers. The cases used in the book suggest that building a social impact alliance and having a story of injustice told through a documentary can be as significant as the typical mass and/or social media strategy. So, any PIC campaign planning should include thinking about this option and the book provides a good guide for this.

Overall, Borum Chattoo's *Story Movements* gives a scholarly overview of the field of social impact documentaries in the public interest. The book also highlights the close relationship to social impact and investigative journalism and offers an underused strategic option for PIC campaigns.