Pop Culture as a Powerful Force for Narrative Change

New pop culture tools and resources let groups start important conversations around issue-oriented film and television storylines

By Kristen Grimm

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We all tell ourselves stories. There’s a story of how each workday goes—psychologists call these behavioral scripts—and there are larger narratives we tell ourselves about our lives in general. There’s even a subfield of psychoanalysis called narrative therapy that encourages patients to edit their life stories when things look like they’re headed toward an unhappy ending.

Similarly, a subfield of social sector communications called narrative change has sprung up that proposes a form of narrative therapy for society at large. The thinking goes that there are society-wide narratives around race, sexuality, opportunity, religion, and the environment that are in need of a good copyedit.

Pop culture and especially film and television are particularly well-positioned to do this. These stories seep deep down into our cores and help impact our attitudes and behaviors. Think of how TV shows like “Will & Grace” and “Modern Family” helped accustomed America first to gay people in general and then gay people getting married. Think about Murphy Brown’s row with Dan Quayle over single parenthood and who got to decide what did or did not make a family. Think about Shonda Rhimes expanding the expectations for gender and racial diversity in the workplace with her TV dramas. Thanks in part to working with The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy, studies suggest that MTV’s “16 and Pregnant” demonstrably helped lower the nation’s teen birthrate. A children’s cartoon, “Doc McStuffins,” featuring an African-American female doctor, perhaps drives the point home best. The show’s creator, Chris Nee, has oft told the anecdote of the time her young son, a fan of the show, innocently asked her if men could be doctors too. Chris’s response: “Maybe one day.”

Pop culture can create and redefine narratives that guide what we talk about and how we think about things. “We’re looking at pop culture as central to expanding empathy and a broader, more inclusive American identity,” said Taryn Higashi, executive director of Unbound Philanthropy. Together with Nathan Cummings, Ford, and the JPB foundations, Unbound is in the process of building a Pop Culture Collaborative Fund, which is designed to bring philanthropy, the entertainment industry, and social justice activists together to transform cultural understanding of people of color, immigrants, refugees, Muslims, and other communities who are deeply affected by harmful portrayals in popular culture. “We’re trying to be responsive and think about new and different ways to have public conversations. Pop culture allows us to do that with populations that our other strategies may not reach,” said Higashi.

Pop culture is great at letting us see things from an alternate perspective. Living in the shoes of characters who may be different from ourselves is an important quality that film and television bring to the table. David Morse, chief communications officer for The Atlantic Philanthropies—a foundation that’s helped track and craft the narrative change movement—said, “Stories have the power to radically change how people think about and relate to complex social issues. They’re the most powerful ways to cultivate empathy and inspire and mobilize action.”

Indeed, it’s difficult to think of the outcry over the gendered bathroom bills arising without trans issues and portrayals being taken up by popular shows like “Transparent” and indie films like “Tangerine.” TV series like “Making a Murderer” and “The People Vs. O.J. Simpson” have also inarguably led to water cooler (and social media) conversations making people question who is in prison, debate complicated topics like prosecutorial misconduct, and address issues like race and gender.

Each storyline that deals with a social or environmental issue—no matter how imperfectly—is like a mini-communications strategy ripe for the picking. It may be no surprise, then, that organizations are beginning to take advantage of these moments. Communications strategists would do well to learn from groups that impact storylines in development (including ColorOfChange, GLAAD, Hollywood Health & Society, Science and Entertainment Exchange, and the Global Media Center for Social Impact) as well as organizations that seek to leverage the hundreds and hundreds of storylines out there already (including Cultural Pulse and our own project, AndACTION).

Tracy Van Slyke, author of the 2014 call-to-action report “Spoiler Alert: How Progressives Can Break Through With Pop Culture,” sees a shifting landscape. “We’re starting to see people and organizations come together to create deliberate pop culture strategies and experiment with new ways to engage with television, film, celebrities, and fan energy. That’s a big change from 10 years ago. Now there’s emerging infrastructure designed to help social change groups understand and use culture.”

Van Slyke is helping to create that infrastructure herself. She heads up the CEL Culture Lab, which helps social change organizations, foundations, and communications firms build their cultural savvy and skills. One of its programs, the Cultural Pulse, pilots tools, research, and strategy that have helped groups seize pop culture moments and tap into online conversations around everything from #OscarsSoWhite to storylines from “Orange Is The New Black.” In her work with dozens of organizations, Van Slyke has seen high interest in pivoting off of pop culture storylines and building relationships with the powerful fan communities who share overlapping values.
Many groups working on specific issues have deepened their pop culture outreach or even opened up Los Angeles-based offices. ColorOfChange, a national racial justice organization, recently hired Brian Walker, a veteran of Participant Media and New Line Cinema, to oversee entertainment outreach on behalf of the organization. Walker, too, has noticed a variety of critical shifts over the past decade. In addition to greater interest from foundations and private donors for culture change work, he’s also noted “a greater call to action for organizations and producers of content to create more diverse and inclusive teams and pipelines of staffing.” Walker works with screenwriters, producers, and executives in order to improve inclusion and to increase the output and quality of media representations of black people in film, television, and new digital platforms. Together with AndACTION, ColorOfChange recently ran a live Twitter chat during an episode of WGN’s hit “Underground”–a TV series that reframes black slaves escaping via the underground railroad not as victims but as superheroes.

Advocacy groups can more easily tap into the conversations that movies and TV spark if they see pop culture as they do social media or rapid response to breaking news. At AndACTION, which we launched at Spitfire Strategies last year, we are framing this
as the “pop culture pivot.” Just as groups respond quickly to newsworthy moments in American politics, they also should be prepared to respond to pop culture moments (both positive and negative) that intersect with their issues.

Some groups do this already. The Peace Corps, for example, responded to the film “Ft. Tilden” and its erroneous assertion that being in the Peace Corps meant getting shipped off to Syria with a friendly tweet—a great example of working “with” and not “against” an imperfect storyline. Other groups also have a high “pop culture quotient.” The National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON) runs both proactive arts outreach (with the launch of its Art/Work fellowship designed to shape narrative) as well as reactive response to portrayals of day laborers in film and television on its social media. Similarly, the Department of Energy used the Netflix summer hit “Stranger Things” to talk about STEM/STEAM in a blog entry, which got picked up by dozens of media outlets in the process.

Katie Elmore Mota, Co-Founder/Co-President of Wise Entertainment, noted the importance of “embracing the grey of characters and of issues—nothing is black and white.” Elmore Mota also serves as Executive Producer for the Hulu hit East Los High, which takes up social issues such as immigration and sexual health by design. At Wise, the discussion of the issues doesn’t end when the director calls, “Cut!” but is curated on social media by a team of experts. “This bridge is really important,” says Mota, “as it isn’t just an epilogue anymore with a number the audience may call, but it is an ongoing conversation. We believe this conversation is vital at every step of the process.”
Whether such issue-oriented conversations around films and television shows arise with the help of content creators, through intermediaries, or spontaneously, foundations have a role to play in encouraging their grantees to experiment with this promising path. More resources and support are still needed to help groups navigate these uncharted waters. As Taryn Higashi from Unbound Philanthropy says, “I think we need to recognize that harnessing the power of pop culture is new work for many advocates, and we need to provide time and resources for them to experiment with these strategies. Many advocates are used to working toward more short-term and concrete outcomes. But working with pop culture is an exciting new landscape to understand and engage with. Success will require trust and strong relationships.”

Putting downstream pop culture to work for nonprofits is new territory, and thrives on the spirit of well-managed experimentation. Teasing social issues out of pop culture content like film and TV storylines, then carefully matching them to nonprofits, is what Spitfire’s AndACTION, Cultural Pulse, and ColorOfChange work to do in a hands-on way with cause organizations.

At AndACTION we are making it as easy as possible for groups to try their hand at pop culture engagement via a searchable online database of upcoming and recent storylines on a multitude of social and environmental issues, push emails when new entries are added to our database, tipsheets, and webinars. We have already worked with HBO, IFC Films, ACLU, Rock the Vote, and other studios and nonprofits to leverage films and TV shows on a variety of issues. Our job is to make it less scary and more intuitive for groups to harness pop culture to use powerful narratives for social change. The fall TV season is chock full of opportunities to ride conversations that will happen on a variety of issues, from CBS’s “Code Black” (medical and health issues) to NBC’s “Superstore” (economic security) to CW’s “Jane the Virgin” (immigration). We love to experiment and would love to hear from you. Together, we might just succeed in rewriting some of our collective stories for the better.

Kristen Grimm is president of Spitfire Strategies. She created AndACTION as part of her Henry Crown Fellowship at the Aspen Institute.

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