

# BAM 2023 CONFERENCE

---



BUSINESS  
SCHOOL

The Art of Engaging Audiences: How Impact Producers Run Film-based Campaigns for  
Social Change

**Stephan Manning**

University of Sussex

**Ana Suarez Lopez**

University of Sussex

**Nichole Wissman**

**The Art of Engaging Audiences:  
How Impact Producers Run Film-based Campaigns for Social Change**

**Stephan Manning**

Professor of Strategy and Innovation  
University of Sussex Business School  
Falmer, Brighton, BN1 9RH, UK  
[s.d.manning@sussex.ac.uk](mailto:s.d.manning@sussex.ac.uk)

**Nichole Wissman**

Assistant Professor of Management  
University of San Diego  
Knauss School of Business  
5998 Alcalá Park, San Diego, CA 92110  
[nwissmanweber@sandiego.edu](mailto:nwissmanweber@sandiego.edu)

**Ana Paula Suárez López**

Impact Producer and Human Rights Activist  
University of Sussex  
Falmer, Brighton, BN1 9RH, UK

**June 2023**

**Full Paper Version for BAM 2023 Conference**

# **The Art of Engaging Audiences: How Impact Producers Run Film-based Campaigns for Social Change**

## **ABSTRACT**

Cultural products, such as art, music and film, are increasingly used strategically to promote social change. In film, so-called impact producers run film-based impact campaigns to raise awareness on social issues, and promote behavioral and policy change. These campaigns can be conceived as interstitial spaces between creative content production and issue-based fields. Because of their growing importance, we need to better understand these interstitial spaces and intermediary roles within them. Based on primary and secondary data, we discuss how impact producers set up and maintain these spaces. We find that they operate as strategic convenors and amplifiers by leveraging film narratives for issue-based impact objectives, while also building on existing movements and campaigns, and mobilizing impact partners at multiple levels, to engage target audiences. Findings have important implications for research on interstitial spaces, creative industries and social change processes.

**KEYWORDS:** Creative Industries, Social Impact, Interstitial Spaces, Brokerage, Issue-Based Fields

## **INTRODUCTION**

Social change efforts, i.e. activities aimed at raising awareness and changing practices and policies related to social and environmental issues (Benford and Snow, 2000; Schneiberg and Lounsbury, 2017; Stephan et al., 2016), build on and (re-) produce “collective action frames”, i.e. shared understandings of problems, responsibilities and potential solutions that may inspire and legitimate collective action towards social change (Benford and Snow, 2000). Collective action frames become particularly important in so-called “issue-based fields”, i.e. institutional arenas in which actors with different agendas and interests, including policy-makers, business leaders, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and social movement organizations, deal with particular issues, such as climate change, inequality, migration etc. (Hoffman, 1999). In framing issues, social change agents, such as NGOs, increasingly refer to narratives that are not only created through text but through various media and cultural artefacts, including pictures, music and film (Van Dyke and Taylor, 2018; Amenta and Polletta, 2019). Visual forms in particular are known to convey information that is multi-layered, rich in context and emotionally impactful (Höllerer, Jancsary and Grafström, 2018), thus having a potentially strong impact on the framing of social and environmental issues (Klein and Amis, 2021).

Social change agents therefore increasingly professionalize the use of media and cultural artefacts in pursuit of their goals (Caren et al. 2020). In turn, professionals in creative industries can become important drivers of social change (Svejenova and Christiansen, 2017). This has led to new linkages between creative content production and issue-based fields that are vital to our understanding of how social change happens. Yet, management research is only beginning to examine these linkages and dynamics (e.g. Klein and Amis, 2021).

One useful theoretical framework to examine linkages between different field contexts, such as creative content production and issue-based fields, is that of “interstitial spaces”. Furnari (2014) defines them as small-scale settings where individuals from different fields occasionally and informally interact and experiment with the development of new norms and practices. Whereas many studies have looked at interstitial spaces in contexts of innovation and field change in more general (e.g. Furnari, 2014; Villani and Phillips 2021), some have also extended the idea to examine social change processes across fields (e.g. DeJordy et al. 2020; Manning and Vavilov, 2023). However, our understanding of interstitial spaces in contexts of social change is still limited. This article promotes this research agenda by focusing on impact campaigns (ICs) as increasingly important interstitial spaces. Specifically we look at ICs as time-limited strategic efforts linking films to social issues and change processes (Nash and Corner, 2016; Borum Chattoo and Feldman, 2017).

According to Furnari (2014), for building and sustaining interstitial spaces, so-called “catalysts” are vital actors who help facilitate and sustain other’s interaction within these spaces over time, while also assisting with the construction of shared meanings and agendas. Yet, we are only beginning to understand how catalysts perform these roles and thereby help constitute interstitial spaces (Villani and Phillips, 2021). In the context of film-based ICs, so-called “impact producers” (IPs) take on but also go beyond the role of catalysts by strategizing the use of films to generate various forms of impact, from changing mindsets, to behavioral change, to policy change and changing communities (Doc Society, 2023; Borum Chattoo and Jenkins, 2019; Hill *et al.*, 2019). By doing so,

they connect filmmakers with “issue networks” (Nash and Corner, 2016). Examples of the work of IPs are the campaign based on the documentary “Bag it” (2010) which aimed at making people aware of the environmental damage of plastic waste, leading to plastic bans in several U.S. locations (Doc Society, 2023), or the campaign based on “Dark Waters” (2019) which led to the banning of the use and disposal of so-called “forever chemicals” (Participant Media, 2023). In this article, we examine in more detail how IPs operate, in order to develop a more specific understanding of agency in interstitial spaces in contexts of social change. We ask: *How do impact producers build and use interstitial spaces between creative content production and issue-based fields to promote social change?*

Based on interviews with IPs and filmmakers as well as a secondary analysis of impact case studies, we find that IPs act as strategic convenors and amplifiers by leveraging a film’s story for issue-related impact goals, such as awareness-building, behavioral change, policy changes, and community building. In particular, they engage in four interconnected practices: (i) developing impact goals in line with creative content, (ii) supporting and building on prior/existing campaigns, (iii) mobilizing partners at multiple levels of impact, and (iv) engaging target audiences and change agents. We argue that these practices may be relevant for interstitial spaces between issue-based fields and various fields of creative content production, including art, music, film and research. Findings contribute to research on the role of cultural artefacts in promoting social change; interstitial spaces and catalysts in social change contexts; and new professional roles and forms of organization in creative industries.

## LINKING CREATIVE CONTENT TO SOCIAL ISSUES: A FIELD PERSPECTIVE

Numerous studies, especially in the tradition of social movement research, have shown that social change efforts both impact and are impacted by cultural artefacts, including music and film (Vasi *et al.*, 2015; Van Dyke and Taylor, 2018; Amenta and Polletta, 2019). In turn, especially media and cultural studies increasingly point to how for example the production of documentary films can affect social and political discourses, social practice and policy-making (Borum Chattoo and Feldman, 2017;

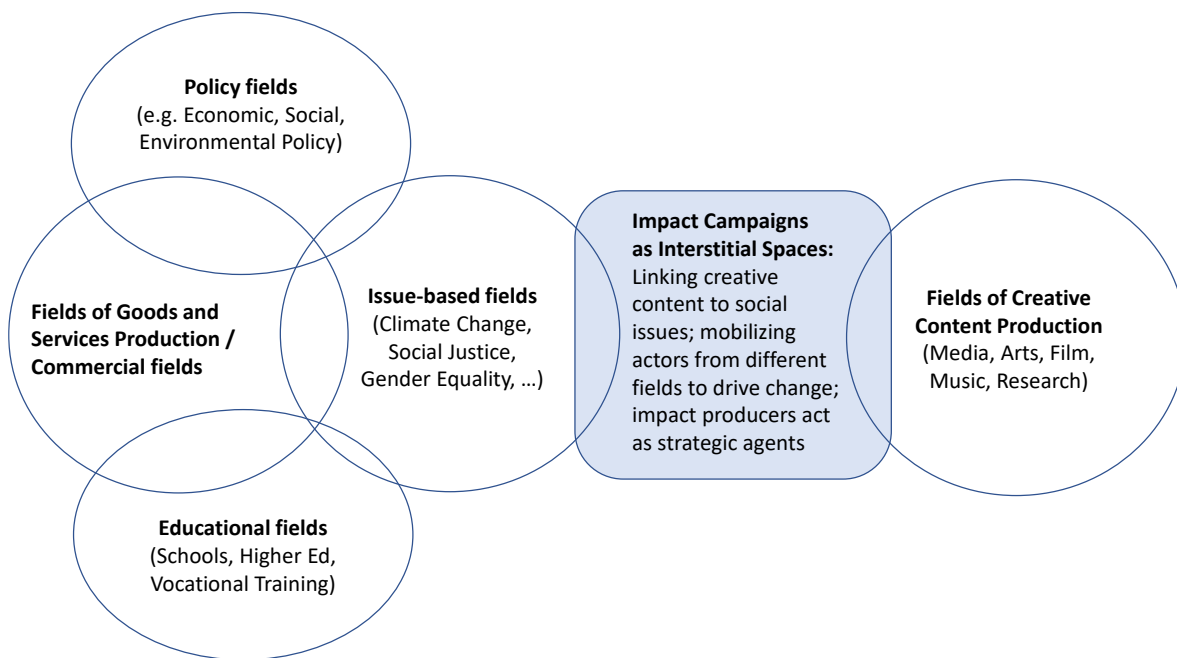
Bieniek-Tobasco *et al.*, 2019; Borum Chattoo and Jenkins, 2019; Hill *et al.*, 2019). In a rare article in management studies, Svejenova and Christiansen (2017) stress the importance of “creative leadership” in embedding social missions in the production of cultural artefacts. Yet, we know relatively little about potential organizational links between arenas of social change and creative industries. Nor do we know much about the potential role of strategic agency in establishing such linkages.

To explore these linkages, we take a field perspective that allows us to better understand the position and relationships of actors towards particular issues and the production of cultural artefacts, as well as the norms and practices affecting these relationships (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Bourdieu, 1993; Hoffman, 1999). Specifically relevant here are the concepts of organizational field and issue-based field. Organizational fields are defined by DiMaggio and Powell (1983) as “recognized area[s] of social life” that are constituted by organizations that produce similar products or services and/or that are involved in a common enterprise. Examples include fields of goods and services production, including creative content production, such as media, film and research; as well as policy fields, and educational fields. By comparison, “issue-based fields” form around “issues that bring together various field constituents with disparate purposes” and interests (Hoffman 1999, p. 352). Examples of issues include climate change, social justice and gender equality. Issue-based fields are “arenas” in which participants from different fields engage in discourses, develop ideological positions and (de-) legitimize policies and practices (Hall 1987; Clarke 1991). Interactions in issue-based fields may feed back into organizational fields, as they may lead field participants to question and change established practices (Litrico and David, 2017; Furnari, 2018). Both organizational and issue-based fields may establish “systemic qualities” in bringing about norms and logics of interaction that get established and reproduced by field participants over time (Giddens, 1984).

In this study, we are specifically interested in linkages between issue-based fields and fields of creative content production, such as film. One important linkage between these fields are social impact campaigns (ICs), which are run alongside the distribution of films and which are aimed at driving

social change processes by raising awareness about social and environmental issues that are related to the content of the film (Nash and Corner, 2016; Borum Chattoo and Feldman, 2017; Doc Society, 2023). Figure 1 illustrates this linkage, while also showing how issue-based fields reach into other fields that get affected by these campaigns. ICs show characteristics of interstitial spaces, which are critical arenas of social interaction in driving change and innovation. According to Furnari (2014), interstitial spaces are made of social interactions between participants from different fields; they come into existence occasionally and informally; and they are made of interactions around a common activity to which individuals devote limited time. As primary examples, Furnari (2014) discusses clubs, workshops and meetups, which are spaces in which new technologies and practices are developed. In the context of social change, ICs represent an equally important interstitial space.

Figure 1: Impact campaigns linking creative content production and issue-based fields



One example of an IC is the campaign around the U.S. documentary “Chasing Coral” (2017) which exposes the death of coral reefs. The campaign, which was run by Exposure Labs, was aimed at raising awareness about mass coral deaths, humanize the climate change narrative, target law-makers and funders, change voters’ behavior and support grassroots initiatives. Using special screening events and

partnering with various foundations and influencers, the IC managed to establish corals as a symbol for climate change, stimulate donations and help launch initiatives for tracking coral damage. Another example is the Bully Project, an IC initiated by the filmmaker of “Bully” (2011) which deals with the damaging effects of bullying at school. In partnership with First School busing, teacher unions, girls scouts, DonorsChoose.org and other campaigns, the impact team aimed at dispelling the myth that ‘kids will be kids’ by reframing bullying as an issue of concern. As part of the IC, the documentary was shown and discussed at 705 schools in 175 cities, reaching 250,000 students. In addition, a White House screening was organized to bring bullying onto the political agenda, and educator toolkits were developed to guide teachers to better deal with bullying (see Doc Society. 2023). Both examples show how ICs involve stakeholders from various fields around a specific agenda within a limited time frame to promote change – all core features of interstitial spaces.

The examples also show the importance of strategic coordination in the effective running of ICs. More specifically, film-based ICs are run by so-called impact producers (IPs) who, at least in part, take on the role of catalysts (Furnari, 2014) or curators (Mitnick and Ryan 2015) by bringing participants from different fields together around a chosen issue and by facilitating the construction of meaning around that issue. By doing so, they pursue various impact goals which may range from changing mindsets, to behavioral change, to policy change and changing communities (Doc Society, 2023; Borum Chattoo and Jenkins, 2019; Hill *et al.*, 2019). The role of IP is taken on either by the filmmakers and their own teams (like in the case of Bully) or by a specialized organization that is hired by the filmmaker (like in the case of Chasing Coral). Below we discuss in more detail how IPs run campaigns and build a capacity to run ICs on a regular basis. We also discuss how IP roles go beyond the ‘catalyst’ role that is typically associated with coordinators in interstitial spaces.

In examining the work of IPs, we also address the way they build relationships with actors in issue-based fields and the field of filmmaking, and the way norms and practices from both fields affect the way they build interstitial spaces between them. In this regard it is important to consider that issue-

based fields are populated by a diverse set of participants who influence how issues, such as bullying and climate change, are framed and discussed. Participants include NGOs and social movement organizations which use various framing strategies to raise awareness about issues and to push for changes in policies and practice (Benford and Snow, 2000; Schneiberg and Lounsbury, 2017). In addition, mainstream media organizations, such as newspapers and TV channels, play a central role in interpreting and giving meaning to issues and events related to these issues (Klein and Amis, 2021). More recently, social media platforms have become important complementary arenas of discourse affecting the impact of films (Vasi *et al.*, 2015). In addition, policy-makers, foundations and issue experts, may influence the way issues are framed (Borum Chattoo and Jenkins, 2019). Issue-based fields are also populated by counter-movements (Meyer and Staggenborg, 1996) and stakeholders with more ambiguous interests. For example, corporations may play a key role in shaping discourses to their benefit (Levy, Reinecke and Manning, 2016). Finally, dynamics in issue-based fields are affected by shifting opinions in the general public and local communities. It is therefore critical to consider the importance of these actors when examining how IPs set up interstitial spaces.

At the same time, IPs work with participants in fields of creative content production which have their own norms, practices and organizational forms (Bourdieu, 1993). Cultural artefacts, such as films, music and art, are “experience goods” (Lampel, Lant and Shamsie, 2000) that combine artistic and commercial value (Hirsch, 1972). Creative content production is thereby affected by the imperative of “creative variety” (DeFillippi and Arthur, 1998), which is partly promoted by the demand of audiences for entertainment and novelty. This in turn affects the way creators of art, film and music develop ideas and select projects. To develop new projects on a regular basis, creators typically build and operate within so-called “project network organizations” which consist of core project teams and flexible partner pools that are jointly mobilized on a project-by-project basis (Windeler and Sydow, 2001; Manning, 2005, 2017). Aside from these rather flexible project-based relationships, fields of creative content production are also shaped by more stable, often regionally embedded institutions. In

film, for example, these include film schools, film festivals and film funding organizations (Grabher, 2002), all of which co-produce “orders of worth” (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2007; Anand and Watson, 2004). Being effective in running ICs thus requires IPs to consider practices and norms of creative content production as much as characteristics of issue-based fields.

Next, we examine in detail how IPs build ICs in terms of interstitial spaces between issue-based fields and the field of film production in particular, and thereby navigate the norms, practices and relationships within and across these fields.

## DATA AND METHODS

In order to better understand how impact producers (IPs) run impact campaigns (ICs) as interstitial spaces we build on an explorative qualitative research design given the novelty of the topic and the lack of studies on it. Following good practice of inductive case-based research, we mobilize multiple sources of evidence to stimulate “analytical generalization” (Yin, 2013), i.e. theorizing by relating concrete empirical findings to more abstract inductive categories (Tsang, 2014).

In terms of data sources, we make use of three kinds of data. First, we utilize information from secondary data on ICs and the work of IPs. Specifically, we analyzed the content of 66 case studies of ICs on the website of the “Impact Field Guide”, which has become a major reference for filmmakers and IPs (see below). We coded the campaigns in terms of topic, budget, type of issue addressed, impact goals, impact partners, and outcomes.

Second, we use data from 17 explorative interviews of about one hour each with filmmakers, IPs and IC funding experts between May 2021 and November 2022. The goal of these interviews was to learn about the roles of IPs and practices of running ICs. Most interviews focused on particular films and ICs, some of which were already completed and some were still in the making when the conversations took place. Initial interview partners were selected opportunistically through established personal contacts of the two authors. For example, one author had contacts with various documentary

filmmakers engaged with human rights issues. The other author had various contacts through crowdfunding campaigns which he has supported. Later, interviews were added more systematically. In particular, both authors attended the annual DocFest in Sheffield in 2022, a major documentary film festival, at which they identified and established contacts with representatives of all major impact-oriented productions at that time. Most of them were interviewed for this study.

Third, the authors are both practitioners of filmmaking, especially in the context of documentaries. One is an IP, the other is an executive producer of various films. In this capacity, the authors have deep insights into practices and challenges of filmmaking. Both authors have attended several film festivals since May 2021, including DocFest and the IDFA Documentary Film Festival in Amsterdam, with the goal of learning more about IPs and experiences of filmmakers with ICs. As a result, the findings are also informed by insights from several shorter conversations with filmmakers in the context of screenings or meetups.

Analyzing our data, we first reviewed the history of ICs and identified major characteristics and effects, based on prior studies and our own review of case studies. We then coded our interviews for major roles of IPs as well as practices they engage to set up ICs. Based on an initial screening of IP activities, we identified four major sets of practices along with various sub-practices. They include: (i) developing impact goals in line with creative content (especially film characters and narratives), (ii) supporting and building on prior/existing campaigns, (iii) mobilizing partners at multiple levels of impact, and (iv) engaging target audiences and change agents. We discuss these practices and how they interconnect below. First, we introduce major features of ICs.

## IMPACT CAMPAIGNS IN FILM: HISTORY, CHARACTERISTICS AND EFFECTS

Impact campaigns (ICs) in film are a relatively new trend promoted by mission-driven film production firms such as Participant Media in the U.S. and non-profit organizations such as Doc Society in the UK. They reflect the increasing professionalization of film production with a social mission (Doc

Society, 2023). ICs – or “film-based social action campaigns” (Karlin and Johnson, 2011) – “re-imagine” films in terms of their utility in strategic communication of social and environmental issues (Nash and Corner, 2016). They foster public engagement through a combination of storytelling and coordination with civil society actors around these issues (Borum Chattoo and Jenkins, 2019).

The notion that film can be used to influence public opinion on social issues is not new. Since the beginning, films have been used as a vehicle for political propaganda, especially under the rule of authoritarian regimes. Films have also been used to champion social reforms (Aufderheide, 2007), and promote social engagement (Nichols, 2010). In addition, NGOs and social movements have often used advocacy films as instruments to communicate their agenda (see also Amenta and Polletta, 2019; Caren, Andrews and Lu, 2020). By comparison, “impact films”, i.e. films based on which ICs are run, are typically independent (i.e. not commissioned) productions with artistic merit and entertainment value. They are distributed in a regular way through festivals, cinema, TV and digital platforms, while also being used more specifically for targeted ICs. The rise of ICs can be partly explained by the increasing openness of audiences to social and environmental issues, but also by changes in the funding landscape, in particular the growing role of non-traditional, mission-driven funding organizations, such as foundations (Nash and Corner, 2016). Finally, impact-oriented film production has been promoted by social entrepreneurs, such as Jeff Skoll in the US, who started the production firm Participant Media in 2004 “with a mission to use visual storytelling to amplify social issues and catalyze social change” (Gilchrist, 2019). The non-profit organization Doc Society in the UK has similarly pushed the trend of film-based ICs with special focus on documentaries.

The widely referenced Impact Field Guide by Doc Society (2023) suggests that ICs typically aim for one or several of four different types of impact: “changing minds”, “changing behaviors”, “building communities” and “changing policies and institutions”. The 66 impact case studies by Doc Society, which cover documentary films and related campaigns from 2001 and 2020, give plenty of examples of campaigns across these four impact goals. One example of an awareness-focused

campaign is the IC run on the film “Burma VJ” (2009) which deals with atrocities in Burma at that time. The shared goal of the filmmakers and the IP (“Democratic Voice of Burma”) was to make these atrocities visible and (as a secondary goal) inspire civil action for democracy. One example of an IC focusing on behavior change is “Bully” (2011) which aimed at making teachers, students and the general public aware of the damaging effects of bullying, but more importantly, also sought to develop anti-bullying campaigns and educator toolkits to combat the occurrence of bullying at schools. One example of a policy change-focused IC is the one based on “The Invisible War” (2012), a film on sexual harassment and assault in the U.S. military. The impact team aimed at pushing for new regulation to protect victims and prevent misconduct. Finally, an example for building communities is the IC based on “Budrus” (2009), a film on non-violent, women-led resistance in Palestine. It aimed at educating Palestinian and Israeli communities about civic peace building and the role of women in this effort. Our analysis of impact cases suggests that the choice of impact goal may vary by the novelty of the issue as well as the level of contestation around that issue (see below). We also find that IC goals may be affected by budget, since policy change-oriented ICs have the highest budget (\$1 Million on average), whereas awareness-focused ICs have the lowest (\$650k on average).

In terms of outcomes of IC, systematic studies are still lacking. Especially media studies have begun discussing how ICs shape public opinion (Borum Chattoo and Feldman, 2017; Hill *et al.*, 2019), policies (Borum Chattoo and Jenkins, 2019), behaviors (Bieniek-Tobasco *et al.*, 2019), and communities (Canella, 2017). The 66 impact cases give a detailed report on outcomes. For example, the “Burma VJ” IC successfully reached international audiences and Western politicians; the “Bully” IC led to 705 school screenings in 175 cities, and focused youth summits; the “Invisible War” IC led the U.S. Defense Department to better protect victims and federal legislation to improve reporting and prosecution of cases; the “Budrus” IC led to the launch of several educational programs about civic engagement. To explain the impact of such films, prior studies would often emphasize the capacity of visual storytelling to trigger emotional responses (Hill *et al.*, 2019), and the identification of audiences

with characters and storylines (Borum Chattoo and Feldman, 2017). Visual storytelling can unite people emotionally from different sides of the political spectrum (Nash and Corner, 2016; Klein and Amis, 2021). According to VanDeCarr (2010, p.4), ‘People “take sides” on an issue, but it’s much harder to “take sides” on a story.’ However, the larger impact films can generate – beyond immediate emotional responses – is mainly the result of the way ICs are set up and run to reach and engage target audiences. In this process, IPs play a vital role, as we discuss next.

## CRAFTING IMPACT CAMPAIGNS AS RECURRENT INTERSTITIAL SPACES

In developing and running impact campaigns (IC), impact producers (IPs) play a vital role. Through ICs, IPs link creative content to social issues, and thereby bridge fields of creative content production, such as film, with issue-based fields. First, we introduce two complementary roles of IPs – as catalysts and amplifiers. Then, we discuss their work in greater depth, focusing on how they (i) develop impact goals in line with creative content, (ii) support and build on prior/existing campaigns, (iii) mobilize partners at multiple levels of impact, and (iv) engage target audiences and change agents. In doing so, we elaborate on both their campaign-specific activities as well as their longer-term strategies of building the capacity to run campaigns effectively over time.

### **Impact Producers as Strategic Convenors and Amplifiers**

The formal role of IP is still relatively new. Our analysis of IC case studies by Doc Society revealed that about 25% of ICs evolved without formal strategic leadership. Among those campaigns that were strategically coordinated, about half were run directly by the filmmaker and his/her team, the other half were designed by specialized IPs. Whether or not external IPs are hired depends in part on the size of allocated budget for ICs. Within the sample of cases we studied, film producers with an impact budget of more than 1 Million Dollars could typically afford hiring an IP. However, in some cases, filmmakers also choose to run ICs themselves as a way to have more control over the process. In fact, some of the

very successful campaigns, such as The Bully Project, were run or co-run by the filmmakers who, in those cases, took on the role of IP as well.

The main difference between filmmakers-as-IPS and external specialized IPs is that the former take on this role occasionally, and specifically for their own film projects. By comparison, specialized IPs typically work for impact production firms that run ICs for different films on a regular basis. Therefore, while filmmakers-as-IPs and specialized IPs may adopt similar strategies when developing specific campaigns, specialized IPs typically do that more professionally and based on a network of partners as well as IC expertise they build up over time. Thus, specialized IPs are more likely to develop and sustain interstitial spaces between film production and issue-based fields.

Before analyzing IP roles and practices in greater detail, it is important to review how IP roles and responsibilities in film production are formally prescribed in the field. In this regard, the Impact Field Guide by Doc Society plays a vital role as a reference that is widely used by filmmakers and IPs. According to the Impact Field Guide, the responsibilities of IPs are defined in the following way:

“The Impact Producer is responsible for maximizing a film’s potential for social change. Responsibilities may vary [...] but often include strategy development, issue mapping, braintrust facilitation, organisational partnership development and management, digital content production and engagement, and evaluation and impact measurement. An Impact Producer may also coordinate and/or oversee a film’s semi-theatrical screening [...]. The Impact Producer may also play a role in story development and fundraising, beginning as early as pre-production.”

If filmmakers choose (and have the budget) to hire IPs, the latter enter projects either when the film is finalized and ready for distribution, or right from the start. In the case of the former, IPs develop impact strategies based on already established creative content. However, filmmakers often take on the “mindset” of an IP from the start by thinking of how the film could generate impact, while choosing to officially hire supporting IPs later in the process.

Regardless of how IP roles are distributed between filmmaker and specialized IPs, interviews and secondary data analysis suggest that IPs combine two important roles: strategic convenor and

amplifier. As *strategic convenor*, IPs mobilize various partners and stakeholders to develop a shared agenda for social impact in line with the content of a film. We borrow this term from Wright and Neimand (2018) who rightly suggest that IPs are agenda-driven and develop campaigns strategically in line with their agenda. For example, Exposure Labs mobilized support from various foundations around the idea of establishing the death of coral reefs as a symbol for the devastating effects of climate change. The team of the Bully Project established a coalition of stakeholders in the education field to support the notion that bullying at school should be treated as a serious concern.

In so far, IPs are more than just “catalysts” (Furnari, 2014; Villani and Phillips, 2021) or “curators” (Mitnick and Ryan 2015). While playing a facilitating role as well, IPs are typically agenda-driven, thus taking a strong interest in mobilizing other stakeholders towards a particular outcome they care about. This is true not only for filmmakers who take on IP roles, but also for professional IPs who typically specialize in certain domains of social change, such as social justice or environmental protection. For example, the IP Waterbear focuses on content related to wildlife diversity, the natural environment and “the future of our planet” (Waterbear, 2023). Even though specialized IPs are quite flexible in terms of the specific films they support, they have a strong social and/or environmental mission orientation. Engaging IPs that have a strong reputation for supporting particular social and/or environmental causes may not only help mobilize stakeholders and reach target audiences, but may also, more pragmatically, help mobilize funding for impact. Mobilizing more funding, in turn, may increase the likelihood of effective impact. This film producer explains:

“We find that in order to access specific funding, we need a dedicated nonprofit organization to host that campaign, ideally an organization that works in the thematic field of the film. [...] Otherwise it happens very easily that somebody comes along and asks [...] aren’t we just sort of subsidizing distribution of this film?”

At the same time, IPs take on the role of *amplifiers*. By that we mean that IPs are brought in to, on the one hand, expand on the impact a film would naturally have on audiences by the sheer power of storytelling. On the other hand, IPs amplify the effectiveness of existing issue-related movements by

leveraging a film's story in support of them (see below). The relationship between storytelling and ICs is complementary. Wright and Neimand (2018) suggest that character-based storytelling by itself can have a powerful, emotional impact on audiences. At the same time, however, as Wright and Neimand (2018) argue "stories don't necessarily move people". In their mind, it takes ICs and partnerships to mobilize audiences for social change. This is where IPs come in, as they have the capacity to "maximize a film's potential for social change", as the Impact Field Guide puts it. This amplifying role and capacity is nicely summarized by one environmentally oriented filmmaker we interviewed:

"Whereas I guess the kind of impact that I would have as a storyteller is you move somebody, but then they don't necessarily have an avenue other than just telling people [...] but how do you actually get them to change the behavior? How do you kind of amplify that? And I guess that's what is interesting about the impact campaign side of things."

One important aspect of amplifying is to reach audiences with ICs who would otherwise not pay attention to particular issues. This allows to increase the likelihood of actual changes in thinking and behaviors, which may also facilitate changes in policy-making. As one filmmaker put it,

"There is always a danger with impact campaigns that you're just kind of preaching to the converted. So the most interesting question is how do you get to the ones that you wouldn't typically get to."

Next, we elaborate in more detail on how IPs set up ICs as interstitial spaces.

### **Developing impact goals in line with creative content**

The first major activity IPs engage in is developing impact goals and strategies in line with a film's narrative. The Impact Field Guide calls this "Planning for Impact", which also includes identifying issue-based fields and stakeholders who might share an interest in the subject of a film. One important outcome of this process is the identification of target audiences for ICs and "pressure points" to make a difference in ongoing social movements. This requires being "good at spotting the impact potential of creative projects", as one IC funding expert we interviewed put it.

To both filmmakers and IPs, the Impact Field Guide is a key reference for identifying impact opportunities. As noted above, according to the guide, film narratives can be related to issues that vary by degree of novelty and level of contention or opposition. Depending on the issue, certain impact goals may be more desirable or feasible than others. For example, according to our own explorative analysis of 66 impact case studies, filmmakers and impact teams choose to aim for policy and structural changes in particular if the issue is formally unknown, whereas the focus may be on changing minds, behaviors and communities, when the issue is better known at the time of the film release. An example for the former includes “Dark Waters”, which revealed the poisoning of soil and waters by so-called “forever chemicals” and whose IC led to the ban of these chemicals in many U.S. states. An example for the latter is “Bully”, which deals with the known issue of “bullying” and which aimed at changing minds and behaviors of teachers and students related to it.

The process of identifying concrete impact opportunities often starts only after film production is complete and a film is ready for distribution. This is partly because budget priority is typically on completing the film, while ICs are only considered when the budget (still) allows it. In such cases, filmmakers may choose to consult with specialized IPs or related funding organizations to determine the potential of ICs based on the film’s story. One IC funding expert puts it this way:

“What does the story unlock? Who does it speak to? What are the natural themes arising from this narrative?”

One complementary practice of identifying impact opportunities is by running focus groups and surveys of test audiences. Some filmmakers we interviewed used results of these surveys and initial conversations to inform pitches to impact-oriented film funding.

However, increasingly, impact opportunities are strategized earlier in film development. Either filmmakers may choose to engage IPs from the start (if budget is allocated for that), or, more typically, they think of some core impact goals guiding film development. One good example is the film “The

Forest is Ours!” (name changed), whose producer we interviewed, which deals with the fight of indigenous people for their land. From the start, the producer framed the film as an impact project:

“We wanted to leave a legacy with the film, with the community. So if we just made the film and moved on, but it didn't create a long lasting impact for [the indigenous people] [...] that would have been kind of a failure to us. [...] The first priority, I think, was always a commitment and a personal collaboration with the community itself. [...] That's the heart of everything.”

While helping indigenous people protect their lands by amplifying their voices was “the heart of the film”, as the producer put it, later on an IP was hired to help develop a comprehensive IC that would build on initial objectives, while also expanding on them. “Scaling up” the impact included reaching out to organizations at multiple – local, national, international – levels to support concrete projects and policy initiatives in support of protecting forests and indigenous people (see below).

Similarly, the main objective of the film “They are innocent!” (name changed) was to tell the story of the killing of two innocent students by the military and to use the film to “clear their names” in the public discourse. However, with the involvement of a professional IP, additional “higher-level” objectives were brought in, including raising awareness about the militarization of public security. In the words of the film producer, “clearing the students’ names was always the center, but other objectives were added over the years.”

Having a core impact agenda from the start may affect the creative process of film development. The film “They are innocent!” is a good example. In order to shift the discourse around the innocence of the protagonists, the filmmakers considered it important to reach “conservative audiences” who place a lot of emphasis on traditional values and “law and order”. Hence, they chose to spotlight the families of the victims who represent these conservative values:

“We had a lot of political discussions in the editing process. [...] Who is the film aimed at? [...] Who is going to see the film? Who are we interested in seeing the film? [...] So, we started designing the film to try to reach this more conservative audience. For example, the film is full of references to Christianity. [...] We [focused on] conventional family structures.

And in that way we guaranteed that these [audiences] would not reject the film, but [...] feel the same anger and the same courage that [the students'] families felt.”

At the same time, our interviewees made clear that there is a fine balance between identifying impact opportunities and respecting creative choices of the filmmaker. One filmmaker we interviewed made a clear distinction between “advocacy pieces” and films that have impact potential but also artistic merit. The latter are often more ambiguous about any “message”, while providing a space for audiences to think and make up their mind, which may eventually lead to larger impact. The filmmaker argues:

“Advocacy pieces are important, but I think an [independent] film is a bit more ambiguous. It gives it credibility and it gives people a space to think and make up their mind and hopefully come to the conclusions that we want them to come to in the end anyway. [...] The better impact films are actually the more subtle ones, the more cinematic ones, the ones that convey human experience and the ones that are ambiguous.”

The fact that film narratives are often complex and ambiguous may offer multiple impact opportunities for filmmakers and IPs. For example, in the case of “Becoming a hero” (name changed), a film series about ordinary people becoming leaders in civic engagement in their communities, the producer considered multiple impact avenues, from educating communities about strategies of empowerment to educating businesses about leadership in face of adversity.

In addition, making impact films “story-led” by making creative choices that make “cinematic sense”, rather than being solely led by impact objectives, may also help reach larger audiences who may see a film primarily for entertainment value or emotional impact, independent of or in addition to any social or environmental agenda. The producer of “The Forest is Ours!” argues:

“That’s partly a deliberate choice, but also partly an instinctual thing. [...] if you want to impact things, it makes sense that [your impact goals] are in line with the creative choices. [...] We as filmmakers had to find the courage and balance to keep our film focused in the interest of making something that would have the widest possible reach while finding the balance. How much information to include, how much context? [...] In the end, we ended up with a very focused drama with basically hardly any interviews.”

This rationale is also followed by specialized IPs who respect filmmakers' creative choices and who build ICs on those choices rather than having filmmakers develop content based on specific impact goals. These quotes from two IPs illustrate this position.

“It's a really tricky balance between interrupting any kind of creativity, because I think [...] what is very clear is that there's no value in making something extremely impactful if it's not entertaining, because if it's not entertaining, it's not going to get any of the engagement.”

“If you don't have the great content, you don't actually get the audience engagement and then you don't actually get the kind of the engagement you need for making change.”

However, ICs are not only developed based on an assessment of the impact potential of a particular story but they follow an often tedious process of identifying existing campaigns on the same issue along with the identification of potential impact partners and critical stakeholders. One reason why impact budgets are allocated to specialized IPs is this time-consuming process we discuss next.

### **Supporting and building on prior/existing campaigns**

One key mechanism by which IPs amplify the impact a film would “naturally” have by the sheer power of storytelling is by connecting a film with established movements and campaigns on related issues. In turn, by connecting to these movements, IPs may also amplify the reach and effectiveness of the latter. This is also how IPs establish a footing in issue-based fields that typically exist prior to the release of films (unless the issue was previously unknown). Identifying related movements is therefore often the first step in designing ICs. When selecting projects for funding, this IC expert typically asks:

“How does [the narrative of the film] intersect with [ongoing] movements [and] conversations? What's the opportunity here?”

The Doc Society impact cases give numerous examples of how ICs connect with pre-existing movements and campaigns and, by doing so, manage to reach impact goals more effectively. For example, the IC around the documentary “Budrus” sought to connect with already existing civic peace-building campaigns in Israel and Palestine to reach their goal of educating Israelis and Palestinians

about women-led civic engagements in line with the film's narrative. The IC around "American Promise", which aimed to change the future of young black men in U.S. education, built on an ongoing movement to close the "black male achievement gap". In collaboration with related foundations and community organizations, the IC managed to sensitize educators and establish mentoring opportunities for students. As a third example, the ICs around the films "Chasing Coral" and "Chasing Ice", which deal with the death of coral reefs and the melting of polar ice respectively, connect with the long-standing agenda of several environmental groups, which helped the IC achieve their goals of awareness building, eliciting donations and changing the minds of policymakers on these issues.

Our interviews with filmmakers further confirmed the importance of reaching out to established campaigns and movements. For example, in the case of "The Forest is Ours!", the producer described the tedious process of identifying pre-existing, often disparate campaigns related to saving the forest and protecting indigenous people. However, this process, which was facilitated by the work of a specialized IP, was necessary to build legitimacy and support for the IC:

"At first, our goal was to make sure to support existing movements. We had a sense that there are so many groups and organizations, campaigns, movements, some organized, some very disparate and grassroots. We're trying to protect [the forest]. It would be crazy for us to try to reinvent something. So we understood that we needed to support existing movements and especially supporting indigenous people. And so we basically spent six weeks full time on that in a complicated process, which was kind of a bit of a privilege given that we had resources for that. Probably close to 100 conversations with different organizations helped us understand what their priorities were and map out the field."

In a similar fashion, the IP of "They are innocent!" sought to link the film's topic to the ongoing issue of militarization of the police. However, tapping into this domain required establishing links with existing campaigns and organizations. As a result, according to the filmmaker, the IC around the film was expanded, while at the same becoming a "tool" for related campaigns:

"Most important was the IPs treatment with these collectives that were fighting against militarization. It wasn't just that they helped the film, but that the film served them as a discursive tool to support their points that militarization was wrong. So we arrived at a very good juncture where the film was very useful for all these collectives and organizations."

In addition, both filmmakers and IPs explicitly refer to prior ICs when designing their own. For example, the producer of “Becoming a Hero” asked her team to study the impact cases “Chasing Ice” and “Chasing Coral” for inspiration, even if their topics are quite unrelated. As one IP put it, “it helps to have a knowledge of what has been done before, whether you've done it yourself or not.”

Yet, the same IP also warns about the limitations of “copy and paste” when it comes to running ICs. Instead, there is a “creative element” to ICs, quite similar to film projects, which gives them a flavor of artistic novelty and uniqueness. More specifically, the IP elaborates:

“I think there's a danger that when you connect too much to previous efforts, then you're just trying to kind of copy what they did. Doing the same thing [would be] kind of weird because people wouldn't approach filmmaking in this way either. You know, they'd be very keen that their film is like, you know, a very unique individual artistic product.”

Indeed, the impression of “uniqueness” is solidified by examining the 66 impact cases we studied for this paper. None of them is very similar to any other. This is not only because each IC uniquely links a particular film to a social issue, but because ICs can be seen as “creative efforts” in their own right, by expanding on the narrative of a film, while also adopting characteristics of social change campaigns. This shows that ICs as interstitial spaces not only bridge issue-based fields with creative content production, but also combine institutional norms and practices from both fields.

### **Mobilizing partners at multiple levels of impact**

Another mechanism by which IPs generate impact with ICs is by mobilizing partners for impact in issue-based fields at multiple levels – local, national/regional and global. As the Impact Field Guide and articles on ICs (e.g. Wright and Neimand, 2018) point out, building and mobilizing partnerships is key for ICs to be effective. Again, reviewing the impact cases of Doc Society gives plenty of evidence for the role of partnerships. Many ICs were based on collaborations with dozens of NGOs and community organizations, issue-related foundations, business leaders and international

organizations. For example, the campaign around “American Promise” involved 118 community organizations; the IC around “Budrus” involved 50 NGOs in Israel; and “Chasing Ice” involved 70 local partnerships, alongside business leaders, churches and environmental groups.

In addition, however, we find that, more specifically, IPs take a multi-level partnership approach to inform issue-based fields and promote change in effective ways. One IP formulates this as a combination of bottom-up and top-down forms of engagement that allows for more comprehensive change processes to happen, referring to the example of an IC she ran on sustainable fashion:

“[You cannot] drive innovation for alternative materials [in fashion] until this is being asked for by consumers. So you need a kind of bottom up approach for impact. And then simultaneously, we were starting discussions with World Animal Protection, who is a partner of ours, as well as some organizations that run relevant fashion weeks around the world. Because if you can start getting those materials around at fashion weeks, then it's less of an incentive for brands to be utilizing them in their products [...]. That is a kind of example of a [combined] bottom up and top down strategy. [...] Systems change starts with petitions and getting people to engage around certain topics, and then [you need] to reach policy makers and decision makers around the world.”

Many film projects we studied had a more local impact orientation at the beginning, thus focusing on mobilizing partners, e.g. community organizations, at the local level. This approach stems from the deep engagement of filmmakers with the protagonists of their films and their immediate environment. For example, the production team of “The Forest is Ours!” started with engaging local and regional organizations that are concerned with supporting indigenous groups. Later, they moved on to establishing contacts with national umbrella organizations. The producer remembers:

“We started with asking who are the organizations supporting the people in the film, and which relationships do they have. [So we discovered] a small grassroots Indigenous led coalition that cuts across communities. Then we [established contact with] National indigenous organizations. There is a whole bunch.”

With the help of specialized IPs, filmmakers may then expand the mobilization of impact partners by reaching out to international organizations, including foundations, NGOs, and intergovernmental bodies. For example, in the case of “The Forest is Ours!”, the impact team reached out to diplomats

and embassies in different countries to mobilize support for the protection of forests and indigenous people all over the world. Similarly, IPs in other projects, such as “They are innocent!”, were able to mobilize international partners, such as the UN and Amnesty International, to address broader issues, such as the militarization of the police to complement initial impact goals. The director remembers:

“There were, for example, organizations or collectives that [I] had worked with in other projects, and we liked to include them in the distribution process of the film. But [the IP] was mainly the one that established relations, for example, with the UN, with Amnesty International, with other collectives.”

Yet, impact partners at different levels often approach impact differently, which is why IPs prefer a multi-level approach. One IP gives a vivid example of an IC she was involved in that was aimed at getting people to move away from dairy products. In this IC, they involved Greenpeace as a partner, mainly to drive policy change, whereas behavioral change had to be tackled in a different way:

“We worked on a short campaign earlier this year with Greenpeace. It was about the dairy industry and we were looking at how can we get people to start shifting their diets away from dairy. [...] But Greenpeace worked on a systems change level. They don't talk about behavior change. [...] So we had to then kind of make sure that our strategy lined up with what we wanted to do, which is to give our people [ways] to change on day to day basis. But the Greenpeace strategy was also useful when looking at politicians putting a cap on the global dairy business. So connecting those bits in the middle is definitely always a challenge.”

The involvement of partners, with their own agendas and interests, may also lead impact teams to adapt or expand their own impact goals. For example, in the case of “The Forest is Ours!”, supporting international regulations against deforestation became an additional impact goal that was led by impact partners that were acquired by the IP. The film producer remembers:

“We wanted to create tension and noise. But there's also a few things where we have ourselves tapped into. These are led by our partners, but there are things that we have ourselves identified. You know, they may be long shots, but if we are able to push the needle a little bit, these are specific important levers of power that have a big impact on the ground. For example, there is this big one coming up, which is a vote on a proposed regulation [...] on deforestation, pushing businesses to refrain from buying products from illegally deforested areas.”

Next, we discuss how mobilizing partners at multiple levels of impact and supporting existing campaigns, in conjunction, affect how IPs target and engage audiences and change agents.

### **Engaging target audiences and change agents**

One central mechanism of generating impact through ICs is the screening of films in front of target audiences, along with accompanying measures, such as panel discussions, petitions, educational programs, and social media campaigns. Depending on the impact goals, target groups may range from the general public, to local communities, politicians and business leaders. The main goal thereby is to turn film audiences into change agents, and, likewise, to turn target groups and change agents into audiences. ICs that effectively turn audiences into change agents and vice versa become “productive” interstitial spaces in which audiences engage in reframing issues and changing practices.

One key concern for IPs is to target audiences and organize screenings in such a way that ICs can “break out of the echo chamber”, i.e. reach and engage new audiences to change their behaviors and/or way of thinking about a topic. One foundation is the emotional engagement of audiences based on the characters and narrative of the film. However, one additional component is the mobilization of target groups to watch the film in the first place and to engage with it in deeper ways. Three tactics stand out as important, based on our interviews and secondary data material: selecting locations for screenings, using ambassadors, and special screenings for decision-makers.

First, one key to engaging target audiences is the *selection of screening locations*. For example, ICs aimed at changing communities, such as “American Promise”, “Bag It” and “Budrus”, typically choose screenings in relevant local communities to reach target audiences. These screenings are often facilitated by community partner organizations, which IPs help contact and involve in the campaign. For example, one key objective of “The Forest is Ours!” is to screen the film both in indigenous communities and farmer communities to raise shared awareness of consequences of deforestation for

different stakeholders. Likewise, in the project “They are innocent!”, community screenings were key to “clear the names” of the students killed by Police.

However, picking the right “location” may also refer to particular institutions or organizations whose members or beneficiaries are the target group of ICs. One example is the IC around the film “Bully”. While the film was released at 30 festivals and in 15 countries, and watched by 2.6 Million people globally, more importantly the film was shown at 705 schools in 175 cities. These school screenings, along with discussion sessions on bullying, were made possible through partnerships with teacher unions, first school busing and related campaigns. In a similar fashion, the producer of “Becoming a Hero” is envisioning a combined location strategy:

“The idea is to take the film to community screens and educational institutions which we've already started to contact, like universities, private schools and even corporations, whose members are interested in leadership in the face of adversity. So our goal is to inspire action similar to that of the hero in the film.”

Second, IPs may make *strategic use of ambassadors* to mobilize audiences to watch and discuss a film. Ambassadors are influencers in communities and among certain target groups, whose opinion may lead otherwise unengaged individuals to take notice of a film and related issue. Various campaigns, e.g. “Chasing Coral”, made effective use of ambassadors in reaching their goals. Again, IPs can be instrumental in establishing contacts with such ambassadors. One IP describes in an interview how involving celebrity ambassadors can mobilize communities:

“Ambassadors are kind of well-known voices. We've got a film that is releasing soon that we've got a voiceover from a well-known comedian, which means that we can tap into that community and try and engage around this topic. So that's more and more going to become a trend. How can we use these amazing celebs that have huge followings.”

Third, especially ICs aimed at policy change make use of *special screenings for decision-makers*, including business leaders and policy-makers. For example, several ICs we reviewed, including “Bully” and “Budrus”, mention screenings and/or discussions of the film at the White House. In the case of “Bully”, Barack Obama officially endorsed the mission of the film to raise awareness about the

dangers of bullying. Other ICs, such as “Chasing Ice”, made use of screenings for politicians to shift debates about focal issues. In the case of “Chasing Ice”, the IC targeted a congressman in Ohio to change his opinion on the causes of melting polar ice. The campaign work of IPs can be vital in making such screenings possible. This is confirmed by the director of “The are innocent!” who emphasizes how the IP they hired enabled critical screenings in front of the senate and supreme court:

“So we always thought that we were going to do something with this film, when it came out, that we wanted to create noise, that we wanted people to see it, discuss it, etc. But it wasn't until [the Impact Production Organization] came in that we were really able to do it. And that's when we started presenting to other NGOs, we started doing special screenings in the Senate, in the Chamber of Deputies, the Supreme Court, etc.”

While screenings are typically not an “impact goal” in themselves they are vital elements in the broader impact strategy, as they may help raise awareness, induce behavioral changes and mobilize policy-makers to take action. However, in reaching these impact goals, the timing of screenings can matter. For example, in the case of “The are innocent!”, the director comments that releasing the film and running the campaign in the middle of an election was “very good timing” since the security issue was occupying a central place in the discussion. Likewise, the producer of “The Forest is Ours!” predicted in the interview that the effectiveness of the IC will depend on who gets elected as leader of the country since depending on that, indigenous rights may or may not be a central item on the political agenda.

### **Building and sustaining the capacity for running impact campaigns**

According to Furnari (2014), one key dilemma of interstitial spaces is that the experimental nature of activities in these spaces both enables and limits the development of new practices. Catalysts therefore play an important role in sustaining interactions in interstitial spaces to make effective innovation more likely. Similarly, impact campaigns (ICs) are often creative and experimental, yet they are also temporary. The societal problems they address typically outlast them. However, specialized impact producers (IPs) in particular may develop the capacity to run ICs regularly around different films, yet

on related themes, such as social justice and environmental protection, which allows them to have a continuous influence on issue-based fields. Next, we discuss critical ways in which IPs build and sustain the capacity to run ICs.

One key dimension in regularly running IPs based on different films, is the *development of pools of creative and impact partners*. On the one hand, IPs rely on creative storytellers, ideally those with a strong interest in social and environmental change. Some filmmakers may have experience with impact-oriented films or strong connections with social movements. Others may share an interest in such topics but “exist in some kind of bubble, in their own media ecology”, according to one IC funding expert. IPs typically have an interest to engage and collaborate with like-minded filmmakers, no matter how connected they are to issue-based fields prior to each project.

In fact, in establishing pools of creative storytellers, IPs need to strike a balance between maintaining relationships for repeat collaboration with trusted creatives, and growing the pool to include new partners whose work may give access to new audiences. Having a diverse pool may allow IPs to “break out of the echo chamber” when running ICs. One IP frames it this way:

“We have the benefit of building this global network of creatives and storytellers that we can tap into and that can send their ideas to us. We're building that pool quite a lot at the moment. [...] There are directors that we've worked with a few times. [...] I think knowing that there are people that are well-versed [in socio-environmental storytelling] is great, but also finding the new directors and the new voices is how we're going to break out of the echo chamber.”

This orientation towards “creative variety” in building and using the pool of storytellers is very much in line with norms and practices of film production. For example, when we asked the producer of “The Forest is Ours!” whether he had an interest in following up on this successful project, he responded that he is much more interested in moving onto other topics. This is quite typical for producers and directors who seek to develop creative range and who develop an interest in a variety of domains of storytelling. From the perspective of IPs that specialize in supporting films on environmental themes, it is much more likely that the topic of protecting forests and indigenous people will be taken up by

other directors in other forms in the future. This, in turn, offers the opportunity to explore new ways to reach and engage new audiences around this topic.

On the other hand, IPs rely on building and maintaining relationships with potential impact partners. As noted above, one major motivation for filmmakers to engage specialized IPs is their network of partners – foundations, NGOs, media partners, international organizations – they can mobilize for particular projects. Whereas filmmakers often develop relationships with organizations that are closely related to the protagonists of their films, such as local community organizations, IPs, in addition, develop relationships with global impact partners whose support they can mobilize for multiple campaigns over time. These impact partners are typically also powerful actors in their respective issue-based fields, e.g. Greenpeace in the field of climate change, and Amnesty in the field of social justice. Establishing these connections allows IPs to embed films and campaigns in ongoing conversations and movements around current issues.

Aside from international organizations, IPs maintain a network of like-minded foundations and funders who have an interest in supporting creative social and environmental initiatives. One IC funding expert calls them “cultural allies” who help identify fundable impact opportunities:

“You know, priorities are determined by the needs of the field, by key things and trends [...]. But also by dialogue with our network of international cultural allies [who] tell us, you know, what's going on and what's needed and what will be useful.”

In addition, IPs build critical relationships with major media organizations and social media platforms. In particular, IPs are interested in maintaining contacts with “movement advocates” in the press and media who, according to one IP, are vital in amplifying campaigns.

A second important element in developing the capacity to run ICs is the cultivation and further development of *effective practices of running campaigns*. Above we already mentioned how both IPs and filmmakers refer to impact cases and recommendations of the Impact Field Guide when identifying impact opportunities and designing campaigns. Indeed, whereas each campaign is to some extent

unique, is also re-combines established micro-practices, including target group screenings, surveys of audiences, social media campaigns, petitions, consultations with politicians and business leaders, and various forms of community engagement. Numerous impact cases, many of whom we studied, provide evidence of the effective application of such elements across campaigns.

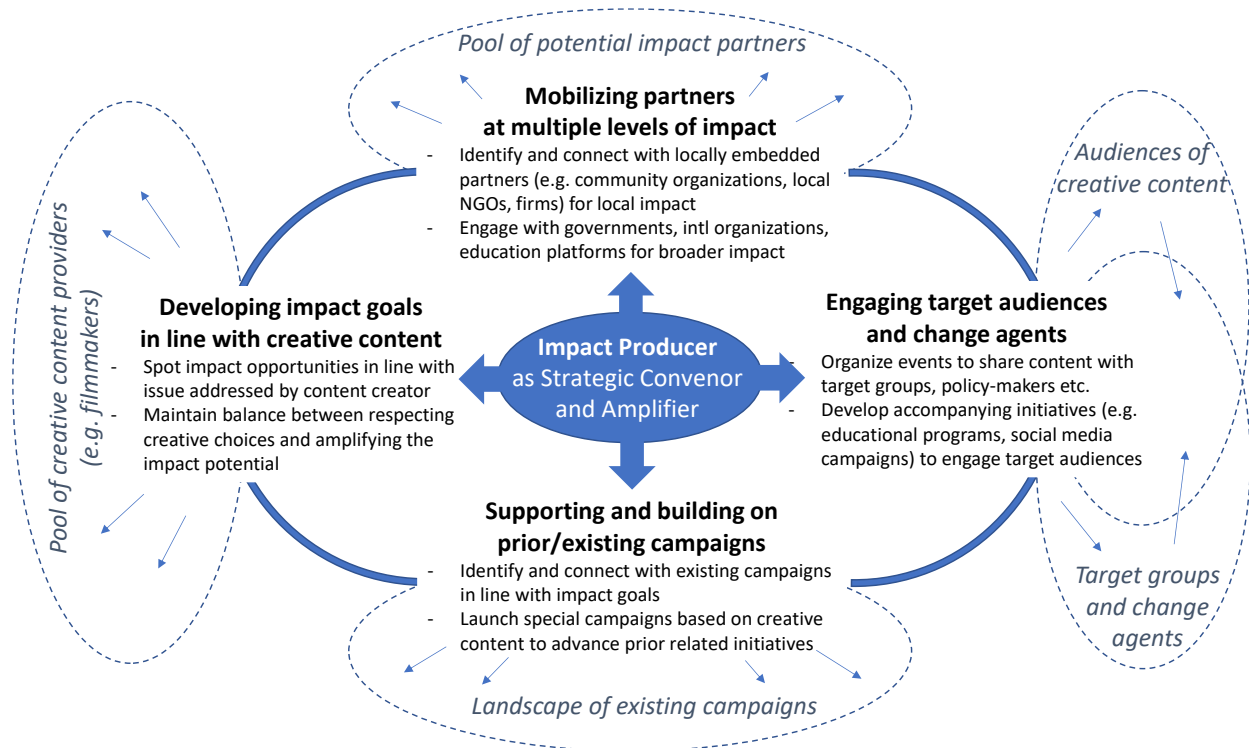
In addition, IPs and impact-oriented funders have developed rather sophisticated methods of *measuring the impact of campaigns*. Such evaluations are not only used to justify funding towards various stakeholders, but also encourage learning across ICs over time. For example, according to the Impact Field Guide, specific evaluation instruments are used to measure the four major forms of impact. These instruments are employed either by IPs themselves or by evaluation partners. For example, to measure awareness-building, various forms of surveys are used, mostly in connection with film screenings. To measure changes in behavior, IPs measure voting and purchasing behavior, fundraising activity, petitions, volunteering activities etc. The effective building of communities is evaluated by changes in volunteering, attendance in community meetings and fundraising. Changes in structures are evaluated by tracking legal and corporate actions, and policy changes. The impact cases we reviewed evidence how different quantitative and qualitative measures are used to reflect the actual impact of campaigns. However, refining practices of ICs is an ongoing effort. As a relatively new trend, ICs are still dominated by experimentation rather than standard practice.

## DISCUSSION: HOW IMPACT PRODUCERS PROMOTE SOCIAL CHANGE EFFORTS

In this study, we explored how impact producers (IPs) build and use interstitial spaces to connect creative content production with issue-based fields to promote social change efforts. We argued and showed empirically that IPs run so-called impact campaigns (IC) that represent important forms of interstitial spaces in the context of social change. Based on our empirical findings in the film industry, we discuss how actors in IP roles may run ICs in various contexts, i.e. how they can develop the capacity to tap into various fields of creative production to use creative content to inform conversations

on social and environmental issues as well as efforts to change policies and practices. Creative content not only includes films, but also pieces of music and art, as well as various forms of writing, including academic research. We will thus discuss implications of our findings across different creative fields.

Figure 2: Major practices IPs engage in to use creative content to promote social change



In general, we find that IPs operate as strategic convenors and amplifiers in expanding the potential impact creative content can have on various audiences, and in using that content to support existing movements. We thus suggest that IPs not only act as “catalysts” (Furnari, 2014; Villani and Phillips, 2021) or “curators” (Mitnick and Ryan 2015), but as mission-driven strategic agents who take an interest in particular outcomes of ICs. Even though this study focused on IPs in film, a similar level of strategic engagement can be found among mission-driven artists, such as Ai Weiwei, or academics, such as Julie Battilana, who may occasionally run or get involved in ICs by using their art and research to engage audiences around social issues. For example, Ai Weiwei has run ICs around his work on corruption, censorship and human rights (see e.g. Kirshner, 2019). In academia, Julie Battilana and

collaborators have campaigned for the democratization of work and redistribution of power, typically around influential books they have published, e.g. “Power, for All” (2022). In such cases, IP roles are taken on by creative professionals, whereas in film, specialized IPs have emerged that support filmmakers in running campaigns. Specifically, we find that, in the case of film, IPs connect four major practices to run ICs, as displayed in Figure 2. We discuss them in detail next.

First, we find that IPs *develop impact goals and strategies in line with creative content* that is provided by creative professionals, here: filmmakers. In doing so they identify social issues that are addressed by the creator as well as related impact opportunities, e.g. changing minds and behaviors, building communities, or changing policies, around these issues. The choice of impact goals may be affected by perceived features of the social issue being addressed, e.g. the degree of novelty and controversy (see also Doc Society, 2023). We further showed that, in crafting impact goals, IPs balance impact opportunities with choices and visions of content creators, in order to promote authenticity and emotional engagement. This suggests that, in running ICs as interstitial spaces, IPs adhere to practices and norms of creative production while also considering dynamics of discourse and controversy in issue-based fields (see for the latter e.g. Litrico and David, 2017).

Second, IPs typically seek to *support and build on existing prior/existing campaigns* when planning for specific campaigns. This allows them to embed new initiatives in ongoing movements, which they seek to promote and amplify by their specific IC. It also helps build legitimacy with change agents in issue-based fields. However, we also find that each IC is to a great extent unique. IPs to some degree consider ICs themselves “creative endeavors” that may recombine established micro-practices without actually copying any prior efforts as a whole. This also aligns with the shared goal of IPs to “break out of the echo chamber”, i.e. to reach and engage new audiences, which is also why they prefer to work with new creative professionals over time.

Third, IPs mobilize *partners at multiple levels of impact*, from local to national and global, to create leverage in issue-based fields and increase the likelihood of effective change. For example,

partnering with local community organizations may promote awareness-building and behavioral changes, whereas partnering with advocates in business and politics and international NGOs may further policy changes. We also find that IPs build long-term relationships with large foundations and international partners, which allows them to have a continuous impact on social and environmental issues, based on different, film-specific campaigns over time. Maintaining these partnerships helps IPs sustain interstitial spaces between creative content production and particular issue-based fields.

Fourth, IPs use various ways to *engage target audiences and change agents*. Specifically, in the case of film, IPs run screening events in particular locations and organizations to reach target groups. IPs also engage ambassadors whose endorsement of the issue may mobilize audiences that are hard to reach. Finally, organizing screenings in front of politicians and law-makers may promote changes in policies. While the organization of screenings may be specific to film, in other contexts, such as art and academia, equivalent events may include exhibitions and presentations. However, beyond such events, IPs also run social media campaigns, launch community projects and develop educational materials (among other measures) to pursue their goals. Regular impact assessments are used to evaluate and improve on the effectiveness of such measures in reaching impact goals.

Based on our findings we encourage future studies to analyze how and to what extent these practices are adopted beyond the context of film. For example, how do different art forms affect how audiences get emotional engaged and connected with social issues? How suitable are different kinds of creative content in promoting different forms of impact? And to what extent do ICs professionalize and institutionalize in different creative domains? More generally, we encourage future studies to examine how ICs evolve over time. In particular, the interplay of strategic planning and emergence seems worth studying since ICs are typically situated in complex and dynamic multi-stakeholder settings. In this regard, it could be interesting to examine in more detail how IPs and filmmakers connect creative content to social issues. Another area of study could be a detailed inquiry of challenges in developing ICs, such as the “echo chamber problem”, i.e. the tension between leveraging the artistic

and entertainment value of creative content to appeal to larger audiences while emphasizing the social or environmental message to promote awareness-building and behavioral change.

## BROADER IMPLICATIONS

Our study has important broader implications for future research. We discuss next three major streams of research that can be informed by this study, (i) the role of cultural artefacts in promoting social change, (ii) the role of interstitial spaces and catalysts in social change contexts, and (iii) new professional roles and forms of organization in creative industries.

First, one central motivation of this study has been to advance growing research on the role of cultural artefacts, including art, music and film, in social change efforts (Vasi *et al.*, 2015; Van Dyke and Taylor, 2018; Amenta and Polletta, 2019). Prior studies typically looked at various forms of art and media either as strategic tools of NGOs and social movement organizations to promote their agenda (e.g. Caren, Andrews and Lu, 2020), or as artefacts that happen to trigger dynamics of change without any strategic coordination (Vasi *et al.* 2015; Klein and Amis, 2021). An example of the latter is the picture of the dead boy at the beach that led the UK government to embrace a more welcoming attitude towards refugees (Klein and Amis, 2021). By comparison, impact campaigns build on creative content that is developed with strong emphasis on independent artistic and entertainment value, yet with an additional potential to generate various forms of impact, which can be mobilized strategically. In terms of their capacity to engage new audiences for social change (i.e. “break out of the echo chamber”), our findings suggests that such cultural artefacts may be better suited to engage new audiences for social change than advocacy pieces. At the same time, change efforts can be directed more effectively through impact campaigns based on these artefacts than by relying on organic media buzz which may or may not emerge based on cultural artefacts produced over time. We therefore encourage future research to take a fresh and more nuanced look at the role of strategic agency in using cultural artefacts to promote social change. This also requires revisiting the conditions under which cultural artefacts can have social

impact. The current “culture war”, in which ideological efforts of each political camp are immediately spotted, may be a particularly fascinating context in which one could study the benefits and limitations of strategic coordination in producing cultural artefacts “with a mission”.

Second, this study is one of the few that to our knowledge has examined the role of interstitial spaces and catalysts in social change efforts. While the concept of interstitial space was developed mainly to explain how changes in norms and practices come about in institutional fields in general (Furnari, 2014; Villani and Phillips, 2021), this study demonstrated the promise of this concept in informing research on social change processes. Specifically, we looked at impact campaigns as interstitial spaces between creative content production and issue-based fields. While sharing features with interstitial spaces between other fields, such as clubs and meetups, impact campaigns also have distinct properties that relate to social change. For example, while being “experimental” to some extent, they are also directed by ideological imperatives, such as social justice and environmental protection. Likewise, impact producers not only operate as “catalysts”, but they are driven by a social change agenda which leads them to care about particular outcomes. It is therefore important to better understand both the political and ideological contexts within which these spaces emerge. Also, what leads particular actors to take a strategic role in convening them? Finally, how do participants in such interstitial spaces manage the complex emotions, ranging from anger and frustration, to hope and optimism, that commonly occur within such settings (see also DeJordy et al. 2020).

Third, this study may inform future research on professional roles and organizational forms in creative industries. Creative industries have often inspired management scholars to study new forms of organization, roles and careers (e.g. Mintzberg and McHugh, 1985; Jones et al. 1996; DeFillippi and Arthur 1998; Starkey et al. 2000; Manning, 2017). The emergence of impact campaigns as a practice may inspire a new wave of studies. For example, this study suggests that impact producers develop new forms of “project network organizations” (Manning, 2017) to be able to run impact campaigns on a regular basis. Their networks are similar to film production networks in the sense that they are

composed of both recurrent and ad-hoc project-based relationships with various partners – here: creative professionals and impact partners from issue-based fields. Like film producers, impact producers engage in “nexus work” (Long Lingo and O’Mahony, 2005) by connecting various professionals for joint projects (see also Ferriani et al. 2008). However, unlike film producers, they connect actors across field boundaries, here: film production and issue-based fields. Also, they not only connect actors but also topics and issue frames, which is central to what impact campaigns do. Related to this, we explored their role as amplifiers in both extending the impact of films on audiences and the effectiveness of existing change campaigns. These observations may require extending our understanding of “nexus work” (or brokerage) in creative industries and beyond.

In conclusion, this study has explored the new trend of impact campaigns that link creative content production to social issues and issue-based fields, thus representing an important form of interstitial spaces. Findings may inspire future research on how cultural artefacts can be used to drive social change. In addition, this study has major implications for practice, in particular for professionals interested in generating societal impact with their work.

## REFERENCES

- Allison TH, Grimes M, McKenny AF and Short J (2021) Occupy Wall Street ten years on: How its disruptive institutional entrepreneurship spread and why it fizzled. *Journal of Business Venturing Insights* 16
- Amenta E and Polletta F (2019) The Cultural Impacts of Social Movements. *Annual Review of Sociology* 45(1): 279–299.
- Anand N and Watson MR (2004) Tournament Rituals in the Evolution of Fields: The Case of the Grammy Awards. *The Academy of Management Journal* 47(1): 59–80.
- Aufderheide P (2007) *Documentary Film: A Very Short Introduction*. 1st edition. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Battilana J, Leca B and Boxenbaum E (2009) 2 How Actors Change Institutions: Towards a Theory of Institutional Entrepreneurship. *Academy of Management Annals* 3(1): 65–107.
- Benford RD and Snow DA (2000) Framing Processes and Social Movements: An Overview and Assessment. *Annual Review of Sociology* 26: 611–639.

- Bieniek-Tobasco A, McCormick S, Rimal RN, Harrington CB, Shafer M and Shaikh H (2019) Communicating climate change through documentary film: imagery, emotion, and efficacy. *Climatic Change* 154(1): 1–18.
- Boltanski L and Chiapello E (2007) *The New Spirit of Capitalism*. Translated by G. Elliot. London: Verso Books.
- Borum Chattoo C and Feldman L (2017) Storytelling for Social Change: Leveraging Documentary and Comedy for Public Engagement in Global Poverty. *Journal of Communication* 67(5): 678–701.
- Borum Chattoo C and Jenkins W (2019) From reel life to real social change: the role of contemporary social-issue documentary in U.S. public policy. *Media, Culture & Society* 41(8): 1107–1124.
- Bourdieu P (1993) *The Field of Cultural Production*. Columbia University Press.
- Canella G (2017) Social movement documentary practices: digital storytelling, social media and organizing. *Digital Creativity* 28(1): 24–37.
- Caren N, Andrews KT and Lu T (2020) Contemporary Social Movements in a Hybrid Media Environment. *Annual Review of Sociology* 46(1): 443–465.
- DeFillippi RJ and Arthur MB (1998) Paradox in Project-Based Enterprise: The Case of Film Making. *California Management Review* 40(2): 125–139.
- DeJordy R., Scully M, Ventresca, MJ and Creed DWE (2020) Inhabited Ecosystems: Propelling Transformative Social Change Between and Through Organizations. *Administrative Science Quarterly*.
- DiMaggio PJ and Powell WW (1983) The Iron Cage Revisited: Institutional Isomorphism and Collective Rationality in Organizational Fields. *American Sociological Review* 48(2): 147–160.
- Doc Society (2023) *The Impact Field Guide & Toolkit. From Art to Impact*. Available at: <https://impactguide.org/>.
- Ferraro F, Etzion D and Gehman J (2015) Tackling Grand Challenges Pragmatically: Robust Action Revisited. *Organization Studies* 36(3): 363–390.
- Furnari S (2014) Interstitial Spaces: Microinteraction Settings and the Genesis of New Practices Between Institutional Fields. *Academy of Management Review (AMR)*, 39(4), pp. 439–462.
- Furnari S (2016) Institutional fields as linked arenas: Inter-field resource dependence, institutional work and institutional change. *Human Relations* 69(3): 551–580.
- Furnari, S. (2018). When does an issue trigger change in a field? A comparative approach to issue frames, field structures and types of field change. *Human Relations*, 71(3), pp. 321–348.
- Gehman J, Etzion D and Ferraro F (2022) Robust Action: Advancing a Distinctive Approach to Grand Challenges. *Research in the Sociology of Organizations* 79: 259–278.
- Giddens A (1984) *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. University of California Press.
- Gilchrist TE (2019) Movies That Matter. *Stanford Social Innovation Review* 17(4): 15–16.
- Grabher G (2002) Cool Projects, Boring Institutions: Temporary Collaboration in Social Context. *Regional Studies* 36: 205–214.
- Hill A, Askanius T, Kondo K and Urueta JL (2019) Provocative engagement: Documentary audiences and performances in *The Act of Killing* and *The Look of Silence*. *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 22(5): 662–677.

- Hirsch PM (1972) Processing Fads and Fashions: An Organization-Set Analysis of Cultural Industry Systems. *American Journal of Sociology* 77(4): 639–659.
- Hjorth D and Reay T (2022) Organizational and Institutional Entrepreneurship: Introduction to the Special Issue. *Organization Studies* 43(2): 159–177.
- Hoffman AJ (1999) Institutional Evolution and Change: Environmentalism and the U.S. Chemical Industry. *Academy of Management Journal* 42(4): 351–371.
- Höllerer MA, Jancsary D and Grafström M (2018) “A Picture is Worth a Thousand Words”: Multimodal Sensemaking of the Global Financial Crisis. *Organization Studies* 39(5–6): 617–644.
- Karlin B and Johnson J (2011) Measuring Impact: The Importance of Evaluation for Documentary Film Campaigns. *M/C Journal* 14(6).
- Kirshner, G. (2019). Ai Weiwei and the Art of Activism. Diggit Magazine. <https://www.diggitmagazine.com/articles/ai-weiwei-and-art-activism>
- Klein J and Amis JM (2021) The Dynamics of Framing: Image, Emotion, and the European Migration Crisis. *Academy of Management Journal* 64(5): 1324–1354.
- Lampel J, Lant T and Shamsie J (2000) Balancing Act: Learning from Organizing Practices in Cultural Industries. *Organization Science* 11(3): 263–269.
- Leblebici H, Salancik GR, Copay A and King T (1991) Institutional Change and the Transformation of Interorganizational Fields: An Organizational History of the U.S. Radio Broadcasting Industry. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 36(3): 333–363.
- Levy D, Reinecke J and Manning S (2016) The Political Dynamics of Sustainable Coffee: Contested Value Regimes and the Transformation of Sustainability. *Journal of Management Studies* 53(3): 364–401.
- Lingo EL and O’Mahony S (2010) Nexus Work: Brokerage on Creative Projects. *Administrative Science Quarterly* 55(1): 47–81.
- Litrico J-B and David RJ (2017) The Evolution of Issue Interpretation within Organizational Fields: Actor Positions, Framing Trajectories, and Field Settlement. *Academy of Management Journal*, 60 (3), 986-1015.
- Lundin RA and Söderholm A (1995) A theory of the temporary organization. *Scandinavian Journal of Management* 11(4): 437–455.
- Manning S (2005) Managing project networks as dynamic organizational forms: Learning from the TV movie industry. *International Journal of Project Management* 23(5): 410–414.
- Manning S (2017) The rise of project network organizations: Building core teams and flexible partner pools for interorganizational projects. *Research Policy* 46(8): 1399–1415.
- Manning S and Vavilov S (2023) Organizing projects for social innovation. in Davies A, Lenfle S and Loch C, *Handbook of Innovation and Project Management*. Elgar.
- Meyer DS and Staggenborg S (1996) Movements, Countermovements, and the Structure of Political Opportunity. *American Journal of Sociology* 101 (6), 1628-1660.
- Mintzberg H and McHugh A (1985) Strategy Formation in an Adhocracy. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 30(2): 160–197.
- Mintzberg H and Waters WA (1985) Of Strategies, Deliberate and Emergent. *Strategic Management Journal* 6 (3): 257-272.
- Mitnick BM and Ryan RC (2015) On making meanings: Curators, social assembly, and mashups. *Strategic Organization* 13 (2): 141-152.

- Nash K and Corner J (2016) Strategic impact documentary: Contexts of production and social intervention. *European Journal of Communication* 31(3): 227–242.
- Nichols B (2010) *Introduction to Documentary*. Second edition. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Obstfeld D (2012) Creative Projects: A Less Routine Approach Toward Getting New Things Done. *Organization Science* 23(6): 1571–1592.
- Participant Media (2023): Dark Waters. Fight Forever Chemicals. Participant.com/campaigns/Dark-Waters.
- Reinecke J and Ansari S (2016) Taming Wicked Problems: The Role of Framing in the Construction of Corporate Social Responsibility. *Journal of Management Studies* 53(3): 299–329.
- Reinecke J. and Ansari S. (2021) Microfoundations of Framing: The Interactional Production of Collective Action Frames in the Occupy Movement. *Academy of Management Journal* 64(2): 378–408.
- Schneiberg M and Lounsbury M (2017) Social Movements and the Dynamics of Institutions and Organizations. in *The SAGE Handbook of Organizational Institutionalism*. SAGE Publications Ltd, pp. 281–310.
- Scott WR (2014) *Institutions and Organizations*. SAGE Publications.
- Soppe B and Pershina R (2019) Melting Icebergs vs. Spectacularization: Storytelling of Conflicting Institutional Demands in Wildlife Documentaries. *Research in the Sociology of Organizations* 65B: 85–106.
- Starkey K, Barnatt C and Tempest S (2000) Beyond Networks and Hierarchies: Latent Organizations in the U.K. Television Industry. *Organization Science* 11: 299–305.
- Stephan U, Patterson M, Kelly C and Mair J (2016) Organizations Driving Positive Social Change: A Review and an Integrative Framework of Change Processes. *Journal of Management* 42 (5), 1250–1281.
- Svejenova S and Christiansen LH (2017) Creative Leadership for Social Impact. In: Jones C and Maoret M (Eds): *Frontiers of Creative Industries. Research in the Sociology of Organizations*.
- Van Dyke N and Taylor V (2018) The Cultural Outcomes of Social Movements. in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*. John Wiley & Sons, pp. 482–498.
- VanDeCarr P (2010) An Assessment of Beyond the Choir. Active Voice. Available at: [https://www.activevoice.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/AV\\_AnAssessmentOfBeyondTheChoir\\_final.pdf](https://www.activevoice.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/AV_AnAssessmentOfBeyondTheChoir_final.pdf).
- Vasi IB, Walker ET, Johnson JS and Tan HF (2015) “No Fracking Way!” Documentary Film, Discursive Opportunity, and Local Opposition against Hydraulic Fracturing in the United States, 2010 to 2013. *American Sociological Review* 80(5): 934–959.
- Villani E and Phillips N (2021) Formal organizations and interstitial spaces: Catalysts, complexity, and the initiation of cross-field collaboration. *Strategic Organization* 19 (1), 5–36.
- Windeler A and Sydow J (2001) Project Networks and Changing Industry Practices Collaborative Content Production in the German Television Industry. *Organization Studies* 22(6): 1035–1060.
- Wright S and Neimand A (2018) The Secret to Better Storytelling for SocialChange: Better Partnerships. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*.