Public Relations Journal Vol. 3, No. 4, Fall 2009
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Filmmakers as Social Advocates—A New Challenge for Issues Management: Claims-making and Framing in Four Social Issue Documentaries

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This study examines the rise of the social issue documentary film as a medium deserving serious attention by issues managers. After tracing the development of the genre, the papers argues that commercial filmmakers serve as important secondary advocates for causes through highly visible, commercial film productions that frame issues in provocative ways, ascribe blame, and call for social change. A content analysis of four contemporary American films targeting major corporations – Starbucks, McDonalds, Wal-Mart and General Motors – examined the use of issue framing and five story-telling devices identified in the claims-making literature: interviews, statistics, dramatizations, symbols, and celebrities. An additional important tool was identified: the presentation of documentary evidence. Implications for issues management are discussed.

The social issue documentary film has been rejuvenated as an art form that draws attention to social problems, and today the genre enjoys growing commercial success as filmmakers strive to quench the public's thirst for films with social relevance (Kipnes, 2004). Recent productions such as Robert Kenner's *Food, Inc.* (2009), Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) and Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) and *Sicko* (2007) have prominently focused public attention on major social issues ranging from the environment to healthcare reform.

Researchers in issues management and public relations generally have paid little attention to independently produced documentaries as channels of advocacy. Filmmakers generally have been dismissed as quirky gadflies, and their productions have been marginalized in terms of their consequences. However, the influence of social issue documentaries is growing, and researchers and issues managers alike need to better understand this important form of *infotainment* (which also might be termed *advo-tainment*) as a channel used to broaden public awareness and concern about public issues and promote causes.

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Beyond the popularity of these films, the topic is important because many of the ground rules that apply to the discussion of public issues in the traditional news media don't apply to films. Except for maintaining credibility with audiences, filmmakers are under no journalistic obligation to be fair or balanced – and are unfettered by institutional pressures from advertisers or political figures that might otherwise circumvent coverage of a controversial topic. This might be one of most important strengths of the genre, which can tell stories persuasively in unconventional and deliberately provoking ways.

Documentary films dealing with social problems enjoy growing support from investors, motion picture distributors, and film exhibitors who have recognized the market potential of these films as entertainment fare. However, their commercial success in theaters often overshadowed by DVD sales. The films themselves and the causes they promote receive added exposure through movie trailers streamed on films' official Web Sites, video sharing sites such as YouTube and Hulu, and file sharing among movie enthusiasts and issue supporters. Moreover, newsworthy activities related to the films – premieres at film festivals, endorsements by celebrities, releases in local theaters, distribution on DVDs, awards received -- all provide platforms to raise public consciousness of the issue addressed in the film. Importantly, such exposure results from publicity, reviews and commentaries in the *entertainment* (versus *public affairs* or *news*) portions of public media.

Drawing upon the framing and claims-making literature, this study examined the development of the social issue documentary film and the techniques used by filmmakers to advocate social action by analyzing four documentaries distributed between 2000 and 2006. All four films examined important social problems, framed social problems from particular perspectives, and ascribed blame to major corporations. In so doing, this paper suggests that issues managers should recognize the growing influence of these commercial documentary films, understand how filmmakers construct arguments, and consider best practices for responding to organizational attacks.

ORIGINS OF THE SOCIAL ISSUE DOCUMENTARY FILM

The earliest motion pictures recorded by Thomas Edison in the United States and the Lumière brothers in France recorded scenes of everyday life (Barsam, 1992). This documentary film tradition has continued despite the evolution of the commercial motion picture into a medium offering primarily fictional entertainment fare (Platinga, 2005).

Since its inception in the 1920s, the documentary film has been the subject of controversy as critics debated whether documentaries should merely depict reality or whether images should be manipulated to promote a particular ideological point of view (Jacobs, 1971a). Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), acknowledged as the first full-length documentary, was roundly criticized because much of its depictions of life among natives on Hudson Bay was staged (Jacobs, 1971b). Purists emphasized the need to avoid staging or manipulation. For example, Russian filmmaker Dziga Vertov

(Guynn, 1990, pp.24-28) strived for “film truth” (*kino-pravda*) and argued that the goal of a documentary filmmaker should be “to expose truth by genuinely cinematic means that would reflect the hidden socioeconomic contradictions of a given environment” (Petric, 1992, p. 90). Vertov was a forerunner of *cinéma-vérité*, the cinematic movement popularized by Jean Rouch in the 1950s that called for recording life without staging, rearrangement or ideological purpose (Baugh, 2005).

John Grierson, a British social scientist, was the first filmmaker to apply the term *documentary* to a non-fiction film in the 1930s (Rabiger, 2004, p. 20). Grierson saw the film as a tool for social change, arguing “Education is activist or it is nothing” (1966, p. 261). Grierson dismissed the need for films to be commercially successful in theaters. Instead, he popularized the idea of exhibiting documentaries in institutional settings such as schools, hospitals, trade unions, and clubs (Guyun, 1990; L’Etang, 1999). His vision also inspired the creation of pioneering documentary production companies in the United States such as the Worker's Film and Photo League (1930), Nykino (1934), and Frontier Films (1936).

Beginning in the late 1920s, governments funded documentary films for public education and propaganda. Indeed, most of Grierson’s work was completed for the British government. The French used film to promote progressive farming techniques (Levine, 2004, p. 77). The United States government hired film writer-reviewer Pare Lorentz to produce films for the New Deal’s Resettlement Administration to encourage the abandonment of unproductive farming and the relocation of families away from impoverished rural areas during the Depression. German filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will,* which documented the Nazi Party Congress rally in Nuremberg in 1934, and *Olympiad*, which chronicled the famous 1936 Berlin games, are considered classics of modern film. Riefenstahl asserted that her films were simply facts as the camera recorded what happened, not Nazi propaganda (Perez, 200, p. 30).

During World War II, governments in United States and elsewhere similarly hired filmmakers to produce films for largely propaganda purposes. Notable examples included Frank Capra’s *Why We Fight* series. The first film in the series, *Prelude to War*, won the Academy Award for Best Documentary in 1942—the first full-length documentary film so honored (Capra, 1971). Although these and other efforts were highly influential, the use of documentaries for propaganda purposes sullied the reputation of documentary films as artistic endeavors. Although the production of government and corporate-sponsored films continued, many aspiring filmmakers saw these productions as unglamorous and artistically confining (Aufderheide, 2007).

Early theatrical documentaries met with little commercial success in the United States compared to Europe, largely because motion picture producers and distributors thought documentaries would not be accepted by theater-goers. After World War II, the principal theatrical documentaries that were commercially viable were short and full-length nature films in the *True Life Adventures* series produced by Walt Disney from 1948 to 1960 and three full-length oceanographic films produced by Jacques Cousteau

(*The Silent World*, 1956; *The Golden Fish*, 1959; *The World Without Sun*, 1965). A handful of other commercial productions all featured shows business personalities-- *Lonely Boy* (1961), *Showman* (1962) and *Don't Look Back* (1967) (Jacobs, 1971c).

The advent of television helped kindle public interest in documentaries. Most important was the pioneering works of Edward R. Murrow's. These included the *See It Now* series, CBS's attacks on the demagoguery of Senator Joseph McCarthy, and *Harvest of Shame* (1960), a 55-minute made-for-television documentary where Murrow reported on the plight of migrant farm workers. Murrow's reportorial style, which combined interviews with live footage, was duplicated widely by filmmakers and lent credibility to the documentary genre (Ellis & McLane, 2005).

Commercialization of the Documentary Film

From the 1950s until the late 1980s, social issue documentary films were mostly short subjects that dealt with problems such as farm labor, drug use, prostitution and war (Arnold, 1971). During this period a number of filmmakers also tackled the important topic of civil rights (*A City Decides,* 1957; *All the Way Home*, 1958—see Sloan 1971). But only a few notable filmmakers worked in the full-length format because of the high cost of production and the limited audience interest. Notable exceptions were Frederick Wiseman, who created full-length documentaries that focused on the oppression of various groups. Wiseman's controversial *Titicut Follies* (1968) exposed the horrible mistreatment of the criminally insane but was banned from viewing by the general public because of its controversial content (Anderson & Besson, 1991; Grant, 1998, 2006).

Exhibition of documentary films remained largely limited to showings at libraries, schools, and government institutions – and independent art houses clustered in major cities or college towns. Then, in 1989, producer-director Michael Moore opened the gate for wider distribution of documentaries in theaters with his production *Roger & Me.* Using an offbeat approach, Moore's film exposed the social cost of the downsizing by General Motors on Moore's hometown of Flint, Michigan (Moore, 2002; Schultz, 2005; Stoll, 2009).

In a departure from the strategies used by other documentary filmmakers, Moore persuaded Warner Bros. to distribute his low-budget film (which cost only $200,000 to produce) in exchange for a $3 million license agreement. Warner Bros. agreed to distribute the film to 1,300 screens and to show the film for free to unions and schools in economically depressed locations (Warren, 2003). To date, the film has generated more than $7 million in revenues (Box Office Mojo, 2008).

The theatrical financial success of Roger & Me was a surprise to critics and filmmakers. As with many other documentary films, critics such as *New Yorker*'s Pauline Kael (1990) chided Moore's exaggerated claims and filming methods as throwbacks to old propaganda films (Hardy & Clarke, 2004). Yet the public attended in droves. Although Moore failed in his attempt to get GM to ease the plight of its laid-off workers, his bristling commentary on corporate indifference and ineptitude prompted extensive

discussion -- even among people who didn't see the film.

Roger & Me paved the way for many other documentary filmmakers to pursue financing for larger-scale productions as well as distribution commitments from major studios. Films that soon followed included *Paris is Burning* (1991), *Brother's Keeper* (1992), *The War Room* (1993), *Hoop Dreams* (1994), *Unzipped* (1995), *The Celluloid Closet* (1996), *Startup.com* (2001) and *The Fog of War* (2003). All attempted to expose elements of society, government and industry that other media forms had not. The trend was fostered by the rise of new film festivals that celebrated documentaries, acceptance by television and cable networks, and new digital technologies that reduced costs and made production more accessible. Online promotion and delivery systems further contributed to the success of these films.

The impact of the genre can be seen from the following statistics: From 1996 to 1998, premieres of documentaries on U.S. cable and broadcast networks jumped from 28 to 98. By 1999, fully 85% of American households reported watching at least one documentary per week (Rabiger, 2004, p. 40). From 2001 to 2005, the productions of full-length documentary films increased from 15 to 82 (Nash Information Services, 2008). Due to the recent increase in theatrical releases of documentary films, in late 2006 the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences issued new, more stringent requirements for feature-length documentary entries in the Oscar competition. For Academy consideration, documentaries now must be screened for seven days in either Los Angeles or New York City, as well as in 14 theatres in at least 10 states (Professor documents …, 2008).

ADVOCACY AND SOCIAL CLAIMS-MAKING BY FILMMAKERS

Documentary films provide a unique vehicle to call attention to social problems and the role of institutions in them. As pioneer filmmaker Pare Lorentz observed, the documentary has the potential to "dwarf the stage, the press and literature with its power" (cited in Hogan, 1998, p. 2). In part, this power is rooted in the artistic liberties accorded film artisans. Audiences also gravitate toward films in which they also have a high level of interest or involvement (Bitzer, 1968) and are engulfed by the power of documentary films to raise emotions (Rabiger, 2004). Many social issue documentary films focus on the negative aspects of social conditions; psychological research suggests that people are more persuaded by negative versus positive claims, including the threat of losses versus gains (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979).

Activism, Advocacy, and Claims-making Defined

Social issue documentaries are highly sophisticated tools of activism, i.e. or how individual or groups identify situations in society as problematic and then organize to resolve them (Salmon, 1990). More specifically, social issue documentaries are tools of *advocacy* or communication used to broaden awareness of the issue, enlist supporters and prompt social action (Alinsky, 1971; Cobb & Elder, 1972; Hallahan, 2001). Crable & Vibbert (1985, p. 5) explain that an issue is created whenever one or more human

agents "attach significance to a situation or perceived problem." Issues inherently involve the exercise of power of society – and whether, how or by whom a problems will be defined and resolved (Jaques, 2006, p. 412).

Social issue documentary films are rarely among the first tools deployed in discussions of issues. The process typically begins with interpersonal communication among people directly affected by a problem and who eventually become the issue's primary advocates. Other tools that follow are the use of controlled media (brochures, pamphlets, etc), group events (meetings, speeches, rallies, etc.), interactive media (Web sites, blogs, social networking sites) and publicity in newspapers, magazines, radio and television – also efforts to push an issue onto the public discussion, media and public policy agendas.

Social issue documentaries are advocacy tools that generally emerge as issues mature – while resolution is still being debated and before any organizational changes or public policy actions are undertaken. Unlike tools created by issue organizers themselves, social issue documentary films are created by independent, third-party filmmakers who become a) aware of a social problem, b) concerned and motivated to help the cause, c) cognizant of a potential audience, and d) inspired with an idea for a film.

Social issue documentary films differ from *sponsored* films or videos that might be produced by an issue's principal activists or advocates. Documentary filmmakers usually have no direct personal interest in resolving a particular problem. Instead, these filmmakers might better be characterized as sympathetic supporters acting as *second-order advocates.* In addition to a genuine concern about the problem, documentary filmmakers are inspired to become involved because of an array of other concerns ranging from artistic satisfaction to professional reputation and financial reward.

Similar to the principal advocates involved in advancing a cause, documentary filmmakers rely on *rhetoric*, the presentation of persuasive arguments intended to produce action (Bitzer, 1968). Films are similar to other persuasive forms of communication because of their reliance on the spoken word, but obviously also depend on visual imagery. Rabiger (2004, pp. 59-78) explains that documentary films rely upon observational and participatory evidence using sound and imagery and particularly credible testimonials, witnesses and action. In so doing, documentary filmmakers go "beyond the vital facts and opinions and produce evidence that will make a strong emotional impact" (Rabiger, 2004, p. 135).

One of the most important rhetorical techniques found in documentary films (and other forms of communication involving social issues) is *claims-making*, i.e. making representations about situations (Best, 1987, 2003; Salmon, 1990). Claims-making is central to the constructionist approach to social problems found in modern sociology (Schneider, 1985) reflects and the gap between public perceptions and objective conditions associated with issues (Miller, 1999). Claims involve defining the *nature of a problem*, i.e. characterizing a problem as being of a particular type (a process known as

typification). Claims also frequently involve the *cause of the problem*, i.e. to attribute responsibility or blame for an adverse situation. Finally, claims include arguments favoring particular *remedies for a problem*, or what should be done to correct a situation. Spector & Kitsuse (1987, p. 78) sum up the concept by suggesting that claims-making involves one party interacting with another party to demand that something be done about some putative condition.

Virtually all activists and social advocates make claims using whatever communications tools are available to them. Michael Moore's film *Roger & Me* (1989) provided a classic example of claims-making by documentary filmmakers. The issue was the economic plight of the economy and the people in Flint, Michigan. Moore ascribed the cause specifically to irresponsible actions by General Motors and called for the carmaker to provide more assistance to its laid-off workers and the Flint community.

Framing Issues to Define Problems and Attribute Responsibilities.

Recent studies suggest that one of the most valuable techniques for making claims is to frame a problem effectively. Framing theory primarily has been examined a process of media story construction, but has been recognized as a basic strategy that can used in persuasive communications generally (Hallahan, 1999). Framing theory thus focuses on how messages are created and connected to the underlying psychological processing of messages. Entman explains:

> Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of perceived reality and make them more salient in the communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and/or treatment recommendation for the item described (Entman, 1993, p. 55).

Parties involved in disputes essentially vie to have their *preferred* framing of a social situations accepted by others and so focus on particular descriptions and explanations for why a problem exists – while excluding all others (placing them out of the perceptual frame). Framing provides audiences with a meaningful context for understanding social problems – a context that usually is conducive to an advocate's preferred solution and detrimental to opponents. These involve the use of positively and negatively valenced frames drawing upon culturally resonating themes, ideas, beliefs, values traditions and rituals that people either cherish or disparage (Hallahan, 1999).

Attributing blame. Theories of claims-making and framing both suggest that advocates in disputes strive to place responsibility for social problems squarely at the feet of others. In today's contentious society, blame for social problems can be ascribed routinely to nations, political parties, politicians or other social actors, or institutions.

In the case of social issue documentary films such as *Roger & Me* (1989), corporations are favorite targets. Anti-corporate groups argue that the increased

economic and political power of corporations is the root cause of various social ills, ranging from the depletion of precious resources to the deterioration in the quality of people's lives (Karagianni & Cornelissen, 2006). Anti-business sentiments in the United States can be traced to the Progressive Era at the beginning of the 20th century, when social reforms raised questions about the practices of Big Business and pressed government to intercede. Today, corporation bashing is a global phenomenon because of the size, wealth and influence of enterprises (Goodpaster, 2007; Larkin, 2003). Complaints about corporations are often rooted in allegations of corporate social irresponsibility, i.e. taking actions that only serve the profit motive and ignore the greater needs, concerns and interests of ordinary citizens or communities at large.

Story-telling Devices. Documentary films frame messages through story-telling devices that reinforce the framing of issues and the attribution of responsibility. A review of the claims-making literature suggested at least five key techniques that might be especially valuable. These include the use of *celebrities, symbols, dramatizations, large and official numbers*, and *interviews* (see Salmon, 1990), although other devices can be identified (see Gamson & Modigliani, 1989).

Celebrities. Claims-makers use famous people in the same way as advertisers—to attract public interest in issues and to transfer positive thoughts and emotions associated with the celebrity to the cause. Celebrities can be entertainment personalities, politicians, community leaders, notable subject-matter experts or social activists familiar to audiences.

Symbols. Familiar cultural and social icons are used in films to cogently express ideas, associate a cause with particular social values, and invoke desired emotional responses from audiences. Examples include patriotic emblems, historical icons, organizational logos, people, and scenes that evoke either positive or negative feelings.

Dramatizations are depictions of actions that help audiences gain an understanding of situations, ideas or events and are used to help explain complex ideas. Dramatizations can include original footage shot with actors playing out situations, re-engagements of past events (Rabiger, 2004), or the inclusion of existing historical film or video footage to tell a story.

Large or official numbers. Statistics are used in documentary film as an attempt to demonstrate the significance of the claims being made. Statistics support and dramatize claims and can help documentary storytellers to tie a local or singular story to a wider trend or issue.

Interviews involve the personalization of the story through first-hand accounts of events, the expression of opinions, or the sharing of insights by third-party experts. Interviews validate arguments being advanced in the film and can subtly and cogently advance the film's story line. The reiteration of key points can often provide compelling evidence about the veracity of claims.

STUDY DESIGN AND METHOD

This study examined four contemporary documentaries to understand how documentary filmmakers use their talents to advance social issues. The three primary research questions were:

R1. How do social issue documentary filmmakers frame issues?

R2. How are claims-making devices used by social issue documentary filmmakers?

R3. How do filmmakers attribute blame and call for improving corporate social responsibility?

Films Selected for Analysis

The four films chosen were all produced between 2000 and 2006. The number and scope of films was limited to make the study both manageable and current. All four films enjoyed fairly wide commercial distribution in theaters or as DVDs, took a strong position on a contemporary issue, and targeted specific organizations as responsible for the problem. For details, see Table 1.

Black Gold (Francis & Francis, 2006; Black Gold, 2006) chronicled poverty among more than 74,000 Ethiopian coffee farmers and was a catalyst for the current coffee fair trade movement. The film sympathetically profiled efforts of leader Tadesse Meskela to save his fellow countrymen from bankruptcy despite producing one of the most valuable agricultural commodities in the world. The film did well on the film festival circuit and was released in a handful of theaters in summer 2007. Even before its debut, the film prompted Starbucks and major roasters to defend their coffee buying practice (Nestle, S.A., 2003; Starbucks, 2008; Taylor, 2003).

Super Size Me (Spulock, 2004; Super Size Me, 2004) challenged the nutritional value, portion sizes, and marketing techniques used to promote the high calorie, fat-laden fare sold by fast-food restaurants. The film's arguments about the associated health risks rang true for many audiences and received considerable media attention globally. While claiming that plans to do so were already in the works, McDonalds and several of its major competitors rushed to put healthier food choices on their menus during the time the film was released (Associated Press 2004).

Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price (Greenwald, 2005; Wal-Mart: The High Cost…, 2005) differed from other films in the study because it focused on a single company and actually was one of several films that have attacked the world's largest retailer. (Also see the concurrently conducted study by Stokes and Holloway, 2009). The film addressed a wide range of complaints about the company and challenged the company's "All American" persona. When this movie was released in late 2005, the film received substantial attention from sympathetic audiences and seemed to hit a major

nerve (Barbaro, 2005).

Who Killed the Electric Car? (Deeter & Paine, 2006; Who Killed the …, 2006) was exhibited in art houses, and then released on DVD in November 2006. The first half of the film traced the development of General Motor's EV1 electric car and the testing of vehicles in California. The second half then deconstructs how plans to create an alternative vehicle was systematically subverted and the EV1 was eventually withdrawn from the market based on claims that replacement parts were unavailable (Barthhmuss, 2006). The 800 cars leased in the test were actually crushed in salvage yards despite the growing demand for the more fuel-efficient cars.

METHODOLOGY

The films were analyzed using both qualitative and quantitative content analysis by viewing DVDs of the films and by analyzing scripts obtained from the producers or by creating verbatim transcripts. Each transcript was scrutinized using a formal coding scheme to determine how underlying issues were framed and responsibility attributed – as well as for the use of the story-telling devices outlined above.

Each film chosen for the study took aim at specific companies and their deficiencies in terms of corporate social responsibility. Claims about corporate irresponsibility were analyzed using Lerbinger's (2006) pyramid model of corporate responsibility. Briefly Lerbinger's argues that companies can engage in a five-tier hierarchy of social responsibility initiatives that range from making major economic contributions to society (lowest) to promoting the public interest (highest):

5. Support public policies that are in the public interest
4. Make social investments to strength society's infrastructure
3. Help to solve social problems
2. Minimize social costs imposed on society
1. Perform basic economic functions of producing goods and services for society, and thereby provide jobs (Lerbinger, 2006, pp. 409-411).

FINDINGS

Framing of Underlying Social and Attribution of Blame.

As summarized in Table 2, each of the four films dealt with particular contemporary social problems but opted to define the issue narrowly--consistent with contemporary framing theory. Each film focused blame on particular organizations, and sought remedies involving changes in organizational practices or public policy.

Black Gold. The underlying social problem depicted in this film was the abject poverty in which Ethiopian coffee growers and their families live. While various factors contribute to the problem, the filmmakers chose to focus on *profiteering* by the various middlemen involved in exporting coffee beans to the American and European markets. Needless bureaucracy sops up any potential for growers to get higher prices for their crops. This premise breaks down into multiple smaller claims against private

corporations such as Starbucks, other coffee distributors, the New York Board of Trade, and the World Trade Organization. According to the filmmakers, resolution requires the creation of a streamlined distribution system where farmers can sell directly to major coffee retailers (e.g. Starbucks) and major roasters (Nestle, Procter & Gamble, Sara Lee, etc.).

Super-Size Me fundamentally addressed the problem of child obesity in the United States but also tackled the poor eating habits of American more generally. Importantly, the filmmaker chose to define the issue in terms of the unhealthy choices provided by fast-food chains such as McDonalds. High fat content, needlessly large portion sizes, and marketing campaigns that focus on highly profitable (but marginally nutritious) menu items were cited as the real problem—not, for example, poor food selections by consumers. *Super-Size Me* particularly challenged McDonalds to provide more healthful menu choices, to inform consumers about the nutritional content of its offerings, and to stop unscrupulous marketing to children.

Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price was an indictment of large-scale corporations that can use their massive buying power, sophisticated management systems, and marketing savvy to beat out smaller, less efficient local competitors. However, the film also chastised particular practices of Wal-Mart. Instead of addressing unfair marketing practices (monopolization, selling below the actual cost of goods, etc.) the film framed the problem in terms of human suffering imposed on employees, workers in factors operated by foreign suppliers, and small business owners who can't compete in towns where Wal-Mart locates stores. A litany of specific complaints was cited: racial and gender discrimination, denial of health and disability benefits, and requiring overtime work without pay. Tangential issues included violations of Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) regulations and customer safety risks. Unlike the other productions, the film particularly targeted Wal-Mart's corporate management, particularly then-CEO Lee Scott. The film suggests the need for a union and support for grassroots organizations that are fighting to block Wal-Mart from opening stores in their communities.

Who Killed the Electric Car? focused on the underlying issue of the America's over-reliance on upon gasoline-powered automobiles and the attendant environmental consequences. In particular, however, the film framed the problem in terms of resistance by established automobile and oil companies to any alternative vehicles that might jeopardize corporate profitably, eliminate the market for after-market consumables (fuel, replacement parts, etc.), require significant new investments, or pose new competition. Although various institutions are culpable – including government, oil companies and state regulators – the film placed primary blame on General Motors. GM initially was a major advocate and covered the research and development costs for the EV1, only to renege on its commitment by citing unavailability of replacement parts (Associated Press, 2003). The film sought to be put pressure on GM to resume production of the EV1 and to lead in the energy conservation battle.

Uses of Story-telling Devices

Examination of the argumentations in the films revealed evidence of all five of the story-telling devices identified in the literature review, plus one important technique not identified previously: the use of documents as evidence—print ads, articles and legal briefs or court decisions. As summarized in Table 3, the combination of techniques used varied in each film.

Interviews or personal accounts were the principal story-telling device employed in all films – a reflection of modern broadcast journalism practices. In all four films, parts of the same interviews are spliced throughout the entire production. Thus, the counts in Table 2 reflect only the net number of interviewees. On average, 57.5 people appeared in each film. *Super Size Me* topped the list with 87 interviews; *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price* came in second with 66, *Who Killed the Electric Car?* used 48, and *Black Gold* included the fewest individual interviews with only 29.

The findings suggest that social issue documentary films depend on interviews to forcefully present claims. The roles of the interviewees included victims (coffee farmers, fast-food junkies, retail employees. car owners), experts (economists, medical professionals and dieticians, educators, technicians and auto mechanics), advocates (representatives of free trade groups, reformers, environmentalists), and ordinary citizens (such as customers of McDonalds and Wal-Mart). *Super-Size Me* relied heavily on "man on-the-street" interviews, which in part accounts for the large number of people who appeared on camera.

Large or Official Numbers. Equally notable was the extensive use of large or official numbers. Although film is considered a medium that exploits visuals—and thus mostly relies on emotional versus rational arguments--the films were notable in their direct and indirect use of numbers. Large numbers were used several ways: First, the sheer magnitude of some of the figures cited was staggering, e.g. the $92 billion spent on treating Type 2 diabetes, Wal-Mart's 26 million square feet of then-vacated store space, and the $65 billion in oil company profits in 2005. Second, in two of the films – *Black Gold* and *Wal-Mart*: *The High Cost of Low Prices* – the differences *between* numbers were used to focus attention on the plight of Ethiopian farmers and Wal-Mart employees. The $2.90 paid for a *cup* of coffee at Starbucks was contrasted to the 23 cents per *kilo* paid to farmers for their beans. Wal-Mart CEO Lee Scott's $27 million salary was shown to dwarf the $13,861 in annual wages received by the typical Wal-Mart store worker. Third, the sheer *number of numbers* used and the number of examples listed provided compelling heuristic evidence for the claims made.

All four films relied heavily on *showing* key numbers (along with other facts and lists) as text superimposed on the screen to underscore key points. This was an unanticipated convention of storytelling not commonly used in broadcast journalism and might differentiate social issue documentaries from other documentary forms where providing compelling evidence to reinforce claims is not so important. This technique was particularly prevalent in the Wal-Mart production. In one segment, a scrolling list of white text overwhelmed audiences by enumerating 72 individual reports of violent

attacks that occurred in Wal-Mart parking lots.

The use of on-screen text in tandem with numbers in the narration facilitated communicating complex ideas that might be difficult to grasp orally, although the technique presumes audiences are able to read the screen. In the case of *Super Size Me*, animations and accompanying sounds and pictures were to illustrate statistics.

Dramatizations were instrumental devices used to advance each film's story. Two of the films followed the activities of principals to tell the film's story. *Black Gold* took a somewhat traditional approach by following farmer Tadesse Meskela for much of the film and by showing his everyday life and efforts to assist his cooperative of coffee growers, including visits to western supermarkets. In the tradition of Michael Moore, filmmaker Morgan Spurlock dramatized the threat of unhealthful fast food in *Super-Size Me* by chronicling a quasi-experiment where he ate nothing but three meals a day for 30 days at McDonalds. Rules of the stunt required him to try every item on the menu during the month – and to "super size" his order anytime he was asked whether he'd like to do so. Starting out with above-average health and fitness, Spurlock gained 25 pounds, lost critical liver function, and reported being depressed. The film documented his regular visits to doctors, physical therapists and nutritionists to assess and report on the rapid decline in his health.

When shooting original dramatic footage was not feasible, another unanticipated technique in three of the films – all except *Black Gold* – involved the use of pre-existing filmed or video news clips or commercials. Filmmakers tapped readily available footage from film, video, news or other archives to help tell their stories in compelling ways. In *Super Size Me*, one interviewee talks about how many advertisements for fast-food and junk foods a child sees in a single year. Meanwhile audiences viewed a rapid-fire montage of 42 commercials in less than 60 seconds. The Wal-Mart film also heavily relied on video clips--mostly of Wal-Mart CEO Lee Scott speaking at corporate conferences or in TV news stories. Scott's favorable comments about Wal-Mart's were then juxtaposed to complaints aired in TV newscasts. Audiences could readily conclude that, in fact, the alleged violations were widespread.

Symbols. All four films were notable for their use of powerful imagery to draw contrasts between situations. *Black Gold* effectively compared affluent Westerners who sipped on expensive lattes mixed for them by Starbucks baristas to the indigent Ethiopian farmers who were dependent on US AID packages and Red Cross relief—images that were purposefully inserted in the film. The film also featured Tedesse Maeskela himself as a *symbol* -- the noble, visionary reformer whose efforts should be admired. In *Super-Size Me*, the symbolic contrasts juxtaposed unhealthful symbols such as overweight girls, restaurant menu boards, soda and junk food vending machines to abandoned toys and playground equipment and pedometers representing the need for people to exercise more. Symbolism in *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price* mostly evolved around characterizations of the people involved: the greedy corporate executive personified in CEO Lee Scott, the sympathetic but powerless

district and store manager, and the beaten-down family business owner forced to quit (a reversal of the David v. Goliath story). Finally, similar to two of the other films, *Who Killed the Electric Car?* relied heavily on environmental symbolism by contrasting footage of urban smoke stacks and traffic congestion created by gas-guzzling cars to pristine nature scenes with free-flowing streams and clean air. In this same vein, *Black Gold* struck a responsive chord with audiences by prominently featuring the pastoral beauty of the Ethiopian countryside, while *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price* tapped the audience's concerns about environment by pointing our Wal-Mart's alleged dumping of pesticides in South Carolina's idyllic Catawba River.

Importantly, all four films prominently used applicable corporate logos and other icons in their targeting of culpable corporations—including but not limited to Starbucks, McDonalds, Wal-Mart and GM. Three of the films – all except *Black Gold* – made prominent use of the American flag to conjure up visions of American ideals. The same films featured exterior shots of the White House to represent suggest that the federal government had the power to remedy the problem addressed.

Celebrities. Among the major story-telling techniques investigated in this study, the least used devices were endorsements by famous people. Only *Who Killed The Electric Car?* relied on this technique -- by prominently naming the various Hollywood entertainment figures who initially leased electric cars: Phyllis Diller, Tom Hanks and Mel Gibson, among others. Actor-activist Ed Begley Jr. and Ralph Nader, both advocates for clean air and alternative fuels, presented their stories. The film also relied on film clips to suggest support by former Presidents George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush. Particularly compelling was actor Peter Horton, who was interviewed while GM representatives were shown in the background repossessing his car at the conclusion of its lease.

Documentary Evidence. An unexpected finding that became readily evident in reviewing the films was the extensive use of *documentary evidence* in three of films – all except *Black Gold*. Showing pictures of news articles, print ads and legal documents related to events that lead up to the production of the film enhanced the impact, legitimacy and authority of the films' claims. *Super Size Me* featured the most instances of showing print ads, articles, and legal documents (22 examples), which can be explained in part by the fact the film's concept was inspired by a lawsuit. However, *Who Killed the Electric Car?* followed closely behind (18 examples) while claims against Wal-Mart were highlighted 11 times in this way.

Attribution of Blame and Calls for Improved Corporate Social Responsibility

In considering the four films from within the context of Lerbinger's (2006) pyramid of corporate social responsibility, none of the films chided the targeted organizations for failing to perform their fundamental functions of producing goods and services for society and producing jobs. Yet all four the films argued that targeted organizations failed at the second tier of corporate social responsibility -- to minimize the social costs imposed on society (poverty among coffee growers, child obesity, human suffering among workers, and pollution/dependence on foreign oil). All four films also suggested

that the focal organizations failed in their affirmative responsibility to solve these social problems.

In terms the higher-order responsibilities cited by Lerbinger, only *Super Size Me* did not address the question of making social investments to strengthen the infrastructure of society. Similarly the film didn't state or imply that the fast-food industry were in violation of public policies or should be regulated (except to suggest that schools ought to limit sales of soda and empty-calorie junk foods to students). Yet, effecting public policy changes were clearly among desired changes sought in the other films in the areas of coffee importation, enforcement of employee rights and environmental protection, and investing in alternative modes of transportation and energy conservation.

DISCUSSION

These findings suggest that the social issue documentary film, in fact, has become an effective tool for advocacy. The results also support the idea that filmmakers frame social problems in particular ways to advance preferred solutions and also rely heavily on the identified story-telling devices identified in the claims-making literature. Importantly, this framing provides a valuable creative focus for their works.

The implications that can be drawn from this study are obviously limited because this study examined only four films produced within a comparatively narrow time period. The inclusion of other films might reveal disaffirming conclusions, and the same approaches might not be found in films that do not so narrowly target corporate culprits. A case in point might be Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*, which positions climate change as a universal problem for which everyone is responsible. Similarly, this study did not examine all possible story-telling devices that might be used by filmmakers, nor cinematic techniques (such as the use of postmodern editing, special effects or sound) that would primarily be of interest to filmmakers.

Clearly, documentary filmmakers can be seen as highly visible, albeit second-order advocates for social change. It is important to note that all four these productions were produced *after* the issues they covered were well established by advocacy groups, which helped create a ready audience willing to pay admission to theaters or to purchase DVDs. Although critics might charge that the filmmakers merely exploited public concern about these issues, the conviction with which all four of the filmmakers addressed these problems – and the considerable professional and financial risks taken -- suggest otherwise.

Worthy of particular mention is the fact that anti-corporate sentiments are prominent in these films. But pointing a finger of blame at a specific corporation does not always mean that the corporation alone is the cause of the problem. It appears that these moviemakers fully recognized the larger issues and attempted to acknowledge that there might be various causes. For example, *Super Size Me* ventured beyond

McDonalds and the fast-food industry to point out that school foodservice and vending programs also contributed to the problems of child obesity and poor diet. *Who Killed the Electric Car?* actually acknowledged at least seven culprits for the demise of the EV1, ranging from state regulation, the technology of fuel-cells, and consumer indifference. Ironically, such attempts at balance can actually work *against* the effectiveness of a film in calling for remedies by diluting its message. Although the films made some attempt at providing a broader perspective, all four films will probably be remembered for their anti-corporate attacks.

All four films illustrate the important point that leaders in institutional or industry categories—such as Starbucks, McDonalds, Wal-Mart and General Motors—carry a special burden that comes with their number-one position. All four films imply that these large corporations have a dominating influence over government and various elements of public policy, potentially can abuse their power, and ultimately must take responsibility for societal problems. At minimum, the filmmakers suggest that these corporations, as the leaders within their industries, have the ability and duty to mitigate the social problems described.

The impact of these films is open for debate and requires a separate, more thorough analysis. However, all four of the issues addressed in them remain unresolved (Procter & Gamble, 2007). In the cases of Black *Gold*, *Super Size Me* and *Wal-Mart: the High Cost of Low Price*, company officials had suggested that the kinds of changes called for in the films were already being planned (MacArthur, 2004; Maldonado, 2004; McDonald's 2004, 2008). In fact, this might be true. Because social issue documentaries aren't produced until an issue has already widely visible, it is possible that these actually had little direct effect and that changes were implemented as a result as internal initiatives or other sources of pressure. Such a conclusion, however, might lead companies to mistakenly dismiss the potential impact of documentary films. All the companies featured were aware that these documentaries were being produced; the fear of *possible* negative public reaction might have been sufficient to prompt changes. Thus the resulting changes in corporate practices might have been an indirect effect.

From an issues management perspective, key questions center on how organizations should respond when they know they might be featured in these kinds of documentary productions. Should an organization follow conventional wisdom that it's better to provide accurate and favorably frame information from the company's perspective (Hoger & Swem, 2000)? Or should an organization purposely ignore documentary filmmakers? With the guerilla techniques used by directors such as Michael Moore, many corporations might take the position that no what matter what they might say, it is unlikely their arguments will be included or will be edited in a favorable or balanced way.

Within the four films, only one official corporate spokesperson appeared on camera when a GM corporate communications executive vainly attempted to defend the company's stance on aborting the EV1 in *Who Killed the Electric Car?* (Kage, 2006). *Black Gold* featured a Starbucks retail manager who talked about the popularity of

Starbucks but did not address (or was not asked about) the company's stance on fair trade coffee. Whether a Wal-Mart spokesperson was asked to participate is uncertain; the company's official positions were represented entirely through available video excerpts of CEO Lee Scott. McDonalds avoided speaking with the director of *Super Size Me* – a fact adroitly documented when the filmmaker recorded on film one of short dismissive phone conversations where he attempted to set up an interview with McDonald's director of corporate communications. The segment suggested that the company either wanted to dodge the issue or didn't take the filmmaker seriously.

Clearly one of the lessons illustrated in these four films is that filmmakers are not required to abide by the same standards of fair reporting associated with mainstream journalism. This technique makes social issue documentaries more provocative and more entertaining than the typical discussion of public issues in the news. The more controversial, the greater will be the public attention that can be generated when the film appears at film festivals, releases in theaters or distributes on DVDs.

Further research about social issue documentaries is required. In particular, documentary filmmakers need to be interviewed to better understand their motivations, techniques, and perceptions about themselves as advocates for social change. Also filmmakers can shed valuable insights on how limitations of time, budget and access to materials and materials bias their creative work. Attention also needs to be paid to how the production of a highly visible documentary can help thrust an otherwise languishing issue into the public, media and public policy limelight – and how the efforts of documentary filmmakers can operate synergistically with the continuing efforts of an issue's primary activists/advocates/claims-makers.

In particular, more needs to understood about the important role of secondary media coverage in both promoting the films and advancing the issues. In a content analysis of one year of news coverage related to two of these films, Pompper and Higgins (2007) found 85 news stories about *Super Size Me* from the period using two major news databases. McDonald's response appeared in only 13% of these stories, representing 1% of the average story length (average total word count: 737). Their analysis uncovered 55 stories about the Wal-Mart movie; corporate responses appeared in 36% of these stories and represented only 5% of each story (average total word count: 871 words). Importantly, only one-third of the coverage for films appeared in the week prior to release, or during the week of the film's release. This suggests that fully two-thirds of the coverage focused on analysis and discussion of the films' themes, underlying issues, or corporate responses for up to a year after release—with little space devoted to contradictory perspectives.

Research also should be pursued to understand the motives, perceptions and responses of audiences – particularly how the release of a highly visible documentary can stimulate word-of-mouth discussion among audience members who might otherwise be reticent to discuss the issue with family or friends. Audience research also needs to consider the importance of documentary films to audience segments already

favorably predisposed to an issue versus the impact of films on audiences who are only aware of a problem but might become involved as a result of seeing a film. Finally, more needs to be learned about how targeted organizations perceive these kinds of documentary productions and their strategies for response. A cursory analysis suggests that responses to these films varied from corrective action to defiance (Associated Press, 2004; Wal-Mart Stores, 2005, 2007; Wickstrom, 2006). But more needs to be learned about how issues managers and organizational executives perceive documentary films as an adversarial tool.

Understanding how documentary films frame issues and make claims can help practitioners understand the role of today's documentary as a tool used in postmodern activism (Rober & Toledano, 2005; Tyler, 2005). Such understanding can help practitioners and their clients go far in developing best practices for responding to this provocative – and provoking – new medium of issue communication.

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Table 1. Profile of Four Films Analyzed

	Black Gold	*Super Size Me*	*Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price*	*Who Killed the Electric Car?*
Year of Production	2006	2004	2005	2006
Filmmakers	Director-Writers: Marc and Nick Francis Producer: Christopher Hird	Director-Producer: Morgan Spurlock	Director: Robert Greenwald Producer: Jim Gilliam	Director-Producer: Chris Paine
Running Time MPAA Rating	77 mins.	100 mins. PG-13	97 mins.	93 mins. PG
Distributor	California Newsreel	Samuel Goldwyn Films /Roadside Attractions	Brave New World Disinformation Company	Sony Pictures Corporation
Production Cost	Not available	$2 million	~$1.5 million	Not available
Theaters Exhibition Revenues # Theaters	$227,105 6	$11.5 million 230	Direct to DVD	$1.6 million 74
Web Site	www.blackgoldmovie.com www.oxfarmamerica.com	www.supersizeme.com	www.walmartmovie.com	www.sonyclassics.com/whokilledtheelectriccar
Notes	Official Selection Sundance Film Festival	Academy Award Nomination for Best Documentary; Best Director Sundance Film Festival		Official Selection Sundance Film Festival Tribeca Film Festival

Table 2. Summary of Issues, Framing and Attribution of Blame in Four Contemporary Social Issue Documentary Films

	Black Gold	*Super Size Me*	*Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price*	*Who Killed the Electric Car?*
Social Problem/Issue Addressed	Poverty of Ethiopian coffee farmers	Childhood obesity;	Displacement of traditional retailing by large corporations	Dependence on automobile transportation, including pollution
Framing of the Issue	Exploitation, needless profit- taking by coffee distributors	Unhealthy choices, marketing by fast-food chains	Exploitation of employees, workers, suppliers; destruction of communities*	Co-option of alternative vehicles
Target of Blame	Coffee middle-men, sellers, especially Starbucks and major roasters	McDonalds Competitors, including school foodservice	Wal-Mart management	General Motors Also government, oil companies, state regulators
Advocated Solutions	Streamline distribution, remove coffee exchanges, improve prices paid to farmers	Offer more healthful menu choices	Change company policies; Stop building new stores; Unionization.	Resume EV1 production; eliminate energy waste; adhere to public policy goals.
Violations of Lerbinger's pyramid of corporate social responsibility (see legend)	3, 4, 5	2,3	2,3,4,5	2, 3, 5

* Secondary claims dealt with environmental pollution; risks to customer safety.

** Levels in Lerbinger's (2006) pyramid of social responsibility included:

5. Support public policies that are in the public interest
4. Make social investments to strength societies infrastructure
3. Help to solve social problems
2. Minimize social costs imposed on society
1. Perform basic economic function of producing goods and services for society, and there by provide jobs (Lerbinger, 2006, pp. 409-411).

Table 2: Framing and Story-Telling Devices Used in the Four Films

Number of examples

	Black Gold	*Super Size Me*	*Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price*	*Who Killed the Electric Car?*
Interviews (Net number of people interviewed)	29	87	66	48
Dramatizations Featured Character Staged/re-creations Film/video clips	 1 0 0	 1 13 51	 0 1 78	 0 0 28
Large and/or Official Numbers Cited in narrative Screen text with facts	 19 17	 10 22	 71 55	 47 11
Symbols (Notable examples)*	Wealthy coffee drinkers Baristas Noble reformer Rural pastoralism Red Cross relief trucks US AID bags	Overweight girls Unused toys, playgrounds Pedometers Soda, vending machines Menu boards	Greedy executive Powerless store manager Exploited workers Family business owners	Smokestacks, smog Auto congestion Gas guzzlers Pristine nature scenes Auto salvage yard
Celebrities	1	2	3	18
Documentary Evidence Print ads, articles, or legal documents	0	22	11	18

* All films prominently featured company logos, buildings and other icons. Films except *Black Gold* also incorporated the American flag as well as exterior shots of the White House.