UPSTREAM DOWNRIVER

MAXIMIZING IMPACT:

A MEDIA ECOSYSTEM CASE STUDY

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For more information about the Upstream, Downriver Media Project, go to:
http://www.upstreamdownriver.org

Maggie Burnette Stogner
http://www.bluebearfilms.com

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INTRODUCTION

So many audiences, so much content, so little time.

How can we create meaningful impact in today's fragmented media world? How do we cut through the information and cognitive overload?[1] What are the most effective strategies to engage and activate audiences with so many options at our fingertips? The explosion of formats, platforms, lengths, styles, and approaches is giving rise to unprecedented opportunities and challenges. This report is designed to help content creators, funders, educators, and others to better understand how to achieve meaningful impact in today's congested media world. It draws from my academic media research, multi-decade experience creating social and environmental documentary films, a range of case studies, and key learnings from the multi-faceted ***Upstream, Downriver Media Project*** [2]
It references multidisciplinary scholarly resources, experts in the field, and credible data studies. It does not use AI.

This report explores how to create and maximize impact by:

- Identifying opportunities across today's media landscape;
- Creating a multi-tiered 'Media Ecosystem' distribution strategy; and
- Implementing effective engagement on digital and social media platforms.

Summaries and data snapshots provide information to identify best platforms and formats. A case study summary of the five-year, multi-tiered "Upstream, Downriver Media Project" offers insights on maximizing impact by creating a media ecosystem.

DEFINING IMPACT

At the 2019 Jackon Wild Film Festival summit, filmmakers from around the world were asking a lot of the same questions: Where are you getting traction? What's working? How can my film create meaningful impact? A mind-shifting discussion ensued. Can we, by engaging new audiences and building community over the course of a filmmaking journey, create impact before the film is even released? Traditionally, impact campaigns are launched after the film is finished, but what about the opportunities to create change during the development and production phases? This discussion prompted the research and publication of the 2020 *Impact Media Report: Creative, Collaborative & Outreach Strategies for Nature, Environmental and Science Films*.[3] See www.cefimpactmedia.org. Case Studies with interviews with filmmakers and impact producers[4] explore a range of approaches and include films that won the Jackson Wild Film Festival's Impact Category as well as other documentaries distinguished by their impact campaigns. The Redford Center's "Watershed" (2012), for example, provides an excellent example of initiating impact from the outset of the film, a strategy that ultimately helped raise over $30 million to restore the Colorado River Delta.[5] The *"Upstream, Downriver Media Project"* featured in this report, created a media ecosystem across traditional, digital and social content to help activate clean water advocacy.

Creating impact from the inception of your idea.

In its earliest stages, a film can be a powerful tool to bring diverse constituents together around a common cause. Using a Visionary Change Framework, the Impact Media Report:

> *"…explores a media ecosystem built on collective wisdom, diverse viewpoints, shared purpose, and an ongoing, open exchange of innovative ideas. It accentuates a process that begins at the inception of a project, with a framework for visionary change".*[6]

A Visionary Change Framework poses three questions:

What do you want to change?
Who can help make that change?
How do you reach those changemakers?

The *Impact Media Toolkit*[7] guides users through five steps:

Define your visionary change
Tap into trends & innovations
Design impact with an ever-expanding spiral model
Build empathy bridges
Assess and evaluate success

This Toolkit has been a popular resource for many organizations, including the National Geographic Storytelling Institute, American Association of the Advancement of Science, Wildlife Filmmakers in Africa, WGBH/NOVA, University Film & Video Association, the international educational film and video association CILECT, film festival workshops, and a range of advocacy organizations.

"It's really fantastic. There are so many impact resources and reports out there, but this feels very definitive."
– James Byrne, Media Director,
Greg Carr Foundation, Gorongosa Project

IDENTIFYING CHANGEMAKERS

Once you have clearly defined impact goals, the next step is identifying who has the power, access, and interest to help further those goals. Who are the changemakers, the policymakers, experts, influencers, funders, grassroot citizen groups, organizations that can inspire, empower, motivate action? Social media promotes the idea that the more people reached, the greater the impact. The dopamine rush of seeing thumbs up, hearts, likes and more likes in response to posted content is undeniably addictive. Creating a following and casting a wide net can help raise visibility, but large numbers do not necessarily translate to impact. Aligning with influencers who have robust followings can also be an effective strategy if the social media posts generate real impact through social behavior change and specific actions.

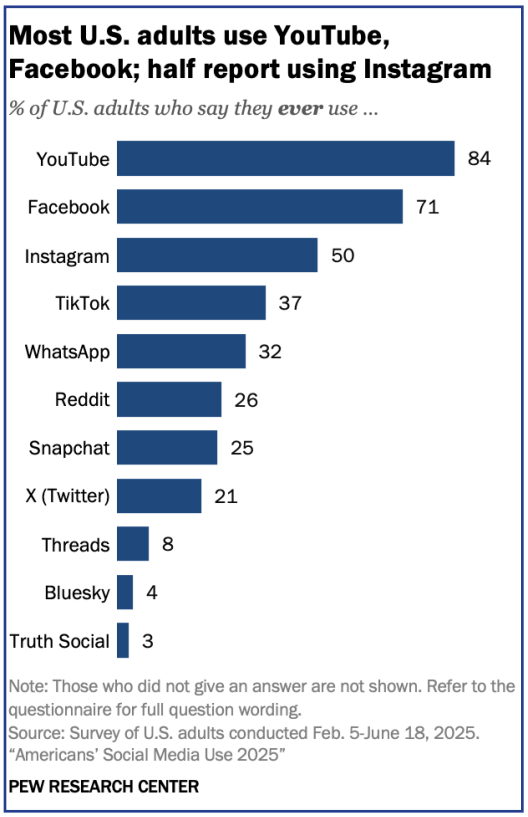
The ***Upstream, Downriver Media Project*** [8] impact goal is to help engage and activate advocacy for water justice and equity. Over four years, its media products have expanded to a range of formats with multi-tiered distribution. This case study illustrates how a fully developed media ecosystem can raise visibility, engage and activate communities across demographics, and increase alignment with changemakers. The potential for earned impact [9] steadily increases as organizations share the content with their constituents. The ***Upstream, Downriver*** media ecosystem includes an hour film for broadcast and theatrical screenings, a half-hour film for educational, a YouTube Channel with the ***Women Water Warriors*** series of 6-minute episodes, and short clips posted across digital and social media platforms. It reaches an ever-larger audience as people share the posts to raise awareness and to use the content for their own advocacy. Another example is the short, animated film *"Saving Ralph"* created to engage communities to advocate against the use of animals for cosmetic testing. It was distributed broadly with toolkits for organizing boycotts, engaging policymakers and other actions. Many communities created their own media content around the film, formed action groups, and launched localized impact campaigns. Ultimately, two countries banned the practice and several cosmetic companies pledged to stop testing on animals.

There are those who seek very targeted changemakers to help their cause. National Geographic Explorer-in-Residence and founder of the Pristine Seas project Enric Sala was determined to find a way to protect our oceans' last wild places. He is renowned for saying that he makes films "for an audience of one", often the president of a country who has the power to designate and protect marine sanctuaries. The producers of the large format film "The Arctic: Our Last Great Wilderness" made clips available before the release of the film to help prevent the passage of a bill that would allow fracking in the Arctic. The clips were posted on social media with a call to action and a link to submit public comments. Several social media influencers helped generate substantial response. The result was an overwhelming number of public comments, too many to be processed before the deadline, so the bill could not come to vote. "Saving the Florida Wildlife Corridor" also targeted a very specific audience: Florida State Representatives who were ambivalent about supporting a bill to designate a wildlife corridor. The filmmakers strategically chose to film wild areas near the homes of the least

supportive politicians and emphasized family values tied to Florida's natural beauty. The film premiered at Florida's State House and was instrumental in securing land for the wildlife corridor.

Whether reaching an audience of one, or a range of communities whose mission aligns with yours, impact campaigns can take many shapes and engage in a myriad of ways. The days of appointment television with captive audiences and one-size-fits-all distribution have faded far into the sunset. Digital and social platforms are providing new opportunities for engaging and motivating positive change. Like the proverbial pebble in a pond, the concentric circles can be activated for ever-expanding impact. See these and other impact case studies at https://www.cefimpactmedia.org/case-studies/

REACHING THE CHANGEMAKERS



Today, the challenge of reaching audiences in ways that engage, inspire, and activate is non-linear, multi-faceted, and constantly transforming. Consider that in 2000, fewer than 10% of the U.S. population had smart phones and only 46% used the Internet. Digital and social media did not yet exist. YouTube launched in December 2005, Facebook in 2006, and Instagram in 2010. Social media platforms are expanding exponentially and now offer much greater functionality. From UserGroups and ChatGroups, to Influencers and paid ads, the confluence of technological advances has changed the way much of the public engages in social issues.

A 2025 Pew Research study found that over fifty percent of people from age 18-29 used social media platforms to get involved with political and social issues important to them.[10] Another 2025 Pew study reported that 41% of respondents aged 18-29 regularly get news from Facebook and YouTube, 40% from Instagram, and 43% from TikTok.[11]

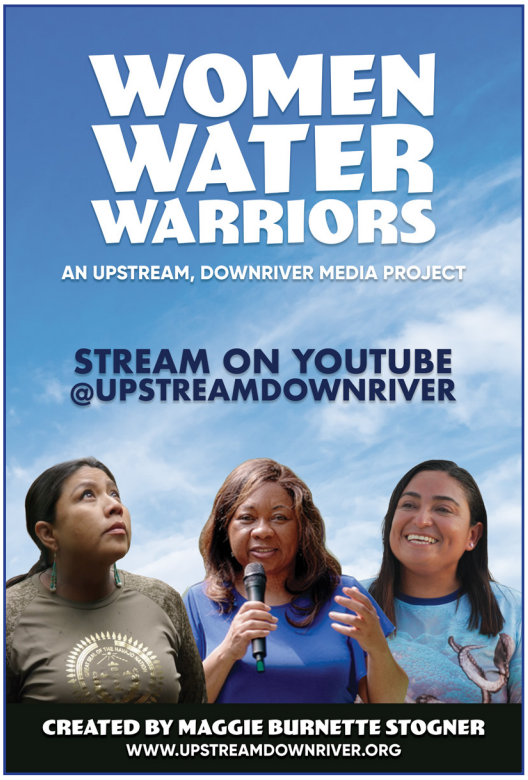
Creating strategic outreach across these and other media content platforms, such as Substack and Medium, can be time consuming and overwhelming. Prioritizing your impact goals, understanding which platforms reach the changemakers you seek, and how to align with them to effect change, is key.

CREATING A MEDIA ECOSYSTEM FOR MAXIMUM IMPACT

The value of creating a **media ecosystem** that engages across interconnected platforms is gaining traction. The traditional trifecta of theatrical, broadcast, and educational versions of a film still exists, but the explosive growth of digital and social media platforms, and the rise of short-form content, have radically transformed viewing habits and media consumption. Today, people connect over Facebook groups, Instagram stories, TikTok stitched content, You Tube series, to name just a few. One platform does not exclude another, people can and will use multiple platforms at once, each serving different interests or needs. A GWI report in 2019 found that the average internet user was on 8.1 different social platforms, noting the number has held steady since 2017.[12]

A successful media ecosystem includes products of different lengths, aspect ratios, and styles with an overarching brand and aesthetic. Strategically capturing, versioning, and reinventing content to distribute across platforms offers endless opportunities. Ideally, it is developed and designed at the outset of a media project, so content is captured to work across platforms as stand-alone, mixed and matched, versioned, repurposed, and spin-off products. It is not limited to moving visuals. Photos, audio clips, interview podcasts, behind-the-scenes, and other forms can expand ways to raise visibility, engage changemakers, and increase impact. Understanding which platforms can reach your target demographics and how they work, before you start your project, is highly recommended. *See below for information about platforms.*

Today, the range of products that can be created under one content umbrella is boundless. After four years of expanding content, the ***Upstream, Downriver Media Project*** has now become its own brand. The journey has been an ongoing learning process. The project began as a public television half-hour in 2022 and then expanded into a broadcast hour in 2025. Both films screened on the film festival circuit, with environmental organizations and on public television.
In 2026, a YouTube series launched with the ***Women Water Warriors*** series of 5–7-minute episodes as well as short clips from the hour, which have been posted on the project's TikTok channel. The short videos and posts are shared by Changemakers for their own specific advocacy. In May 2026, a 22-minute Spanish-language documentary ***Refuge Keepers*** (2026) was versioned from three YouTube episodes filmed in the Yucatan. Available in both Spanish and English, it is extending the international reach of the ***Upstream, Downriver Media Project*** at Spanish-language film festivals and theatrical screenings events such as the 2026 World Ocean Day in Celestún.



OPPORTUNITIES & BEST STRATEGIES

How do you reach the changemaking audiences you need for greater impact? Will they watch a broadcast film, or attend a festival screening? If the option is available, would they stream it? And, most importantly: what will they do once they've watched it? An upside of today's fractured, fragmented media landscape are new opportunities to build community around specific impact goals. Creating impact from the inception of an idea is more critical than ever. Designing a strategic campaign by engaging and activating at every stage, can significantly enhance impact results. Sharing teasers and trailers, behind-the-scenes moments, short clips, sound bites, all contribute to raising the visibility of your project and amassing community for advocacy.

CHALLENGES & PITFALLS

The challenges can be daunting, from wrangling vast amounts of media to creating a cohesive aesthetic and brand. Which platforms will generate the most meaningful impact results over time? What will generate results with an acceptable time/cost benefit? What are best practices for negotiating rights for licensed content for multiple versions and repurposing. In the early digital days, National Geographic was prescient about its rights agreements and included 'formats yet to be developed'. If you are sharing content with partners and participants to use for their advocacy, how will you ensure that they adhere to rights agreements? How can you capture content for both horizontal and vertical formats? What new platforms are emerging, and how are they being used?

The media landscape is mutating rapidly. Identifying trends, tracking innovations, keeping up with changes is tough. For example, in 2019, the Global Web Index identified a "new frontier in social media, where entertainment and communication are more closely interlinked in virtual hangout spaces" using social services such as Houseparty and Squad.[13] While this trend is a useful aspect of creating community impact, those platforms are no longer relevant. Houseparty shuttered in 2021. Squad has morphed into an "influencer marketing" app that sources talent to create content for your project with costs starting at $10,000. Identifying reliable, stable apps and platforms to grow your media ecosystem over time is important. (David Attenborough's media franchise has spanned seven decades!) Reliable partners are also key. Climate Action Now, for example, was founded in 2012 by a group of volunteers dedicated to "building a powerful climate justice movement through organizing, action and public education".[14] It provides a platform for community networking, with an online subscriber-based newsletter, monthly zoom meetings, and chapters around the globe that focus on a range of environmental issues. There are many small and large organizations with whom you can align that have solid track records and excellent reputations.

OVERVIEW OF DIGITAL/SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

The following provides snapshots of platforms, their reach, how they work, and how they can help achieve your impact goals. The Pew Research Center's 2025 Social Media Fact Sheet[15] analyzes social media platform use by age, gender, level of education, income, and community (urban, suburban, rural). YouTube and Facebook are the most popular platforms, with Instagram a close third. This Report derived research statistics from outside sources as well as data provided by the platforms themselves. Note that many platforms are morphing quickly, which can result in variable, fluid statistics. The information below is based on data available in May 2026. This list is by no means definitive. ***Upstream, Downriver Media Project*** implemented an experimental approach that is evolving alongside user trends and platform changes.

YOUTUBE

Description: YouTube is a video-sharing social platform where users can upload full videos and vertical-format shorts. Users may subscribe to creators, leave comments, and share their own videos or videos created by others. Videos are recommended to users using a recommendation algorithm, can be searched for using tags, and are frequently shared on external platforms (such as Reddit and Patreon). YouTube is heavily integrated with Google/Alphabet's advertisement services, accessible through "YouTube Ads". Video advertisements are inserted into a user's video when watching videos, and advertisements will appear as their own posted video when a user is on the 'Shorts' part of the platform

Demography: Pew Research surveys found that 84% of all adults, and 95% of adults aged 18-29 have used YouTube. Spanish-language videos represent 6.7% of McGrady et al (2023)'s total sample and is the third most represented language behind English (21.4%) and Hindi (7.6%).[16] A higher percentage of Hispanic (88%) and Asian (92%) respondents reported using YouTube, compared to 82% of white respondents.

Stats: WolframlAlpha puts the daily page views of YouTube.com at 12 billion, with an estimated 1.3 billion daily visitors, and 33 billion visits a month.[17] There are 9.8 billion uploaded videos as of the sample collection period for McGrady et al, (2023). The average number of views per video was 5,868, and the median was 35, according to the random sampling. Only 3.6% of their sample had over 10k views, and that 3.6% accounts for over 90% of all views. The average number of comments was 5.3, the average number of likes was 16.5, but both had a median of 0. The average number of subscribers on a channel was 55,000, with a median of 61. YouTube has previously stated that recommendation algorithms drive 70% of their traffic, yet McGrady et al found that there is only a very weak correlation between Views and Subscribers.

Safety Rating: GLAAD's Social Media Safety Index notes that YouTube's moderation of its platform has eroded since 2024. The Platform Safety Index rates YouTube as a "D+", noting that young users should be supervised.

FACEBOOK

Description: Facebook is a social platform where users can connect with and message each other, sharing posts and videos. Facebook also has several other features, such as games, groups, and their marketplace, allowing users to connect through shared interests, gamified social interactions, or classified advertisements. Facebook is owned by parent company "Meta", which also operates Instagram.

Demography: 71% of adults in the US report that they have used Facebook, with the highest concentration being between 30-49 (at 92%) and 50-64 (at 85%). Notably, only 68% of people aged 18-29 reported having ever used Facebook. 78% of women reported using Facebook, compared to just 63% of men, a gap of 16%. Most ethnicities reported a similar percentage of use, except for English-speaking Asian adults, only 62% of whom report having used Facebook, 8-12% lower than other demographics.

Stats: Facebook.com gets 1.8 billion page views per day, with 360 million daily visitors. According to a 2024 SEC filing, Facebook has 3.07 Billion monthly active users. Pew Research found that 91% of Facebook users report seeing news-related content, and 37% of Facebook users report that news is a major reason they are on the platform. 55% of Facebook news consumers say they got their news from Advocacy and/or nonprofit organizations. 33% of those users also reported that they "often see news that seems inaccurate." [18]

Safety Rating: The Platform Safety Index gives Facebook an "F", noting that there are some safety measures in use, but none of them are adequate protection for young users. GLAAD also notes that moderation and protections for Meta products have eroded since 2024.

INSTAGRAM

Description: Instagram is an image and vertical video platform owned by Meta, which allows users to share photos to their feed, post short videos and pictures for their followers with 'Stories', and vertical-format short videos, 'Reels', that are shared via recommendation algorithm to other Instagram users.

Demography: 80% of people between the ages of 18-29 report having ever used Instagram, and 50% of all adults report the same. Instagram has the second-highest percentage of social platform use in the USA, behind YouTube at 95%. In addition, Black and Hispanic users in the United States had a 9-17% higher rate of usage than white adults in the US. A Reuter's Institute digital news report found that 18% of respondents used Instagram to access news and current events, compared to 31% for YouTube, and 37% for Facebook.[19]

Stats: A Kepios analysis of Meta's advertising tools estimated 1.74 billion unique accounts in January of 2025, and they estimated about 182 million accounts in the USA that were able to receive ads. Measurement of Ad Reach currently appears to be the best method for estimating the size of the network, as Meta has not recently disclosed Instagram's monthly active users.

Safety Rating: GLAAD gave Instagram a score of 41/100, noting that Instagram, like all Meta platforms, have been rolling back moderation and hate speech policy. The Platform Safety Index rates Instagram a "D", and lacks basic protections, especially for underage users.[20]

LINKEDIN

Description: LinkedIn is a social platform where users connect with other professionals, and employers have pages dedicated to their companies. LinkedIn has a media feed with in-line advertisements and sponsored posts, and enables users to message others, apply for jobs, share work, and track projects. LinkedIn is a subsidiary of Microsoft and uses Google's AdSense advertising DSP for their ad deliveries.

Demography: The US, India, and Brazil have the highest number of users, per country. There are over 247 million registered LinkedIn users in the U.S. who have created a personal account on the platform. Nearly 60% of LinkedIn users worldwide surveyed are male, 53% earn more than $100k a year, 53% have a college degree or more. Only 23% of the Hispanic survey recipients reported using LinkedIn, and only 18% of rural recipients had used LinkedIn.[21]

Statistics: According to Resourcera.com, LinkedIn has "grown into a massive professional ecosystem with over 1.3 billion registered users and 300-600 million monthly active users across 200+ countries." There are also an estimated 71 million companies and over 100,000 educational institutions that have accounts on LinkedIn. A 2023 Pew Research survey found that 30% of adults in the US have used LinkedIn at least once. Pew Research has not included LinkedIn in their most recent social media surveys. Statistical data for this platform varies significantly according to source.

Safety Rating: The Platform Safety Index rates LinkedIn as a D+, noting that LinkedIn has limited direct message communication features, and has a history of protecting user data, but has gaps in its safety measures. GLAAD is not tracking LinkedIn's data.

TIKTOK

Description: TikTok is a vertical-format video sharing social platform launched in 2016 and owned by ByteDance and "TikTok USDS Joint Venture LLC", a new company started in 2026 to oversee U.S. operation of the platform. TikTok is a much newer platform than YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram, launched in 2016. It uses an interest-based algorithm where users follow specific accounts and scroll a feed that recommends videos based on their interests and past engagement. TikTok collects and analyzes audio and video from posts on its platform, with the company stating that it is "to improve safety and user experience, to recommend and moderate content, and for analytics and demographic classification, such as inferred age range."[22] TikTok's algorithm is heavily biased toward boosting faces on the screen. Viewers are more inclined to follow a personality rather than a concept or a movement.

Demography: A 2025 Pew Research survey found that while only 37% of all adults have ever used TikTok, 63% of people aged 19-29 have used the social platform. There, Instagram and TikTok are used more widely by teen girls than teen boys.[23] For example, 66% of girls say they use TikTok, compared with 59% of boys. A Pew-Knight Initiative survey reported that 41% of respondents cited "Getting News" as one of the reasons they are on the platform, and 90% reported seeing videos related to news or current events. "Though news is not the main reason many TikTok users visit the site, most still encounter news-related content there. Most TikTok users (95%) say they use the site because it's entertaining, while 41% cite getting news as a reason, according to our March 2024 survey." [24]

Stats: While the company has not confirmed the number of users on its platforms, there are several estimations that put the number at 1.9 billion monthly active users.[25]

Safety Rating: GLAAD gives TikTok a 56 out of 100 and noted that, unlike many other platforms, it has preserved policy protecting LGBTQ and marginalized populations. The managing company has

set Community Guidelines concerning AI-Generated media, deepfakes, and misinformation.[26] The Platform Safety Index gives TikTok a D and indicates that though the company has implemented more effective moderation tools, the nature of the shared content and the limited ability of its identity and age verification tools mean that it is not advisable for minors to use the platform unsupervised.

REDDIT

Description: Reddit is a text and image-sharing social platform revolving around 'sub-Reddit's', each their own message board, with posts ranked by community interest.

Demography: Overall, 26% of surveyed adults report having used Reddit, according to Pew Research. Users tend to be younger, with more education, and in higher income brackets. Reddit shows lower usage among black and Hispanic adults in the US, at 18% and 22%, respectively. On the other hand, 44% of Asian adults in the US reported having used the platform. Use in rural areas is 17%, compared to 29-30% in urban and suburban areas.

Statistics: WolframlAlpha reports 540 million views from 110 million unique visitors per day. Reddit Inc's SEC filing in 2025 records 121.4 million Daily Active Users. The same filing says that "approximately 57% of Redditors visited the platform from outside of the United States" and that "over 90% of all Reddit posts created were made in English."

Safety Ratings: The Platform Safety Index gives Reddit an F, noting there are few safeguards to protect minors during unsupervised use, and moderation varies significantly between subreddits.

SUBSTACK

Description: Substack is a subscription-based blogging platform, letting users follow individual creators for direct content like newsletters, videos, livestreams, and podcasts. Substack runs on a subscription model and takes 10% of all subscription revenue. Substack does not run advertisements on its platform.[27]

Demography: "NicheIndex.co" sampled 26k Substack populations, Indexing newsletters, their price, and tracking 'niches' within the data set. The top 3 categories from their data set were "Climate & Environment", "Travel", and "Business". 84% of newsletters charged between $5-10 dollars a month, with $5 as the minimum allowed subscription price.[28]

Statistics: Semrush (An Adobe Company)[29] estimated that Substack.com received 114 million total visits in April 2026.[30] A 2024 New York Times articles reported that Substack had 4 million individual subscriptions on their platform.[31]

Safety Ratings: The Platform Safety index gives Substack a D+, noting that there are acceptable moderation tools, and personal data protections. Substack lacks age verification, and behavioral detection tools

MEDIUM

Description: Medium is a Blogging and self-publishing social platform where users can follow other users and creators, as well as receive recommendations for articles that might interest them. Medium offers a membership for $5/month, allowing access to member-exclusive media, and special content management tools. Medium is owned by “A Medium Corporation” and is privately held.

Demography: The United States account for 31% of all traffic, followed by India at 12%, the United Kingdom at 4%, and Germany at 3%. Medium has not made other demographic data public and is not tracked by Pew Research or other external research entities.

Statistics: Semrush (An Adobe Company) measured 104 million total visits to Medium.com over the month of April 2026. Medium does not publish metrics concerning the number of users on their platform.[32]

Safety Ratings: The Platform Safety Index gives Medium a D+, noting that while there are acceptable moderation tools, and the organization is mostly transparent about how it uses your data, Medium lacks proper age verification and behavioral detection tools.

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UNITING FOR WATER JUSTICE
OFFICIAL SELECTION ENVIRONMENTAL FILM FESTIVAL IN THE NATION'S CAPITAL 2025
OFFICIAL SELECTION CLIMATE FILM FESTIVAL 2025
WILD & SCENIC FILM FESTIVAL OFFICIAL SELECTION 2026
OFFICIAL SELECTION Colorado Environmental Film Festival 2026
OFFICIAL SELECTION Chesapeake Film Festival 2025
OFFICIAL SELECTION Alexandria Film Festival 2025
OFFICIAL SELECTION San Pedro International Film Festival 2025
OFFICIAL SELECTION Green Film Festival of San Francisco 2025
OFFICIAL SELECTION Social Justice Film Festival 2026
OFFICIAL SELECTION Documentaries Without Borders International Film Festival 2026
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CASE STUDY: UPSTREAM, DOWNRIVER MEDIA PROJECT

This case study examines the creation of an interconnected media ecosystem designed to maximize meaningful impact. A half hour film, ***Upstream, Downriver – Fighting for Water Justice***[33] premiered at a symposium in late 2022 for the 50-year anniversary of the Clean Water Act. The goal was to inform, engage, inspire, and empower viewers to advocate for clean water and healthy ecosystems. The distribution model was a traditional progression of festival screenings, events with environmental organizations, then a short run of public television broadcasts, followed by educational distribution with New Day Films.[34] This model was based on the success of distribution for the half-hour film "Unbreathable" [35](2020), produced for the 50-year anniversary of the Clean Air Act. However, by 2023, it was becoming clear that the traditional, linear distribution model was outdated.

Additional funding provided an opportunity to expand to a one-hour film, ***Upstream, Downriver – Uniting for Water Justice*** which used much of the original footage plus new stories. The mindset for distribution pivoted from a traditional approach to a nonlinear media ecosystem with content designed and created to reach as many changemakers as quickly as possible using multiple platforms. Rather than waiting until the end of its festival run, the hour version ***Upstream, Downriver – Uniting for Water Justice*** premiered in March 2025 at the Environmental Film Festival in the Nation's Capital, www.dceff.org and on national public television in April 2025, distributed by APT. Educational distribution with New Day Films quickly followed. The need to engage and activate around water justice and equity issues far outweighed the risks of being disqualified from festivals. Some festivals did decline because the film was already being broadcast, but many made an exception.

The ***Upstream, Downriver Media Project*** now includes a half-hour film, a one-hour film, a YouTube Channel, and channels on Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, as well as posts on LinkedIn. Importantly, all content drives viewers to the website, which serves as a hub as well as providing water justice resources and toolkits. http://www.upstreamdownriver.org/ Branding is consistent across all media, and the impact goals are specific and interconnected across platforms. The project's use of social and digital media platforms demonstrates the capacity of short-form video platforms to facilitate awareness of social/environmental justice initiatives. It can generate earned media which can happen, according to the PRLab, "organically through word-of-mouth, media coverage, or an online buzz".[36] Most important is the earned impact that can be generated by reaching a broad range of motivated stakeholders and changemakers to activate communities.

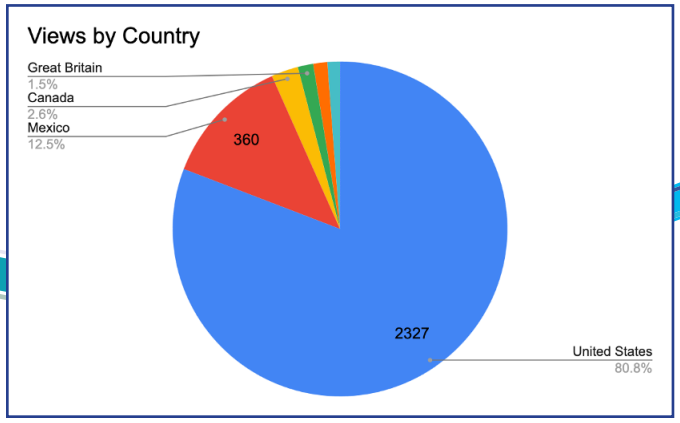
Here is a summary of the ***Upstream, Downriver Media Ecosystem***:

FESTIVALS: For the hour film, these include the Environmental Film Festival in the Nation's Capital aka DCEFF (premiere), Climate Film Festival[37] with a festival streaming on the international environmental streaming platform Waterbear,[38] Chesapeake Film Festival, Green Film Festival of San Francisco, Alexandria Film Festival, San Pedro International Film Festival, Frozen River Film Festival, Colorado Environmental Film Festival, Wild & Scenic Film Festival, Documentaries Without Borders International Film Festival, Social Justice Film Festival, Impact DOCS Awards.

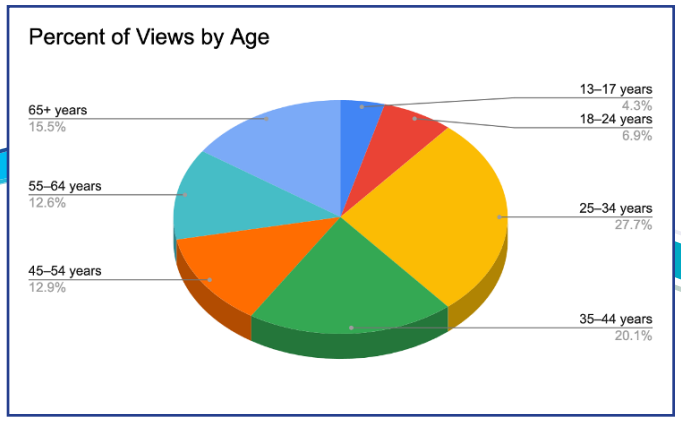
BROADCAST: ***Upstream, Downriver*** is distributed nationally on public television through American Public Television. From April 2025-May 2026, the hour film aired nearly 1,400 times across the U.S. and continues to have repeat airings. It is nominated for a 2026 Capital Emmy Award in the Cultural/Topical category and won two 2026 Telly Bronze Awards, in the Long Form Documentary and Environmental/Climate categories. Public television is watched by 58 percent of all U.S. TV households, a reach of approximately 130+ million people.[39] According to PBS, sixty percent of these viewers live in rural communities. Nearly two-thirds, 63%, of viewers identify as Republican or Independent.[40]

EDUCATIONAL: Distributed through New Day Films.[41] Over the past two and a half years, screening licenses for the half-hour film and hour film were purchased by universities, environmental and health organizations, churches, utility companies, and individuals. Streaming licenses are available for 14-days, one-year, or lifetime. The range of organizations is significant, here is a sampling: Association for Environmental Studies and Sciences (AESS), American Public Health Association (APHA) annual conference, NOLA Water Week, Philadelphia Retirement Home with Third Act,[42] Ohio State University, American University, Anacostia Watershed, Waterkeeper Alliance, Easton Utilities Employee Day, University Film & Video Association conference; Green Latinos, and others. Both films are also available on Kanopy, a university and public library educational streaming distributor.

YOUTUBE *UPSTREAM, DOWNRIVER* CHANNEL: The Channel includes the new "Women Water Warrior" series as well as 22 vertical clips. The series is nine short episodes, 5-7 minutes each, that highlight women leaders rallying communities to advocate for water justice and create solutions. Half of the episodes are versioned from stories in the longer film, and half are created from new footage. A short Intro video with Series Founder/Director Maggie Burnette Stogner explains her motivation for creating the "Upstream, Downriver Media Project." In one month, from April 21 to May 21, 2026, the nine episodes, welcome video, and trailer for the hour generated an aggregate of 3,856 views, 23,634 impressions, and over 74 hours of watch time. 80.8% of the views were in the U.S., 12.5% in Mexico and 2.6% in Canada. Viewership is fairly evenly distributed across age groups from 25 to 65+ years of age.



Youtube 1 Month Review



Youtube 1 Month Review

FACEBOOK & INSTAGRAM: As of May 2026, there are a combined total of 117 followers, with a content reach of 9,986 unique accounts. Video content is performing particularly well, generating 18,229 total views, indicating strong engagement with short-form and visual storytelling. In addition, some posts are uploaded on the personal Facebook and Instagram accounts of the Upstream, Downriver team, film participants and their organizations' sites, the American University Center for Environmental Filmmaking sites, and others. Tracking the shares across these other sites is challenging, as is the lack of useful metrics.

LINKEDIN: The ***Upstream, Downriver*** LinkedIn page generated 829 impressions and received 48 reactions, a mediocre response. By contrast, Upstream-related posts shared via Maggie Burnette Stogner's personal LinkedIn page significantly expanded reach, earning 4,356 additional impressions. This demonstrates the effectiveness of leveraging individual professional networks to amplify organizational content. Participants in the Upstream films and YouTube series also post on their LinkedIn sites. Tracking and gathering this data with a limited team and budget is challenging.

TIKTOK: Over a thirty-day period, from its launch on March 15 to April 15, 2026, the "Upstream, Downriver" TikTok channel achieved a 171.8% increase in viewership, reaching a predominantly new audience. This suggests that the platform's interest-based algorithm bypassed traditional audience silos to engage unique viewers in critical conversations regarding water justice and equity. Unlike traditional social networks that rely on existing follower bases, TikTok prioritizes content relevance, allowing mission driven media to achieve high impact visibility regardless of an account's initial size. In this case, out of a total 3,865 viewers, a remarkable 99.8% were identified as new visitors. Content engagement was highest when the messaging combined narrative documentary elements with direct calls to action. The highest performing video, which directed users to external advocacy resources, garnered over 1,300 views, suggesting the audience is actively seeking deeper involvement. The demographic data reveals a majority female audience (64%), with activity peaks on Tuesday afternoons.

Strategic Methodologies for Environmental Justice Impact on TikTok:

The "two second rule" of digital attention spans necessitates a strong visual or narrative "hook" to prevent viewer attrition. For this campaign, the focus favored community reactions to create a sense of trust and human connection, which is essential for movements centered on justice and equity. Captions and niche-specific hashtags such as #WaterIsLife and #EnvironmentalJustice, helped the campaign signal its relevance to both the algorithm and the viewer. These tactics, combined with strategic postings, transformed the account from a static profile into a dynamic hub for water justice advocacy. By simplifying complex environmental messages into authentic, short-form stories, grassroots movements can achieve significant stopping power in a crowded digital landscape. The data suggests that the future of environmental advocacy lies in the ability to marry rigorous factual documentary work with the high-speed, high-connectivity nature of modern social media platforms.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maggie Burnette Stogner has been making award-winning documentary films for 35 years. Her career spans leadership roles as Executive Director of the Center for Environmental Filmmaking at American University; Senior Producer at National Geographic TV & Films; Senior Producer at Apple Computer, and founder of the production company Blue Bear Films (maggiebluebear.media). She has produced and directed large format films and immersive media for world-touring cultural exhibits for National Geographic, Smithsonian, LucasFilms, the Canadian Museum of History and Culture and others. Her independent films include the award-winning ***Upstream, Downriver - Uniting for Water Justice*** which was nominated for a 2026 Capital Region Emmy, and has won two 2026 TELLY Bronze awards in the Long Format Documentary and Cultural/Topical categories, ***Unbreathable – the Fight for Healthy Air***, and ***In the Executioner's Shadow*** about the death penalty. She is committed to creating compelling media that engages and activates viewers across media platforms.

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