The background is a vertical split of yellow and white. The white side features a faint, abstract pattern of concentric circles and dots in various colors (yellow, orange, blue, grey). The yellow side is solid. A thin blue border frames the entire page.

RESOURCE GUIDE

ON DOCUMENTARY STORYTELLING FOR COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

A RADICAL OPTIMIST COLLECTIVE- CMSI
RESOURCE GUIDE FOR USING DOCUMENTARIES TO START CONVERSATIONS
ON RACISM, RACIALIZED TRAUMA, AND RACIAL VIOLENCE

JANUARY 2021



ABOUT THE CENTER FOR MEDIA & SOCIAL IMPACT (CMSI):

The Center for Media & Social Impact (CMSI), based at American University's School of Communication in Washington, D.C., is an innovation lab and research center that creates, studies, and showcases media for social impact. Focusing on independent, documentary and public media, the Center bridges boundaries between scholars, producers and communication practitioners across media production, media impact, social justice, public policy, and audience engagement. The Center produces resources for the field and academic research; convenes conferences and events; and works collaboratively to understand and design media that matter.

ABOUT ITVS

ITVS is a San Francisco-based nonprofit organization that has, for over 25 years, funded and partnered with a diverse range of documentary filmmakers to produce and distribute untold stories. ITVS incubates and co-produces these award-winning films and then airs them for free on PBS via our weekly series, Independent Lens, as well as on other PBS series and through our digital platform, OVEE. ITVS is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. For more information, visit itvs.org.

ABOUT THE RADICAL OPTIMIST COLLECTIVE:

Radical Optimist deploys a consistent approach across all of its work anchored in equity and inclusion. We acknowledge we do not have all of the answers and we believe that the most powerful results come from a co-developed process with the stakeholders that any initiative aims to serve and impact. We work hand-in-hand with internal teams to develop goals and agendas for each experience.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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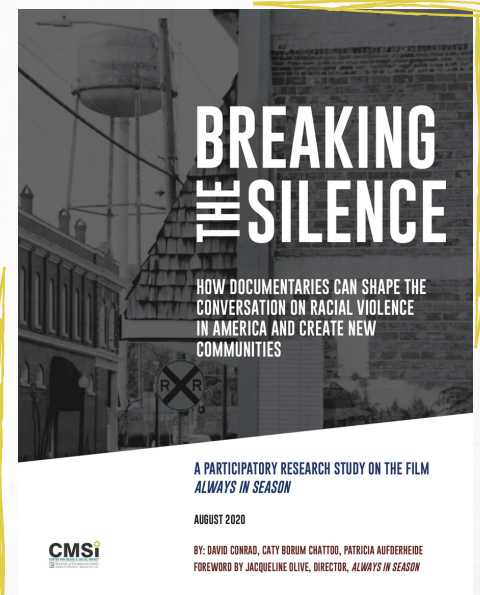
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ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This resource guide was prepared by Radical Optimist Collective to provide documentary filmmakers, impact producers, public broadcasters, and civic and community groups with a set of insights and resources to inform the use of documentary films to facilitate engagement, dialogue and community building around urgent social justice issues, including racism, racial violence and racial justice in America.

This resource guide was created with support from the Center for Media & Social Impact (CMSI) at American University, which specializes in the use of documentaries and creative culture for social change and community building, but it is driven by the expertise and perspective of a Radical Optimist team that specializes in facilitating conversations around racial justice and healing.

This guide is also **evidence-based**. It was created following a participatory study held in seven communities across the country, which used a community screening of the documentary, *Always in Season*, to catalyze community conversations and break long-standing cultures of silence around issues of racial violence. The results of this study were documented in a report titled ***Breaking The Silence: How Documentaries Can Shape The Conversation on Racial Violence in America and Create New Communities***. Among its findings, funded by ITVS through the support of Ford Foundation, the research highlighted the need for more community-centered guidance and resources on how documentaries can be used as tools in facilitating productive conversations on issues of racism and racial violence -- among other important social issues -- in communities across the country.



As organizers consider expanding community engagement strategies beyond traditional approaches (i.e. post-screening panels), this resource guide encourages documentary producers and groups to:

- 1) consider** the interpersonal work that is needed to understand racial violence and trauma and engage in racial healing;
- 2) prepare** the groundwork for deeper community engagement using documentary films as a centering mechanism;
- 3) design and facilitate** conversations and community building actions that bring people together through documentaries; and
- 4) grow and support** a community that is learning, healing and coming together to transform their communities.

²This work can be accessed here: [LINK HERE](#)

¹ The Radical Optimist: [LINK HERE](#)

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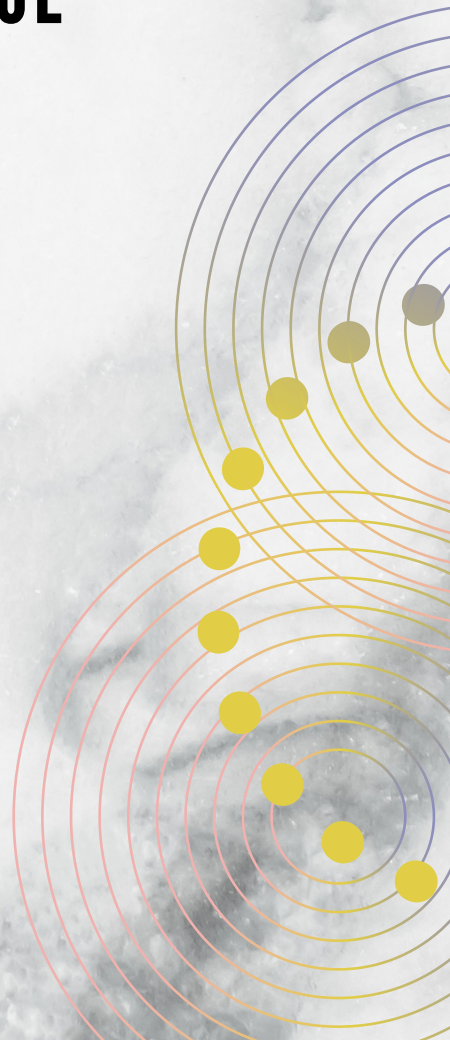
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A grayscale photograph of a city street scene. In the foreground, the rear of a white car is visible. The street is lined with multi-story brick buildings. A street sign with a large 'R' is visible on the right. The overall tone is somber and urban.

STEP ONE

consider your place and the gravity of the issue

we start with ourselves...

For everyone, and especially for white people, the first step of racial healing is recognizing that racism is systemic. We need to resist the temptation to distance ourselves from it, and we need to acknowledge the history of racism, racial violence and racialized trauma right at home, in our community. If healing is to occur, then every voice needs to be included in the process. This is not the job of BIPOC on our teams or in our communities. This is an opportunity to grow and heal, to develop the skills and stamina to work in and through moments of racial stress.

What this means is that community organizers should be equipped with the resources and guidance they need to understand the nuance and gravity of the issues featured by the documentary before they facilitate any community-level conversations around it.

This is not a task that should be outsourced to a panel alone, but one that is prioritized by the organizer of the community conversations.

PREPARE FOR MEANINGFUL ENGAGEMENT USING DOCUMENTARY FILMS AS A CENTERING MECHANISM

Community engagement is an ever-building set of relationships -- a network of trust in your community. It is part of building your own role in the community. No one event has to accomplish everything. But each event is part of building a stronger set of relationships among your participants and between them and your organizations. **To build these relationships your approach should be about creating transformational experiences, rather than transactional.** This means:

1 | THINKING CONVERSATION, NOT PANELS

We're all experts on how we felt about a film, and how it connects to our life experience. Welcome people to a space of sharing experience across difference, with facilitators, not subject experts, helping them do that. This means:

“It's tempting to find the experts to discuss the hot-button topics after the screening. But if you want to invite people to a real conversation, you don't want them to defer to “the experts” in the room for answers.”

2 | BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH CONVERSATION LEADERS/PARTNERS AND PROVIDE QUALITY TRAINING AND GUIDANCE ON HOW-TO FACILITATE COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

Remember that credentials and titles are less important than being able to encourage people to talk together. People from all walks of life and backgrounds can lead conversations. They might have backgrounds in social work, pastoral care, or therapeutic support, or they might have another claim on the community's trust. At the same time, it is important to remember that an untrained/unprepared person, even if well-meaning, can do more harm than good. For this reason, the development of specific training and guidance on both the issues of the documentary, and in facilitating community conversations, is essential.

The following are some important characteristics and values that we believe anyone tasked with facilitating a community conversation should have, but they should not replace proper guidance and training:

Here are some characteristics of an effective facilitator and conversation leader:

- They do not over-manage and are not rushing for resolution in the group.
- They allow room for deeper discussion versus jumping to the next topic or question.
- They are able to observe, hold and sit with emotional content and participant emotions.
- They are intuitive and empathic. They can deeply sense the feelings of other people and groups and use that intuitive muscle to help guide conversations.
- They hear the unvoiced questions, can anticipate the needs of groups and individuals, and where others grapple for words, they seem to find the right words and the right tone.
- They embrace ‘both/and’ thinking at all times and understand that multiple truths can be true and the goal is “not to be right but to work to get it right.”³ ‘Both/and’ thinking is grounded in a collaborative mindset that acknowledges the validity of all perspectives and synthesizes individual views into a collective view.⁴

³ Brene Brown, Shame and Accountability podcast, July 2020. Also, the Guidelines for Racial Healing & Trauma Informed Conversations can help facilitation. Link [HERE](#).

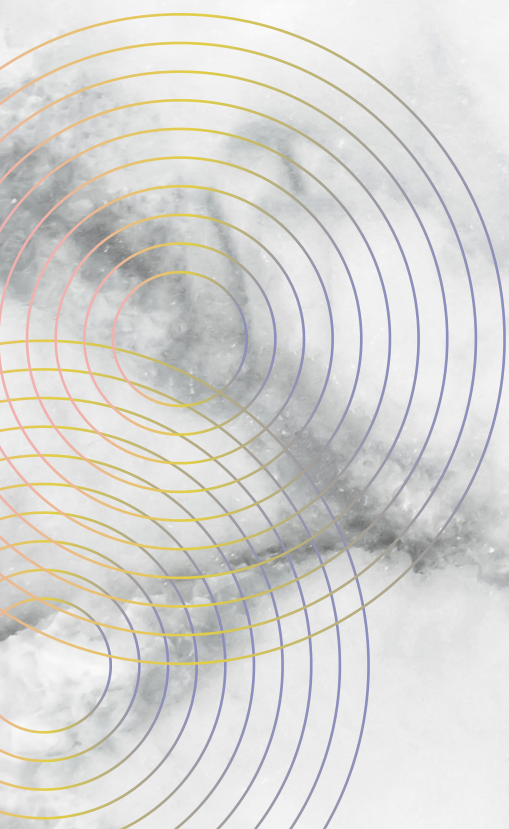
⁴ Consider the Guidelines for Racial Healing & Trauma Informed Conversations Link [HERE](#).

Finally, we encourage co-facilitation in pairs and with accountability partners. Effective conversation leadership usually has more than one person in a leadership role. We recommend that facilitators have some form of a relationship with each other, even if that is getting to know one another in the week of the session. Co-facilitation allows for balancing of skills, and diversity in perspectives and strengths in understanding the individual and group needs. It also creates support for each facilitator. Generally, life feels safer if we know that someone has our back and we aren't going at it alone.

Another important aspect of preparation is location. Consider whether your location is accessible to most community members and appropriate for the sensitivity of the conversations you will be hosting. This means:

3 | CHOOSING A TRUSTED PLACE

Accessibility, beyond the important issues of physical access, is about creating places for belonging and inclusion. Try to meet communities where they are, versus always requiring that they come to you (unless that is a familiar safe space for them). When choosing a local place, think about it as an invitation into someone's home. Be gracious, don't judge. And don't be afraid to infuse touches that make the space feel welcoming and warm (flowers, a candle, artwork, music, etc.).



DESIGN + FACILITATE CONVERSATIONS AND COMMUNITY BUILDING ACTIONS THAT BRING PEOPLE TOGETHER THROUGH DOCUMENTARIES

1 | CREATE A "SAFE ENOUGH" ENVIRONMENT

Create a "safe enough" environment. Communities, especially communities of color, hold deep mistrust of public, government, and commercial institutions around issues of racial violence and racism. Create a "safe enough" environment for the conversation by using [*Radical Optimist Collective's Conversation Container Guidelines*](#) for Facilitators and the [*Shared Understandings*](#).

2 | ACKNOWLEDGE TRAUMA AND DO NO HARM

Stories can be powerful--and profoundly upsetting. In a focus group we conducted following a viewing of *Always in Season*, one of the African- American participants opened her comments by asking the group, in a tear-filled statement, "Can we just take a moment to weep?" And we did.

Stories that explore the hidden and untold truths of the pain, terror, violence and trauma experienced by Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) communities are all trauma stories. A whole host of emotions will likely be triggered. What's the right thing to do? The first thing is to make time to let people express and share the emotions they are experiencing.

3 | CHOOSE YOUR WORDS THOUGHTFULLY AND SHARE THE MEANING OF THE WORDS YOU USE.

Words matter. Our words can make a person feel immediately included and safe or not. Learning and understanding some key phrases in racial equity and anti-racist practice is an essential step in creating a space for a safe and brave community conversation. [*Racial Equity Tools*](#) created an excellent [*racial equity terms glossary*](#) as a resources for leaders of racial equity⁵ work. Additionally, and especially given the focus of racial violence and lynching as demonstrated in *Always in Season*, understanding the brutal history of lynching in America is another essential step in creating a space to hold conversations about racial violence and trauma. PBS's *American Experience* is an excellent resource with more than 100 articles and films that explore the history of [*lynching in America*](#).

4 | SOMETIMES LISTENING IS THE GOAL.

Community events don't always have to be about 'solving' a problem. The act of sharing experiences, listening to the experiences of others, and building new community consciousness is an important outcome in itself. Encourage the group to listen to build relationships, not to problem-solve. Welcome them to a process, a conversation that will be continued. Be ready to ask next-step questions about what needs to be explored. Such as: "What/who else needs to be represented? Who is missing? Who is benefitting from this story being told?"

5 | GUIDE CONVERSATION

Guide the conversation to keep attention on-topic. A documentary can provide a way into uncomfortable and overdue conversations in communities. Your guidance can help the conversation remain centered around the issues of racial violence and trauma as raised in the film and help prevent one person from dominating the conversation, and to help community members explore what racial violence and racism means to them.

The following questions may help facilitators support the individual and the group process:

- What happened to you?
 - How does what happened to you affect you now?
 - How, in spite of what happened, have you been able to triumph?
 - What are the external factors that create or maintain the personal and/or community sense of injury?
 - What do you need to heal?
 - What gift have you been able to bring forth from this experience? (what meaning does it have in your life?)
 - What lessons/wisdom can you share with others based on your experience with power wounding and healing?⁶
-

6 | SHOW THE GRATITUDE YOU FEEL

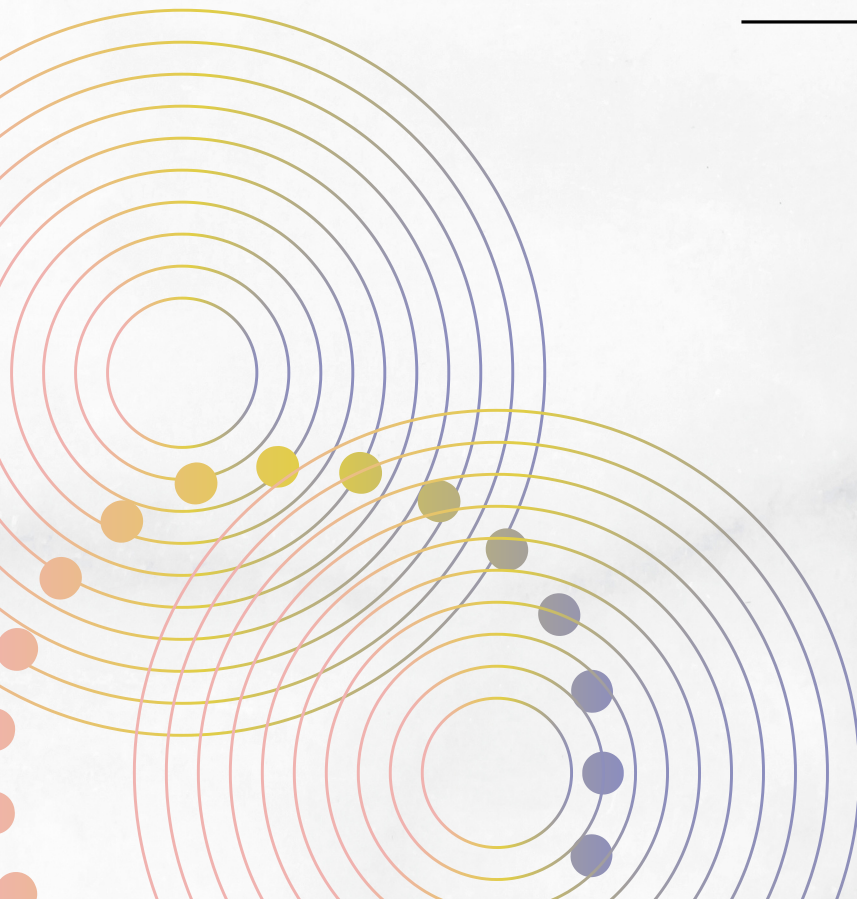
People of color are frequently invited to community events and asked to share difficult experiences and explain their experience to white community members, while very little substantive change occurs as a result. It is important to recognize this history and not take for granted the participation, vulnerability, courage, and energy required of everyone who shows up. Addressing the disproportionate emotional effort for people of color. Show empathy and respect for people's vulnerability and courage.

GROW AND SUPPORT A COMMUNITY THAT IS LEARNING, HEALING AND COMING TOGETHER TO TRANSFORM THEIR COMMUNITIES.

For organizers, this event should be part of a process of building community. You can make sure that people not only have a meaningful experience, but know your long-term vision, and their opportunities to engage or be involved in the future.

Here are four ways community organizations can make it easier for people to understand their longer-term, community-building vision:

1. **Use the documentary** as a way into a conversation about your community. Encourage the conversation to move to the realities and perspectives experienced by the community members in the room.
2. **Share with the group** how this one event can be part of a process. Provide opportunities for follow-up engagements, encourage community members and organizations to connect on the issues raised during the conversation, and welcome opportunities for partnerships.
3. **Bring the insights home.** How do the learning experiences of these events help your station become more diverse, more racially just, more aware of the issues raised? How can the station's work draw from the insights revealed by the conversation? The opportunities created by building community enrich the possibilities for everyone.
4. **Build virtual cohorts** among stations and community groups to build best practices and to continue evolving new models for engagement.



**FOR MORE INFORMATION AND RESOURCES
PLEASE CONTACT:**



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