



# BREAKING ≡ SILENCE

HOW DOCUMENTARIES CAN SHAPE THE  
CONVERSATION ON RACIAL VIOLENCE  
IN AMERICA AND CREATE NEW  
COMMUNITIES

A PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH STUDY ON THE FILM  
*ALWAYS IN SEASON*

OCTOBER 2020



## 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 THE REPORT

This report was prepared and written by a team at the Center for Media & Social Impact. CMSI executive director Caty Borum Chattoo and CMSI senior research fellow Patricia Aufderheide served as principal investigators. The report was written by David Conrad, CMSI postdoctoral researcher, who also served as the lead researcher on the study, Caty Borum Chattoo, and Patricia Aufderheide. This study was facilitated by the work and support of Varsha Ramani, CMSI communications and program manager. This work was funded by the Independent Television Service (ITVS) made possible through support from the Ford Foundation.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## 4 FOREWORD

## 7 INTRODUCTION

The Documentary: *Always in Season*

The Communities

The Research Method(s)

## 11 KEY HIGHLIGHTS OF FINDINGS FROM THE COMMUNITY FOCUS-GROUP CONVERSATIONS

## 17 CREATING ENGAGING COMMUNITY EVENTS WITH DOCUMENTARY STORYTELLING

## 20 QUOTES FROM PARTICIPANTS

# FOREWORD

As I write this, rapid shifts are taking place around the world due to the collective response to alarming racial violence in the United States of many kinds, including cases of police brutality like the May 25, 2020, murder of George Floyd by white Minneapolis Police Officer Derek Chauvin, who choked the life out of Floyd with his knee lethally held on the Black man's neck for nearly nine minutes - all recorded on video. That is an incredibly difficult truth that is important to say directly and unflinchingly, despite the pain and rage that can come with facing such unjustified violence. In fact, to do so is an acknowledgement of George Floyd's humanity and an expression of our own. This is the approach I took with *Always in Season*.

It's been hard to see the images of George Floyd's suffering and Derek Chauvin's inhumane response to his pleas for the compassion that every person is due. The cell phone and police cam videos, like the historic images of lynching, are especially distressing for Black and Indigenous people in the United States for whom the trauma is most intimate and runs deepest. The current global outcry and organizing against systemic racism in response to George Floyd's death, and life, are a testament to how devastating repeated acts of racial violence are for most people across the country, and throughout the world.

Much of the nation seems to be awakening to the historic legacy of racial violence on a new level previously unseen in my lifetime. The fact that there is a modern civil rights movement that is more focused than ever on police brutality, vigilante murders, and the spate of contemporary public hanging deaths of Black people in the context of how institutions have responded to, ignored, benefitted from, and been designed around anti-Black racism is a much needed balm for me in the moment. The very same shifts in consciousness taking place across the country, from a fuzzy understanding of the reverberations of this history to greater clarity about its connections to the present, led me to make *Always in Season* twelve years ago as I learned more about lynching and worked to document the multigenerational fallout of the terrorism.

I had a lot of reasons for making this film, but what initially guided me was seeing the collection of lynching photographs and postcards called "Without Sanctuary: Lynching Photography in America," which bears witness to the tens of thousands of white men, women, and children posing proudly with the bodies of thousands of Black people, who account for most of the 6,500 documented cases of

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people victimized by lynching (as documented by the newly released *Reconstruction in America* report from the Equal Justice Initiative) between 1865 and 1950. I first saw “Without Sanctuary” in my home state of Mississippi in 2001 and viewed the photographs in ways I had never seen them before. Prior to attending the exhibit, I thought about lynching victims as a lot of people did, as anonymous Black men hanging. And when I came across “Without Sanctuary”, I realized that the lynching photos featured faces of the men, women, and children who were killed that could have been my family members. They could have been my friends and my neighbors. Their images called me to understand more about who they were and how, in many cases, they came to their deaths with half or more of the white people in their communities murderously turning on them. After months, I started to also look at the perpetrators and the spectators in those images and realize that they could have been my friends. They could have been the people that I knew, that I had gone to school with, or my neighbors. It was important for me to explore how participating in and/or living in the midst of this seminal violence impacted Blacks who survived, whites, and non-Black people of color.

When I started researching for *Always in Season* in 2008, very few people were looking at this history. Although it had already been studied and documented to some extent and made relatively widely available, there was in effect radio silence about lynching in the mainstream. Very little attention was even given to contemporary racial violence at that time, much less historic. The country was actually only a few years out from a national debate about whether we were living in a post-racial society in which racism no longer existed. While the American story was being crafted with amnesia, there were pockets of people fighting for justice in cases of suspected racial violence, like the killing of Amadou Diallo by police in New York in 1999 and the death of Antwan Sedgwick, found hanging publicly in Hampton, Virginia, shortly after the O.J. Simpson verdict was announced in October 1995. But, the attention these cases drew was not comprehensive or long-lasting. The country fell back into silence. That was the national climate as I moved into production with the film in 2010, until Trayvon Martin was gunned by George Zimmerman in Sanford, Florida, in February 2012, and a string of other cell phone videos documented similar murders of unarmed Black and brown people by police - from Oscar Grant, III, killed by BART Police Officer Johannes Mehserle in Oakland, California, in 2009, to the death of George Floyd a couple of months ago, and too many others in between and since.

Early on, I felt it was important that people—particularly young people who, like me, were underexposed to this history in secondary education—are able to name aspects of racial violence and the systemic racism happening in their communities that they encounter every day. The country is currently grappling with the fallout of lynching, and to be able to understand and discuss the issues thoroughly, allows for greater clarity in the work towards justice and reconciliation.

**“I AM HEARTENED THAT  
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ALWAYS IN SEASON IS  
HELPING COMMUNITIES  
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AROUND RACIAL  
VIOLENCE.”**



As we filmed for eight years through 2018, national attention on racial violence grew and waned. However, it is encouraging to see more than 25 million people, in the first seven months of 2020 alone, protesting racism and organizing for structural change out of the intersectional ideals of, and in solidarity with, The Movement For Black Lives. As pushback has increased in recent months about the cursory investigations into suspicious deaths deemed suicides of Black people found hanging publicly like Danye Jones, the 24-year-old son of Black Lives Matter activist, Melissa McKinnies, who was found hanging from a tree in their backyard on October 17, 2018 (as we were finishing the final edit of *Always in Season*); Titi Gulley, a 31-year-old Black transgender woman found hanging in Portland, Oregon, on May 27, 2019; Robert L. Fuller, a 24-year-old African American man who was found hanging from a tree in Palmdale, California, on June 10, 2020; of course, Lennon Lacy, whose story is featured in the film; and dozens of others—the term “lynching” has been used emphatically by some to describe their deaths. Whether any of these cases were, in fact, lynchings, suicides, or murders that were not racially motivated, what I hear people voicing, as they demand answers and justice, is important to consider. The climate that made lynching possible historically has evolved into the dehumanization and racial violence occurring today, and it is not an irrational leap to think that a lynching could occur now, so it is crucial that law enforcement, the criminal justice system, government agencies, journalism, secondary schools and colleges and universities, and other institutions frame the work that they are charged to do around the deaths and lives of Black people with lessons from this history. Strategies for justice and reconciliation that acknowledge threads of the past in the present are increasing, and demands for full equity are growing.

In addition to using the film to help communities make these connections, I see *Always in Season* as a vital tool for the process of reimagining the future. It is important to openly and comprehensively explore what justice and reconciliation can look like for the future in ways that let the past inform us and a deeper understanding of the present inspire radical institutional change moving forward.

I am heartened that this study finds that *Always in Season* is helping communities to break down cultures of silence around racial violence. Not only has the film encouraged people to speak out and become more conscious about lynching and related issues of racism, it has also provoked people to actively confront them in many ways. I am grateful for the thoroughness with which the CMSI staff undertook this study; the hard work and dedication of our impact team; the commitment by ITVS to share *Always in Season* with communities at more than 70 *Indie Lens PopUp* screening events in 2020, telling the American story with more accuracy; the generosity of those I filmed with who shared their stories despite the risks; the openness with which dozens of crew members collaborated, the support of funders who partner with us in production and with impact and engagement; dozens of local, regional and national impact partners; and the vulnerability of audiences who have viewed the film around the United States and globally and engaged in uncomfortable dialogues, community-building, deeper activism, and direct acts of kindness towards the people featured in *Always in Season*.

The work ahead for justice and reconciliation is as much local as it is national or global, and I am convinced now more than ever, that we are capable.

**JACQUELINE OLIVE**

**DIRECTOR, *ALWAYS IN SEASON***

# INTRODUCTION

The participatory contemporary media ecology is paradoxical. Audiences can readily access documentaries across a variety of platforms, and grassroots voices are able to participate in media-making and civic practice in unprecedented ways. Independent documentary filmmakers can artistically open a window with which to see little-seen voices and perspectives, often transmitting reality with a greater depth and emotional resonance than daily news reporting. And yet, at the same time, public trust in news media has fallen to historic lows. Ideological divides continue to widen across a range of public issues. Simultaneously, as news deserts in local communities continue to expand, distrust in news and increased political polarization result.

- **In this context, how do independent, point-of-view documentaries function to inform the public and inform conversations about the important public issues they address?**
- **Can they encourage conversation across difference, or do they merely “preach to the converted”?**
- **How do community audiences perceive the credibility and authenticity of documentary storytelling about contemporary social challenges facing communities in the United States?**
- **Is this kind of documentary storytelling understood as trustworthy engagement with shared problems, and can it bypass partisan divides?**
- **How do community audiences seek — and trust — other forms of media and news, as well as independent documentary storytelling on PBS?**

This study addresses these questions with a close look at one season’s community outreach screenings of a PBS film about the history and current reality of lynching in the U.S., *Always in Season*.

# THE DOCUMENTARY ALWAYS IN SEASON



As summarized by the filmmaker and ITVS,<sup>1</sup> the documentary feature film, *Always in Season*, explores the lingering impact of more than a century of lynching African Americans and connects this form of historic racial terrorism to racial violence today with a narrative framed by the case of Lennon Lacy, an African American teen who was found hanging from a swing set in Bladenboro, North Carolina, on August 29, 2014. Despite inconsistencies in the case, local officials quickly ruled Lennon's death a suicide, but his mother, Claudia, believes Lennon was lynched.

*Always in Season* features Claudia's fight for justice for her son. As the film unfolds, Lennon's case, and the suspicions surrounding it, intersect with stories of other communities seeking justice and reconciliation. A few hundred miles away in Monroe, Georgia, a diverse group of reenactors, including the adult daughter of a former Ku Klux Klan leader, annually dramatize a 1946 quadruple lynching to ensure that the victims are never forgotten and encourage the community to come forward with information that might bring the perpetrators to justice. As the terrorism of the past bleeds into the present, the film asks: what will it take for Americans to begin building a national movement for racial justice and reconciliation?

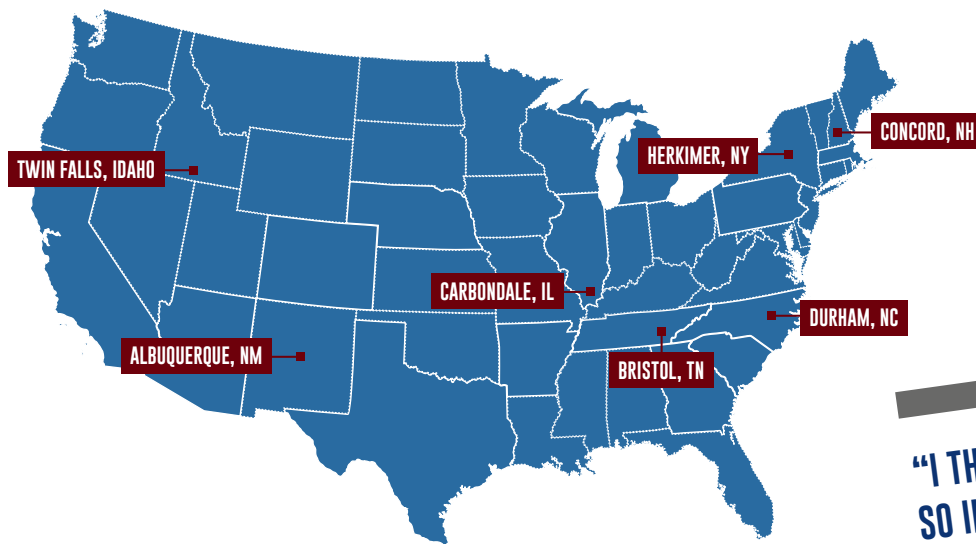
*Always in Season* had its theatrical release on September 20, 2019, and it was screened in communities across the country as part of the PBS series, *Independent Lens*, in February 2020. *Always in Season* is the debut feature documentary of independent filmmaker Jacqueline Olive (Director).



# THE COMMUNITIES

This project engaged participants in seven communities across the country. These communities were selected from the total group of 72 ITVS screenings of *Always in Season* that took place during the month of February 2020 as part of its *Indie Lens Pop-Up* series.

In addition to their logistical compatibility (i.e. that the screenings fell on different days), these communities were identified as best reflecting a diverse cross-section of the country, based on a mixed set of considerations including: **geographic diversity, demographics, political partisanship, adjacency to news deserts<sup>2</sup> (i.e. access to local news), and median household income.**



Taken together, the seven communities reflect geographic diversity (with at least one community from each of the four U.S. census regions), political balance (3 counties with majority Trump voters in 2016, 2 counties with majority Clinton voters in 2016, and 2 swing counties that year), economic balance (2 communities have median household incomes below \$45,000, 3 communities are between \$45,000 and \$50,000, and 2 are above \$50,000), and media access diversity (3 of the communities are in or adjacent to news deserts), among other categories of demographic diversity.

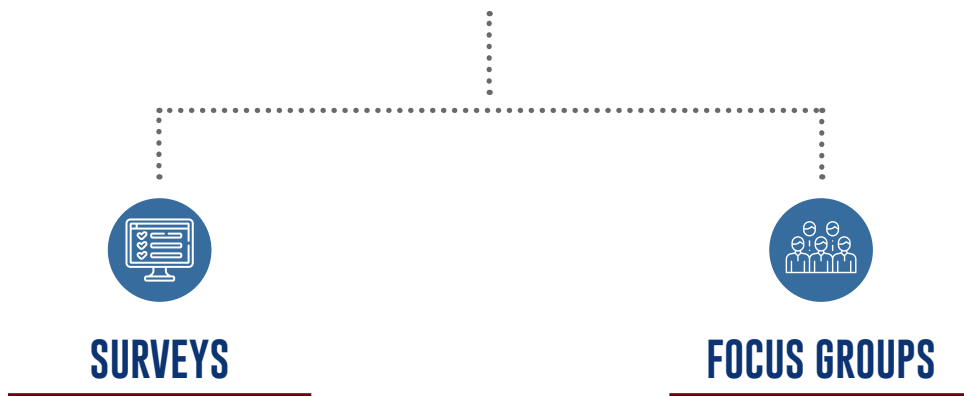
The settings of the focus group discussions were also just as varied. The conversations took place in a small room in a (Carbondale) public library, the conference room of a local (Durham) public television station, a university campus classroom (in Albuquerque), a Denny's restaurant (in Herkimer), a independent movie theater (in Concord), a community center (in Twin Falls), and a historic (once segregated) theater on the city's main street (in Bristol).

**"I THINK THE DOCUMENTARY IS SO IMPORTANT, BECAUSE IF YOU FICTIONALIZE THIS, THEN IT GIVES PEOPLE AN EXCUSE TO WRITE IT OFF AS THEY MADE THAT PART UP FOR DRAMA'S SAKE. AND IN A DOCUMENTARY YOU CAN'T HIDE FROM IT."**

**—ALBUQUERQUE PARTICIPANT**

# THE RESEARCH METHODS

**The result of a participatory research design, the findings of this study were co-produced by the 100+ participants who engaged in this research as participants and partners.** This report is the outcome of extended dialogues that took place with industry experts, local partners and community participants across the country in multiple stages over the last year. Deeply rooted in a participatory approach, a group of research partners and organizations worked together to develop this study's design, survey and focus group questions, findings and recommendations. With the support of 9 community co-facilitators/partners, 7 focus groups took place with 98 participants and pre/post-screening surveys were collected from 204 respondents. The focus group participants were invited by the local partners and by the researchers following each screening. Anyone who wanted to attend the focus groups was welcome, and each participant was provided with a small gift incentive and meal.



The pre- and post-screening surveys were administered to every audience member who attended the seven ITVS market screenings of ***Always in Season***. This survey data included basic information on the demographics and attitudes/reaction of the wider screening audience by yielding insights into who was at the screening, how long they had lived in the community, along with their media behaviours, pre-screening preconceptions, and post-screening reflections. The surveys were completed by a total of 204 respondents, reflecting about 64% of the total audience that attended the screenings.

The aim of the community focus-group conversations was to dive deeper into the experiences and questions that a survey can't capture. For instance, the focus groups were designed to explore the ways in which documentaries can bring to the forefront expression and engagement with details and truths that are traditionally pushed to the margins in other forms of media; to explore how people feel after watching the documentary; and how they articulate its significance to them and their community. The focus groups housed qualities of both depth and non-directedness, meaning that they were designed to not be dominated by the facilitators and were intended to elicit opinions without being judgmental.

# KEY HIGHLIGHTS OF FINDINGS FROM THE **COMMUNITY** FOCUS-GROUP CONVERSATIONS

The film and community screenings functioned both to inform individuals and to encourage conversations across differences in communities. Together, the film and community screenings **provided trusted information; built community consciousness; and created community building.**

## 1) PROVIDED A TRUSTED SOURCE OF INFORMATION

At a time of escalating media distrust, and expanding partisan divides and news deserts, viewers saw documentary storytelling as trustworthy and credible.

- **People often (in every group) shared a belief that local and national media outlets are “failing us” and that uncomfortable truths are being hidden from them.** They expressed a range of emotions — from sadness and shame to outrage and frustration — at not knowing more about cases of racial violence and suspicious suicides across the country, and a feeling that they are missing critical stories important to them and their community.
- **Participants widely described the documentary as providing information of critical value to them and as a trustworthy vehicle of information.** Participants felt it provided essential details and facts, which they believe to be true.
- **The documentary provided representations and experiences not commonly found in mainstream news.** Participants of color expressed feeling ‘seen’ by the documentary in ways they don’t usually experience within the news coverage of mainstream national and local news sources (including newspapers and cable news networks).
- **Participants said that the documentary and group viewing setting helped them to acknowledge the implications of what they had seen.** Participants spoke about how, at times, they wanted to close their eyes, or change the channel, but they couldn’t. Several participants (in 6 of the 7 communities) said that the documentary was dually effective in both portraying how racial violence involves a process of dehumanization and then providing a way of humanizing those who experience racial violence, something they do not see happen in mainstream forms of media.

**“OUR MAINSTREAM MEDIA IS FAILING US... THIS IS THE FIRST TIME I HAD EVEN HEARD OF THIS [LENNON LACY] LYNCHING IN OUR STATE, AND I’M FROM FAYETTEVILLE, NORTH CAROLINA WHICH ISN’T FAR FROM BLADENBORO.”**

**—DURHAM PARTICIPANT**

- **Participants said they feel the documentary reflected more complexity and detail than they get from other sources of news and information.** People in every community spoke about how the documentary helped them better understand the realities of racial violence in their community by providing them with essential details and language to describe it. The act of *hearing the real voices of people and seeing their faces* made it hard for participants to ignore - or remain removed - from the truths being portrayed. Participants in every community also said the documentary provided them with new language (like racial terror) that they had not used before to better understand what has happened (and is happening) in the country.
- **Many participants said the film connected with them emotionally, and that helped them empathize with others' experiences.** Participants of all backgrounds expressed how the documentary helped them to form emotional connections that led to meaning-making and validation. Several participants identified with the mother of Lennon Lacy, who was a central person in the documentary, and they spoke about how the documentary humanized people that they feel would have largely been treated as stereotypes or statistics in mainstream news reporting. Further, while "the news" often feels distant, participants described the documentary as feeling personal. At least one person in every community said they felt the documentary *in their body*.

**"I THINK IT PUTS YOU IN THE SHOES OF PEOPLE BETTER THAN THE NEWS, WHICH [FEELS] SEPARATED. YOU'RE MORE DISTANT FROM IT. AND WATCHING THAT DOCUMENTARY YOU FEEL EMBARRASSED."**

**—CARBONDALE PARTICIPANT**

## 2) BUILT COMMUNITY CONSCIOUSNESS/AWARENESS

**"I WONDERED TO MYSELF, WHY ARE THE WHITE PEOPLE IN THIS COMMUNITY NOT STANDING IN SOLIDARITY WITH THIS FAMILY? HOW CAN THEY BE SO DEEP IN THEIR DENIAL OF TRUTH...OR WHY WERE WE NOT DRIVING THERE, TO BLADENBORO, TO DEMAND JUSTICE FOR THESE PEOPLE?"**

**—DURHAM PARTICIPANT**

The documentary and community event provided a space for participants to recognize, name, and begin to breakdown long-standing cultures of silence in their communities around racial violence, in several ways:

- **Participants across the country felt that the documentary told a story that echoed with the experience of their community.** In most instances, people initiated the discussion by sharing their personal response to the documentary -- describing feelings of anger, shame, frustration, hopelessness. As part of their personal responses, participants expressed thoughts - emotionally and passionately - about their own community's history and realities. People in every focus group said comments such as: "This is true here,". Participants reflected: "This is real," "this is our history," "this is happening in our community," "this is our responsibility," "we can't be silent."

- **The documentary functioned as an effective tool in stimulating participants to explore a culture of silence in their community around issues of racial violence.**

Participants across communities used similar language to describe the culture of silence, most often referring to it as a “mob mentality”, a culture of “watching” and “covertness,” and the quiet “suppression of truth telling.” The based community conversations generally followed two steps: First, communities recognized and addressed the “culture of silence” in the documentary, and, then, they recognized and addressed the “culture of silence” in their community.

- **Many participants of color shared personal experiences of racial violence and discrimination in a community setting for the first time.** Several participants of color shared experiences of racial violence from both the recent and distant past -- involving them or friends or family members -- and the fear that many of them still carry living as a person of color in their community.

### 3) CREATED SPACES FOR COMMUNITY BUILDING

Community documentary screenings foster meaningful opportunities to build community and open honest conversation. Someone in every community discussion group said that they need more community spaces and events like this. People felt the community setting helped foster dialogue, on an issue directly relevant to them, in a way that doesn't exist elsewhere in their community.

- **Post-screening panels are not substitutes for community conversations:** While post-screening panels are often useful in providing helpful context, they cannot replace the unique dynamics and impact of a community-led/centered discussion.
- **Participants said that the community discussion provided a place to have a “real conversation” that is difficult — or impossible — for them to find elsewhere.** In all but one community, participants said they did not have other opportunities for community engagement on this issue.
- **Following the discussions, many participants said that they felt newly committed to challenging cultures of silence and “bystander apathy” in their community, and determined to make new cultures and communities.**

What followed from the personal stories and shared experiences was a process of community interrogation. Participants called on one another to bring “to light” the racial violence that has persisted for too long in their community, and to dismantle the ‘mob mentality’ and ‘culture of silence’ by “stepping out” of it, “speaking out,” and “continuing to push” for change. Participants across communities expressed shared feelings of hopelessness, anger and frustration; called-out realities that they felt had long been hidden or ignored in their community; and made efforts toward justice, healing, and change. Participants commonly expressed the feeling that simply showing the documentary and walking away would have risked further exacerbating the problem of disconnection in their community; that the process of breaking the culture of silence requires a process of recognizing each other, community engagement, context, and dialogue.

**“CAN WE ALL JUST STOP  
[THE CONVERSATION] FOR A  
MINUTE, AND WEEP?”**

**—DURHAM PARTICIPANT**

- **The community setting uniquely immersed participants in the issues and truths of the documentary:** Several participants expressed the power of watching the film with other members of their community, and how the setting caused them to confront the issues of the documentary in new ways. As one participant, put it: “I was forced to hear all the facts, all the emotions for everyone involved...it can’t happen at home watching this on Hulu, or something, I would turn because I couldn’t take the violence, but having the [community] audience, I was forced to sit there and absorb every emotion.”
- **Community building is not only about identifying solutions together, but also about having simple (even if uncomfortable) conversations.** Rather than focusing on a rush to solutions, participants expressed insights into the value of pausing long enough to simply share experiences, connect, and have honest conversations on realities that have long gone unaddressed or unspoken. Some participants remarked that having difficult conversations with other members of their community made them more hopeful, even when they expressed or heard feelings of *anger, exhaustion, frustration, and hopelessness*.

“I FELT WHAT ROB SAID TOO. IT WAS GREAT TO SEE THIS IN A GROUP SETTING BECAUSE THERE IS A FEELING OF COMMUNITY. YOU’RE NOT IN IT ALL BY YOURSELF. YOU’RE NOT DEALING WITH THE ISSUES ALL BY YOURSELF.”

—CONCORD PARTICIPANT

“I LIKE THIS BECAUSE IT CREATES A COMMUNITY WHERE SOMETIMES, AROUND THIS VALLEY, IT’S VERY HARD TO FIND LIKE: “THIS IS A REAL CONVERSATION.” AND OUTLETS LIKE THIS WHERE PEOPLE CAN JUST HASH OUT ISSUES, IT’S VERY REFRESHING.”

—HERKIMER PARTICIPANT

- **The documentary and community conversations prompted participants to accept personal responsibility,** as a community member, for the perpetuation of racial violence and cultures of silence in their community.
- **Participants of color (primarily) challenged their community members to follow through on the commitments they made in the discussion.** Several people of color challenged their community with expressions of frustration and exhaustion at the fact that past community events have raised issues of racial justice and violence — sometimes through difficult documentaries or panel events — only to have community action fizzle out after everyone leaves the event.



# KEY HIGHLIGHTS OF FINDINGS FROM THE SURVEYS

Out of an estimated total of 320 people who attended the screenings across the seven communities, we received anonymous survey responses from 204 respondents - reflecting about 64% of the total audience that attended the screenings.

## CREATING SPACE FOR COMMUNITY CONVERSATION



### RESPONDENTS TRUSTED THE DOCUMENTARY.

Despite today marking a moment of unprecedented media distrust, **99% OF PARTICIPANTS** — who live in counties reflecting demographic, geographic and political diversity — said that they thought the “documentary provided a true portrayal of a real problem.”



### RESPONDENTS NEED HELP AND MORE OPPORTUNITIES TO TALK ABOUT SOCIAL PROBLEMS THAT ARE IMPORTANT TO THEM WITH OTHER MEMBERS OF THEIR

While 85% of respondents said that the issue of “racism and racial violence” was “very important” to them, and every participant said that it was at least “somewhat important” to them (reflecting 100% of respondents), about **1 IN 4 RESPONDENTS** said they either “don’t frequently enough” (20%) or “almost never” (6%) discuss issues of racism and racial violence with members of their community.

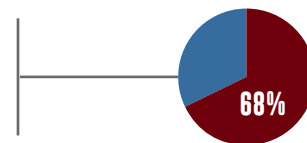


Further, nearly **1 IN 3 PARTICIPANTS** even stated that they had never watched a documentary about a social problem with members of their community before.



### BEING WITH OTHER COMMUNITY MEMBERS MAKES A DIFFERENCE.

Every respondent said that watching a documentary about a social problem - like racial violence - with other members of their community was useful. **SIXTY-EIGHT PERCENT** rated it “very helpful” (68%) and **32 PERCENT** rated it “helpful”. No respondent said that it was “not helpful” or “not at all helpful.”



### THE DOCUMENTARY RAISED AWARENESS.

**THREE OUT OF EVERY FOUR PEOPLE** (76%) said their awareness about issues of racial violence increased as a result of the event.

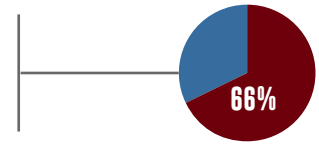


## EMOTIONAL RESPONSE TO A POWERFUL STORY



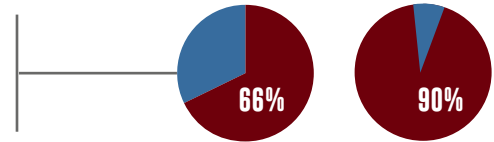
### THE DOCUMENTARY WAS TRANSPORTIVE.

The majority of respondents said that they were emotionally transported by the documentary. About **66%** of respondents said they ‘forgot where they were and got sucked into the story’.



### THE DOCUMENTARY INSPIRED FEELINGS OF EMPATHY AND SOLIDARITY.

The film and group conversation encouraged participants to emotionally confront and personally feel the difficult realities of the people depicted in the documentary. While the majority of respondents (**66%**) said that they ‘personally identified with one or more of the characters’; nearly every participant (**90%**) said that they found themselves ‘wondering how they would feel and behave if they were in any one of the characters positions?’



### RESPONDENTS EXPRESSED EMOTIONS OF SHARED SUFFERING MORE THAN ANY OTHER FEELING.

The emotions that respondents rated as experiencing most “deeply” during the documentary were ‘emotions of shared suffering’: sadness (**3.8 OUT OF 4**), disgust (**3.8 OUT OF 4**), sympathy (**3.7 OUT OF 4**), anger (**3.6 OUT OF 4**), and compassion (**3.6 OUT OF 4**). The emotions that respondents experienced very little or “not at all” were ‘personal beliefs or outlooks’: optimism (**1.7 OUT OF 4**) and hope (**1.8 OUT OF 4**).

**SADNESS** | —

**COMPASSION** | —

**DISGUST** | —

**OPTIMISM** | —

**SYMPATHY** | —

**HOPE** | —

**ANGER** | —

# CREATING ENGAGING COMMUNITY EVENTS WITH DOCUMENTARY STORYTELLING

We have synthesized our findings into **7 evidence-based reasons** for why (and how) documentaries should be used as a platform for organizing urgently needed community events.

## 1) DOCUMENTARIES ARE CUTTING THROUGH A CLIMATE OF MEDIA MISTRUST.

At a time of unprecedented levels of media mistrust, 99 percent of the people who participated in this study said that they believe the documentary provided a “true portrayal of a real problem.” People in communities across the country — reflecting diversity in political ideology, demographics, socio-economic status, and media access — expressed “trusting” the information provided by the documentary. This feedback was especially prevalent in communities that were in or adjacent to news deserts, but it was also expressed in every community engaged by this study; public TV stations and community organizations have an opportunity to leverage their trust to meet increasing demands for information and community collaboration, amid spreading climates of media mistrust and news deserts, with documentary-centered community discussions.

## 2) DOCUMENTARIES ARE REPORTING CRITICAL STORIES ON RACIAL VIOLENCE AND OTHER SOCIAL ISSUES THAT LOCAL AND NATIONAL MEDIA ARE OVERLOOKING.

Not only did participants across the country say they feel stories of interest to them are being missed by local and mainstream news outlets, but they also expressed a desire for sources of information that presents more context and details than they often find in mainstream news coverage today. The documentary, they say, is capable of addressing these needs. Documentaries are centering the concerns and experiences of communities who are traditionally pushed to the margins of mainstream news coverage.

## 3) DOCUMENTARIES ARE MAKING NEWS PERSONAL AND HELPING PEOPLE MAKE-MEANING FROM THE NEWS.

Documentaries are capable of making emotional connections with audiences in ways that other mainstream news and information outlets often do not. While “the news” often feels distant, participants described the documentary as feeling personal. By being transported deeply into an engaging story, rather than recitation of factual information alone, viewers experience an empathetic, emotional connection with the subjects they meet on screen.

During the focus group discussions, we explored what it is about the documentary that makes it so trustworthy. Participants frequently pointed to the details, historical facts, and balance of the documentary as its most trustworthy attributes, but they also expressed feeling like these contextual details were impactful because they were embedded into a long-form narrative that transported, engaged, and emotionally involved them in ways that other forms of media do not. As a result, they said, it helped them to *make meaning* of the facts and to better understand, trust, and empathize with the implications of the facts being presented.

Several participants said that the documentary connected with them emotionally, and that helped them empathize with others' experiences. In the survey, the majority of respondents said that they were emotionally transported by the documentary. About 66% of surveyed respondents, for instance, said they 'forgot where they were and got sucked into the story'. Further, while the majority of respondents (66%) said that they also 'personally identified with one or more of the characters' (66%), *nearly every participant (90%) said that they found themselves 'wondering how they would feel and behave if they were in any one of the characters positions?'* For instance, several participants in the focus groups identified with the mother of Lennon Lacy, who was a central person in the documentary, and they spoke about how the documentary humanized people that they feel would have largely been treated as stereotypes or statistics in mainstream news reporting.

#### 4) DOCUMENTARIES ARE EFFECTIVE TOOLS FOR COMMUNITY BUILDING.

Participants across the country expressed the feeling that having a chance to come together with other members of their community and discuss issues important to them was helpful and rare. The community screenings provided people with a space to share ideas and engage in dialogue with each other in a real community environment. And participants say the live screening events have the power to bring people together in a way that is lasting, with organizers saying that community members have continued reaching out to them in the days following the screening about other ways that they can convene.

There is an opportunity today for public television and community organizations to play an especially crucial role in facilitating producing community experiences and dialogue by using their trust for good. As trusted institutions, the public television stations and community organizations engaged in this research proved capable of overcoming today's moment of heightened media distrust. People depended on their trust in public TV and the local organizations to both commit the time and expend the moral, emotional and intellectual energy to engage with each other. At this moment, trusted local institutions have an opportunity to provide a service that communities are calling for and to provide a service of significant value in the streaming era.

#### 5) DOCUMENTARY-DRIVEN COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS ARE NOT THE SAME AS "PANEL EVENTS."

Participants expressed appreciation for the context and opportunity provided during panel events, especially when the filmmaker is involved in the conversation, but many participants also emphasized how different they are from a 'real conversation' in which people have time to engage one another in dialogue and to make meaning together. The call-and-response nature of panels often limits the ability of community participants to

become part of a collective conversation. This highlights the difference between formats which prioritize the dissemination of perspectives and information, and formats which are designed to foster community building – this study found both to be of value, but that panel events often minimize the opportunity for community building. While panel events often create a one-way flow of engagement between the ‘panel’ and ‘audience’, this study found that community conversations are capable of breaking down such categories and hierarchies. The community conversations facilitated by this study provided opportunities — within about the same amount of time as a typical panel conversation — for people to feel like they were participants in a community building event and for them to engage meaningfully with each other on difficult subjects; as such, community conversations should be considered a valuable pursuit of largely untapped potential in documentary events.

### **6) DOCUMENTARY-BASED COMMUNITY EVENTS ARE DISRUPTING CULTURES OF SILENCE, PROVOKING CHANGE AND HELPING PEOPLE TO CREATE NEW COMMUNITIES.**

Participants frequently expressed the feeling that the act of watching the documentary and discussing it with their community compelled them “to confront” rather than just “learn” or “think about” the realities and experiences of racial violence in their community. About 1 in 3 people who attended the documentary screening said they had never seen a documentary about a social issue with their community before, though every survey respondent said it was either “very helpful” or “helpful” to do so.

People spoke about cultures of silence in their community around racial violence and other social issues. In confronting these realities together, community discussions moved toward provocations, challenges, calls for change, meaning making, and shared expressions to play more active roles in shaping their communities. In this way, the documentary planted seeds of further learning, further action, and further self-awareness — all of which were then further developed through the community conversations that followed.

### **7) AFFIRMATIONS OF SUPPORT ARE NOT ENOUGH, COMMUNITY BUILDING NECESSITATES ACTION — AND COMMUNITY GROUPS/STATIONS HAVE A ROLE TO PLAY.**

While breaking cultures of silence around racial violence and injustice is an essential first step, participants in every community also raised the importance of ensuring that tangible actions, accountabilities and commitments follow from community conversations. Community groups and stations have an opportunity to provide a real service in helping to facilitate such follow-up action and play an important role in community building by doing so, a chance to build trusting relationships with not only individuals but institutions.

# QUOTES FROM PARTICIPANTS

"I think we should actively be seeking out more opportunities. We can say New Hampshire is still mostly white but we can find opportunities to engage. And I think it's incumbent on all of us to try to find places and spaces where we can step out of that and engage in these conversations."

- Concord Participant

**"I THINK THE FILM ITSELF  
HAS PHYSICAL HEAVINESS  
THAT I FEEL AFTER  
WATCHING IT. I FEEL  
THIS HEAVINESS ON MY  
HEART."**

**—TWIN FALLS PARTICIPANT**

**"THIS FILM REALLY BROUGHT  
TOGETHER A DIVERSE  
COMMUNITY TOO. THE CROWD  
AT THESE FILMS IS NOT ALWAYS  
THIS DIVERSE, AND THAT'S A  
REAL GIFT TO HAVE THIS TIME  
TOGETHER IN COMMUNITY."**

**—CONCORD PARTICIPANT**

"I see discussions on Facebook about this issue that are just not productive. People will be talking past each other or making accusations ... I just feel like it's important to go somewhere and meet people and talk to them about these issues as opposed to just being on the computer, spouting out what you think and what you don't think."

- Concord Participant



"I was just thinking that everybody has to be accountable. Everybody has to be accountable for what's going on in America. And everybody has to play a role. Everybody has to play a part. I go back to: you just can't be invisible. You have just got to step out."

- Bristol Participant

"As the mother of three [white] young men, I feel like it's my responsibility to make sure that they witness information like this, that they are engaged in knowing the history behind it and that they go forward with that knowledge and try to build bridges and make sure that they are not part of that problem."

- Twin Falls Participant

**"AS WHITE PEOPLE, WE'RE SO OFTEN LULLED INTO THIS NOTION THAT RACISM DOESN'T EXIST, THAT IT DOESN'T DIRECTLY IMPACT US. SO I THINK THIS DOCUMENTARY... REALLY HIGHLIGHTS THE REAL ISSUE AT HAND THAT IS SO OFTEN NOT ADDRESSED BY WHITE PEOPLE AND NOT AS ACKNOWLEDGED. SO IT'S REALLY IMPORTANT FOR, ESPECIALLY FOR WHITE PEOPLE, TO LEAN INTO THAT DISCOMFORT AND REALIZE THE REALITY OF IT ALL BECAUSE PEOPLE OF COLOR KNOW WHAT'S HAPPENING. IT'S HAPPENING TO THEM ALL THE TIME, SO THEREFORE FOR A WHITE PERSON TO FEEL UNCOMFORTABLE FOR A MOMENT IS BRIEF IN REGARDS TO THE REALITY THAT IS TO A PERSON OF COLOR. I THINK THAT'S REALLY IMPORTANT FOR ME IS TO LEAN INTO THAT DISCOMFORT AND BE UNCOMFORTABLE BECAUSE THE REALITY IS THAT FOR PEOPLE OF COLOR, IT'S 24 HOURS A DAY, 7 DAYS A WEEK. "**

**—CONCORD PARTICIPANT**

# END NOTES

1 Documentary description and more details can be found at: <https://itvs.org/films/always-in-season>

2 A community's adjacency to news deserts (counties with no local media outlets) and political partisanship were used in order to ensure a sampling of communities that reflected various levels of media trust. Recent studies have found levels of media trust falling nationwide, to or near their lowest points in decades. A recent Poynter Media Trust Survey found that only 55 percent of Americans have trust in national network news, 59 percent in national newspapers and 47 percent in online-only news outlets. And the best indicator for a person's level of media trust has been their political identity, with Republicans displaying considerably lower levels of media trust than Democrats (Knight, 2019; Pew, 2018, 2019; Poynter 2018, 2019).

# BREAKING ≡ SILENCE



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