



# More Than Words: Using Video to Inspire Change



Four teenagers participate in The Factory, Bay Area Video Coalition's video production collective that creates short films, music videos and public service announcements.

© Jason Jakaitis, BAVC

**T**hough they may have different objectives, professional journalists, documentary filmmakers and social activists alike use the power of video to tell stories, have an impact on audiences and effect change. Below, experts share advice and examples for developing, articulating and promoting a message through video.

## What to Say: Developing Your Message

Understanding your audience is critical to developing a successful message. "You really need to

do your research on a particular issue and get to know how it impacts you and your peers, your family and your community," explains Ingrid Hu Dahl, director of Next Gen Programs for the Bay Area Video Coalition (BAVC), a nonprofit organization that works to inspire social change by empowering media makers to develop and share their stories. This early research will help inform your decisions throughout the creative process.

The next consideration in developing your message is access. "Do I have the ability to go to

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this community right now? Can I build relationships with people there? Is that the best story for me to be telling?" are all questions you should be asking, says

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### EXAMPLE

Jason Jakaitis' team developed a deep understanding of their documentary's subjects and subject matter by simulating the experience of the visually impaired for two weeks.

*"One of our first Community Filmmaking Partnerships was with the Hatlen Center for the Blind. Four of our filmmakers were asked to make a video to support Hatlen's fundraising efforts — this included working closely with visually impaired youth who were also complete strangers. The filmmakers spent two weeks at Hatlen simply taking the same classes as the program participants, meeting with youth and learning their stories, and actually simulating visual impairment with blindfolds and participating in activities with the Hatlen students. The filmmakers developed relationships with these subjects, which made for more powerful interviews and a stronger film."*

Jason Jakaitis  
BAVC

See film here: <http://goo.gl/2axK2>



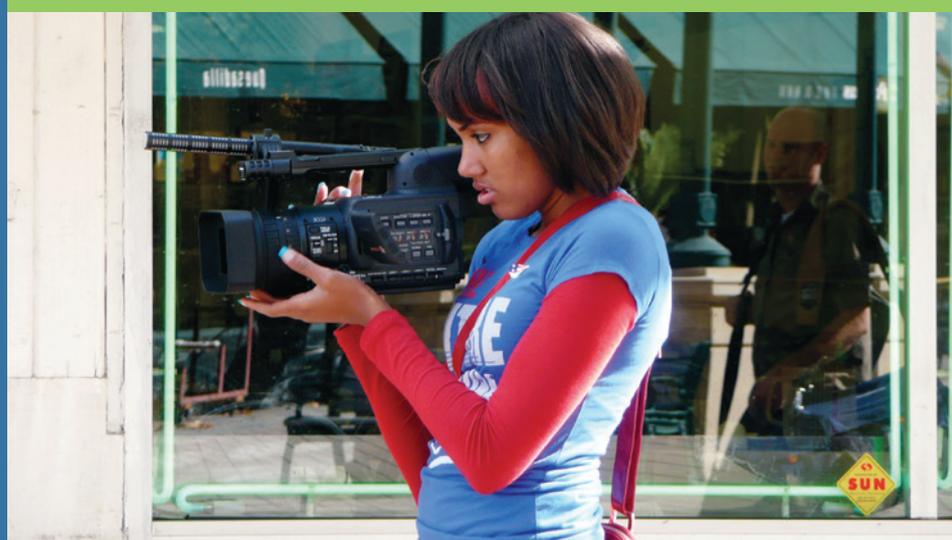
Brandon Kramer, co-founder of Meridian Hill Pictures, a documentary production company that works with communities to tell their stories and effect positive change.

Once you understand your issue and have access to the story, think about whose perspective will have the greatest impact on your audience. Centering your message on the story of an individual who has been affected by your issue makes it more interesting and accessible. Find the individual whose story will grip your audience emotionally or intellectually from the beginning of your video. "If you have the ability to create a story where you really get to see the different dimensions and layers of a human being," Kramer explains, "then you're allowing other people both inside and outside of the community to really connect with and engage at a much deeper level." Focus on one or two people to give your message more emotional impact, detail and depth.

**"Give the viewer an opportunity to make a difference the moment the film is over, before the energy has dissipated."**

End your video with a call to action. "Give the viewer an opportunity to make a difference the moment the film is over, before the energy has dissipated," recommends Jason Jakaitis, manager of BAVC's advanced youth filmmaking program, called The Factory. While you are developing your message, keep in mind what that action will be and how it ties into your message.

A young woman shoots video for BAVC'S The Factory. © Jason Jakaitis, BAVC



## More Than Words: Using Video to Inspire Change

### How to Say It: Articulating Your Message with Video

Now that you have developed your message, it is time to think about the compelling images that will become your visual language.

**“If you really know how to speak the language properly, you can turn off the sound and not use any words at all.”**

“No matter what language is your native language, if you can see, you can understand the messages that I put out,” says Bill Gentile, an independent journalist and a professor at American University.

In his classes, Gentile outlines three pillars of the visual language. “You’ve got the images, which are the driving force; you’ve got natural sound, be it the sounds of cars going by or planes overhead; and you’ve got narration,” he explains.

The images can range from close-ups and wide shots to pans and zooms; what is important is that the images speak. “If you really know how to speak the language properly, you can turn off the sound and not use any words at all,” Gentile says.

The natural sound elevates images from a two-dimensional to a three-dimensional realm, while narration weaves the audio and visual elements into a complete story. Narration can be especially critical when trying to convey a lot of information in a short amount of time.

In addition to shooting compelling images, it is also important to document in both a truthful and active way. “Instead of filming somebody sitting in a chair and talking about their inaccess to food, film somebody going into a grocery store and asking for produce,” Kramer suggests.

Norwood tenants share their story at a 2011 Housing for All rally in Washington. © Norwood Cooperative Association



### EXAMPLE

Erin Finicane, a student in Gentile’s class, used powerful visuals of children drawing pictures of the rats in their homes and men dumping stagnant water out of their bathtubs to document the tenants’ poor living conditions. A jury would not have to hear the sound to understand the issue.

*“I was following the story of a community of low-income tenants in DC who were trying to prevent a condo conversion by buying their building. For Bill’s class I produced a trailer for a larger project called Brunching with Bedbugs that the community included in their application package for city funding. Though the trailer was by no means the sole reason, it did help them get the \$10 million in city funding they needed to buy the building and create a tenant-owned cooperative.”*

Erin Finicane  
citizen journalist

See film here: <http://goo.gl/jyOsl>



### EXAMPLE

Brandon Kramer encouraged a group of trainees in an urban forestry program to take ownership of their films from start to finish, which helped create more momentum for the call to action.

*“One of their films was specifically profiling a community in Northeast DC where the community members didn’t have access to fresh produce. They wanted a story from their perspective to really showcase that inaccess to food and how that’s affecting their community and how building community gardens in their own neighborhood was their way of sort of self-addressing that. ... That went on to screen across the neighborhood and among other things, like raising awareness and getting people to understand this lack of healthy food in the community, it also created change. Some stores in the community started to sell fresh produce and greens. It helped to motivate more efforts to create community gardens in the neighborhood as well.”*

Brandon Kramer  
Meridian Hill Pictures

See film here: <http://goo.gl/2axK2>



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### How to Spread It: Promoting Your Message

Developing a great message with compelling visuals means nothing if no one sees it. One of the best strategies for attracting attention is involving like-minded partners and community members from the start. “It’s really important that community members understand how to put a pulse and a life into their film,” says Kramer, “and how you can mobilize an entire community to engage with it.”

Kramer encourages filmmakers to think about facilitating discussion and spurring action throughout the creative process.

You can also rely on your network for face-to-face promotion such as handing out flyers or putting up posters. To have global impact, however, you will need to use mass and social media promotion as well. “Media is a profoundly powerful tool for connecting with people and guiding them up the ladder of engagement,” says Liba Rubenstein, director of outreach for causes and politics for the website Tumblr.

Whether you are using face-to-face or media promotions, Rubenstein says, a clear and simple call to action is necessary to effect change. A video may reach a lot of people but fall short of its ultimate goal if those people are not mobilized to action.

Encourage your viewers to action by starting with something simple, such as asking them to share the video on a social media platform or sign a petition for a related cause. As your audience grows more involved, ask them to take bigger steps such as submitting their own story or attending an event.

“In this incredibly exciting era of democratized media, any activist or organization that tells a creative and compelling story has the ability to access a huge audience and raise awareness,” says Rubenstein. “Translating this awareness into action remains the hard part, no matter the medium of communication.”

Meridian Hill Pictures staff filmmaker Ellie Walton collaborates with DC Green Corps member Michael Samuels on a participatory video project in Washington’s Marvin Gaye Park. © Lance Kramer, Meridian Hill Pictures

