

CASE STUDY

THE INVISIBLE WAR

COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES that FAST TRACK POLICY CHANGE



POLICY



AGILITY



REPETITION



INTEGRATION

HIGHLIGHTS

Issue Sexual assault in the military goes underreported and under prosecuted as a crime. Women assaulted during service have a higher PTSD rate than men in combat.

Strategy Focused communications strategy for policymaker education integrated into the production process for documentary film.

Who Fledgling Fund and others including the Women's Donor Network, Sundance Institute and several private donors.

How Much \$25,000 for pre-Sundance outreach; an additional \$35,000 for post-festival outreach, \$5,000 for social media and an additional \$20,000 in pass-through funding from a private partner donor.

Biggest Result Prompted Department of Defense policy change, stimulated more than 30 Congressional legislative reforms and inspired pending federal legislation.

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“WE MADE THE FILM TO HELP CHANGE POLICY.” – FILMMAKER KIRBY DICK

INTRODUCTION

ORIGINS

The Fledgling Fund believes that well-made documentary films can serve as a catalyst to change minds, encourage viewers to alter entrenched behaviors, and start, inform or reenergize social movements. It has particular faith in films with a compelling narrative and an outreach plan. Through Good Pitch, a convener of NGOs, funders, companies and media outlets that strategize with, and partner with, documentary filmmakers on their outreach, the Fund was exposed to filmmakers Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering’s project, *The Invisible War*. The film explored the issue of military sexual assault; a widespread, yet under-prosecuted offense requiring systemic change in the military and congressional-policy intervention.

Motivated by its belief that audience engagement needs to be part of an integrated communications strategy from the very beginning of the production process and as a result of Dick and Ziering’s pitch to a roundtable of Good Pitch attendees, the Fund provided \$25,000 to fund initial outreach for *The Invisible War*, and a subsequent \$60,000 for additional outreach and a social media campaign. Grant funds supported website development, outreach staffing and travel. The net result was that within two days of watching the film at a special screening (months prior to public release), then Defense Secretary Leon Panetta held a press conference to announce changes in Department of Defense policy. Panetta himself told film producers his action was a direct result of seeing the film.

The story of *The Invisible War* resonates for all grantmakers who seek to give a disenfranchised population a voice and raise awareness of a complex social issue among federal policymakers and the public.



IMPACT

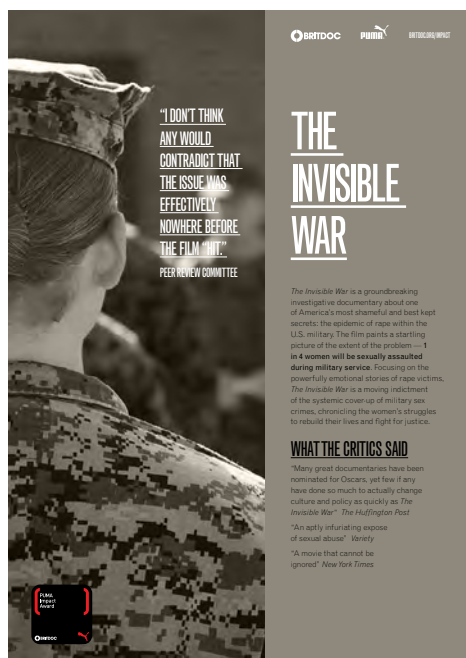
"We made the film to help change policy," described filmmaker Kirby Dick in an interview with trade publication, *The Wrap*. "We just didn't think it would happen so soon."

The 93-minute film made its world premiere at the Sundance Film Festival in January of 2012. Screenings of the film left festival audiences stunned and *The Invisible War* won the Audience Award for Best Documentary. Using the outreach funds, the next step was to show it to policymakers in Washington beginning in February and engage them as an audience in answering the question "what can we do about it?" The plan was to get the film screened at the highest levels of the Pentagon, in Congress, and at the Department of Defense. Approximately 35 screenings with policymakers were held three months prior to public release in May of 2012.

Shortly after Defense Secretary Leon Panetta's April press conference, the full House Armed Services Committee held its first hearing on the issue in twenty years. *The New York Times* directly attributed that to *The Invisible War*. Two months later, Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (D-New York) held the senate's first hearing on the topic in a decade. At the hearing, nearly all the Senators spoke of the value and impact of the film.

When Panetta announced he was leaving the Defense Department, Senators holding confirmation hearings for Secretary of Defense nominee Chuck Hagel questioned him on the issue of sexual military assault and mentioned *The Invisible War*. The same month, President Barack Obama vowed to "end the scourge" of military sexual assault.

In May 2013, Senator Gillibrand and ten colleagues issued bicameral legislation to modernize the Uniform Code of Military Justice. Later that year, newly appointed Secretary of Defense Hagel, released new sexual assault policies for the military cracking down on inappropriate relations between recruiters/instructors and new troops.



The issue of military sexual assault maintained traction in 2014 when heated debate ensued over a bill on the topic introduced by Senator Gillibrand and a rival effort by Senator Claire McCaskill (D-Missouri). Ultimately Gillibrand's measure was defeated by a shortage of only five votes. McCaskill's legislation cleared the Senate with a vote of 97-0, but the bill is currently held up in the House — where it may or may not receive a vote this year.

Perhaps one of the most satisfying outcomes has been that the filmmakers ultimately licensed the film as a training tool to be shown at individual military bases around the world.

HOW IT HAPPENED

The Invisible War team augmented a traditional film distribution strategy with outreach and strategic communications efforts (e.g., website dedicated to the film, speaking engagements, Twitter campaign, cross-promotion of screenings) as well as audience engagement techniques (e.g., sign a petition, connect with partner organizations, initiate in-person or online discussion).

Two thumbs up

At the heart of *The Invisible War*'s success is quality filmmaking. *The Invisible War* had a strong, character-driven story that created an emotional connection with the viewer. Proactive, planned exposure at festivals, private screenings and its nomination for a February 2013 Academy Award made *The Invisible War* a consistent presence in the media and kept the issue top-of-mind for lawmakers and the public. Theatrical release of the film was accompanied by a professional publicity campaign and national press coverage that exploded in print, online and broadcast. While box office receipts tallied only \$60,000, the film's impact reached far beyond those who saw it in a theater.

Standing room only on Capitol Hill

Dedicated financial resources and the time of experienced public relations and communications professionals resulted in the largest host committee ever for a film screening on Capitol Hill and a standing-room only screening at the Library of Congress. Outreach to policymakers and their staff was framed as bi-partisan and the issue framed as anti-assault, not anti-military.

The Invisible War outreach team also held three private screenings for the highest levels of military leadership and organized more than 300 screenings at military bases. Through Good Pitch, the team engaged with partners who had access to policymakers at the highest levels of government and the military. Likewise, the filmmakers relentlessly networked with their contacts to open doors at the highest levels. They showed the film to members of the Obama administration and the State Department. For the first time in 30 years, General Mark A. Welsh, Chief of Staff of the Air Force, flew all AF Wing Commanders from bases around the world back to the Pentagon where they watched *The Invisible War*.

All about sequencing

Because the policymaker screenings pre-dated public release by several months, government officials were offered a window of opportunity to act and present solutions. The net result was they came across proactive and effective, rather than unresponsive or unaware. Still, the audience engagement campaign for the public release included a call to action for viewers to sign an online petition.

Ongoing outreach and media efforts after the public release were timed to coincide with hearings, related litigation and other opportunistic milestones that presented themselves along the way.

Other partners expanded reach

Through Good Pitch and other efforts, *The Invisible War* established mutually-beneficial partnerships with more than a dozen organizations including the ACLU and the Victim Rights Law Center. The documentary had more than 1,100 community screenings for an estimated 300,000 people, and 75 screenings in other countries around the world. It reached 2.1 million people with its May 2013 debut on PBS' "Independent Lens." Other funding partners contributed to the financing of production and outreach.

Critical mass in the national media

Upon the film's theatrical release, an intensive publicity campaign was conducted. Press coverage exploded — and the topic of military sexual assault began to see the coverage it had long deserved. The film's impact on the issue was covered by *The New York Times*, *National Public Radio*, *Vanity Fair*, *Salon*, *The Atlantic*, *Politico* and *Think Progress*. The subjects of the documentary also made several appearances on talk shows including ABC's *The View*. Katie Couric devoted an hour-long episode of her show to *The Invisible War*. Online and social media exploded as well. The movie websites garnered 470,000 visits, and 739,000 online views of the film trailer. The film has more than 36,000 Facebook members and 8,000 Twitter followers. #NotInvisible has been mentioned in more than 15,000 Tweets.

And the PUMA goes to...

In addition to all of its other achievements, *The Invisible War* was nominated for the BRITDOC Foundation's PUMA Impact Award for documentary films that have made the greatest positive impact on society or the environment. The film received Special Commendation. In the words of a member of the peer review committee for the award, "I don't think any would contradict that the issue was effectively nowhere before the film hit."

According to the BRITDOC, "There has been a raft of unprecedented legislation which has tackled [the issue of military sexual assault] from multiple angles, a signal that the campaign has managed to create a change in culture within that most conservative of institutions, the U.S. military."

LESSONS LEARNED

- ▶ High-quality investigative journalism and the art of filmmaking can combine to make a compelling media product.
- ▶ Outreach, strategic communication and audience engagement are distinctive strategies from traditional film distribution that require dedicated financial resources and professional skill sets — as well as integration early in the production process.
- ▶ Sustained outreach over time helped keep the issues top of mind among key stakeholders through leadership changes and legislative setbacks.
- ▶ The outreach team had flexibility, agility and the resources necessary to respond to opportunistic milestones — such as policy hearings and cinematic awards — and sustained momentum.



10 Elements of Success

Among the Fast Track case studies, we've identified the following 10 insights. The most critical elements of success for each case appear as symbols throughout the series.



1 SOLUTIONS

The majority of these initiatives contained messages not just about the problem, but about a range of potential solutions. The net effect is to give the public hope and give policymakers a call to action. This approach also speaks directly to the nexus of the nature of the Internet and journalism: to both ask questions and answer them.



2 POLICYMAKERS

Identifying policymakers explicitly as a target audience and devoting appropriate resources to outreach is key. Whenever possible, explicitly making it a bi-partisan effort can be very effective.



3 AGILITY

While a communications strategy is important, so is building in flexibility. The ability to respond quickly with resources to a changing landscape is critical to overcoming unforeseen challenges and leveraging unexpected opportunities. Often these initiatives can be a bit messy mid-stream; flexibility and agility makes navigation easier.



4 REPETITION

Continuity of coverage has a multiplier effect on awareness building. Journalistic series and paid-advertising campaigns keep issues top-of-mind during delays in the legislative process.



5 HUMANITY

Engaging community voices can be a powerful way to give an issue a human face. Emphasizing personal impact stories can also support journalistic efforts, assist with multi-media content, engage the constituents of lawmakers and provide testimonials for solutions.



6 PAID ADVERTISING

Having the ability to control the content and timing of messages through paid advertising can create awareness during key milestones. The ability to customize messages geographically or by target audience can also accelerate the speed of social change.



7 FOUNDATION BRANDING

Putting a foundation's name and "brand" on media or communications efforts lends credibility and gravitas to an issue, especially in smaller markets or rural areas. Stakeholders are more likely to take another look at an issue if it has become the priority of a philanthropic institution.



8 MEDIA START-UPS

Establishing digital outlets where in-depth coverage about an issue can be a cost-effective and efficient way of designating a "space" for the issue to live in. At their best, these sites also become media tools for expanded and sustained coverage over time.



9 PARTNER. PARTNER. PARTNER.

Whether it is funder partnerships or media partnerships, collaborative and in-kind efforts result in impact that is greater than the sum of its individual parts.



10 INTEGRATION FROM THE OUTSET

The combination of media, community and policy-maker engagement from the beginning of a strategic communications effort is key to success. The catalytic effect of coordinating and integrating these strategies far outweighs any one as a siloed or solo effort.