

## **Making an Impact through Non-Fiction Film**

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Social Impact Cinema is an emerging field of independent documentary filmmaking that seeks to tell deep human stories that inspire a revolution of the heart. These stories capture critical, complex narratives that reflect societal problems, and some of the most essential global struggles of our time. They also serve to catalyze personal and community action in the spirit of engaged civic activism, bringing a renewed meaning to democracies driven by people power, and storytelling out of the authentic experience of humanity.

—The Neda Nobari Foundation

This is the reason why I chose to become a documentary filmmaker. I had a strong desire from a young age to make an impact in my society and country and I wanted to do this through film, a medium that transcends language, culture, religion and nationality.

However, I quickly learned that documentary filmmaking especially in Malaysia, would not be as straightforward as I had imagined.

### **Freedom of Press in Malaysia**

Malaysia's freedom of press world ranking is 145 out of 180 in the world. Under our "Sedition Act" journalists can be jailed for up to 20 years if convicted of sedition. Over the past 30 years, several Malaysian and international journalists have been jailed or exiled for investigating or uncovering corruption and other crimes linked to our government officials. As a result, I believe, this has directly contributed to the fact that there are less than 20 international level documentary filmmakers who make a living from non-fiction filmmaking in Malaysia. I am one of them.

### **Pushing the Envelope**

So how do you go about making impact through documentary in a country that imprisons journalists? This is a question many aspiring Malaysian documentarians ask themselves before committing to this field.

The very first documentary I made, at age 26, was a film about the lack of sex education in local schools and the negative impact this was having on teenagers and young adults in Malaysia. Being a predominantly Muslim nation, this subject was obviously taboo and was rarely spoken about at home or between children and their parents in Malaysia.

But statistics showed that our country had a high level of HIV cases, teenage pregnancies and other worrying statistics closely linked to a lack of proper sex education. So I felt this was the

perfect subject for my first film as it would challenge social norms in favor of bringing to light an important healthcare issue.

As I delved deeper into my research, I was shocked at how many people refused to speak to me on camera about this topic. Some people even said they did not want to get in trouble with the government.

When the film was complete, it screened to a large audience at one of Malaysia's biggest film festivals. I was nervous about how the audience would respond to the film considering the resistance I had faced producing it. But I was very pleasantly surprised that the film struck a chord with Malaysians from all walks of life. The film went on to win multiple awards and screened at several film festivals.

But what left the biggest impact on me was the experience of engaging with the Malaysian audience members while screening the film. In a way, the screening seemed to be therapeutic for Malaysians who for years had never spoken about their lack of proper sex education until my screening.

It was through these first film screenings that my eyes were truly opened to how impactful documentary could be in my home country. I realized that in a repressed and conservative society like Malaysia, a closed-door film screening was one of the few public spaces that felt safe enough for Malaysians to vocalize their feelings on taboo subjects. This was definitely one of the loopholes filmmakers in my country could take advantage of without the risk of police investigation or imprisonment.

But if I wanted to make a career out of documentary filmmaking in Malaysia, I realized I needed to step away from controversial topics and pursue much more safe subjects like food, travel, culture and history.

### **Commercial Impact Filmmaking**

Fast forward, to 10 years later, after an entire career of making relatively safe and government friendly documentaries, I had a burning desire to make an impact through film once again about an issue that is close to my heart. Environmental conservation. If anyone knows anything about Malaysia and our timber and oil palm industry, you will know that this is a very "sensitive" subject. So, how was I going to make a film about environmental destruction in Malaysia without compromising my career?

The simple solution was, my director and I decided to focus the entire narrative of our film from the perspective of our subjects and completely step away from politics or government corruption. But if you read between the lines of my script, you will see the truth is very much

embedded in the film.

We were very fortunate that National Geographic USA decided to broadcast the film, *Operation Sumatran Rhino* (2016), in the United States and all across the globe for their new series called “Mission Critical.” This was a great honor for a Malaysian wildlife conservation story to be broadcast in over 150 countries, to an audience numbering in the hundreds of thousands—a very rare opportunity for a Southeast Asian conservation story.

When the film premiered there was global media coverage and attention focused on the rhinos. We also organized public screenings to raise awareness for the cause, and one screening was attended by Dame Jane Goodall.

Through the organization of multiple film screenings, we were able to raise funds for the Borneo Rhino Alliance (BORA) and bring even more attention to the Malaysia’s Sumatran Rhinos. At the time of the film release, BORA was in serious danger of being shut down. But thankfully, it still remains in operation today and BORA has credited our film as part of the support system that has kept them in operation.

It is a well-known fact that our planet is being destroyed at an alarming rate and much needs to be done by humanity to restore planet earth. But over the past 10 years I have also witnessed how documentary has become an essential part of the solution to this ongoing crisis. Through award-winning documentaries like *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), *The Cove* (2009) and *Racing Extinction* (2015), millions of people around the world have been moved to action for the environment. I firmly believe that if every school curriculum incorporated powerful documentaries about urgent social and environmental issues, the world would have many more problem solvers and fewer problems that need solving.

### **Impact through the Visual Arts in Asia**

Over the 8 weeks of my participation in the ALFP, I have realized that Malaysia is not the only country in Asia that utilizes film and art to convey powerful messages on social issues. Asia in general is rooted in conservative values that emphasize “saving face” and not challenging cultural norms or authority. So naturally, in countries where you can be persecuted for speaking out against the government or in cultures where discussing social issues is frowned upon, the public turn to alternative forms of expression that are deemed, less direct or not as confrontational.

Throughout my time in Tokyo, I discovered that both Thailand and Japan use visual arts like theater, film and photography to convey messages on culturally taboo subjects and in both countries books and films have been banned or rejected by local publishers because the subject matter is considered “too sensitive.”

During the ALFP seminar series, I had the privilege of meeting Kosuke Okahara, an award-winning documentary photographer who gave a lecture on his passion project entitled “Ibasyo” which is an internationally acclaimed photo documentary highlighting young Japanese women struggling with self-harming—a taboo subject in Japan. Okahara utilized beautifully shot black and white photographs to illustrate the harrowing and incredibly lonely experience of living with a psychologically and physically damaging condition in a society that shuns discussions around mental illness. Okahara took his photo exhibition one step further by creating a travelling book project where he shipped six blank books, each one representing one of the featured women, all over the world to strangers who then wrote messages of loving kindness to each of the women. The objective was to create connectivity and to build self-worth for Okahara’s characters—to let them know that people did care about them. I was impressed to find out that all six women were living normal lives and were no longer self-harming.

Having the opportunity to engage in discussions around art and social issues in Japan truly deepened my understanding of the unique power of the visual arts in the context of Southeast Asia especially. It gives me great hope, knowing that Asian voices are being heard through art.

### **The Digital Filmmaking Age**

In the last 10 years, the landscape of the visual arts industry and video production has changed drastically. Digital filmmaking coupled with social media has dominated and transformed my industry in a way that has sent shockwaves throughout the filmmaking world.

But nowhere has social media had as profound an impact as in Malaysia this year.

### **Digital Storytelling Changed the World and My Country**

In my country our government has full control of our media, which has kept millions of Malaysians largely in the dark about the realities of the immense corruption that has been allowed to continue and fester for the past 60 years. It finally took an international investigation involving law enforcement agencies across the United States, Europe and Asia to shed light on what news agencies are calling one of the world’s most shocking financial scandals of all time.

On May 9, 2018... Malaysians finally woke up.

As some of you may know, Malaysia has just recently shocked the world with the results of our general elections. We successfully and most importantly, peacefully voted out our ruling party, UMNO, from a 60 year dictatorship and voted in the opposition. How did this happen? Was it just luck or a miracle from God? Perhaps. But I firmly believe that social media and the power of video sharing, especially in rural areas of Malaysia, contributed to the 85% voter turnout on election day, ridding Malaysia of our morally decayed leadership.

Today Malaysia is a changed country. We have a new government that has promised transparency, accountability and more press freedom—words Malaysians in my generation have never associated with our government.

### **Final Words**

Documentary is not just a form of television entertainment anymore. It has evolved into a powerful tool for making significant global impact. With the extensive reach of social media coupled with growing concerns for humanity, the environment and our planet, social-impact films have inspired billions of people to take action all around the world, myself included. My hope is that documentary will continue to play a key role in the evolution of our global society for many years to come.