



WORKS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE



AndACTION
STORIES FOR CHANGE

POP CULTURE.

A POWERFUL WAY TO DRIVE SOCIAL CHANGE.

At AndACTION, we know that stories have power. “[The Invisible War](#)” is a harrowing documentary about the tens of thousands of sexual assaults that take place every year within the U.S. military. Within days of seeing the film in 2012, former Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta announced a significant change in the way reported rapes are investigated in the military. What’s more, he told one of the film’s executive producers that [the film was responsible](#), in part, for his decision.



Photo credit: Cinedigm

From big movie screens to small televisions to tiny hand-held devices, stories have the unique ability to move viewers to think about important issues – and to take action on

them. Pop culture stories are some of the most moving, compelling stories told. From “The Help” exposing the plight of domestic workers to “Modern Family” evolving our understanding of what family is to “Hidden Figures” reshaping our view of women’s contributions to history, everyday movies and TV shows offer people working on important issues a way to emotionally connect people to their cause and be motivated to do more.

Pop culture is uniquely suited to meet strategic communication aims of nonprofits from reducing stigma to changing social norms to giving people a sense of a lived experience that changes hearts and minds. However, organizations often lack the staff or internal resources needed to execute the kind of rapid-response campaign necessary to take advantage of current pop culture storylines. They also don’t know the many different ways they can use pop culture opportunities.

THIS REPORT OFFERS:

- Guidance on how to strategically use the power of pop culture to engage people around important causes.
- Inspiration and best practices to help groups harness the power of pop culture as part of their integrated strategic communication efforts.
- Resources to learn more and do more.

This report is made possible with the Ford Foundation’s generous support.

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CREDITS & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

TURNING ENTERTAINMENT INTO ENGAGEMENT

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We're trying to be responsive to think about new and different ways to have public conversations. Pop culture allows us to do that with populations that our other strategies may not have reached. Other foundations are also similarly thinking about pop culture as a strategy to expand and amplify the work that they already do. It's also at a time when industries that make pop culture are having that conversation internally and that the public is also demanding.

**ADEY FISSEHA,
U.S. PROGRAM OFFICER,
UNBOUND PHILANTHROPY**

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Pop culture – including TV and film, music, sports, fashion, art, books, comic books, theatre, tech, media and politics – intersects with the critical issues our country and world are facing. There's a growing body of [research](#) to back this up, and we are looking for even more evidence as we do this work every single day. Entertainment can and should be used for engagement. Organizations working on issues from women's right to immigration to environment to education want to shape how people think and feel about these issues. Pop culture provides unique, strategic ways to do that.

Today, the explosion of digital TV platforms, star-making Hollywood blockbusters and the launch of more and more video-centered apps has empowered audiences to not just watch but also react and share their feelings about the stories and characters.

POP CULTURE BUILDS EMPATHY

The power of stories to [build empathy](#) is particularly strong in movies and TV because of their capacity to transport the viewer. It goes beyond the “very special episode” approach of the past to incorporate social issues into entire story arcs. When audiences maintain sustained interest in a TV show, they have the opportunity to connect and empathize with a character over long periods of time. This includes audiences seeking more ways to engage with each other and the shows they are watching, which is a bonus for communicators using pop culture as part of their strategy.

Rather than using a flat narrative or one-dimensional characters to appeal to the viewer, successful shows are built around complex characters with whom audiences connect over time, an example of [identification theory](#) used for entertainment education. Compare a classic after-school special with an obvious agenda to a show like “The Good Wife” that addresses issues of discrimination and religious freedom authentically, and it is clear why current pop culture is more effective at generating empathy.

POP CULTURE SHAPES PERCEPTIONS AND RESHAPES NARRATIVES

Caty Borum Chattoo, director of the [Center for Media & Social Impact](#) and professor, researcher and producer at American University, has teased out some theories over her years of research that illuminate why some stories drive social change better than others. For example, according to her report, "[The Laughter Effect: The \[Serious\] Role of Comedy in Social Change](#)," comedy must go "all the way" in order to work persuasively when it comes to social and civic issues. According to her synthesis of research about how comedy appeals work in entertainment, advertising and other formats, comedy works to open a door for audiences to experience social issues that might be complex, to break down barriers of social taboo around social issues, and to increase feelings of empathy and connection, particularly for characters to which they may otherwise have limited exposure. For one such example, consider the popular broadcast comedy "[Modern Family](#)" and its impact on public perception of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) community.

on the small screen, but the show's broad appeal, [critical acclaim](#) and long run has had an undeniable impact on viewers: In a 2014 [poll](#) by The Hollywood Reporter, 27 percent of viewers said that gay TV characters influenced them to support marriage equality. Following the 2015 U.S. Supreme Court ruling to legalize same-sex marriage, "Modern Family" has turned its focus to a new frontier of LGBTQ rights, and a recent [episode](#) where Mitch and Cam's daughter Lily makes a friend was [lauded](#) for featuring an openly transgender child actor.

THIS IS EXACTLY WHAT TARYN HIGASHI, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF [UNBOUND PHILANTHROPY](#), MEANS WHEN SHE TALKS ABOUT THE IDEA THAT WINNING AND SUSTAINING POLICY CHANGE REQUIRES CULTURE CHANGE.

"Pop culture is what can reach audiences who are not reached by our current strategies or moved by them," she told us. "We're looking at



Photo credit: ABC

"Modern Family" updates the classic family sitcom to include less traditional family models. In addition to the nuclear Dunphy family, the show also features gay couple Mitch and Cam and their adopted daughter, as well as patriarch Jay, his young Colombian wife Gloria and her son Manny from a previous marriage. Mitch and Cam were [not the first](#) gay couple to be featured

pop culture as a place where narratives around people of color, Muslims and immigrants are shaped, and we want to shift misleading and inaccurate narratives about these communities to ones of equity and belonging. And we know that pop culture is influential as we've seen it create harmful stereotypes in narratives and we want to reverse them."

POP CULTURE AMPLIFIES ISSUES AND SPARKS CONVERSATIONS BEYOND THE CHOIR



Photo credit: FOX

For social change causes, socially aware movies and TV plotlines have the potential to amplify their issue, especially when they're bolstered by the power of social media. Look at "Empire," which averaged 380,000

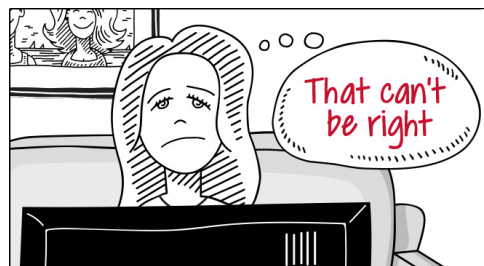
tweets per episode in its second season, including an impressive 95,000 unique tweeters per episode. By engaging viewers beyond watching a TV show, there's an opportunity for communicators to tie in a message and connect directly with viewers about an issue.

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Pop culture is the most powerful way of introducing new ideas, to reinforce or break apart current narratives – it's where people get lost in a good story. Unconscious bias, neurological, physiological impact on brains and bodies, [all] support an individual shift and also transformative societal change. How the culture changes is how the societal and political landscape will shift as well.

— TRACY VAN SLYKE, DIRECTOR, CULTURE LAB, CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT LAB

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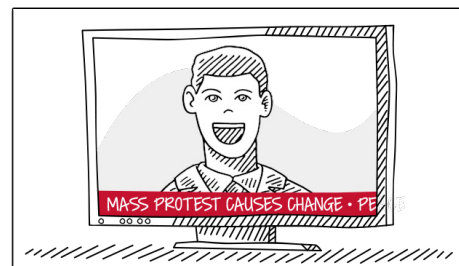
A viewer's heart breaks when her favorite TV show character struggles with a social or environmental issue.



But AndACTION told your nonprofit to expect the storyline weeks ago & you are ready to funnel that energy.



Engaged by the story and your outreach, viewers like her connect and take action.



Change happens. The world is a better place. (And you feel better about watching so much TV.)

Pop culture opportunities are uniquely suited to help organizations achieve the following communication goals.

- 1 SPEAK TRUTH TO POWER** by presenting hard data and statistics in a compelling way, like “House of Cards” did when it explained that African-American women are 50 percent more likely to die of breast cancer than white women.
- 2 CREATE A SOCIAL NORM** by pointing to films and shows that are leading the way in cultural change, like “Transparent” does with transgender visibility.
- 3 CHALLENGE STEREOTYPES** by calling attention to TV and film characters who break with traditional casting, like Captain Raymond Holt from “Brooklyn Nine-Nine” or Imperator Furiosa from “Mad Max.”
- 4 CHALLENGE THE STATUS QUO** by spotlighting and analyzing stories that show the gap between our ideals and the realities of our society.
- 5 SPOTLIGHT A PROBLEM** by bringing attention to issues that audiences aren’t fully aware of or don’t know how to address, like how “Law & Order: SVU” helped drive awareness and the political will for testing the backlog of rape kits throughout the country.
- 6 CREATE A COMMUNITY** to tap a fan base the way the “Harry Potter Alliance” brings people together over a shared love of fantasy and young adult fiction, and harnesses that passion to donate books, send supplies to disaster zones and fight for net neutrality.
- 7 COMBAT STIGMAS WITH STORIES** by highlighting an accurate and nuanced portrayal of a social issue, such as Paula’s regret-free abortion on “Crazy Ex-Girlfriend.”
- 8 DEMONSTRATE MODEL BEHAVIOR WITH STORIES** to emulate behavior, whether via protagonists or antagonists. For example, “MTV’s 16 and Pregnant” shows teens the consequences of unprotected sex and the challenges of life with a baby. After the show premiered, searches and tweets regarding birth control and abortion rose significantly.
- 9 INCREASE EMPATHY WITH STORIES** to cultivate the awareness that we have more in common than we often think, the way viewers of the film “A Day Without a Mexican” exhibited increased empathy toward immigrants.

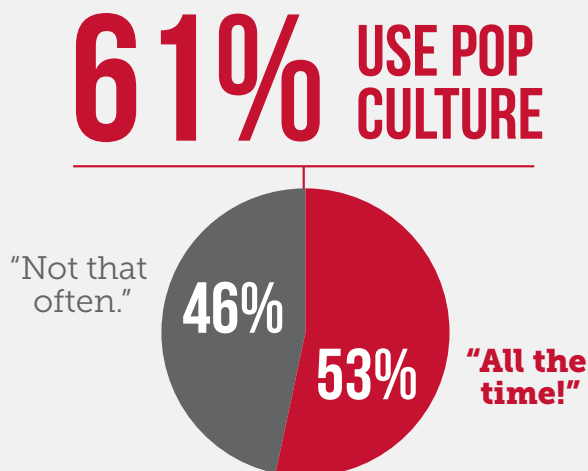
GETTING INSPIRED TO EXPERIMENT WITH POP CULTURE

STATE OF PLAY: WHAT NONPROFITS ARE DOING NOW WITH POP CULTURE AND WHAT THEY NEED TO DO MORE

AndACTION issued a survey and conducted interviews to determine how nonprofits are harnessing the power of stories to use pop culture as an agent for social change. We spoke with a wide range of organizations, including local and national nonprofits, issue advocacy groups, organizations working in the field and those working mostly in the digital space, as well as individuals and groups working in the creative and pop culture arenas.

In a survey of 50 organizations, 61 percent of those surveyed used pop culture in the last two years as part of a communication strategy, but only 53 percent used it all the time (compared to 46 percent who said “not that often”). Of those surveyed, 75 percent said they would use pop culture again – so there is a significant opportunity to grow this discipline.

In the past two years, have you or your organization used pop culture to push your issue?



75% WILL USE IT AGAIN

EFFICIENT + SIMPLE WAYS TO MAKE POP CULTURE WORK

Through our research and interviews, we learned that organizations are looking for efficient, simple ways to put pop culture to work for their causes. They are trying a variety of strategies, including:



Public service announcements.



Celebrity spokespeople.



Digital strategies using social media, like Twitter chats and campaigns built around trending topics.



Film and TV screenings.



Photo contests.



Lesson plans and study guides.



Blogs and op-eds.

Very few work solo. Organizations often partner with others – including businesses, content creators, active fan bases, independent artists, celebrities and internet celebrities.

So what's holding some organizations back? Some simply don't have the capacity, given small staff and limited resources and budgets. One respondent said the organization often does not act in a timely fashion, which is necessary to make the most of pop culture. Another said it didn't think its central issue, health care, was particularly sexy from a pop culture standpoint. Still others don't think they have the necessary skills, including social media savvy, to get enough lift out of marrying an issue to current pop culture. Most agreed they could use more help.

"We struggle with capacity – it's a full-time job when you have just five people," Becca Rueble, senior communications manager at [Make It Work](#), told us about the organization's initial efforts to tie TV shows to a larger conversation

about the issues. "We have three comms people, and it's hard to all of a sudden assign the pop culture work to one person, so we understand the show, the characters, the context [and] can have a nuanced deeper conversation about the topic when it comes together. The inside track and background and lead time and the support to help think through the execution is a game-changer. We don't want it to feel ad hoc so having someone like AndACTION to think it through with us is huge."

However, as organizations build capacity, there's no question that having an infrastructure to use pop culture as part of a communication strategy is essential, says Tracy Van Slyke, director of Citizen Engagement Lab's Culture Lab. One easy way organizations can begin building out their pool of resources is by tapping existing staff. The expertise may already exist, not necessarily in the person in charge of digital or communications but in other staff members who are already pop culture fans.

BRINGING THE ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY IN ON IT

When we spoke with industry executives, they told us they'd all worked with a nonprofit organization in some way, most quite recently, to integrate issues into their storylines. Some of the projects they mentioned include the TV shows "[Pitch](#)," "[Black-ish](#)" and "[Kingdom](#)" and the films "[Spotlight](#)" and "[Bleed For This](#)."



Photo credit: NBC

The executives told us they conduct research to find nonprofits to collaborate with, often by asking friends and colleagues. In most cases, the executives sit on multiple boards of nonprofit organizations. Many in the industry have personal connections to issues, such as Mariska Hargitay, who created the [Joyful Heart Foundation](#) after she began her role on "[Law & Order: SVU](#)." The foundation and show collaborate to integrate issues of domestic violence and abuse into episodes. By bringing issues of importance to them into the room, writers often look for ways to weave issues into the story even as entertainment remains paramount to their work.

Although there are many ways content creators can partner with nonprofit organizations to highlight an issue, the first priority for any show or film is to tell a great story. The executives we spoke with told us that story integration must be authentic and organic. There's an opportunity for organizations that can serve as subject-matter experts to supply information for writers, as well as provide briefings to cast and crew. Based on what the executives told us, there are also opportunities for organizations to establish formal partnerships with shows that frequently address their issue.

Capacity is as much of an issue for the TV and film industry as it is for organizations working for social change, but that's being addressed in a couple of ways. Downstream, AndACTION keeps the lines of communication open between organizations and content creators. By helping causes take advantage of upcoming storylines, AndACTION gives organizations resources to amplify their message, which also means more visibility for relevant TV shows and movies.

Color of Change's culture and entertainment advocacy director Brian Walker is working upstream in the story development process. Instead of having to vet organizations the story creators might want to work with – something TV and film producers told us they didn't have the time or resources for – Color of Change is uniting causes and story creators on the front end. This also addresses the fact that cause organizations don't typically understand the TV development and production process and, as a result, aren't successfully pitching to content creators.

WHY ISN'T EVERYONE DOING IT?

Why haven't you used pop culture as a way to advance buzz?

No capacity

40%

No expertise

66%

No support

0%

INSPIRATION: POP CULTURE IDEAS TO STEAL

How are organizations using pop culture effectively in ways others can replicate?



Image credit: MomsRising

Some groups **use pop culture as a touchstone and build off of lived experience** (even if that experience was on screen) **or a shared experience** to make an important point. [MomsRising](#) turned its affection for “[Mad Men](#)” into an effective [equal pay campaign](#). So effective, in fact, that President Obama used language they created in his 2014 State of the Union [address](#): “A woman deserves equal pay for equal work ... It’s time to do away with workplace policies that belong in a ‘Mad Men’ episode.”

MomsRising told us that having the president adopt its messaging was surprising, but the organization ran with it, developing a meme with staying power – an instantly clear message with widely recognizable imagery – that’s very sharable. The lesson learned, Director of Social Media Strategy Anita Sarah Jackson told us: “Using pop culture references to communicate policy ideas is very powerful.”



Photo credit: Columbia Pictures

While most think tanks in Washington, D.C., don’t bat an eyelash at publishing heavily researched policy papers, it’s not often you see them **frame up scientific work** with an example from a Hollywood film. But that’s just what the [Brookings Institution](#) did to [explain the complexity of maritime piracy](#) off the coast of Somalia. The 2013 Academy Award-nominated film “[Captain Phillips](#)” starring Tom Hanks proved to be an excellent hook for highlighting the reasons behind piracy and ways to stop it. Somali maritime piracy [dropped sharply in late 2013](#), mostly as a result of organizations adopting the best practices spelled out in the blog post about the report.



Image credit: Netflix

Or consider the Netflix series “[Making a Murderer](#),” which ultimately brought massive attention to try and free a young man from jail. The show, which suggested that investigators took advantage of Brendan Dassey’s youth and limited intellect to coax him into confessing to a crime he didn’t commit, had a direct impact on two attorneys who succeeded in getting Dassey’s conviction overturned. In November, a federal judge ordered his release while the state appeals the decision to overturn the conviction, followed by yet another decision to keep him in jail during the appeal, all of which is being well-covered in the news due to the buzz from the show. Actions from viewers that highlighted the problem included petitions to the White House and a [Change.org petition](#) to free Dassey. Groups can also **use actual footage to talk about issues relevant today**.

Networks and studios understand when the issues in their stories have historical relevance, and they can help by providing context as part of their promotional strategies that nonprofits can take advantage of. A good example is HBO's movie "[Confirmation](#)," the true story of U.S. Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas' confirmation hearing when a former employee, law professor Anita Hill, was forced to take the stand to testify against him. She reported sexual harassment she had suffered while working on his team at the

Equal Employment Opportunity Commission. HBO produced a [highly shareable three-minute video](#) about the historical facts on sexual harassment and what has changed as a result of her testimony. Groups like [UltraViolet](#) were able to **add this video to their social media editorial calendars and reach their audience**, which cares deeply about this issue.

The 2014 Academy Award-nominated film "[Selma](#)," about the civil rights movement to enfranchise black Americans with full voting rights, was hit with [almost as much controversy](#) as it was praise. As the film racked up nominations on the award season circuit, [a strategy to show the film to as many schools](#) and interested groups as possible emerged. The filmmakers, led by writer-director-producer Ava DuVernay, partnered with the [Southern Poverty Law Center](#) to create a [viewing guide](#) for the film. Because it is one of the most accurate dramatic representations of Bloody Sunday, when [police brutally attacked](#) the nonviolent marchers as they crossed the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama, on their way to Montgomery, Alabama, **schools and community groups across the U.S. continue to screen the film to foster learning** about the history of civil and voting rights. The guide serves up historical facts and context and guides facilitators and viewers through a series of questions to meet comprehension, empathic and critical thinking goals.

Groups use **popular characters to address polarizing issues**. CBS' Sunday night drama "[Madam Secretary](#)" averages 9 million viewers per week, so

when CBS teased that its 2016 season premiere episode would feature a [storyline](#) about climate change readiness and military impact, AndACTION got the word out to climate change organizations to cross-promote their work along with the tune-in time for the show. Star Téa Leoni live tweeted during the broadcast and [showed her support](#) for the importance of facing climate change with policy solutions. [Climate Nexus](#) – and other similar organizations – was able to quote her tweets and send a heads up about the episode to its list of 5,000 subscribers, the majority of whom are journalists and other climate communicators who could use the show to get buzz going.



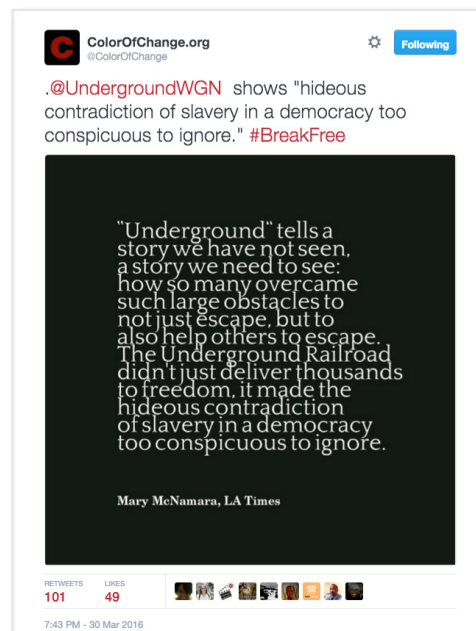


Photo credit: Netflix

INSIDE SCOOP

Because "13th" is on Netflix, organizations can set the date and time for a live tweet to suit their schedule. Digital platforms like Netflix, Amazon and Hulu are filled with "time-shifted" content that organizations can use at any time!

Films serve as **powerful conversation starters** and groups are using TV and film to get their networks and communities talking and commenting. [The Campaign for the Fair Sentencing of Youth](#) (TCFSY) hosted a Twitter chat on Ava DuVernay's recent documentary film "13th," which takes a forceful look at mass incarceration in the U.S. During the chat, TCFSY's advocates and experts shared their thoughts on the film and invited others to join them and submit questions using the hashtags #13th and #TCFSY. Staff members from the [Campaign for Youth Justice](#) and the [Justice Policy Institute](#) also joined TCFSY. The Twitter chat was a [success](#). Film interviewees like social justice activist Van Jones retweeted TCFSY's Executive Director Jody Kent Lavy (45 retweets and 86 likes), and Malkia Cyril, director of the Center for Media Justice, retweeted TCFSY's Advocacy Director James Dold. And the film's director Ava DuVernay herself liked one of TCFSY's tweets. Traffic to @theCFSY Twitter increased by 162 percent the week of the live tweet. This level of interaction gave TCFSY more visibility with an audience that's interested in its issue.



Working with AndACTION, Color Of Change ran a live Twitter chat during an episode of WGN's hit "[Underground](#)," a TV series about slaves on a Georgia cotton plantation who plan a daring escape to the north using the 600-mile Underground Railroad. It **tells the lesser-known story** of slavery – those who risked their death for freedom – which shows the audience their heroism. Twitter chats successfully spark online conversations about issues importance to the participating audiences.

Groups use **cultural touchstones** to give meaning to issues showing that tying pop culture to complex issues doesn't have to be elaborate or complicated. [Progress Michigan](#) dubbed legislation that would prohibit local governments from passing local proworker ordinances the "Death Star" bill because it would impose strict state control, much as its namesake did in "[Star Wars](#)." The moniker [stuck](#), spreading widely on social media, and was cited in numerous local and national articles on the legislation.

Proving that pop culture has the power to **capture the attention of the most hardened beat writers** when used strategically, a perfectly poised pun communicated a message about student debt and opposition to fee hikes. Students protested fee hikes being considered by the California State University board of trustees by dressing up like zombies from the mega hit TV show "[The Walking Dead](#)." They called themselves The Walking Debt and **got extensive coverage** from none other than the [Los Angeles Times](#).

“

We see it through work like [AndACTION's] work and other leaders in this new emerging field that this is a very opportune moment in time, but the people who are leading this work are scattered, they're just building their programs and organizations, and we think a lot can be gained a lot more quickly if a fund, staffed by experts, is created to make connections and then resource work and in addition invest in research and learning that's very practical and can be useful for everybody involved, for the pop culture industry, for the funders, for the advocates.

— TARYN HIGASHI, UNBOUND PHILANTHROPY

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EMBRACING A POP CULTURE MINDSET ORGANIZATION-WIDE

This idea for the Pop Culture Pivot is borrowed from the world of mainstream media. Organizations know to pivot to rapid response when their issue comes up on a news program or news is posted online. So when President Donald Trump issues an immigration order, there is no shortage of organizations and pundits who respond quickly online to shape the conversation, focus on facts, highlight policy solutions and even drive a fundraising appeal.

Nonprofits can do the same when pop culture opportunities come up. So when Xiomara has an abortion on "[Jane the Virgin](#)," reproductive rights groups are at the ready to talk about it. When trucks are getting stuck in the melted roads on "[Ice Road Truckers](#)," environmental groups can show the impact of a warming climate in real time and to a broader audience.

The Pop Culture Pivot is how organizations can systematically infuse culture into communications as a way to push social and even policy change.



Photo credit: Comedy Central

Here's what it looks like in action:

When [a man with a gun opened fire in a movie theatre](#) showing of the Amy Schumer comedy "[Trainwreck](#)," two people were killed, 10 others were injured and the gunman shot and killed himself. Devastated by the tragedy and spurred to use her writing and acting skills to talk about the issue of gun violence, Schumer [worked with](#) Everytown for Gun Safety to provide facts about gun violence and the laws that needed to reduce the number

of victims. In April 2016, her Comedy Central show "[Inside Amy Schumer](#)" featured a sketch called "[Gun Show](#)," which was a home-shopping show spoof that sold guns. On-screen graphics showed facts about gun laws, and the 800 number was live, connecting anyone who called to Everytown. This kind of consciousness-raising provides viewers with easy access to educational and policy information that is relevant to issues happening in real life.

TO DO THE POP CULTURE PIVOT, ORGANIZATIONS NEED TO:

DECIDE WHERE POP CULTURE CAN HELP achieve strategic communication goals and start looking for ready-made opportunities.

GET INTEL. Tap an underutilized resource, staff, board and volunteers who binge watch TV and are addicted to movies. They will know where opportunities are. Groups can also use resources like AndACTION.org to get a heads up of what is coming up. Integrate this into editorial calendars and into the hands of social media mavens. Because they knew workers on the show "[Superstore](#)" would go on strike to protest the firing of a manager who gave a coworker paid maternal leave, [Jobs With Justice](#) was ready with a blog explaining the real issues facing workers when the

episode airs. Same thing when Xiomara has an abortion on "[Jane the Virgin](#)," pro-reproductive justice Latinas at Rewire feel empowered to tell their stories too and are at the ready to tweet storm about it.

TAKE ADVANTAGE OF EMOTIONS RUNNING HIGH BECAUSE OF A STORY.

After the release of the movie "[42](#)," about the life of [Jackie Robinson](#), Philadelphia City Council member Helen Gym introduced [a resolution to apologize to Robinson](#) for the racism he faced when playing in Philadelphia. The movie piqued her interest, and that of the City Council, in remembering him and owning up to the hostility he encountered. The resolution passed unanimously before about 100 children, city leaders and Robinson fans.

MONITOR POP CULTURE. Just as you would monitor the news for mentions of your organization's priority issues, so should you monitor pop culture. Nimbleness is the magic ingredient to ride the cultural waves.

BEST PRACTICES

In talking to nonprofit organizations about their use of pop culture, some strategies bubbled up to the top that organizations can put into play. They don't have to be time consuming or cost a dime.



Focus on what's trending: Watch what's trending on Twitter, Entertainment Weekly, Mashable, Twitter, Facebook and elsewhere. Pick celebrities, shows, films or societal pressure points that are trending. This allows organizations to latch on to ideas that already have traction.

Which of the following would help you incorporate pop culture into your work?



Stay timely: Peg work to book launches, season debuts or finales, live-TV episode viewings, etc. It's worth noting that in our survey, 35 percent of respondents said they need more intel on when upcoming stories related to their issue arise. Another 21 percent said they need more inspiration to guide their work. Both of these fall into AndACTION's areas of expertise.



Use real-world tie-ins: Organizations are doing this in a couple of different ways.



Looking forward: When Charlie Sheen had a public meltdown in 2011 and bragged that his style of living reflected #TigerBlood, the American Red Cross tied that to their regular blood donations and *tweeted*: "We may not collect #tigerblood, but we know our donors & volunteers have fierce passion for doing good! #RedCrossMonth." The result: a modest increase in blood donations as well as a bit of press.

Looking back: Vernon's Hidden Valley Steakhouse partnered with [Albuquerque Health Care for the Homeless](#) (AHCH) to stage a mock funeral for "[Breaking Bad](#)" character Walter White after the series, which was filmed in Albuquerque, New Mexico, wrapped. The mock funeral and fundraiser generated \$17,000 in donations and attracted free press mentions from CNN, CBS, The Hollywood Reporter, The Guardian, Time, The Atlantic, USA Today, Huffington Post and others.



Be authentic: Organizations that experienced the most traction usually only used pop culture in their communication strategies when and if it was appropriate. A good measure of this is whether the medium used (such as film, TV, theater, comic books, photography, etc.) and the tone (happy, sad, upbeat, etc.) matched the organization's mission. It's important that organizations not only know their audiences but also how those audiences want to be reached about a particular issue.



Partner with others: Very few of the organizations worked alone. In particular, Internet celebrities (e.g., YouTubers, Instagrammers, etc.) have extremely large followings and help organizations reach niche and segmented audiences. In fact, while MTV's "[Catfish: The TV Show](#)" co-host Max Joseph was absent from the show due to filming a movie, MTV selected a rotating cast of famous YouTubers to fill in for him – and they also promoted [mtvU](#) and [The Jed Foundation's Half of Us](#) initiative that focuses on youth and mental health.



Use more than one tactic: Organizations were very likely to use more than one tactic at a time, such as live tweeting about TV shows that showcase their issue, engaging YouTube celebrities and submitting an op-ed that ties a current film or TV show to their cause.



Make the most of existing resources. Set up Google alerts to stay updated on current issues, and have pop culture fans within the organization flag topical storylines. Even if they're outside the communications staff, integrate them into communication strategies through technology or periodic meetings.

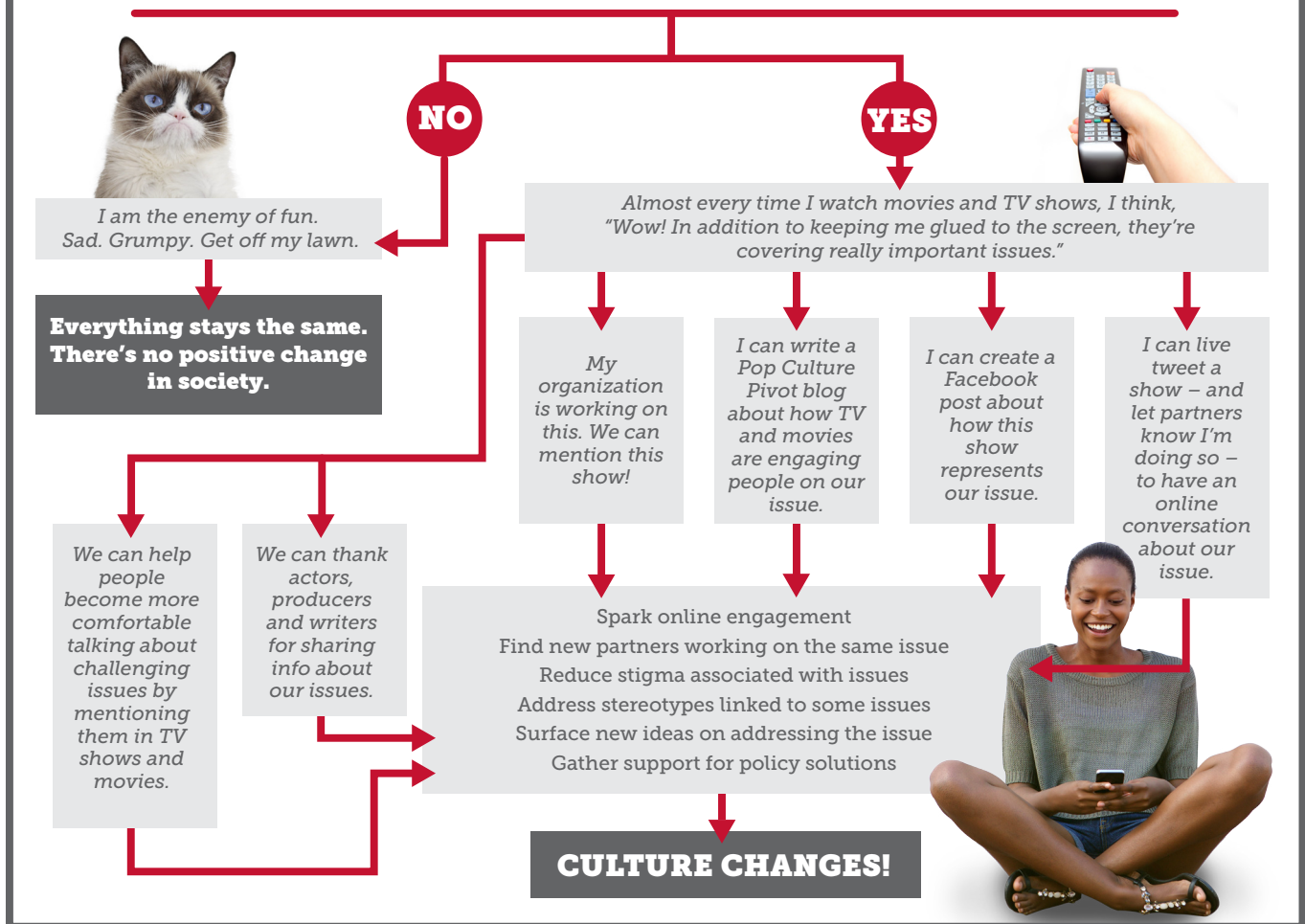
ANDACTION'S RECOMMENDATIONS TO BUILD EXPERTISE AND CAPACITY

Plan and execute more experiments to strengthen the art and science of pop culture as a tool to improve social impact messaging. Taking pop culture for a test drive means trying new things and taking risks. Stay nimble. Consistently running experiments will give organizations the experience they need to fine-tune their pop culture efforts to get maximum value.

Help organizations build the competencies necessary to do this work. Much like when communication staff had to learn to do social media, pop culture competencies take time to develop. Designate one person in your organization to pursue pop culture opportunities. This point person should follow organizations doing good

work in this area like Color of Change, Everytown and AndACTION to get inspired. Having a dedicated point of contact makes it easier for organizations to try their hand at experiments per above. To be sure the pop culture expertise doesn't walk out the door if your point of contact leaves, be sure to encourage the individual to deliberately share what he or she is learning with a broader team so that organizations build this capability in-house. Funders interested in grantees developing this capacity should support learning experiences and circuit rider-type experts to provide hands-on technical assistance to jump-start organizations embracing pop culture plays as part of their engagement strategy.

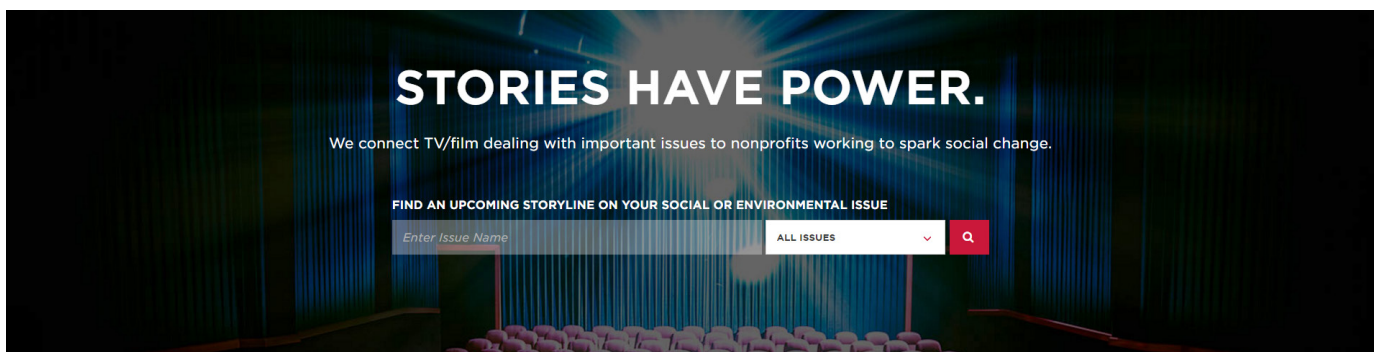
Do you want to use **pop culture** in your work?



Want some more inspiration? Check out AndACTION's [Story Records database](#), which is the heart of our pop culture hub. The database houses stories curated by social issue that give a short plot synopsis and some ideas about how to use the story in social change communication work. We constantly develop clickable sharelines, ready-made tweets and Facebook posts to slot

right into social media feeds or queue up in an editorial calendar.

Learn more about how this database - and our collaboration with organizations and content creators - works starting with the case studies below.



CASE STUDIES

“ALL THE WAY” & ACLU + ROCK THE VOTE

AndACTION worked with [HBO](#), the [American Civil Liberties Union](#) (ACLU) and [Rock The Vote](#) to cross-promote voting rights with the release of “[All The Way](#),” a feature-length film about President Lyndon B. Johnson’s fight to pass the 1964 Civil Rights Act.



Photo credit: HBO

HBO released historical feature film “All The Way,” starring Bryan Cranston as LBJ and Anthony Mackie as Martin Luther King, Jr. (MLK). AndACTION learned about a key plot point from HBO: The main conflict between LBJ and MLK would focus on the removal of voting rights for African-Americans from the act. AndACTION inferred that this plot point could be connected to the present-day struggle for enfranchisement of African-

Americans and other suppressed voter groups and suggested several organizations that could use “All The Way” to pivot to their work on voting rights. We partnered with Rock the Vote and the ACLU to participate in a digital Twitter campaign to cross-promote their work with “All The Way.”



AndACTION centered the content around two strategic aims: speaking truth to power and spotlighting a problem. The film’s scene of Fannie Lou Hamer’s testimony to Congress on being brutally beaten by police after a false arrest is a moving call for empathy, and the elimination of voting rights from the Civil Rights Act echoes the 2013 Supreme Court decision to roll back key provisions of the Voting Rights Act. We received digital graphics and branded images from HBO in advance, then planned social media messaging around civil and voting rights to align with “All The Way” and the two organizations’ missions. We then chose strategic partners, including the Ford Foundation and California Endowment, to tweet and retweet content before the film’s premiere. We also got HBO to retweet partners from their official accounts.

“STRANGER THINGS” & U.S. DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY

The science fiction thriller “[Stranger Things](#)” casts the government as an enemy, but the real U.S. Department of Energy (DOE) showed how to use the story to its advantage.



Image credit: Netflix

The DOE used a storyline from Netflix’s “Stranger Things” to act as the subject-matter expert on the science and policy of energy and government agencies, all of which the show portrays as quite sinister. Instead of attacking the story, the agency took the opportunity to explain some key differences between “Stranger Things” and ... reality! [The DOE wrote a great blog](#) that outlined the real work going on at the agency, filled with links to amazing

women scientists, breakthroughs at the real labs and even an explanation of how Christmas lights work. It shared that through its social media channels, then the post was gleefully picked up by publications and blogs like [Vulture](#), [Gizmodo](#), [Refinery29](#), [Business Insider](#), [Vanity Fair](#), [Newsweek](#), [Vice](#) and countless science publications eager to share the DOE’s fact check.

By latching on to the popularity of “Stranger Things,” the DOE made the most of a show that was capturing the public’s attention – and did it nimbly, which is essential to putting pop culture to good use.

Remember, [even if a storyline is imperfect](#), an organization can make the pop culture pivot to from story to facts. It works every time.

“ORANGE IS THE NEW BLACK” & IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST

AndACTION was monitoring the much-anticipated Season 4 release of Netflix’s “[Orange is the New Black](#)” when we got the tip that a storyline featuring the privatization of the prison in the show would figure prominently.

We used the power of our nonprofit networking and reached out to [In the Public Interest](#), an organization whose work is dedicated to studying and promoting the most fiscally responsible use of public funds while centering on justice and civil rights. The organization had just completed and was working to promote its new policy paper on the exorbitant expense of for-profit prisons. Seeing an opportunity where we could spotlight a problem, we proposed an op-ed written by Piper Kerman, the author of the book “Orange is the New Black,” to connect the storyline to the issue of prison privatization.

Kerman's op-ed was featured in [Fusion](#), an online publication that lives at the crossroads of pop culture, news and politics. It is owned by Univision, part of a media partnership that includes properties like [The Root](#), [The Onion](#) and [The A.V. Club](#). Kerman wrote:

“At the end of last season, fans of the Netflix series ‘Orange is the New Black,’ created by Jenji Kohan, saw Litchfield prison taken over by a private prison corporation. In the new season, which starts today, we’ll watch the show’s fictional women prisoners continuing to find ways to survive together, but there’s a new pressure: the consequences of turning incarceration into a profit-making venture. After a flood of new transfers fills Litchfield to overflowing, the prison becomes painfully understaffed and under-resourced. This is true to reality – to maximize profit for their investors and reduce operational costs, private prisons often cut corners on staffing and

other essentials of safety. The resulting safety and human rights violations in some privately operated prisons have been horrific.

“A [new research brief](#) from In the Public Interest, a nonprofit advocating for best practices in government contracting, details the several ways private prison companies negatively impact prisoners, correctional workers, their families, their communities, and American taxpayers.”



Photo credit: Netflix

By connecting the issue of for-profit prisons to the show, the op-ed gave In the Public Interest a whole new audience to introduce to its critical policy work. All of this work became part of a larger story of disinvestment in for-profit prisons in 2016. In August, the Obama administration [announced](#) it would be ending federal contracts with private prisons. The drumbeat remained steady on the culture front as the excellent documentary “13th” on the mass incarceration crisis from Ava DuVernay opened the New York Film Festival in October. “13th” looks at the issue from a historical and economic perspective.

The combination of pop culture and policy once again shows that change happens when we can spotlight a problem through story, back it up with policy and apply pressure to our institutions through cultural leadership.

MEASURING THE IMPACT OF POP CULTURE EFFORTS

Pop culture wields [significant influence](#) in the U.S., where consumers spend about the same amount of money on entertainment as they do on out-of-pocket health insurance costs – about \$2,600 per year, according to the [2012 Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Expenditure Survey](#). That's more than they spend on education, fruits and vegetables, or alcoholic beverages. What's more, revenue for the commercial pop culture industries totals \$868 billion, making it more than a thousand times larger than all information- and communications-related foundation grantmaking at \$518 million.

THE FUTURE OF MEASUREMENT

Heidi Boisvert is one of these innovators. An artist with a doctorate in electronic arts, she is an assistant professor at New York City College of Technology in the emerging media technology program. She's developing what is now dubbed the Empathy Engine – a system designed to measure and analyze the way media, such as stories, causes or affects empathic engagement.



Photo credit: iStock



She explains:

Although deep cultural transformation and social change are long-term, nonlinear, unpredictable and complex processes, and although no universal consensus currently exists for what works and how it should be measured, I am convinced that because pop culture, media and emerging technology are integral parts of both public and private life, they are without a doubt vehicles for achieving lasting positive social change.



Boisvert's Limbic Lab proposes to create a database comprised of individual records that each capture the subject's biophysical reactions to a media type input, for example, a television show. The subject's reactions to the story, combined with his or her psychographic profile, is processed through the Empathy Engine, which sets emotional correlates – happy, sad, angry, afraid, etc. – identified from the story arc. Subject records will include the subject's answers to follow-up questions specific to the show, then an analysis of a set of subject reactions that can reveal emerging patterns about behaviors and – more important – behavior change. From there, the analytical possibilities of the data sets are unlimited.

Like Boisvert, AndACTION believes this kind of data-driven measurement of the effects of pop culture can be achieved. Investment in this type of research is what will yield the hard data that has seemed elusive to the pop culture and social change field.

Pop culture gets plenty of attention, as shown by ratings for some of the most popular shows. For example, the midseason premiere of “Empire” – at a time when good weather and spring break typically drive viewership down – averaged an impressive [12.2 million viewers](#), making it among the highest-rated shows in 2016. Even outside the “Big Four” networks, hit shows like “Mad Men” – which attracted [4.6 million viewers](#) for its series finale – bring in huge numbers of viewers.

What’s more, pop culture takes conversations beyond the entertainment page to encourage people to talk about the real issues. When “Making a Murderer” was the show everyone was watching, people were actively engaging in lively debates about innocent people being railroaded.

So it’s no wonder that social change organizations are looking for ways to use the power of pop culture in their work. Although these next examples come specifically from the world of sports broadcasting, the impressive metrics of these early efforts – and the strategies these organizations used – may be applied more generally to TV shows and films to garner similar results.

BREAKTHROUGH U.S. used the May 2015 “Fight of the Century” between boxers Floyd Mayweather and Manny Pacquiao to raise awareness for its domestic violence program. Building off the unprecedented hype surrounding the match, Breakthrough recognized a “crisistunity” to drive culture change to shift the public narrative around Mayweather as a celebrated boxer to that of a serial abuser with impunity. In the days leading up to the fight, Breakthrough ran [#NoMayPac](#), a rapid-response campaign that asked sports fans to take a public pledge to boycott the televised fight as a way to say that Mayweather’s actions were unacceptable. Breakthrough reached an enormous number of new people for its target demographic, with 6.3 million potential impressions:

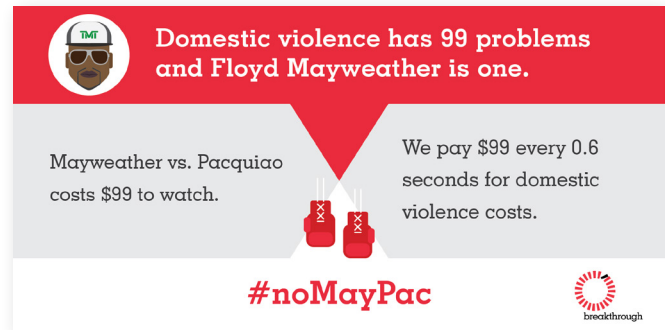


Image credit: Breakthrough U.S.

- Breakthrough reached 6.2 million people on Twitter, with 923 engagements (mentions, retweets, favorites, new followers). The [#NoMayPac](#) hashtag was used 1,440 times.
- On Facebook, 55,803 new people viewed Breakthrough’s page, with 366 engagements (likes, comments, shares and page likes), compared to only a handful of engagements in a noncampaign week.
- More than 4,000 people visited the website campaign page, a significant increase over typical double-digit weekly numbers. Of those on the campaign page, more than 1,500 scrolled down to the bottom of the page, and the average time on the page was 3:08 minutes, indicating real engagement with the content and increased awareness of the issue.

THE NATIONAL WILDLIFE FEDERATION (NWF) reaches millions of TV and online viewers by having naturalist David Mizejewski appear on “Conan” periodically. One appearance to promote the [#SaveLACougars](#) campaign reached a few hundred thousand viewers live and millions more who watched the clip on YouTube. Mizejewski told us that NWF is always looking for opportunities to use pop culture to get more attention for wildlife conservation, and the campaign’s humorous name gave it an extra boost.

"Underground" tells a story we have not seen, a story we need to see: how so many overcame such large obstacles to not just escape, but to also help others to escape. The Underground Railroad didn't just deliver thousands to freedom, it made the hideous contradiction of slavery in a democracy too conspicuous to ignore.

Image credit: Color of Change



Image credit: MomsRising



Photo credit: Netflix



Photo credit: Comedy Central



Photo credit: Netflix

AS ORGANIZATIONS SET UP FEEDBACK LOOPS TO SEE IF POP CULTURE EFFORTS ARE DELIVERING COMMUNICATION RESULTS, CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING:

Did the effort expand the reach of the organization?

Color of Change live tweeted around episodes of WGN's Underground, which is popular among young men ages 18-24. This put the organization in front of an audience it wants to engage more in its efforts.

Did it expose audiences to important narratives, build empathy for people or model behavior?

For MomsRising, getting the president of the United States to repeat its message point against "Mad Men Wages" showed that connecting its wage issue to a cultural touchstone helped to popularize the idea.

Did it intensify sentiment or spur actions among audiences?

Make It Work successfully facilitated an online chat around an episode of Master of None about caring for aging parents.

Did it recruit new champions to speak out?

Amy Schumer joined Everytown's creative council because of her work with the organization around the shooting at the movie theater where her movie was shown.

Did it enhance an organization's social media presence by netting more twitter followers, generating more retweets than usual or getting new allies to tweet on the issue and therefore be public on it?

Center for the Fair Sentencing of Youth experienced all of these things by activating around the film "13th."

Did it make an issue higher profile because it connected with a pop culture opportunity that was trending?

Groups successfully attached the issue of science, technology, engineering and math or STEM education to popular film "Hidden Figures" and organized screenings across the country in conjunction with local science fairs and other related events.

HARNESSING THE POWER OF POP CULTURE

AndACTION is an active participant in the ecosystem of organizations using pop culture for good. All of us who are invested in pop culture are doing so because we recognize that pop culture is an essential tool in the arsenal of social change. Each of these organizations is a valuable resource to organizations wanting to play more with pop culture to generate buzz about their issues.



Pop culture can be used in a wide variety of ways to amplify social issues. Here are just a few examples we love:

Pop Culture Hero

Coalition Inc.

Created by actress Chase Masterson, this organization uses the universal appeal of comics, film and TV to create anti-bullying programs at pop culture events, in schools and in communities.

PBS POV

As a catalyst for public culture, POV by American Documentary creates opportunities to engage with people beyond the TV or computer screen, such as free lesson plans for educators.



Image credit: PBS

Hollywood, Health & Society

This program at the University of Southern California Annenberg Norman Lear Center provides entertainment industry professionals with accurate, timely information for health-related storylines. Its funders have included the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, The California Endowment, the National Cancer Institute, ClimateWorks and the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration.

NYC Domestic Violence (NYCDV)

NYCDV's "Stop the Violence" program uses pop culture, social media and education programs to give teenagers the information they need to learn what dating abuse is and how to see the warning signs.

Inverse

This publication takes a scientific approach to analyzing culture and a cultural approach to talking about science. Its objective is to "better understand tomorrow by examining today."



Image credit: Harry Potter Alliance

Harry Potter Alliance

Drawing on the fandom of the popular book series, this project mobilizes and fundraises in support of equality, literacy and human rights. It engages more than 400,000 fans and, as one example, motivated Warner Bros. to change the sourcing of its Harry Potter chocolate to be 100 percent UTZ or Fairtrade.

Everytown Creative Council

Pop culture icons are playing a leading role in a project for Everytown for Gun Safety, in partnership with founding chair and Academy Award winner Julianne Moore. The more than 80 cultural influencers who have joined the Everytown Creative Council so far are committed to using their creativity and visibility to propel meaningful change in Everytown's ongoing effort to help save lives from gun violence.

The Get Schooled Foundation

Founded through a partnership with Viacom and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation,

The Get Schooled foundation uses website/digital platforms, gamification – for example, taking an online quiz on pop culture to earn points that can be "cashed in" to access resources – and a recipe they call "sizzle and substance" to inspire and engage students. To date, they've reached more than 5 million young people attending close to 11,000 middle and high schools throughout the U.S.

UltraViolet

This organization frequently uses pop culture in its mission to fight sexism and expand women's rights.

CityKids Foundation

Dedicated to making sure the voices of young people are heard in the most positive and powerful ways possible, the foundation reaches more than 100,000 young people worldwide each year through youth-driven messages communicated through performances, workshops and the media, including pop culture.

Advancement Project

This multiracial civil rights organization develops and inspires community-based solutions and features celebrity engagement and endorsements, most notably "Grey's Anatomy" star and social justice activist Jesse Williams, who serves on the board.



Image credit: Advancement Project

GETTING IN THE POP CULTURE GROOVE

Recognizing the power of pop culture, some organizations are looking for ways to shore up their internal resources or partner with others. Here are a few examples:

[Color Of Change](#), a national racial justice organization, hired Brian Walker as its culture and entertainment advocacy director. He collaborates with screenwriters, producers and executives to improve inclusion and increase the output and quality of media representations of black people in film, TV and new digital platforms while the content is being created. As a result, the organization is now “leading efforts to engage key decision-makers in the creative industries including screenwriters, producers and executives in order to improve inclusion and to increase the output and quality of media representations of black people in film and television,” Walker told us.



Photo credit: Netflix

[Make It Work](#) is taking advantage of a pilot program called Cultural Pulse, from which the organization gets a lot of great resources, such as TV shows, movies and themes, Senior Communications Manager Becca Rueble told us. For example, because of these resources, Make It Work was able to facilitate online conversations with supporters around a “[Master of None](#)” episode about caregiving for an aging parent.

The [National Day Labor Organizing Network](#) created what it calls the Art/Work Fellowship to “patronize artwork that changes America and acts as a first-person expression,” Legal Director Chris Newman told us. Its first fellow was Alex Rivera, a Sundance award-winning filmmaker who is making a participant documentary about so-called Dreamers who infiltrate detention centers.

[Wise Entertainment](#) is uniting story creators and issue organizations by creating, developing and producing TV shows, films and transmedia intellectual properties that are edgy, entertaining and character-driven but thoughtfully crafted to tackle some of today’s most pressing social issues. It utilizes research at every step of the process and has a research and

development department that is dedicated to connecting writers and producers to people, institutions, thought leaders and others dealing with key issues.



Image credit: Rock The Vote

[Rock the Vote](#) partnered with [Vevo](#) to create the “[Why I Vote](#)” series. Funded by Vevo, the project was the result of brainstorming and culminated with a Facebook Live youth town hall – and, according to Rock the Vote, some solid media coverage and social media sharing.

CAPITALIZING ON THE POP CULTURE MOMENT

Film and TV stories are special because they close the gap between our brains and our hearts. When we see and empathize with characters on TV and film who may be different from ourselves, we start to identify with their struggles and then we can see things in the real world a whole new way. Culture change leads to perception change, which ultimately leads to society-wide change.

We hope this report has further inspired and empowered funders, social change-makers and cultural strategists to put the power of pop culture to work for their causes.

Contact Us: info@AndACTION.org

LEADING VOICE IN THE FIELD:

dream hampton

dream hampton is a writer, filmmaker, producer and organizer. Her work with [Revolve Impact](#) – a social impact agency whose clients range from artists to nonprofits to political campaigns – leads culture toward social change and political action by developing content and producing events that educate and activate the people most affected by bad, and good, policy.

In 2016, Revolve Impact worked to pass California ballot Proposition 64, the effort to legalize marijuana, as well as to allow those incarcerated with nonviolent marijuana offenses to petition the court to reduce those sentences. They created a multilevel strategic approach to harness pop culture using both traditional and social media. Hampton produced an animated short film written, which was narrated by Jay Z with illustrations by artist Molly Crabapple, called [“A History of the War on Drugs from Prohibition to Gold Rush.”](#) The video was created in partnership with [Drug Policy Alliance](#) (DPA). It was released with an introduction by DPA’s Asha Bandele called [“The War on Drugs is an Epic Fail”](#) in The New York Times. The video has been viewed more than 3 million times, the third-highest number of views for any New York Times video. Prop 64 passed, and those



Artist: Molly Crabapple

serving time are already being released as a result of the new law.

Although Revolve Impact’s work uses a celebrity model, the spirit behind it is rooted in organizing. Coming off of an era of apolitical celebrities, hampton notes, “There was a time when there was a price to pay for speaking up, for having a politick. Now there’s a tax on artists who don’t speak up.” Revolve Impact aims to push and pull artists and content toward resilient pop culture and political leadership rather than ultimately fickle endorsements only in presidential years.

ABOUT THE TEAM



Kristen Grimm is the founder and president of Spitfire Strategies, a public interest communication firm that helps nonprofits and foundations reach their social change goals. She is also a Henry Crown fellow at the Aspen Institute and leads AndACTION as part of her fellowship. A “Buffy the Vampire Slayer” devotee, Kristen likes TV shows and films that showcase strong female characters who are the exact opposite of damsels in distress. We have banned her from bringing sharpened stakes to meetings.



Erin Hart, Spitfire’s managing director, serves as senior advisor to AndACTION. Erin has worked with nonprofits, foundations and government agencies to create social-change campaigns – including work that brought pop culture into movements to reduce youth tobacco use across the U.S. Erin grew up with a serious appreciation for Mel Brooks movies and a belief in humor as the best way to spark discussion about challenging social issues. Shows like “Family Guy” and “Modern Family” continue to prove her right.



Twanna A. Hines is the director of AndACTION. Using her superpowers for good, not evil, she is committed to helping nonprofits effectively embrace storytelling to maximize social impact, mobilize constituents and generate the funds necessary to ensure their missions’ sustainability. Addicted to “This Is Us” and “Scandal,” she loves strong female characters and really great writing. She regularly hosts movie and TV nights with friends she’s known since she was a teen – complete with popcorn for the locals and three-way telephone calls to those who live farther away.



Justine Hebron serves as the communications manager for AndACTION. She takes the lead on building demand for AndACTION from cause organizations and oversees AndACTION’s social media and digital presence. Her career started in feature film production (her first time on location was in Brazil with Ice Cube and Jennifer Lopez for “Anaconda”), then took a turn toward public service and arrived in nonprofit communications. She cries every time George Bailey realizes he’s alive, when Celie stands up to Mister and Elle Woods wins her first case. She has her own Wonder Woman costume.

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EDITORIAL TEAM

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Caty Borum Chattoo, Director, Center for Media & Social Impact

Jen Brower, Graphic Designer

Kristen Grimm, Creator, AndACTION and President, Spitfire Strategies

Alina Evans, Associate, AndACTION

Erin Hart, Managing Director, Spitfire Strategies

Justine Hebron, Communications Manager, AndACTION

Twanna A. Hines, Director, AndACTION

Prita Kohli, Special Projects Manager, Spitfire Strategies

Mohana Kute, Intern, AndACTION

Joy Metcalf, Copy Editor

Dennis Poplin, Senior VP, Spitfire Strategies

Amy Lynn Smith, Writer, AndACTION

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