



How to Use an Imperfect Storyline

Sometimes the stars align, Lady Luck smiles down on you, and the universe hands you a perfect opportunity. (Or, if not the universe, a film or TV production company.) When these opportunities come along, you have to act – fast. Consider Planned Parenthood’s immediate action on the Scandal episode dealing with Olivia Pope’s abortion. Or how, after Mitch and Cam got engaged on Modern Family, the ACLU sent out an invitation for people to “RSVP” to the wedding to show their support for marriage equality.

When well-prepared, savvy organizations take advantage of made-in-heaven pop culture storylines, the results can be astounding.

But let’s be honest – most storylines aren’t perfectly aligned with your key messages. And that’s OK. For many of the most important issues in the public consciousness – from climate change to gun violence to criminal justice reform – we feel lucky when they show up in popular media at all. And when they do, the storylines might not be the ones we would write ourselves.

Remember the outcry over the trailer for “Stonewall,” which featured a young, white, male lead and downplayed the contributions of many real-life leaders in the gay rights movement? Not exactly perfect. But it sparked an important conversation about history and about the continued struggle for LGBTQ equality – and that conversation likely was more important than the one that would have resulted if the film had gotten it “right.”

We can’t always know what issues will pop up in our favorite movies and television shows, and we can’t know the effect those storylines will have. But there’s one thing we do know: they will have an effect. And whether or not a film or television show is tackling your issue the way you would, you can use the story to tell your own.

So let’s say you get advance intel from AndACTION that your issue will be featured in an upcoming episode of a hit show or a movie about to hit theaters. Or maybe you’re channel flipping only to find that the work you do each day is a major primetime storyline that night. Here are some ways to be savvy and strategic about using an onscreen storyline to gain real-world traction on your issue.

Facts and figures. You are the subject matter expert. But now is not the time to scold the writers for getting your life’s work wrong. Instead, cheer what is right, and redirect the audience to your organization’s work on the issue. Use key stats that show the real life consequences that are shown in the story. For example, when HBO’s movie Confirmation about Anita Hill starring Kerry Washington was about to premiere, gender equality activists at UltraViolet pointed to a survey of women in Silicon Valley in 2015 where over 60% of them said they had experienced harassment. The movie takes place in 1991. Had anything changed in 25 years? They were able to start a conversation about the issue by using the movie to deliver their stats. Powerful and effective.

Bask in the afterglow. Your opportunity isn’t over when the credits roll. Even if you didn’t live-tweet during the premiere broadcast or attend a red carpet screening, you can post a more in-depth Facebook post or blog breaking down the storyline, noting where it succeeded and where it missed the mark. Again, this is the time for your organization’s work to shine. Check out our founder’s blog on how the movie Me Before You was roundly criticized for its portrayal of disability, and became an opportunity for disability activists to step in.

Remember – just because you use a storyline as an opportunity to get your message out, it doesn’t mean you’re endorsing the storyline itself. People know that movies and television are sensational. No one thinks doctors on duty really act like the cast of Grey’s Anatomy. Imperfect storylines are a chance to spotlight your issue and show that you are smart and hip for engaging in the conversations already happening. So don’t let the imperfect be the enemy of the good.