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A journal for change through rights-related media scholarship and practice

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In addition to the Legislature, the Executive and the Judiciary of a country, free and functioning Media ensure that governments are kept accountable to the electorate. However, this fourth pillar of democracy has increasingly come under attack worldwide – especially since the Trump administration. The 'media', in this regard, are mostly viewed as synonymous with independent news organisations (i.e. the press) reporting objective, fact-based stories so as to probe the actions of governments. Additionally, the attack on truth and journalistic freedom across the world in recent years has been further complicated by a globalised and market-driven media ecosystem that increasingly caters for their perceived audiences' ideological belief systems. Consequently scholars such as Marvin Kalb and Chris Stirewalt see the media as 'divided along political lines', indicative of a 'fractured society' (Library of Congress 2022).

In addition to considering news media, the *Journal of Media and Rights* (JMR) is interested in this evolving dynamic as it is observed, reflected and/or scrutinised also via *other* forms of media within the audio and audiovisual landscape. Thus, the journal approaches the concept of 'the media' from a broader vantage point, which includes forms of creative media that similarly seek to hold those in power accountable (e.g. films, television programmes, social media, audiovisual research, radio, podcasts, transmedia projects, virtual reality, etc.). By specifically broaching topics connected to this broader conception of the media ecosystem as it relates to the promotion and/or realisation of rights, JMR aims to provide a critical platform that not only scrutinises our fractured society but also hopes to help piece it back together. Below I include some concrete examples of different media that foreground rights in order to change society. These provide evidence of the potency of media to be not only effective for the realisation of rights but also for the purview of an academic journal. The examples included below only scratch the surface of this field but are nevertheless representative of what the scope of this journal entails.

As a film scholar and practice-based researcher myself, I started to associate this broader media landscape as an extension of the fourth pillar of democracy when I first saw Ken Loach's teleplay *Cathy Come Home* (1966). Initially broadcast as part of the BBC's 'The Wednesday Play' series, it tells the story of the slow, cruel descent of Cathy Ward (Carol White) into homelessness and complete abandonment as a direct result of public apathy and inhumane governmental policies. The film shockingly showed how parents in the 1960s were often forcefully separated from their children, simply because of the fact that they could not find and/or afford adequate housing (Sandford 1968). More broadly, the film revealed how the UK government failed to ensure the protection of fundamental human rights such as the right to dignity, the right to family and the right to an adequate standard of living. The film directed public opinion to the extent that the government abolished the relevant policies and made room for the establishment of civil society organisations, such as Shelter, tasked to protect the rights of homeless people. The drama is now credited for being at least partly responsible for these positive changes (Lacey 2011:2).

Another example of the impact of fact-based creative media is *Clouds over Sidra* (2016) – the first virtual reality documentary commissioned by the United Nations (UN). This film deliberately puts the viewer in the shoes of a 12-year-old girl living in the Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan in order to assist the UN's awareness-raising campaign as the war in Syria was unfolding. Co-creator Gabo Arora observed that the UN needed a fresh approach to get their message out about the war. Exclusively relying on models dependent on celebrity involvement and the audience reach of traditional media outlets such as the *New York Times* were becoming outdated and less effective (O'Niell 2015) – a realisation that also seems to have motivated the impact production movement. The independent documentary film sector notably took overt steps to move into the impact environment (see Doc Society's *Impact Field Guide and Toolkit* 2019), similarly suggesting the important role creative and experimental approaches to filmmaking play in preventing human rights abuses and executive overstretch. Films such as *Bully* (Lee Harsh 2007), *Miners Shot Down*

(Rehad Desai 2014) and *Thank You For the Rain* (Kisilu Musya & Julia Dahr 2017) all show how change can be affected by incorporating filmmaking in structured social change campaigns and movement building efforts.

Participation and the right to be heard can also be observed in participatory approaches that seek to include marginalised voices in production processes and community conversations. The Children's Radio Foundation, for instance, believes in the power of radio, podcasts and audio storytelling to create opportunities for young people to report their *own* lives through 'youth dialogue, leadership, and citizenship' (Children's Radio Foundation). The long-running podcast *Ear Hustle* (now on its twelfth season) also builds on participatory approaches to give back agency to incarcerated individuals by enabling them to produce their own media within the confines of California's San Quentin State Prison. In turn, alternative distribution companies such as Sunshine Cinema (South Africa) and film funds such as Docubox (Kenya) seek to decolonise distribution practices by using solar power to bring films to rural communities as part of campaigns to instigate community conversations around social change issues and governance.

Finally, Lacey (2011:3–4) observes in relation to *Cathy Come Home*'s experimental format that mainstream media practices rarely allow for overtly critical and experimental approaches for social justice advocacy. Lez Cooke suggests that the film belonged to the 'golden age' of British television where 'playwrights had the freedom to experiment and regularly produce innovative drama, when there were not the commercial pressures to capture and retain audiences that were later to become such important factors in television' (Cooke 2003:66; Lacey 2011:4). Practice-based and practice-led scholars still embrace critical experimentation through the production of creative artefacts informed by academic research and rights-based professional practice. Especially prominent in the work of such scholars is a commitment to social and environmental justice from the past, present and future. JMR thus especially encourages practice-based and practice-led researchers to submit their work to the journal as it will actively provide a space for work to be showcased and discussed.

This brief introduction to JMR's focus shows that the connection between media and rights has a long, interesting and still developing history. It is rich, diverse and in need of a dedicated space for critical scholarly reflection and practical experimentation. The purpose of JMR is therefore to cultivate such a terrain with an openness to innovation and socio-political scrutiny where media and rights are concerned. The ultimate contribution of the journal will hopefully be to extend the general conception of the fourth pillar of democracy to include a multitude of media formats that aim to affect change within this our fractured world.

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