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The impact of documentary filmmaking

Academics as agents of social and political change

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Abstract

In this article, I draw on three documentaries I have made (*Growing Up Married* [2016], *Lifeline* [2020], and *Left Behind* [2023]) on different forms of gendered violence. I use these as examples to discuss ways in which films made within academic contexts can inform and influence policy. While doing so I reflect on how I built a network of policy makers and charities and used film as a potentially useful tool for partnership development. I explore how scholars can consider filmmaking as a form of activism while arguing that strategies developed within the frame of creative practice afford us alternative ways of promoting social, cultural and political change. I examine the relationship between academic research and activism and the specific role that filmmaking can play in enhancing/problematising this relationship, and argue that the cultivation of impact (as activism) goes beyond institutional, and funding imperatives.

Keywords: academic activism; policy impact; social and cultural impact; academic filmmaking; gendered violence; public engagement; documentary

In this article I critically reflect on how documentary filmmaking in academia can be an efficient strategy for scholar activism. I argue that academics can act as powerful agents of social and political change, as they visualise research through filmmaking. To do so, I highlight the activist potential of filmmaking within academia while drawing on the three short documentaries I have made. These are: *Growing Up Married* (2016), which focuses on the recollections of four women from Turkey of being forced into marriage as children; *Lifeline* (2020), which reveals the reality of working on the frontline of domestic abuse services in the UK during the Covid-19 pandemic; and, most recently, *Left Behind* (2023), which focuses on the implications of the No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) status for migrant victims of domestic violence in the United Kingdom. While reflecting on these examples I offer answers to the questions of: what are the political advantages of documentary filmmaking in the academic context, and what are its potentials?

There is an existing body of scholarship that examines documentary filmmaking as a method of academic inquiry. Angela Fitzgerald and Magnolia Lowe (2020), for instance, make a case for acknowledging documentary filmmaking not only as a research output but as a research process. Documentaries provide an impetus and platform for change, affirmative action and meaningful dialogue (Bacha 2015 cited in Fitzgerald and Lowe 2020, 1). Documentary filmmaking has been acknowledged as a form of qualitative research and discussed as a way to generate and disseminate knowledge in the academic space (Morgan et al. 2019). My aim in this article is not to examine ways in which my creative practice work advances theories of academic filmmaking as a mode of research. Instead, I approach the term academic filmmaking in the context of using film as a tool to create audio-visual forms of academic research on a range of topics that are not confined to film/filmmaking theory. I explore how academia is a fruitful space that provides opportunities to make films on any area of research. In other words, my focus here is not on research into filmmaking, but rather using filmmaking in communicating academic research outside academia. I do this by reflecting on my documentaries' contribution to scholarly and community understanding of gendered violence. I simultaneously highlight the value of filmmaking by demonstrating its impact on policy, community groups, and public debate.

The body of scholarship on academic filmmaking tends to prioritise critical reflections on the applications and methods around the *making* of films and focus less on the methods employed to create social and political impact through films. This is not to say that every film made within academic context has to have impact, though there is room to argue that post-production, and impact strategies of creative practice research are equally worthy of critical reflection. Scholarship on methodological innovations in and with academic filmmaking tend to focus more on the pre-production and production processes, but less on the process of knowledge transition and dissemination, which is how I approach the term impact throughout this article.

Susan Kerrigan and Joanna Callaghan's article (2018) on the impact of filmmaking research proposes a valuable framework with four pathways to impact using film, video and filmmaking. They aptly argue that filmmaking research impact disseminates new knowledge and understanding about life and society, and is evidenced through the medium, the technology as well as a cultural and creative product affecting change in audiences, through organisations and government policies (ibid.). In this article, I reflect on these pathways while concentrating on the political potential of academic filmmaking. It is for this reason that my aim is not to provide an account on the creative choices and aesthetic qualities of the documentaries I made, although I note the value of doing so, and have written about this in detail elsewhere (Atakav 2020, 2023).

Kerrigan and Callaghan's pathways to impact in filmmaking research include: a) film/video as a technology that advances understandings of particular topics; b) research film used as a vehicle for research dissemination; c) research collaborations for which making a film is a means to filmmaking practice; and d) filmmaker researchers engage with stakeholders and refine their research processes through the making of and dissemination of their film. In the context of the three documentaries I use as examples here, the second and fourth aspects of these pathways, in particular, are most relevant. The fourth pathway proposed here is also applicable to the documentaries I have created, as they are all situated within the Humanities, and they occur as a form of cultural production, where the filmmaking is underpinned by social storytelling of society and

culture. All three documentaries discussed here are made to disseminate research findings to the general public.

My focus in this article, then, is to reflect critically on the ways in which documentary filmmaking can be used in academic work as a method; and, documentary as an audio-visual tool that has the potential to make a significant contribution to social, cultural and political life. Although there is significant emphasis on the process making of documentaries in academia and acknowledging it as a method of qualitative inquiry, I argue that there is still a need to develop a framework and reflection on the implications of filmmaking within academia, and strategies for engagement with non-academic contexts for documentaries produced within academic contexts.

In the context of the United Kingdom, within which I work, academics are encouraged or even required to think of research impact for a project to receive funding. Pressures from institutions to produce research with impact may bring about concerns around the ethics of impact. The Research Excellence Framework (REF) (the national system in the UK for assessing the quality of research at higher education providers), for example, has asserted its ambition to assess the impact of research outside of academia. To this end, impact was defined as 'an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia' (UKRI, n.d.). Highly graded impact through peer academic review can mean REF rewards or successful grant acquisition. I argue that academic filmmaking and its impact do not need to be REF related. Indeed, I did not intend to create any of the projects discussed in this article and the strategies for their impact to fit in with an assessment like REF. I would have done the projects in exactly the same way regardless of REF, as I am passionate about and certainly more interested in using the tools afforded by academia in contributing to social, cultural and political change. Filmmaking within a research-informed context can be fraught with ethical challenges. Indeed, the downside of impact (as defined by assessments like REF) has been highlighted for its exploitation of research participants, as well as its short-termism (for instance, see Kelly 2014). There are indeed risks for impact if driven by institutional needs and narratives. These may result in exploitation of participants for short term benefit to demonstrate evidence of impact. In this context, it is crucial to give agency to stakeholders

and build trust with them. It is important to acknowledge that this might create tensions between a final film and participants.

In all three documentaries, my main concern has always been to create an audio-visual platform for women to use to share their experiences. I acknowledge that I take others' images and stories to use them in the service of political and academic projects; however, while doing so, I make it my central concern to consider what social, political and cultural effects come from this kind of work, even if simultaneously questioning at what cost. I see the contributors to the films I make as a agents of change for others. I use filmmaking to mobilise academic research. In doing so, I intend to create a connection between the academic and the non-academic by creating research in a form that others will want to read, watch, or feel and learn from. I see this as the key requirement for impact of any research. In other words, I aim to demonstrate different strategies that shape and maximise the reach and impact of academic films. These include recognition of the potential attractiveness of the work (by the media, policy makers, and the public); the pinpointing of the intended audience; and vigorously promoting any exposure the work receives to gain greater visibility (Mateer and Haillay 2019). All three examples I refer to throughout this article demonstrate how documentary film can play an important role in highlighting, scrutinising, and fighting against gendered violence. I want to show how filmmaking has the potential to enable academics to act as agents of social and political change. This leads to considering my positionality as a scholar-filmmaker-activist. Similar to Ramasubramian and Sousa (2021), I acknowledge that there is a growing number of academics who see activism as an essential part of what drives their passion for their roles as academics, and yet it is 'not everyone's cup of tea'. And I acknowledge that it is important to identify challenges and constraints, and assess ethical values, resources, institutional support, risks, and motivations in adopting an activist approach.

Formulating a research question / identifying an issue in policy

Conducting any academic research starts with identifying a gap in existing knowledge, and formulating a research question addressing that gap. In making documentaries within academia, I hold on

to the same principle. However, my intention of providing visual evidence about social and political gaps in the context of gendered violence leads me to conduct the review of 'literature' outside academia. This could include policy papers, parliamentary white papers, reports by charities and commissioners, etc. The aim here is to identify a gap in governmental policy, for instance, to create audio-visual 'evidence' to address that particular issue.

Growing Up Married, in this context, targeted the Marriage and Civil Partnership (Minimum Age) Bill (which became an Act in the UK in 2022, and seeks to remove parents' right to consent to marriage on behalf of a minor and raises the age of consent to 18). The documentary was used as evidence in discussion of the proposed policy changes because it presented the voices and experiences of child brides. By acting as an audio-visual platform for child brides to share experiences, it contributed to political debates at Westminster in support of parliamentarians and NGOs. *Growing Up Married* shows the potential of academic filmmaking and activist scholarship to forge change and to bring women together across cultural difference. It shows how stories of women in Turkey can be influential in informing the law in the UK around forced and child marriage.

The idea behind *Lifeline* was to rapidly collect stories from the frontline workers of domestic abuse services in England at an historically crucial moment in time, and to capture the 'present' moment. It intentionally coincided with the discussions around the Domestic Abuse Bill (an Act since April 2021), and was submitted as evidence to the Women's Health Strategy Consultation by the UK Government (2021). *Left Behind*, on the other hand, has an overt political agenda to address the Victims and Prisoners Bill discussions. It advocates that that migrant victims and survivors of domestic violence who have 'no recourse to public funds', can be given access to funds, in order to correct a significant shortcoming of the Domestic Abuse Act 2021. The Act was deemed by experts as discriminatory for this reason, and left migrant women in the most vulnerable of positions. It is important to note here, of course, that, political change takes many years of campaigning, so one cannot assume immediate impact, but rather a 'slow-burning' one. This requires sustained effort in keeping connections with stakeholders over long periods of time, but at the same time, it affords academics

the time to build trust with non-academic partners in ways that would otherwise not be possible. This is true for the impact story of *Growing Up Married*, where the film was produced in 2016 but the Child Marriage Act came to force in 2022 – some six years later, after a period of sustained commitment with stakeholders, and campaigning from pressure groups.

Methods of engagement

Engaging with the public, the media, policymakers, politicians, film festivals, universities, and charities has been at the heart of the success of the three documentaries discussed here. As Mateer and Haillay (2019) explain, in the context of practice-as-research, while time demands on academics and researchers might dissuade them from taking on distribution tasks, if the projects in question are truly going to be of value and generate impact, they are essential. Being able to reach target audiences is important, but to generate maximum impact, academic filmmakers need to secure advocacy as well. For both *Lifeline* and *Left Behind*, engaging and integrating in the films interviews with policymakers have been an influential strategy to secure this advocacy.

Identifying participants and defining their engagement in the documentary from the beginning of the project is an important strategy for the potential of a film's impact. This, of course, requires a process of trust-building, and building sustainable relationships with all participants and stakeholders. This can, at times, be a lengthy process, which might take years to establish. In the case of *Left Behind*, for instance, working with charities including Southall Black Sisters (SBS is led by and for black and minoritized women to provide a specialist service to victims of abuse), Karma Nirvana (is the first specialist charity established in the UK for victims and survivors of honour based abuse), and Latin American Women's Rights Service (LAWRS), we had to establish trust by building into the project significant amount of time for meetings before any filmmaking took place. Particularly when the topic is sensitive, charities need to establish a form of trust between researcher-filmmakers and themselves, before considering opening doors to their clients. *Left Behind* foregrounds victim/survivors' stories, and we spent over a year attending events, having frequent meetings, offering our support with weekly workshops for the SBS Support Group to build up the

trust, and convince them that this was an academic impact film project to target a change in policy, rather than journalistic or sensationalist piece that would pose any threat to survivors' safety. Working closely with a range of charities, and involving their views in the film, secured their "buy-in" to use the film in their campaigns related to the issue. This was also true for change and policy makers including MPs and legal professionals. Including their voices in the film meant that they would each become advocates for the film, citing it in political and legal debates, and sharing the film with their networks. This was also relevant to the dissemination strategy for *Lifeline*. It is important to note that despite all efforts, at times, as a result of internal sector politics, and each individual's and charity's priorities, a balancing act of negotiations may need to take place related to questions posed to the creative agency of filmmakers. This might create unforeseen challenges that need to be addressed before the release of a film. For instance, showing *Left Behind* to SBS and LAWRS before its launch resulted in challenging conversations with both charities that demanded changes particularly relating to more screen time for their own charities. We argued that we had a film that argued for change, and that wanted to raise public awareness of an injustice; a film that compelled people to take notice of an issue that has been flying under the radar. We successfully argues that we wanted to make a film that campaigners can use to promote their agenda on NRPF rather than a film that foregrounds particular charities.

For *Left Behind*, one of the activities we ran during the trust-building phase, before we filmed with the women in the Support Group for SBS was to offer a filmmaking workshop in one of their weekly meetings. This gave women the opportunity to learn more about storytelling through film and they created their own short films over the course of the day. This activity afforded us the opportunity to get to know the group better and to share our intentions for the documentary with them. This proved pivotal in inspiring them to take part.

In public-facing academic projects, like *Lifeline*, building trust takes a considerable amount of time, particularly if the topics covered are sensitive. Previous collaborations with these charities in other projects helped establish trust quickly. However, this certainly did not mean that involving participants in the project was not

fraught with ethical challenges. Requesting video and audio diaries from them without influencing their input demanded a self-reflexive approach that is frequently experienced in undertaking feminist research (Gordon 2019, Redmon 2019). With the three documentaries, made with the tools and support provided within academia, I wanted to create audio-visual platforms for women to voice and share their experiences. This required a critical reflection on the question of: what is the best medium to create that platform? Consolidating feminist scholarship and practice as a method of activism, and becoming an academic filmmaker allowed me to take research outside academia, and contribute to change at personal, political, social and cultural levels.

In all three projects I followed similar strategies for dissemination, including targeted press releases to populate media coverage, and the launch of the films as public screenings followed by private screenings with stakeholders as well as at universities and film festivals. *Growing Up Married* offered visual evidence in the discussions of a bill that became law, and raised awareness of the urgency and intensity of the trauma of forced child marriage. *Lifeline* travelled around the world (UK, US, Canada, India, Turkey and Japan) through international film festivals and was broadcast on Balik Arts TV online, and was submitted as evidence to the Women's Health Strategy Consultation by the UK Government (2021). *Left Behind* is a project that contributes: to the campaigns that aim to change policies related to migrant victims of domestic abuse and gendered violence and the "no recourse to public funds" status; to create knowledge exchange between research and the UK Parliament; and, to raising public awareness on the topic while highlighting the experiences of migrant women, and the influential works of changemakers including legal professionals, politicians, frontline workers and domestic violence charities.

Conclusion

Academic filmmaking allows scholars to act as agents of change, and to create visible evidence of social and political issues that need addressing. Regardless of institutional and bureaucratic requirements related to impact within academia, I argue that, as scholars, we need to ask the question to ourselves and to our own research topics: "So what? Why should anyone care?" In this context, my

research is interested in listening to women's experiences, and making them not only audible but also visible. This, of course, brings up certain questions: What does a film allow that, for example, an academic journal article does not? A research film not only allows us to hear the voices of women but also enables us to directly capture the nuances of gesture, emotion, facial expression and vocal intonation and emphasis. This is particularly powerful in the context of sharing the experiences of women as it allows us to capture not only the *testimony* but to situate that testimony in the women's *current* contexts *as survivors*.

In order to achieve impact through academic documentary filmmaking outside academia, I argue that research questions may need to be formulated within literatures and frameworks outside academia in line with socio-political issues. In addition, potential advocates and stakeholders related to the project should be included within the film from the outset as active agents. Finally, concrete evidence of changes instigated by the project need to be collected from the earliest stages in the form of testimonials, as well as evidence from trust-building activities. Similarly, it is invaluable to integrate policymakers, campaigners and charities into projects from the outset. Additionally, it is equally significant to engage with the media to promote the work as widely as possible and to expose the work to audiences outside academic contexts.

In this article, I have argued that documentary and activist filmmaking offer powerful ways to take existing knowledge and share it effectively to target change in cultural politics and policy. It is for this reason that I invite all scholars to consider making media as a form of activism. The strategies developed within the frame of creative practice afford us alternative ways of promoting change and embedding feminist goals of equality via work with academic and non-academic partners. This paradigm in practice-driven impact is not primarily to be understood as part of an academic narrative, institutional need or proposal for grant acquisition, but a process that places its stakeholders centre-stage and gives them agency towards socio-political awareness, policy change, and activism.

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