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NEW STUDY SHOWS VALUABLE ROLE OF DOCUMENTARIES IN SHAPING THE NATIONAL CONVERSATION ON RACIAL VIOLENCE

WASHINGTON DC (October 12, 2020) — The Center for Media & Social Impact today released a study showing that in a time of escalating media distrust and expanding news deserts, Americans view documentary storytelling as a trustworthy information source and a driver of civic dialogue on social challenges such as racial violence.

Conducted in early 2020, prior to the recent surge in global conversations on systemic racism and police violence, the participatory research project focused on communities' responses to *Always in Season*, a film that explores the lingering impact of more than a century of lynching African Americans and connects this form of historic racial terrorism to racial violence today. Directed by Jacqueline Olive, the film is a co-production of ITVS that premiered at the 2019 Sundance Film Festival. In February 2020, *Always in Season* made its broadcast premiere on ITVS's flagship series, *Independent Lens* on PBS.

The study, "Breaking the Silence: How Documentaries Can Shape the Conversation on Racial Violence in America and Create New Communities," engaged more than 200 participants in seven geographically and politically diverse U.S. cities located in close proximity to news deserts. It found that at a time of unprecedented levels of media mistrust, the award-winning documentary provided a "true portrayal of a real problem."

"I am heartened that this study finds that *Always in Season* is helping communities to break down cultures of silence around racial violence. Not only has the film encouraged people to speak out and become more conscious about lynching and related issues of racism, it has also provoked people to actively confront them in many ways," said Jacqueline Olive in her foreword to the study.

"Intimate, truthful independent documentaries play a unique role in fostering civil public dialogue around complex social problems. It's meaningful, in these divisive times, to understand the richness of community conversations around racial justice that took place when people were able to watch *Always in Season* together," said Caty Borum Chattoo, executive director of the Center for Media & Social Impact and a co-PI on the study, along with AU professor Patricia Aufderheide and lead author David Conrad, CMSI post-doctoral fellow.

Other key findings included:

Documentaries are reporting critical stories on racial violence and other social issues that local and national media are overlooking.

Not only did participants across the country say they feel stories of interest to them are being missed by local and mainstream news outlets, but they also expressed a desire for sources of information that



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presents more context and details than they often find in mainstream news coverage today. The documentary, they say, is capable of addressing these needs.

Documentaries are helping people build a sense of shared community solidarity.

Participants frequently pointed to the details, historical facts, and balance of the documentary as its most trustworthy attributes, but they also expressed feeling like these contextual details were impactful because they were embedded into a long-form narrative that transported, engaged, and emotionally involved them in ways that other forms of media do not. As a result, they said, it helped them to make meaning of the facts and to better understand, trust, and connect with the implications of the facts being presented.

Documentaries are effective tools for community building.

Participants across the country expressed the feeling that having a chance to come together with other members of their community and discuss issues important to them was helpful and rare. The community screenings provided people with a space to share ideas and engage in dialogue with each other in a real community environment. And participants say the live screening events have the power to bring people together in a way that is lasting, with organizers saying that community members have continued reaching out to them in the days following the screening about other ways that they can convene.

Documentary-based community events are disrupting cultures of silence, provoking change and helping people to create new communities.

Participants frequently expressed the feeling that the act of watching the documentary and discussing it with their community compelled them "to confront" rather than just "learn" or "think about" the realities and experiences of racial violence in their community. People spoke about cultures of silence in their community around racial violence and other social issues. In confronting these realities together, community discussions moved toward provocations, challenges, calls for change, meaning making, and shared expressions to play more active roles in shaping their communities. In this way, the documentary planted seeds of further learning, further action, and further self-awareness – all of which were then further developed through the community conversations that followed.

Through *Independent Lens's* community screening series, Indie Lens Pop-Up, *Always in Season* played at more than 70 screening events in cities across the US, providing the spaces for civic dialogue on social challenges like racial injustice the CMSI study identifies as critical for community building.

ABOUT CMSI

The [Center for Media & Social Impact](#) (CMSI), based at American University's School of Communication in Washington, D.C., is a creative innovation lab and research center that creates, studies, and showcases media for social impact. Focusing on independent, documentary and public media, the Center bridges boundaries between scholars, producers and communication practitioners across media production, media impact, social justice, public policy, and audience engagement. The Center produces



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resources for the field and academic research; convenes conferences and events; and works collaboratively to understand and design media that matter.

About ITVS

ITVS is a San Francisco-based nonprofit organization that has, for over 25 years, funded and partnered with a diverse range of documentary filmmakers to produce and distribute untold stories. ITVS incubates and co-produces these award-winning films and then airs them for free on PBS via our weekly series, *Independent Lens*, as well as on other PBS series and through our digital platform, OVEE. ITVS is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. For more information, visit itvs.org.

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