



MEDIA IMPACT FUNDERS

2017 Media Impact Festival Case Study: *What Lies Upstream* whatliesupstream.com

Film synopsis:

In this political thriller, investigative filmmaker Cullen Hoback travels to West Virginia to uncover the truth behind a massive chemical spill that left 300,000 people without drinking water for months. But when Hoback discovers a collusion between chemical corporations and the highest levels of government, the investigation spirals in a terrifying direction, and viewers learn the frightening truth about what lies upstream of us all. In the process, Hoback reveals the largest chemical drinking water contamination in a generation.

Production Team:

Cullen Hoback, John Ramos

Funders:

Film Independent, San Francisco Film Society, Netflix, private investors

Issues addressed in film:

The primary political and social issues addressed in the film include the misuse of science by governmental agencies, the risks that environmental chemicals pose to the safety of drinking water, corporate influence over laws designed to protect public health and the need to change how government agencies are run. The importance of good science takes center stage as audiences discover how easy it is for chemical companies to falsify data. Perhaps more shockingly, thanks to EPA and CDC whistleblowers, they learn that similar scientific misconduct is happening in U.S. regulatory agencies.

As the film carefully shows, no water in America can accurately be called “safe.” Even the head of the CDC’s division for toxic substances isn’t willing to use the word “safe” when describing drinking water. The film shows us how scientific agencies are corruptible through the political appointees that lead them, and how science can be weaponized to mislead the public, discredit whistleblowers and create the illusion of water safety.

The primary solution to the systemic breakdown of these institutions seems to be separating science from politics. So long as politicians are beholden to corporate dollars, laws will favor industry over public health, and regulatory agencies will remain at the whim of corporate agendas. At present, there are virtually no independent audits of the safety of drinking water, or of the work being conducted at these agencies. And sadly, minimum guidelines set by the EPA are often not met by local water utilities.

Target audience:

Because of the nationwide nature of the problem, the intended audience for the film is widespread. Its distribution plan will allow it to reach a large audience. The film team will specifically focus on higher-income communities and state capitals whose citizens falsely

believe their water is protected, as when people in a position of power are affected, things have a way of changing.

Impact goals:

The main impact goal is to enact thorough policy change to empower regulators to enforce the law and do their jobs by separating policy from science.

Impact strategy:

With antagonists to regulation and water safety in charge at the federal level, the campaign is focused on state-level initiatives. More specifically, the filmmakers plan to target states that are potentially open to a change in regulatory policy, and to target many affluent communities, as they tend to get much better results when impacted by such a situation as compromised public water. Working with Erin Brockovich and Public Justice to draft policy applicable to multiple states, the team hopes to create a wall between politics and science, incentivizing regulators to find and report problems. In order to achieve this, they will be demonstrating city by city how water is compromised, adding up to an unseen but very real crisis. Based on strategic discussions, initial targets include Utah (a red state) and New York (a blue state).

The outreach plan is ambitious: To conduct water and soil testing in select communities, followed by screenings of the film and panel discussions about the findings. The team will conduct detailed drinking water testing of local water supplies working with independent scientists using the latest GC-MASS methodology and a comparative database of chemicals. Then, at screenings, once people have an understanding of how the political system works and the science involved, arm them with information to demand change in their own state.

The team wants not only to bring awareness to the issues presented in the film, but also to leave the communities with an achievable action plan. They intend to work with local NGOs to set up town halls and identify key targets to invite, including politicians and community leaders. They will provide models and case studies from other communities as an activism blueprint. They will use social media to keep in touch with our allies in these communities, to connect them with similar people elsewhere and to bring pressure to bear on politicians in a position to effect change. They will provide viewers with both short and long-term solutions. Short-term solutions involve personal risk reduction of drinking water—such as filtration, or using alternate non-utility sources that have undergone special treatment. Long-term solutions require political change. Given the current political climate, actions will primarily need to be at the local and state levels.

Ideally, there will be draft legislation ready to go that communities could take to their state legislature with the help of regional NGOs such as the NRDC. Reforms might include regulatory independence from political appointments, independent agency accountability audits, and the implementation of safer water and soil standards. There's also infrastructure investment that can be made to improve issues related to lead, and improve the overall quality of drinking water in communities.

Cullen Hoback, the director, will support screenings and panels with his presence when possible, and Erin Brockovich, Dr. David Lewis, Dr. Andrew Whelton, and Dr. Marc Edwards have all

shown enthusiasm around participating as well. This kind of campaign will require innumerable allies and the filmmakers are working away at getting them on board. Thanks to the Film Collaborative, a festival and theatrical booker, which has extensive partnerships across a wide reach of organizations, the team is working from a list of more than 500 potential partner organizations. The film team is also in contact with the NRDC, whose network is likely to be a great resource. Other allies of the project include Michael Moore, Bobby Kennedy, and Bob Creamer; these people are extensively connected and will make a big difference to the campaign's efforts.

Impact so far: The film has screened at major festivals, including Slamdance, Seattle International (Special Jury Prize), Hot Docs, AFI DOCS, and Traverse City. Distribution partners are ITVS (broadcast on Independent Lens), Ro*co Films (international and educational), and Gravitas Ventures (domestic digital/cable VOD/DVD). A limited theatrical run is planned for early 2018 to garner additional reviews in key markets, and to qualify the film for the Oscars. The broadcast window commences on Earth Day in April 2018.

EPA whistleblower Dr. David Lewis received a grant to conduct water testing. Working with him, the film has held special screenings and panel discussions in cities throughout Virginia. The film has already enjoyed wide coverage, the highlights of which are a rave review in *Variety*, prominent coverage in *Indiewire*, and, most recently, an appearance by director Cullen Hoback on NBC Universal's *Meet the Press* podcast.