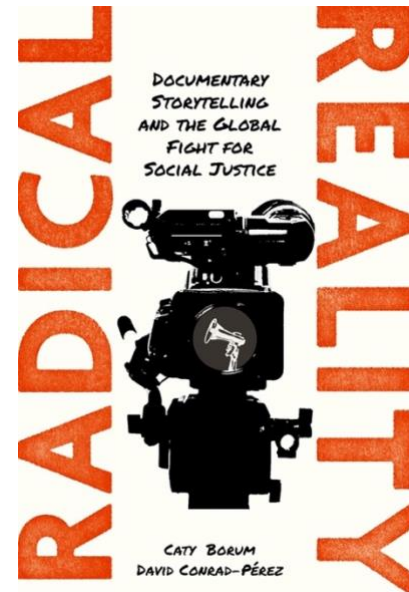


Caty Borum and David Conrad-Pérez, **Radical Reality: Documentary Storytelling and the Global Fight for Social Justice**, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2025, 242 pp., \$35.00 (paperback).

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In ***Radical Reality: Documentary Storytelling and the Global Fight for Social Justice***, Caty Borum and David Conrad-Pérez build the case for how independent documentary has moved from mere entertainment to a frontline tool for social change. By examining films that confront state power, expose war crimes, fight autocracies, or return agency to marginalized communities, the authors show that social justice is not just a theme for these filmmakers—it is the “ultimate objective.” Drawing on dozens of in-depth interviews with filmmakers and a deep analysis of selected documentaries for social justice, the book maps out the exact conditions that turn a story into a catalyst for action, making a strong case for why this specific form of nonfiction belongs at the center of today’s media landscape.



Caty Borum’s background as an award-winning producer adds a vital practical dimension to the text, offering a peer perspective that strengthens the book’s scholarly analysis. While her previous work, *Story Movements* (Borum Chattoo, 2020), laid the groundwork for how documentaries empower audiences, this co-authored book with David Conrad-Pérez introduces a more sophisticated lens on the documentary’s role in global advocacy. As leaders at the Center for Media & Social Impact, the authors are uniquely positioned to center “the perspective of documentary makers and leaders” (p. 22), effectively moving beyond theory to show how diverse, real-world cases are actively reshaping social justice worldwide.

Before moving to the detailed analysis of social activism cases enabled by independent documentary, Borum and Conrad-Pérez clearly outline what this book will do and what lies outside its scope. Their focus remains on how independent creators produce nonfiction that uncovers “hidden or neglected stories” to fight for social justice (p. 5). By drawing on global examples, the authors address how documentary functions within a hostile media environment characterized by surveillance, misinformation, and the suppression of free speech. Rather than a mere survey of films, the book offers a strategic look at how makers navigate political and economic climates that increasingly deem human rights material “risky” (p. 23). At the same time, the authors delineate their scope by excluding what they term “right-wing ideological propaganda that calls itself documentary” (p. 23). While this exclusion leaves a massive segment of the contemporary media landscape for future research, it allows the authors to maintain a tight, purposeful focus on the mechanics of filmmaking as a social justice tool.

The book contains eight chapters, each focused on a different social justice issue and on documentary stories that proved pivotal for change. Following the introductory chapter 1, Borum and

Conrad-Pérez turn to specific cases of global struggles for justice. Chapter 2, "Confronting Government Power," takes up the fight for democracy. The struggle to protect democracy against authoritarianism is a global one, as depicted in two documentaries discussed in the book: *All In: The Fight for Democracy* (US) (p. 30), which tackles voter suppression, and *The Silence of Others* (Spain) (p. 35), which uncovers the suppressed stories of victims of the Franco dictatorship. In both cases, the authors critically examine what made these independent films more than stories: "independent documentaries are connecting dots, shedding light on democratic dismantling that can be hard to detect by regular people going about their lives" (p. 46). Such stories come from all over the world, empowering audiences to recognize and see the patterns of the past in the present.

Chapter 3, "Witnessing Conflict and Resilience," turns to conflict zones and opens with an analysis of the powerful documentary *The Cave* (p. 48), which portrays the work of a Syrian doctor, the first female hospital administrator in the country, who works under the conditions of ongoing war. This chapter demonstrates how "creatively rendered documentary, told by storyteller inside the community rather than outside, can provide critical evidentiary documentation and cultural memories of atrocities in the context of conflict" (p. 52). It also engages the scholarship on witnessing and war crimes (drawing on Barbie Zelizer's [2010] *About to Die*, showing how unique connections with communities and personal stories make documentary an "effective medium for revealing the realities of war" (p. 70).

In the next chapter, the authors move from personal witnessing of war to the fight for freedom of expression. Chapter 4 introduces the struggle for media freedom as an essential element of democracy and an extension of freedom of expression. Borum and Conrad-Pérez search for an answer to the question: "How are independent documentaries telling the stories that push hard against censorship and stand up to media repression?" (p. 75). As an example of documentary power, they point to the International Criminal Court investigation into the crimes against humanity committed by former Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte and his administration, which became known to Filipinos and the world because of activists like Rappler, Ressa, Dias, and "independent documentary filmmakers and journalists speaking truth to power" (p. 75). The chapter draws on rich documentary cases that helped educate people about legislative rights and processes and motivated them to make changes themselves. It shows how documentaries can make complex issues more understandable to the general public, while also emphasizing the importance of filmmakers remaining independent at a time when "pipelines for distribution are blocked by wary government bodies, leaders, and corporate outlets" (p. 101).

Chapter 5 deepens the discussion of human rights activism, moving to practical cases of using documentary as an instrument in this fight. Borum and Conrad-Pérez highlight films that became activist acts—like *Welcome to Chechnya* (p. 112), a documentary that not only exposes the imprisonment and torture of LGBTQIA+ people in Russian Chechnya but also helps them escape. The authors also highlight the distribution strategies that make documentaries' voices prominent and meaningful.

In chapter 6, Borum and Conrad-Pérez turn to activist documentaries. While they argue that almost all the films mentioned in the book can be classified as activist films, this chapter focuses on ordinary people who "find themselves in extraordinary times" (p. 25). It addresses the role of activism in local and global contexts and examines specific practices used in activist work. The films selected depict social movement

building in underrepresented communities, where documentary functions not only as a witness but also as a participant. Chapter 7 builds on this argument and discusses documentaries that became spaces for community-based healing. The film *In My Blood It Runs* (p. 165) about a 10-year-old Arrernte boy from Australia's Northern Territory who balances his traditional upbringing with a state education, is a powerful example of how documentary can center the community and model a high standard of community collaboration—one that means “valuing First Nation perspectives and the history in which they have been misrepresented in past films” (p. 163).

Chapter 8 turns to the future of documentary and independent filmmaking. Borum and Conrad-Pérez argue that there is an urgent need to build mechanisms to support the survival of documentaries, which are more than entertainment and often a force for social justice. They make the case for global and regional networks, arguing that such networks are “crucial for stories that speak truth to power and the artists who make them” (p. 185). The future of documentary, they argue, lies in editorial independence, synergy with journalism, and new distribution strategies. The book is optimistic about this future—challenged by institutional gatekeeping and technological dominance, but still within reach: “Innovation, collective action, and experimentation are vital for empowering the storytellers” (p. 203).

*Radical Reality: Documentary Storytelling and the Global Fight for Social Justice* offers an unprecedented analysis of the most powerful documentaries worldwide—films that have become essential for social change in small communities and larger democracies, helping evacuate people from dangerous places and rewrite histories distorted by colonialism. But the book offers more than an analysis of good stories for social justice: it also brings the challenges of independent filmmaking into the discussion and offers strategies for navigating them. It is a critical work that poses timely questions about the role of documentary as “a form of civil storytelling” (p. 11) in strengthening activism and grassroots movements, and, more importantly, about the future of independent filmmaking itself.

At the same time, *Radical Reality* raises significant questions for the future of documentary and social justice research. For instance, what can we learn from films that, despite their artistic and narrative power, struggle to effect systemic change? The film *Welcome to Chechnya*, for instance, made a significant impact on individual lives and did much to articulate the execution of LGBTQI+ people in Russia, yet the authoritarian regime has remained unchanged. This also raises the question: How do we define “success” in a world where we fight against one dictatorship while simultaneously witnessing the emergence of right-wing movements within democracies? As this work demonstrates, while storytelling is a powerful tool, future research must continue to explore the complex intersection where cinematic impact meets new political reality.

## References

Borum Chattoo, C. (2020). *Story movements: How documentaries empower people and inspire social change*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Zelizer, B. (2010). *About to die: How news images move the public*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.