

# TROUBLE THE WATER

Set against the backdrop of the devastating Hurricane Katrina and the abandonment of 100,000 New Orleans residents to deadly flood waters, *Trouble the Water* tells a story of ordinary people surviving broken levees, armed soldiers, bungling bureaucrats, and a system that has failed the people and their community throughout their lives.

## WHAT THE CRITICS SAID

"*Trouble the Water* looks at the reality of New Orleans from the inside." *LA Times*

"Tia Lessin and Carl Deal's movie about Hurricane Katrina is, in its way, quite as powerful as Spike Lee's massive documentary on the subject." *The Guardian*

**"ESSENTIAL,  
STARTLING AND  
DISTRESSING  
INSIGHT INTO WHAT  
IT WAS LIKE TO BE  
IN THE EYE OF THE  
KATRINA STORM  
IF YOU WERE A  
POOR, BLACK  
RESIDENT OF THE  
NINTH WARD OF  
NEW ORLEANS ON  
MONDAY AUGUST  
29 2005."**

TIMEOUT

THE IMPACT  
**FIELD GUIDE**  
& TOOLKIT

## WHO SAW IT

At the centre of the film is a woman, Kimberly Roberts, who speaks poignantly for those living on the margins, battling not only post-traumatic stress in the aftermath of Katrina, but also lifelong traumas caused by poverty, drugs, gun violence, and government neglect.

*Trouble the Water* celebrates the resilience of Kimberly and her community in the face of these traumas, raising questions that continue to haunt America: Who is vulnerable in our society, and why? What is the responsibility of a government to its citizens? And what does it take to beat the odds and survive?

As Naomi Klein said about the film, "*It's not about a hurricane: it's about America*". This goes to the heart of the power of *Trouble the Water*. Whilst the action of the film focuses on Hurricane Katrina, the stories that are told explore huge social problems that occur throughout the US. Their campaign engaged local and national audiences, facilitated debate and encouraged communities to take action.

### 66 FESTIVALS

Internationally including Sundance, Silverdocs and New Orleans

### 300 CINEMA

Screened in 300 cinemas across the US plus UK, Spain and Brazil

### 7 BROADCAST

Shown on TV in 7 countries including the US

### 111K ONLINE TRAILER

111,273 YouTube views

### 4.8K SOCIAL NETWORKING SITES

606 Facebook Likes  
4,190 Twitter followers  
IMDB, 7.3/10 (1,091 votes), User Reviews Average  
Rotten Tomatoes, 97% Critic Aggregate,  
Average 8.2/10, 71 Reviews

### 28K WEBSITE

Mailing list of 28,052



## **THE CAMPAIGN**

This campaign had local and national ambitions with inclusion and accessibility at its heart. The filmmakers wanted to ensure the film was seen by the widest possible audience but particularly by those who had been affected by the issues within the film and by those who could create change in the system.

They thought about accessibility on a number of levels – from ensuring they engaged local groups in the New Orleans region, right through to details, such as not using Flash technology in their website to ensure accessibility to all computer and mobile device users.

The success of the community engagement campaign was down to the hard work and tenacity of the filmmakers. The resulting partnerships with community organisations, human rights advocates, educational establishments and policymakers led to a wide ranging and effective campaign.

The team aimed to place the film and supporting resources (e.g. educational packs) directly in the hands of national and community organisations, educators, and activists who would use the film to facilitate ideas, educate and discuss strategic action on a localised level.

Whilst the campaign was US-focused, they also held a number of screenings internationally, including in areas affected by natural disasters including in Rangoon, Burma, following the cyclone.

## **CAMPAIGN AIMS**

They had a number of aims including:

- Hold at least 100 non-theatrical community screenings of the film, and 30 youth-oriented and university screenings (including at least ten at historically black colleges and universities).
- Forge partnerships with 25 community-based activist groups working on racial justice, community development and poverty issues and deploy the resources of the film and website for their use.
- Develop an educational discussion guide and companion resources.
- Reach at least 5 networks serving faith-based groups.
- Organize and/or participate in at least 10 policy screenings.
- Organize screenings with philanthropic organizations with a Gulf Coast agenda, and their grantees.

- Build an effective and active web presence in order to convert interest generated by the film's exposure into action.

## **HOW THE CAMPAIGN WORKED**

The results of the campaign far exceeded their original aims (set out above) enabling them to successfully extend the reach of the film and to find new audiences including youth, faith-based and community groups. Accessing these groups created opportunities not only to watch the film, but to do so in a group environment that facilitated discussion and action.

### **REACHING DIVERSE AUDIENCES**

The film team's engagement and distribution strategy is notable in its efforts to engage the African American community. It is telling that when looking for a distributor, they were told by several distributors that they would prefer:

*"...a story with white characters, since African Americans aren't interested in documentaries, and European Americans are not interested in race, [so] no one would turn out or tune in to see the film."*

Through their engagement strategies they were able to successfully challenge this assumption and when the film was released both white and black Americans turned out in large numbers to art-house cinemas throughout the US. Cinema managers repeatedly said that they had *"never seen such racially diverse audiences in their venues before"*.

The film's press strategy, alongside mainstream press, specifically targeted media outlets with an African American demographic. Along with the coverage this produced they also hosted two screenings of *Trouble the Water* at the conference of the National Association of Black Journalists, which helped them to build relationships and secure coverage, in turn helping to raise awareness for the film and its campaign.

The theatrical release coincided with the third anniversary of Katrina and one of the most pivotal election campaigns in generations. The film dealt with issues at the heart of the election season: race in America, the Iraq war, poverty, failing infrastructure of urban and rural areas.

Neither candidate Obama nor McCain, however, were talking about the continuing substantive needs of the Gulf Coast, or Katrina, even as Hurricanes Ike and Gustav bore down on the region at the time, and as a result media coverage of these issues was scarce. But in major newspapers across the country, movie reviewers, cultural writers, political reporters and syndicated journalists were writing about *Trouble the Water*, and reminding voters about these issues.

### **PARTNERSHIPS**

The partnerships were key in terms of accessing new audiences. Partners started coming on board during production and both pre- and post- release of the film. Many partners opened doors to further contacts and it was in this way that the network of partnerships was built.

Here are some examples:

### **UNITE/HERE!**

Union organizers said *Trouble the Water* helped them to build bridges between their majority Latino membership and the African American community. The union also sponsored two screenings in Los Angeles and New York City for its members, as well as one in Pasadena, and promoted it internally to its membership with an email blast from the film's Executive Producer, Danny Glover. This helped to break down barriers between the two communities.

### **THE ILLINOIS COALITION FOR IMMIGRANT AND REFUGEE RIGHTS (ICIRR)**

ICIRR (the largest immigrant rights coalition in the country) partnered with the Community Renewal Society to host a community premiere of *Trouble the Water* in Chicago as part of their ongoing efforts to work to educate the general public on the urgent need to reform the criminal justice system and immigration laws in this nation.

### **ROOFTOP FILMS** (a popular ongoing outdoor film festival in New York City)

Rooftop Films partnered with IMAGENATION to put on a free community screening event at the Harlem Meers in Central Park, featuring live music and participation of community groups, forging new collaborations between cultural organizations that typically reach different demographics.





## **CAMPAIGN IMPACT & ACHIEVEMENTS**

Upon learning that *Trouble the Water* received an Oscar nomination, a Speak Out campaign was launched to generate letters and faxes to Congress in support of the Gulf Coast Civic Works Project (GCCWP - an ultimately unsuccessful bill to create 100,000 jobs and training opportunities for local and displaced workers to rebuild infrastructure and restore the environment). When the film later premiered on HBO, they added a splash page to encourage new visitors to join the action. This ultimately generated more than 20,000 letters to Congress in support of the GCCWP.

There have been several hundred official community screenings of *Trouble the Water* in the US and many more that were not trackable as a result of nearly 500 Educational/Institutional DVDs in circulation.

Of the screenings they did track (many of which the directors, exec Danny Glover or the Roberts family would participate in) there were:

- 79 Educational institutions (colleges, universities, high schools, school districts, public libraries, museums)
- 22 Faith-based institutions (academic and grassroots groups and congregations)
- 100+ NGOs (community and national organizations, professional associations and philanthropic organizations)

## **HURRICANE GUSTAV**

In September 2008, when Gustav forced the evacuation of New Orleans, the film team were immediately able to use targeted mailings and blog postings to direct thousands of people to their campaign partners like the Louisiana Disaster Recovery Foundation and the Greater New Orleans Fair Action Housing Center, who were expediting financial assistance and material aid to those in need.

## **CAMPAIGN NUTS & BOLTS**

### **CAMPAIGN FUNDING**

Grants:

\$200,000 Ford Foundation

\$50,000 French American Charitable Trust

\$50,000 Surdna Foundation (direct to Active Voice)

\$30,000 The Fledgling Fund

\$25,000 Creative Capital Foundation

\$15,000 Sundance Institute Documentary Fund

\$12,500 The 21st Century Foundation (\$7,500 direct to the Tides Foundation)

\$10,000 Open Society Institute

\$3,500 Working Films and Chicken & Egg Pictures

\$2,500 Ms. Foundation for Women

In-kind donations:

\$50,000 Blue State Digital

\$3,500 Working Films and Chicken & Egg Pictures

Total budget: \$452,500

### **PRODUCTION BUDGET**

US\$650,000

### **LENGTH OF CAMPAIGN**

3 years

### **OFFICIAL CAMPAIGN PARTNERS**

40 partners including Amnesty International USA, Greater New Orleans Fair Housing Action Centre, The Gulf Coast Civil Works Campaign, Policy Link.

# CONCLUSION



This Oscar-nominated documentary became a catalyst for national debate not just over Hurricane Katrina but also around social issues across the United States including poverty, the failing public school system and lack of government accountability.

The audience walked away wanting and needing to do something, such was the power of the storytelling. Trouble the Water helped engage people in meaningful

action, and broadened the public vision around the long-term structural social conditions that led to Katrina's devastation of New Orleans, conditions which exist throughout the country.

The way in which the film was embraced by local Gulf Coast groups showed that documentary can empower, educate and unite and highlights the need for people to have their stories told.

# TEAM BIOGRAPHY



## DIRECTORS

TIA LESSIN & CARL DEAL produced and directed Oscar-nominated *Trouble the Water*, winner of the Gotham Independent Film Award and the Sundance Grand Jury Prize. They were producers of Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*, *Bowling for Columbine* and *Capitalism: A Love Story*.

Tia line produced Martin Scorsese's *No Direction Home: Bob Dylan*, and her work producing the groundbreaking satirical documentary series *The Awful Truth*, earned her two Emmy nominations and one arrest. She also received the Sidney Hillman broadcast journalism award for *Behind the Labels*, a film she directed and produced about labour trafficking in the garment industry.

Carl previously worked as an international news producer and writer, reporting from natural disasters and conflict zones in the US, Latin America, and in Iraq. He has written investigative reports for Greenpeace, Amnesty International and Public Citizen. Tia and Carl are members of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.



# AWARDS & PRIZES

This film received huge critical acclaim winning 13 awards and a further five nominations including two Emmys and it was also an Academy Award nominee for Best Documentary Feature.

**SUNDANCE FILM FESTIVAL**, Grand Jury Prize

**FULL FRAME FILM FESTIVAL**, Grand Jury Prize, Kathleen Bryan Edwards  
Human Rights Award, Chicken & Egg / Working Films Award

**SILVERDOCS FILM FESTIVAL**, Special Jury Prize

**BLACK LILY FILM FESTIVAL**, Artistic Achievement Award

**TRAVERSE CITY FILM FESTIVAL, BEST HISTORICAL FILM**

**FILM & VIDEO FESTIVAL**, Henry Hampton Award for Excellence in Film and Digital Media

**CINEMA PLANETA ENVIRONMENTAL FILM FESTIVAL**, Best  
Original Treatment of Environmental Issues

**L'OREAL PARIS / WOMEN IN FILM**, Women of Worth 'Vision' Award

**GOTHAM INDEPENDENT FILM AWARDS**, Best Documentary

**HARRY CHAPIN MEDIA AWARDS**, Best Film

**HISTORY MAKERS**, Best Use of Archive in a Current Affairs Production