



CHATHAM HOUSE

Chatham House, 10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE

T: +44 (0)20 7957 5700 E: [contact@chathamhouse.org](mailto:contact@chathamhouse.org)

F: +44 (0)20 7957 5710 [www.chathamhouse.org](http://www.chathamhouse.org)

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## Transcript

# The Political Impact of Documentaries

## Franny Armstrong

Director, *The Age of Stupid*, *McLibel*; Founder, 10:10 campaign

## Callum Macrae

Film-maker; Director, *Sri Lanka's Killing Fields*

## Chair: Phil Harding

Journalist; Broadcaster; Media Consultant

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**Phil Harding:**

In recent years, whether it's been the films of Michael Moore or Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth*, films about McDonald's or films about Enron or about human rights abuses, we seem to have seen a growth in documentary films with a dramatic political impact.

Increasingly, it seems, films are being made that not only show the world, but also set out to change it. It's that political role of documentaries that we're going to be examining this lunch time. Let me now introduce our two panellists.

On my right is Callum Macrae. He's co-founder of Outsider Television. A little bit about his background. He grew up in Nigeria and Scotland. Among other things, in his early life, he was a dustman for two years. He then ran a pirate radio station for six months. Was it a good radio station?

**Callum Macrae:**

It was of mixed quality.

**Phil Harding:**

Mixed quality. He was then a teacher for seven years, became a serious person. Then he went on to become a journalist, writing for the *Scotsman*, the *Herald*, the *Guardian*; 1992, moved into television, reporting for a Channel 4 programme, *Hard News*. Then in 1993, with Alex Sutherland, he co-founded Outsider Television. Now, Alex Sutherland is your wife.

**Callum Macrae:**

She is.

**Phil Harding:**

Was she your wife at the time?

**Callum Macrae:**

No, she wasn't actually.

**Phil Harding:**

We'll ask about that a bit later on. Since then he's gone out to produce and direct many powerful documentaries for Channel 4 *Dispatches*, for Al Jazeera, and for BBC's *Panorama*. You may know his work most recently through the award-winning documentary that he's made for Channel 4 and a follow-up programme, about *Sri Lanka's Killing Fields*, which was an investigation into the horrors perpetrated during the final weeks of the Sri Lankan civil war, between the government of Sri Lanka and the Tamil Tigers.

That programme has won the International Current Affairs Award at the Royal Television Society's Journalism Awards, and it won two One World Media Awards and was nominated for a BAFTA. Callum now lives in England, but according to the BBC website, is prepared to bore anyone to distraction to tell them how Scottish he is.

Franny Armstrong, co-founder of a film company called Spanner Films. What you need to know about her earlier life is at the age of seven, she wrote and directed her first play at North Ealing Primary School. She was also a drummer, presumably... How old were you when you joined the indie band, Band of Holy Joy?

**Franny Armstrong:**

About 18.

**Phil Harding:**

Okay. How long were you with them for?

**Franny Armstrong:**

About four years.

**Phil Harding:**

Did you have any hits?

**Franny Armstrong:**

No hits. We did have a deal with Rough Trade [Records], that's pretty good.

**Phil Harding:**

That's pretty good. In 1997, she set up Spanner Films and her first film – which I'm sure you've heard of – *McLibel*. That was filmed over 10 years and it was about the McDonald's libel trial. That was released in cinemas and shown in television all over the world. But not without quite a number of rows with lawyers first.

**Franny Armstrong:**

In this country, yeah. First it was going to be on BBC One, but they pulled it for legal reasons. Then Channel 4 picked it up, but then same situation with them. Then it wasn't shown in this country, actually, for years. It was only when the whole story changed and the two people in the court case went to the European Court of Human Rights and won – and it had been shown on TV all around the rest of the world. Suddenly BBC 2 felt able to show it at that point.

**Phil Harding:**

They suddenly got courage.

**Franny Armstrong:**

Yeah. It was great, actually, because there were lots of letters on the BBC website saying, 'This is why I pay my license fee. Only the BBC would have followed a story like this for 10 years.'

**Phil Harding:**

Talk about taking – yeah, never mind. Since then she's directed several other feature films, including *Drowned Out*, which covers the Narmada Dam disaster in Gujarat in India, and *The Age of Stupid*, which confronts the issue of climate change, something I know she feels very strongly about today. She's also the founder of the 10:10 climate campaign, which aims to cut carbon emissions. I'm sure many of you will have heard of that.

Her advice to aspiring film-makers is always to have an afternoon nap. True?

**Franny Armstrong:**

Still do it, every day. I work all night, I have to say.

**Phil Harding:**

Excellent. Can I just start off by asking both of you: how would you describe yourself, primarily? Are you a film-maker? Are you an advocate? Are you a campaigner? Are you a polemicist? Are you a politician?

**Franny Armstrong:**

I actually had no interest in becoming a film-maker whatsoever. The only reason I got into it was when I was 22 I heard about the McDonald's libel trial, McDonald's suing these two campaigners daring to stand up to McDonald's. I just thought, that's the most inspiring thing I've ever heard. If I'm inspired, other people will be too. My dad was a film-maker, so I happened to have access to film-making equipment. So I thought, I'm going to make a little video to help these people. Ten years later, my film was being shown all around the world.

If my dad had had a printing press, I would have been making posters. I had no interest in being a film-maker. Having said that, having made films now, I'm obsessed with it and it's absolutely fantastic.

**Phil Harding:**

But are you a campaigner or a film-maker?

**Franny Armstrong:**

I'm a film-maker more than a campaigner.

**Phil Harding:**

Okay. But the subject matter matters.

**Franny Armstrong:**

Oh my god, yeah. Because also, the way I make films, they kind of take five years and you raise all the money yourself and you're absolutely dedicated to

it. You're not going to do that with a story you're only half-heartedly interested in.

### **Callum Macrae:**

I think I've been all of the things on the list that you read at one point or another. As a journalist, which is what I have been more than anything else, you have a very specific set of rules which govern how you do things. But I think what happens is, that inevitably leads to a campaign, but perhaps if I could explain...

I think the films that I've been doing on Sri Lanka recently – and we've actually just completed a feature documentary called *No Fire Zone*, which is the culmination of three years' work on Sri Lanka. In a sense, what you're doing is... first of all, you have to be a film-maker, because it has to be a good film. So that's a kind of skill and a way of telling stories. That's the basic. And if you're not a good film-maker, there's no point in doing what you're doing. But if you're not a good storyteller, there's no point in trying to be a film-maker or a journalist or anything else. You do tell stories.

How engaged are you in those stories and how much you care about those stories? That I suppose that is the central thing. If you like, as a journalist, it's my job to tell the truth; if that truth is a truth which very few people know and which is being actively denied or concealed, then by definition, as soon as you start trying to tell that story, you are a campaigner.

People think of those two things as being contradictory. I think they're exactly the same thing, because if you're a journalist and you're telling the truth – if you're a campaigner you must tell the truth otherwise your campaign will fail or will be fraudulent.

So a determination to tell that truth, in a sense, becomes a campaign. Certainly with Sri Lanka, it's become a campaign which has taken us around the world, to the UN and all the rest of it.

### **Phil Harding:**

With something like Sri Lanka, which came first, your determination to tell the story or your feeling that there was something here that needed to be righted?

### **Callum Macrae:**

Funnily enough, unusually, because normally I tend to choose – most of the time, I suppose I choose my subject or I find a story which I then try and sell and try and get made into a television programme. Sri Lanka wasn't a subject I – I mainly make films on Africa, although I had the same awareness as anybody else – I was asked to make the film – the original TV documentary – because I've made films about war and war crimes. I've made films mainly about war crimes committed by the West.

So it was a kind of accident. But of course once you start getting into a story like that, it is such a gobsmackingly appalling story – the injustices which were done, the crimes which were committed, are so absolutely appalling and the evidence which we were able to gather is so astonishingly compelling – that it's become a mission. And it's a mission to tell the truth, which is not an unjournalistic [*sic*] thing to do. But it also, it could be argued, a campaign. I'm looking nervously at my Channel 4 lawyer who's over there.

### **Phil Harding:**

Is there a point where the campaign almost takes over the journalism?

### **Franny Armstrong:**

Yes, but hopefully that's after we've made the film. That was certainly the case with our film, *Age of Stupid*. The whole time I was making it, which ended up being five years – it wasn't supposed to be so long – I thought, 'This is my contribution to climate change. And when I finish it, I'll be able to retire.' But then as soon as it came out, as soon as we started showing it to people, everybody was saying the same thing, which is, 'What can I do?'

Then we just felt, we own this film, we're distributing it, we kind of have the responsibility to now make it have as much impact as we possibly can. That's how we came up with our campaign 10:10. Which then was a whole new thing and is now an NGO, and as you said, running in 40 countries and is in a way bigger than the film.

But I completely agree with Callum that you've got to make an extremely good film first, because a lot of people I'm talking to now say, 'I'm doing this film and this campaign, and it's this and that...' I'm always saying, 'Concentrate on the film. You can't do them both at the same time.' If you make a film that's brilliant and powerful, then a campaign may come out of it. But don't do both at the same time at the beginning, because it's too much.

**Phil Harding:**

So when you're looking for a subject, your first criteria is 'it's got to be interesting and it's got to tell people new things', as opposed to 'I want to expose some injustice or something that's happened'.

**Callum Macrae:**

I think it's the same thing. If you, as a journalist, or as a researcher or a filmmaker or even as a campaigner, come across a story which really, really matters and there is a truth... It comes back to this – there is a truth to be told, and that truth is not known, then that's your starting point. That is simultaneously a passion, a mission and by definition, in a sense, will become a campaign.

**Phil Harding:**

Let's just talk a little bit about practicalities. Where do you get your money from to make a film?

**Callum Macrae:**

If it's a television film, it's very straightforward. You get your story; you put it together; you sell it to a TV broadcaster – increasingly one or two or three broadcasters – and they will then fund the film. To make a documentary – because I've done both television programmes on Sri Lanka and then made these documentaries – to make a documentary, we had to raise a huge amount of money.

We've raised it from a variety of sources. We've raised it from things like BRITDOC, from Bertha – which is a foundation from the Pulitzer Center in New York who gave us 20 grand – from Commonwealth WorldView, which gave us 10 grand. Channel 4 was very generous and gave us a lot of money. And so you just raise the funds. It is a very, very different process, because you're having to spend an awful lot of your energy raising money.

Having done that, and having made the film which we've now done – and we only overspent, in the end, I think £11,000 which we're trying to recoup – it cost roughly just over £200,000 to make, which is cheap for a feature doc. We're now raising – we need about £200,000 to take it around the world. So that's what we're trying to raise from other funding agencies.



**Phil Harding:**

Same for you for funding?

**Franny Armstrong:**

Well, my first film *McLibel* I tried to get it commissioned as you're saying, but all of the media organizations in this country had had legal issues with McDonald's before that and nobody wanted to commission a film. Not just with me, because I was a complete unknown, but big documentary names had also tried to get commissioned and nobody could. I ended up making it on my own, essentially with no money whatsoever, just borrowing my dad's equipment.

But then at the end of it, came to realize that actually, if you do that, then you own the rights and you control the distribution. Had the BBC or Channel 4 commissioned the film in the first place, they would have screened it once or twice in this country – 2 million viewers, something like that. There would have been no DVD. There would have been no international festivals. There would certainly have been no cinema release.

We ended up getting 26 million viewers for *McLibel* all around the world. So then I realized: okay we have to control the rights from now on. We're never letting somebody else own our films. And then we came up something which is now very well known, called crowd funding. We wanted to own and control the rights, but at the same time, we needed a big budget by our standards because we wanted it to be on five continents.

**Phil Harding:**

Tell me about crowd funding. How did that work?

**Franny Armstrong:**

In our case, my dad and I and our producer just sat in our house and thought, 'How are we going to raise this money?' So we own the film. And we just came up with the idea, essentially, of selling shares. It's not highly original. And took it to a film financing lawyer, and he said, 'This is the most original film financing I've seen in 25 years, but it's illegal.'

Bit of a problem. The only part that was illegal was essentially the shareholder aspect, so it couldn't be shareholders in that sense. The other problem with it being literally shareholders is that the shareholders own it, so they can kick

out the director if they wanted and get rid of us. It became limited debenture loans. But essentially it's the same principle.

We raised £450,000, 350 people. They each own a little percentage of the profits. They've invested between £500 and £35,000 I think was the biggest one. We pay them their percentage of the film every year for 10 years. We're on the fourth one now. We do it once a year. It's actually really, really good fun to get back in touch with them all and pay them.

**Phil Harding:**

Would you do it again?

**Franny Armstrong:**

I would do it again, but not with 350 people. That is too much admin. Perhaps five or 10 people would be the ideal number. But it gives you complete freedom, complete editorial control and complete control of the distribution.

**Phil Harding:**

Is television as important as it once was in funding documentaries? Or is that changing?

**Callum Macrae:**

I think it's still very important. Most documentaries which are made are made for television. Television documentaries can have a huge impact, because it's very instant and it's very dramatic. But I do think that feature documentaries limited debenture loans I think they're kind of working together. My film is a good example of it, where the channel has actually put money into this film.

But we will then, for example, make television versions of this film. Because the film is a very, very horrible watch. There's just no getting away from it. So we will try and make hour-long television versions which already we're selling to countries around the world. The thing about a feature documentary, once we've taken our feature documentary, we are free to campaign with it, in the sense that you can't necessarily campaign with a television documentary.

**Phil Harding:**

Is that because of who owns it?

**Callum Macrae:**

Yes, and also because a television company cannot and should not be getting involved in major campaigns. A television company will broadcast a programme which is dramatic – it's one of Channel 4's duties, to transmit programmes to audiences and about people which other channels don't do, and that it does. I think our film was a good example of it doing that.

But in terms of launching a wholesale campaign, where you are trying to, in effect, force justice on a regime, on a government which is still running Sri Lanka and is guilty of war crimes – our campaign is to see them face justice.

**Franny Armstrong:**

I was going to say that I think television still is absolutely crucial, because that's where the big numbers are. When I say 65 million people have seen our films, probably 30 million of that, probably more, is on television. So in terms of the mass audience, absolutely crucial.

But then something else we've been doing is something we called 'indie screenings', which is basically, because we own the rights, setting up a website and letting anybody go on our website and buy a license to screen our film wherever they want to. Then, crucially, they can charge for tickets whatever they want and then they can make a profit out of it.

**Phil Harding:**

So television would be your first priority?

**Franny Armstrong:**

No, equally – in terms of the mass numbers, yes. But then in terms of precipitating change, these local screenings – I think we had 1,400 in the first six months of *Age of Stupid*, and so many things, people would write to us and say what happened as a result... Because if you're got 30 people in a small room and then you all watch a film which moves you, and then you have a discussion, so many things come out of that discussion. Even though it's a smaller number than the telly. So many people write to us and say,

'We've set up the local campaign, we've done this, we've done this...' So many people as a result of those local screenings. Both equally important.

**Phil Harding:**

So as a campaigning tool, it's the local meeting that can be very important.

**Franny Armstrong:**

Absolutely – which is the non-theatrical rights, which no distributor cares about.

**Callum Macrae:**

The other thing is in terms of focused screenings, for example, this new feature doc we've just done – we did its first screening at the United Nations Human Rights Council in front of 200 diplomats and country missions. We watched delegations and spoke to them afterwards, and had delegations come up to us and say, 'We are going to change our vote. The Sri Lankan government has pulled the wool over our eyes.' Just from one screening.

That had an effect on the UN vote. So in a sense, you can do these kinds of targeted screenings. We're doing a lot of screenings in parliaments. We did an extract in the British parliament. We're doing screenings in Geneva, in Brussels, in the European parliament in a week's time. We're doing them all over the place.

The point is that if you can combine those kind of influential screenings, some of them private – with country missions, for example – with mass campaign and mass screenings... for example, in India, there have been mass demonstrations, the parliament was brought to a halt on three separate occasions with people demanding that the Indian government vote for the UN resolution, all on the basis of our film. Waving articles that I'd written in the air in the Indian chamber of parliament.

That combination of a popular campaign that you can build through television and through public screenings and screenings which are built around advocacy, and these very specific screenings with influential people.

**Phil Harding:**

Has the internet changed that? You talked about the way that you can now distribute via the internet. But had viewing on the internet changed that? Is it changing it?

**Callum Macrae:**

I think it has. The thing about viewing on the internet is if you make a film, you do want to make sure it's seen in the right way. You don't want it to just lose its impact and be dissipated on the internet. For example, we're actually restricting access to the internet at the moment, because we're trying to do targeted screenings. We're trying to do big screenings. We're trying to build up publicity. We're doing particular campaigns in particular countries.

So in that sense, it doesn't help. But on the other hand, around it we've built a website which we've just set up, called [nofirezone.org](http://nofirezone.org). Just plugging it. Within a month and a half of that setting up, we'd had 111,000 hits from around the world; 2,500 people sent us their emails signing up and saying they wanted to be kept informed. In that sense, that can have a huge effect.

**Phil Harding:**

The way that documentaries are... I mean, there are no secret places hardly at all anymore because of the advent of the camera phone and all of that. I think your films contain quite a lot of camera phone and so-called amateur shooting. Has that changed the nature of documentary and what you can show and what you can't?

**Callum Macrae:**

I think it's in the process of really dramatically changing it. I mean, the Sri Lankan civil war was supposed to be fought in secret. The UN was kicked out, although they kind of went along with being kicked out. Not the people who were there, but the higher levels.

International journalists were kicked out. Local journalists were executed, assassinated, forced into exile, or forced into silence. No one was supposed to see it. And the government of Sri Lanka quite clearly believed that it could massacre literally between 40,000 and 70,000 people and get away with it. Of course they couldn't, because it was filmed. It was filmed by people on camera phones, people on little domestic cameras, Tamil Tigers who were

propagandists who were going to be describing the heroic exploits of their own soldiers, but ended up describing the misery of the civilians.

And also of course, the massacres at the end, the rapes, the executions of naked, bound prisoners, the torture, was filmed by the people doing those acts, by the Sri Lankan government soldiers, on mobile phones. And that footage we've been gathering in for three years and that footage is in our film to demonstrate what happened.

I think it's interesting, because the UN – at the same time as we were making our first film, the UN, having realized how badly it had failed, appointed a group of experts. They produced a report which reached very similar conclusions to ours. And in a sense, that was enormously important because it was considered and read by country missions and read by various people.

The film just had an extraordinary impact, because people could see it happening in front of them. And people who have read the report have then seen the film and said, 'The power of the film, because the evidence is there in front of you, is devastating.'

### **Phil Harding:**

But camera phone footage, by its very nature, because you're not there, gives you another problem, which is how do you know it shows what it purports to show?

### **Callum Macrae:**

I think in a way, people are scared of... I think the media – we as an industry – have to start being less scared of it. The point is that you still have the role of the journalist. You still have the role of the person who is interpreting this information. When I make a film in a war zone, and I talk to somebody in, say, the north of Uganda and say, 'What happened?' I will interview that person and they will describe what happened. And I will make a judgement based on what I know about that person or what I know about the story, what they're saying, how it relates to other people, as to whether that interview is trustworthy, powerful, important, evidential and I should use it.

It's no different when you get footage. I think what we've tended to do is we've said, you know, you get a bit of dramatic footage, you put it on the news. The news doesn't have time to do much with it. It just says, 'We can't authenticate this,' and then it's forgotten. So what we did – probably for the first time, but I

think everybody will be doing – is we spent months and months and months going through this footage, putting it in order, relating it to each other, making sure that we knew exactly where it happened, what had happened, and creating a narrative which is much, much more powerful than a series of eyewitness testimonies.

It's actually, you see it. I think that is going to change the way films are made. I think it's also going to change the way that dictators and those who kill their own people think they can get away with doing it. There are no hiding places.

**Phil Harding:**

Okay, Franny, you've made the film. It's great. It's been shown. Everybody loves it. Do you see that as the end or the beginning of the process? How do you see it? Do you take a deep breath and say, 'Right, now okay, I've got the film. Now I've got to really start the campaign.'

**Franny Armstrong:**

I think my films are kind of like your children; they are with you forever. As you can see, I'm still talking about *McLibel* however many decades after I did it. If they're great and good, then they continue to do their work. After *McLibel* came out, probably the best thing that happened – not just the film but the whole court case and everything – is that junk food is no longer allowed to be advertised to children on television.

That's just a complete triumph. When we first started working on *McLibel*, all of the issues in the story, that we should eat healthy food because it's connected to heart disease and cancer and animal rights and workers' rights and environmental... They were all really, really niche things that only us lot cared about. Then 20 years later, thanks to the film but also the court case, *Jamie's School Dinners*, *Fast Food Nation*, everything, now they're completely totally mainstream subjects. It certainly didn't end then. It goes on and on, and it's part of a big movement. Hopefully for the better.

**Phil Harding:**

I've just got one last question. At the very beginning, I described documentaries as having become more political in recent years. Is that something you both recognize, or do you think they always have been and we're just picking up on a trend now?

**Callum Macrae:**

I'm not quite sure what you mean by political, I suppose. In a sense, documentaries have –

**Phil Harding:**

I mean they either have been set out to change something, or as a result of having been made, they have changed something. It could be either or. They have changed government policy, or they have changed public policy in some way.

**Callum Macrae:**

I think documentaries – we were talking about this earlier, things like *Cathy Come Home* which wasn't a documentary but was perceived as one by many people have been changing things for a long, long time. Is it happening more?

I think it is extraordinary what you can – I was talking to someone else about it. I think four or five of my films have resulted in public enquiries. For example, about 10 years ago we did a film – a fishing boat which had disappeared in the 1970s called the Gaul, disappeared with 50 men on board. The relatives had always campaigned for years and years saying they believed it was being used for spying. That they believed there was something sinister about how it disappeared. It was supposed to be unsinkable. It disappeared without a trace and no bodies were found.

The government consistently said, 'This cannot be done. We can't find the boat. It's far too dangerous. The weather is far too rough. It's in the Arctic Ocean. The whole thing is out of the question. Shut up and stop being silly. No spies were involved and we weren't using it for spying during the Cold War.' This was in the hottest part of the Cold War, if you like, in the Barents Sea.

We went to Channel 4 and said, 'We want to go and find the boat.' I'm not sure, I hope that that would still happen, Channel 4 said, 'Yeah, okay, here's 30 grand. Go and find the boat.' We went and we found the boat. We filmed it. We did what the government said was impossible. We forced the government to admit – they then had to launch a huge public inquiry. They then went and visited the boat. Still managed to deny, although we had conclusive proof that it was being used for spying. It was a bit muddy in the end.



But we forced a change and we forced a government to do something. That kind of thing does happen. There's a public inquiry just now about the Battle of Danny Boy, which again was provoked by an investigation that we did for *Panorama*.

**Phil Harding:**

More explicitly political today?

**Franny Armstrong:**

I think the big change that's happened in my working life – I started in 1995 when I was interested in *McLibel*, and at that point as I said, I had to borrow my dad's equipment because it was way too expensive for ordinary people to have the equipment. But even in the time that I was making *McLibel*, the first good small cheap cameras came in. Now, obviously anyone can buy an HD camera. Now anybody can make any film they want. It's not just a few predominantly men, middle-class white people who are the commissioners at these channels deciding what films are going to be made.

Now anybody can decide that they feel some subject is important enough that they want to commit their life to making it. Whether or not that film is then good enough that anybody ever sees it and it gets distributed is another matter, of course. I would say that's the big change.

**Callum Macrae:**

I do think the democratization caused by the fact that the technology, which once upon a time only we had, is now available to everyone is hugely transforming and important.