

School of Public Health

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'Lots of Views on YouTube Don't Translate to Responsible Work'

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Lisa Russell (SPH'98)

Alumna; Emmy Award-Winning Documentary Filmmaker; Arts Curator; Founder/CEO of StoryShifter

Breakfast: "Iced coffee and a long walk."

Hometown: "I've been living in Brooklyn now for 20 years, and I have to say that Brooklyn definitely feels more like home for me than Ventura, California, did, even though Ventura is where 'I grew up.'"

Extracurricular: “When I’m not being a filmmaker or a curator, I spend time with my friends and go to their shows. They’re a lot of artists, poets, and dancers.”

What is StoryShifter?

StoryShifter is the culmination of my 15 years working as a filmmaker and struggling to figure out how to be an ethical storyteller.

Netflix uses Big Data to make creative decisions about their programming, because they know how audiences respond to which content, how often they watch something, and when they watch it. StoryShifter is basically taking the Netflix model and saying, “Can we use the same type of machine learning and data analytics to gauge what kind of content appeals to which audiences, and also what inspires them to act?”

On the front end, StoryShifter’s platform will be a new entertainment portal for social good that will house film, PSAs, poetry, and photographs on the site with options for users to share, to support the artists, to support the cause, and to support a socially conscious brand that supports the cause. On the back end, StoryShifter will use data analytics to gauge and generate reports on what kind of content resonates with which audiences, so that we can actually have deeper and more meaningful conversations about exploitative storytelling—which is also referred to as “poverty porn”—and what we can do about it.

Filmmakers and artists like myself don’t have any feedback mechanisms. We don’t have press reviews. We don’t have box office numbers. We don’t have ratings. If you make a film and it has a million hits, to some that means it’s a successful film, but we know from *Kony 2012* that lots of views on YouTube do not translate to responsible storytelling.

Watch *Lisa Russell’s recent TEDx talk about StoryShifter*.

Why is exploitative storytelling such an issue in global health and development?

Some organizations err towards emotionally exploitative storytelling because it has in the past generated money. It has gotten people to sponsor a child for a day for this much money, by showing these poor kids with big bellies who are starving.

But the general public is becoming more and more desensitized, and they are tuning it out. It’s also not truly helping on the ground, because you are perpetuating stereotypes that are very harmful. People have dignity even if they are poor, and I think that by showcasing people as desperate, needy people who need saviors like the global health community to come in and save them, it is very, very dangerous in the longterm. I have seen it already, where some people have felt threatened by me having a camera because they’re assuming that I’m coming there to make money off of their suffering.

I also like to say that we’re constantly telling women and girls that they are powerful and they are capable and they are smart, but we have to stop telling stories that they’re not, because we’re creating internal conflict in their perception of who they are.

I grew up in a really difficult situation. My mom didn’t finish eighth grade, but she said, “Despite our circumstances, you can do or be whatever you want.” That was really necessary for me, because I could have been caught in the same cycle of poverty and complacency if I listened to what society was trying to say to me, but, probably due to my mother, I pushed back and I changed my own narrative. People’s circumstances do not predict their potential, and we don’t know whose potential we are hampering by telling stories that they do not desire a better reality or are not capable of improving their own lives and their own situations.

How did you come to global health documentary filmmaking?

After getting my MPH, I went as a humanitarian aid worker to Kosovo and Albania during the 1999 conflict. It was there that I got a firsthand look at how the media was exploiting stories, particularly of women in conflict. We were invited to the US embassy to meet and talk with Kosovar women who were running programs in the camps, and they basically said that

journalists were coming into the camps saying they needed to speak to women who have been raped. “Can you raise your hand if you have been raped?”

But it was what they said after that really stuck with me. They said, “We fear at the end of this war we will no longer be remembered as Kosovar women, but as Kosovar women who have been raped.” That just caused me to look at all the global health and development communication styles, at PSAs, at film, even the news reports, and look at how stories about people in other countries were portrayed. I realized what we were seeing on TV looked nothing like what I was experiencing as a humanitarian aid worker. That planted the seeds for me thinking about film and wanting to tell these stories differently.

I had friends who were filmmakers. I went on one project with my roommate, Julia Black, to Brazil. She was producing a film for Channel 4 London on Brazil's fight against the pharmaceutical industry to create generic medications to help curb what was expected to be a huge HIV epidemic in Brazil. After I did that I fell in love with it. I spent years learning how to shoot, direct, edit—especially edit! Editing is very, very, very hard. It truly is a craft, and I treat it like a craft. It's where the magic happens.

You collaborate with a lot of artists in other disciplines. Why is that?

I did my first film, *Love, Labor, Loss*, on obstetric fistula in Niger, and I worked hard to get it seen. I jumped on a tour bus with Zap Mama, who's a Grammy-nominated Congolese-Belgian singer whose music was in the film, and we went cross-country screening it with Planned Parenthood's VOX college chapters. It created a buzz around this maternal health issue that not a lot of people knew about, with Zap Mama fans who would never step inside of a school of medicine suddenly educated and inspired about obstetric fistula—so much so that one student raised \$19,000 for the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) from one fundraiser.

At the same time, people who knew my work but hadn't heard of Zap Mama were introduced to her music. We cross-pollinated our followers and helped each other. Through collaborating with her and through all of these other socially conscious artists, we've educated a lot of fans about these global development topics. Many of the artists I collaborate with are already focused on some of the same issues—sexual violence, gender equality, etc. I have learned how to wear my global development hat and socially conscious artist hats at the same time and create synergies that are very impactful.

Going full circle, I recently jumped on an old Willie Nelson tour bus with artists and programmers from Pixar, a musician, a painter, and some other filmmakers, and we went through what is commonly referred to as the Rust Belt, visiting individuals, schools, organizations, maker spaces, small businesses, etc., that are doing incredible work to revitalize their communities. I met and was inspired by so many incredible people. We visited maker spaces in cities that were hit hard by the automobile crises, and blacksmiths who were transforming their businesses in light of the changing economy. We did storytelling workshops with coal miners. I can just go on and on and on and on. I would love to do more of these storytelling tours with the global health and development community, or the social justice community. It's a very effective way to build community and inspire people for social change.

How has your filmmaking career changed over time?

My career is not that different than when I first started, but the environment in the global health community is much more responsive to it. There was no global health storytelling courses or tracks. There were communications and journalism, but nothing that quite bridged documentary filmmaking, arts, and global health.

I would have tons of career angst-ridden students saying, “I have this love for this, and I have this love for that, but I don't know what to do with it.” My response, after looking back at my own career, is to say, ‘My career did not exist when I started it.’ You don't know if the career that you are dreaming about may exist in five or 10 years, but if you keep putting these pieces together you might be able to come up with something incredible.

Are you hopeful about the global health community's move to embrace storytelling?

I am actually somewhat critical right now of the global health storytelling movement, because I don't think that these organizations are engaging enough true storytellers who understand the craft of storytelling and invest in becoming a master of it. A lot of it is basically just global health experts who have been in global health communications now saying, “We are

storytellers.” In my opinion, we are at risk of having our communications once again be criticized if the global health storytelling trend does not take this as a serious craft and opens its doors to invite and learn from true storytellers.

I hope that we as a global health community can truly build institutional credibility for artists. Not just have us do a film here or do a performance at a gala there. Invite us to attend or sit on panels at global health conferences. Create scholarships for artists. Invite us to sit at the table when decisions are being made about global health programming. Bring us in as adjuncts to teach in schools of public health. What is happening now is still just scratching the surface, and there is so much more that can be done to elevate our field.

—*Michelle Samuels*

Lisa Russell is taking over the SPH Instagram account from July 23 through 27. Follow along at [Instagram.com/BUSPH/](https://www.instagram.com/BUSPH/) and with the hashtag #BUSPHSummer18.

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