



# the Visitor

Social Action Campaign

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## Imagine That: How *The Visitor* Helps Viewers See Their Way From Outrage To Action

By Paul VanDeCarr



Even with the ubiquity of online and other digital media, few can deny the influence of the big screen. It shapes what people read, wear, talk about on the subway and think. But can Hollywood movies move people to social change? Documentary films like *An Inconvenient Truth* and *Sicko* have sparked action on the environment, health care and other issues. But documentary film audiences go to the theater expecting to get informed, outraged, politicized; not so for Friday-night multiplex audiences, who want entertainment.

Ironically, it's precisely those expectations that can make an engrossing drama like *The Visitor* a model for how feature films can effect change. "You get so absorbed in the drama that it's not until after *The Visitor* ends that you realize you've also learned a lot," says Ellen Schneider, executive director of the media strategy organization Active Voice, "and that you want to do something about it."

Any artistically successful film moves people emotionally. But *The Visitor*, which highlights the experience of immigrant detention in America, is one of the first successful Hollywood films to prompt advocates, lawyers, funders, moviegoers, churches and others to jump in and actually do something. That's because Participant Media, executive producers of *The Visitor*, paired up with Active Voice to produce a social action campaign around the film – one that will continue to affect peoples' lives long after the film has been released.

In more than 30 communities nationwide, Active Voice worked with local partners to transform a night at the movies into a high-impact event. From Detroit to Nashville, to Colorado Springs and dozens of other cities, *The Visitor* was used to educate audiences about local policy issues, enlist them to visit nearby detention centers, get their help on advocacy efforts and more. At these and many other screenings, the film gave audiences a potent story, while structured discussions and printed materials gave them a way to convert their emotions into action. The campaign succeeded in its goals to build new alliances around detention issues, support community-based organizations' existing efforts and engage college students and faculty to advocate for modernized immigration laws. John Schreiber, Executive Vice President, Social Action and Advocacy at Participant Media, had an ambitious, long-term vision for the campaign: "We wanted *The Visitor* to help restore due process in America, even if we start on a modest scale."

## A WRITER-DIRECTOR'S VISION

Had the film's writer or director gotten too wrapped up in a political agenda while writing and shooting, the film probably would have failed artistically, and therefore been a poor basis for any social action campaign. "It was never my intention to dissect the issue of detention," says Writer-Director Tom McCarthy. "My job is to tell a story. I started with these two characters and how they would meet."

In *The Visitor*, 62-year-old Walter Vale is a disillusioned Connecticut economics professor who is sleepwalking through his life. When his college sends him to Manhattan to attend a conference, Walter is surprised to find a young couple has taken up residence in his long-unused apartment. Victims of a real estate scam, Tarek, a Syrian man, and Zainab, his Senegalese girlfriend, have nowhere else to go. Walter reluctantly allows the couple to stay with him. Touched by his kindness, Tarek, a talented musician, insists on teaching the aging academic to play the African drum, which opens Walter's eyes to a vibrant world of local jazz clubs and drum circles. As the friendship between the two men deepens, the differences in culture, age and temperament fall away. After being stopped by police in the subway, Tarek is arrested as an undocumented immigrant and held for deportation. As his situation turns desperate, Walter finds himself compelled to help his new friend with a passion he thought he had long ago lost. When Tarek's beautiful mother, Mouna, arrives unexpectedly in search of her son, the professor's personal commitment develops into an unlikely romance. And it's through the newfound connections with these virtual strangers that Walter is awakened to a new world and a new life.



The film earned an Academy Award® nomination for Best Actor for Richard Jenkins in the role of Walter, and excellent reviews from critics. In the *New York Post*, no bastion of pro-immigrant fervor, Lou Lumenick said it was "hands down" the "best movie I've seen this year." In the *Los Angeles Times*, Carina Chocano wrote, "It's tempting to describe McCarthy's movie as a story about the effect of draconian post-Sept. 11 immigration laws on individuals, but this would make it sound like the kind of issue-driven movie that plays like a scolding and feels like a chore. *The Visitor* is far from that. It's a film about relationships, their randomness and unpredictability, and what happens when bureaucracy attempts to make life conform to its rigid, parochial and often ignorant standards."

## CONNECTING WITH AUDIENCES

Thanks to McCarthy's research into detainees and detention centers, the film is rich in detail, and many advocates are pleased with the film's verisimilitude. Maria Teresa Rojas of the Open Society Institute, which funded Active Voice to implement the action campaign around the film, says, "In the advocacy world, we always use the example of people being arrested 'over something as simple as jumping a turnstile,' and that's exactly what happens in the film."

Accurate as it may be, *The Visitor* doesn't capture all facets of detention, or go into detail about the harsh conditions detainees face. But many advocates, including Andrea Black of Detention Watch Network, see the creative choices as an asset. She says the film's perspective may be precisely what makes it accessible to a mainstream audience that can help effect change in detention policies. "A segment of the audience will see themselves reflected in this film," says Black. "They see the character of Walter going through this transformation from sad to scared to angry." And that's just the kind of transition that campaign organizers say will lead some viewers to take action.

It's not just Walter's but also Tarek's transformation that may resonate with viewers; indeed, Walter's conversion only makes sense in light of the injustice that his new friend suffers. Tarek comes across as a high-spirited young musician trying to make his way in the exciting environment of New York City, only to find himself arrested and confined to a detention center. And if a guy like Tarek—handsome, affable and connected—can get detained and deported, then the question to the audience is how little chance someone less sympathetic or more isolated might have. Off-screen, Tarek's story is repeated many times over. As McCarthy learned in the course of his research, over 322,000 immigrants were detained in 2007, more than triple the 95,000 people detained in 2001. Most of them pose no danger to our communities, say advocates, and their detention costs us too much money, as well as some of our most cherished values as a democracy. "I'm no expert on immigration law," McCarthy admitted to the *Los Angeles Times*. "There are no easy answers, but we have to do better than this."





## BEYOND THE BOX OFFICE: ACTIVATING EVERYDAY ADVOCATES

For the theatrical run, neither the film's distributors nor Participant Media or other investors wanted the film to be pigeonholed as an "issue" movie. As McCarthy asks rhetorically, "Who wants to see a detention film?" The theatrical marketing campaign focused on the picture's human aspects, and so attracted many people who might never have opted to see a film about immigration policy. Soon the film was ranked in the top-10 highest grossing films at the national box office three weeks in a row.

That was great news in more ways than one for Participant Media, a media company with an emphasis on film production. Profit and politics are not at cross-purposes, says Participant Chief Executive Officer Jim Berk. "The box office success of *The Visitor* proved that, in the midst of so much media clutter, audiences are increasingly embracing movies that entertain and transport them – and that even have the power to get them involved after the credits roll." *The Visitor* is no anomaly at Participant. "We've steered this course on films as varied as *An Inconvenient Truth* and *The Kite Runner*," Participant Executive Vice President of Social Action and Advocacy John Schreiber adds.

Participant Media sponsors a social action campaign for each of its films and hired Active Voice to coordinate the campaign for *The Visitor*. Active Voice, a San Francisco-based organization that uses film to put a human face on public policy issues, capitalized on *The Visitor's* popularity to carry out a community-based effort to convert moviegoers into activists. The film was used as a tool to move key audiences to take action around unjust policies that target, detain and deport immigrants—often without due process.

"*The Visitor* shines light on a usually hidden and frightening situation—detention," says Schneider of Active Voice. "But the question for audiences is, 'What can I do?' Unless there's a structure in place to channel our energies, we usually do nothing." Schneider's organization started its campaign by asking groups like Amnesty International, Detention Watch Network, National Immigration Justice Center and others, "What can ordinary people do?"

Their answers led Active Voice to create a companion guide for the film, which summarizes the plot, poses questions for discussion, gives essential information about immigration and detention and directs readers to additional resources. The guide also suggests specific actions to take, such as visiting a detainee (there's a map of detention centers in the guide), volunteering for a local immigrant aid organization (the guide includes a list of national organizations to connect with) or helping raise bond money for a detainee (readers are directed to a group that facilitates just that). A web page dedicated to the film helps educate and connect viewers. "The trick here," says Shaady Salehi, Active Voice's program director, "is that, for every action we suggest in the guide, we also provide a resource to make that action possible."

The guide has been used by advocates, educators and community leaders at screenings across the country, organized by local groups and coordinated nationally by Active Voice. Active Voice's lead partner in San Diego used the screening to raise awareness about the prevalence of asylum-seekers in detention and the construction of a new 3,000-bed correctional facility in the area. ACCESS, a Detroit-based organization, screened the film at the Arab American

National Museum to almost 200 Southeast Michigan community members and served dinner to break the day's Ramadan fast. After a screening in Colorado Springs, more than two-thirds of the audience signed up to take a tour of a local detention facility. Lead partners in Nashville and Nebraska used the film to educate the public about newly formed "welcoming initiatives."

The campaign focused on over 30 communities with nearby detention facilities and sizeable Middle Eastern, Muslim and South Asian (MEMSA) populations. "Each community is different," says Salehi. "Immigration plays out one way in one city, and very differently in another. Our role at Active Voice is to help our local partners to identify their own particular objectives and action steps. But we also coordinate nationally, so that the sites can connect to and learn from each other."

## CALLING 1,000 LAWYERS TO PRO BONO ACTION

It's not just everyday advocates that the film has moved to action, but experienced lawyers as well. "The Visitor really touches a chord with many lawyers that people can be held indefinitely in detention, and they don't get lawyers, even though their liberty is at stake," says David Lash, managing attorney for pro bono programs at O'Melveny & Meyers (OMM), an international and multi-practice law firm with which Active Voice and Participant Media partnered. The firm decided that it could have the greatest impact by training attorneys (from OMM and other firms, in many areas of practice) to represent detainees at what Lash says is "the tipping point"—bond hearings. "To reunite someone with their family, to give someone back their liberty, who came to the U.S. seeking their liberty—it's very emotional for the lawyers and the clients," Lash says. Aside from the personal satisfaction of helping immigrants, lawyers in several cities can use the training to fulfill their mandatory continuing legal education requirements. As of this writing, the firm has produced an extensive training manual and partnered with other organizations to train over 500 lawyers and counting.

And that's just the beginning. Participant Media, Active Voice and OMM have now teamed up with Bet Tzedek's Justice Network to use *The Visitor* and the training materials to recruit and train more than 1,000 lawyers on the issues surrounding deportation proceedings. "There are attorneys around the country who would jump at the opportunity to offer pro bono services to detained immigrants," notes Mitch Kamin, President/CEO of Bet Tzedek Legal Services, "but they need the 'hook' and a little training. *The Visitor* is the best hook I've seen." Perhaps that's why Participant Media has committed to donating \$25,000 a year for three years – about a quarter of the total three year training budget – to get this network off the ground and into the courtroom.





## LASTING IMPACT

Conducting a social action campaign for a feature film may seem like an awfully indirect way to create policy change around immigration, the environment, health care or any other issue. But Rojas of the Open Society Institute says that a feature film is an “integral part” of a campaign. “Anyone interested in creating change may start at the policy level or the direct services level,” she says, “but you need the public to be knowledgeable about issues, you need them to care.”

Broad public concern “softens the ground” for advocates, says Andrea Black of the Detention Watch Network, making it easier for them to push for change. *The Visitor* takes the immigration issue beyond the specialized world of advocacy organizations, and into the realm of popular culture. In this way, a feature film can achieve victories that litigation, advocacy and other forms of work cannot—and makes way for those other forms to take effect.



Millions of people have seen *The Visitor* in theatres. Thousands saw the film at community screenings, and they now have the tools they need to take action. Active Voice and Participant Media continue to be active in the campaign, distributing the discussion guide, organizing screenings, raising money for public education, building infrastructure for lawyer trainings and more—all in an effort to create a lasting impact.

Ellen Schneider says that *The Visitor* campaign shares some qualities with the documentary film campaigns her organization normally conducts. But this campaign also brings together a rare mix of players to meet various needs: investors sell tickets, nonprofits gain public exposure and funders learn the value of adding a piece of pop culture entertainment to their portfolios. “And most importantly,” says Schneider, “everyone helps make a policy concern human, urgent and completely alive.”

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Social Action Campaign is a collaboration of Participant Media and Active Voice

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Participant believes that a good story well told can truly make a difference in how one sees the world. Whether it is a feature film, documentary or other form of media, Participant exists to tell compelling, entertaining stories that also create awareness of the real issues that shape our lives.

The company seeks to entertain audiences first, then to invite them to participate in making a difference. To facilitate this, Participant creates specific social action campaigns for each film and documentary designed to give a voice to issues that resonate in the films. Participant teams with social sector organizations, non-profits, and corporations who are committed to creating an open forum for discussion and education, and who can, with Participant, offer specific ways for audience members to get involved. These include action kits, screening programs, educational curriculum and classes, house parties, seminars, panels, and other activities, and are ongoing "legacy" programs that are updated and revised to continue beyond the film's domestic and international theatrical, DVD, and television windows. To date, Participant has developed active, working relationships with 156 non-profits reaching nearly 75 million people. [www.participantmedia.com](http://www.participantmedia.com)



Active Voice is a nationally recognized non-profit team of strategic communication specialists who use film, television and digital media to spark social change. From grassroots to grass tops; online or big screen; documentary or narrative; independent or "interdependent" Active Voice works with preeminent filmmakers, funders, advocates and thought leaders to put human faces on the big issues of our times. Since its inception in 2001, Active Voice has built a diverse portfolio of film-based campaigns focusing on a range of issues, including immigration, criminal justice, healthcare and sustainability. [www.activevoice.net](http://www.activevoice.net)