Breakthrough US in 2020-2022: A Strategy and Impact Snapshot

Breakthrough harnesses the power of creative media and popular culture to shift the way people think, understand and act in support of gender equity, racial justice, and LGBTQ+ and immigrant rights. We shape cultural narratives and challenge the status quo, through an intersectional feminist approach.

Vision Statement

Our work is shaped by a transformative vision of justice for all people, particularly those who survive on the edges of the margins. We imagine a world where:

- All people live in safety and dignity, and have the resources to thrive;
- There is an end to discrimination and violence in all forms;
- Our identities are celebrated, and we are free to express ourselves and evolve;
- Media and pop culture are replete with diverse, authentic representations, and are spaces of affirmation and joy.

Our Approach

THEORY OF CHANGE

If we infuse media and popular culture with diverse, authentic representations of people from marginalized communities, and uplift their creative and activist work, we will inspire audiences to empathize and take action toward a violence- and discrimination- free world.

Breakthrough plays a unique role in the ecosystem, as both a media production house and an engine of human rights advocacy. The building blocks of our campaigns are the instruments of pop culture: social media, music videos, video games, comedy shows, podcasts, documentary films, narrative fiction, and more. Our strategy revolves around:

I. Artistry - We believe in the intrinsic value of the arts, and produce works that, in addition to carrying a powerful message, stand alone on their artistic merit and audience appeal.
II. Storytelling - Through authentic, nuanced stories, we challenge stereotypes and illuminate unjust realities, activating empathy and transforming existing media representations, toward long-term narrative and cultural change.
III. Mass Media - We harness the power of traditional and new media, disseminating our campaigns through channels that reach audiences at scale.
IV. Strategic Partnerships - We nurture deep, respectful collaborations with a diverse array of changemakers, to coalesce our power, and enhance the cultural relevance of our campaigns.
V. **Movement building** - We amplify the voices of activists, artists, and other movement builders at the grassroots, helping to advance social justice through an intergenerational and intersectional feminist lens.

Psychological studies and studies of our field -- media and pop culture for social change -- have demonstrated the effectiveness of these tools.¹ Not only do they *captivate* and *transport* audiences, immersing them in new worlds and subjectivities; they are also *persuasive*, even more so when narratives are nuanced, authentic and complex; and *affective*, activating strong emotions, including empathy. Storytelling through pop culture is not only capable of challenging stereotypes and stigmas and illuminating unjust realities; it also introduces new narratives and ways of relating to one another.² Through television shows like *Pose*, *Transparent* and *Orange is the New Black*, audiences have embraced transgender and gender non-conforming characters, and become more vocal champions of LGBTQ+ rights. And through social media, pop stars, and film and television helmed by Black creatives, the Movement for Black Lives has gained increased traction, to the point that *The Washington Post*, commenting in July 2020, proclaimed anti-racism to be a “cultural imperative”.³

**Our Impact**

Breakthrough has a twenty-year history of innovation and impact in the social change space. We are known worldwide for our expertise in developing high-quality media products and tools for human rights advocacy, which are adaptable across geographies. Our work has contributed to pivotal shifts, from personal attitudes and media discourse around undocumented immigrants (expunging the word “illegal”),⁴ to a sense of shared responsibility for eradicating gender-based violence, where men and boys are self-appointed catalysts of change.⁵ Highlights include:

- **ICED: I Can End Deportation (2008)** - With ICED, Breakthrough became the first organization to use video game technology to activate young people on immigrant rights. ICED reached 25 million people in 175 countries via national and global media, was downloaded by 131,300 players, and contributed to a measurable reduction in use of the word “illegal” to describe undocumented people. ICED was a cornerstone of *Restoring Fairness*, a twelve-year campaign on immigrant rights that Breakthrough launched in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.

- **Ring the Bell! One Million Men, One Million Promises (2013)** - Encouraging men and boys to intervene in situations of intimate partner violence, *Bell Bajao!* reached 243 million people and was adapted in 9 countries. In 2013, at the launch of *Ring the Bell: One million men. One million promises*, celebrity partners including Sir Patrick Stewart,


² AndACTION (2017).


⁴ Center for Children & Technology (2008), Evaluation of Breakthrough’s ICED Video Game.

⁵ End Violence Against Women Now (2013), Case Study: Breakthrough Campaign, Bell Bajao!
Eve Ensler and Amitabh Bachchan rallied a global audience to take concrete action in support of women’s safety and rights.

- **#ImHere (2012)** - Breakthrough’s #ImHere campaign reached more than 7 million people and mobilized thousands to support immigrant women. *The Call*, a short narrative film, featured Sophia, an undocumented immigrant who risks deportation if she reports her teenage daughter’s sexual assault. The campaign highlighted the risks and human rights violations experienced by undocumented immigrants and immigrants in detention.

- **#NoMayPac (2015)** - Seizing on a moment of massive attention to boxer and serial abuser Floyd Mayweather, three days before the ‘fight of the century’ between Mayweather and Manny Pacquiao, #NoMayPac reached more than 50 million people and successfully reframed the public conversation with a demand for individual and institutional accountability for domestic violence.

- **The G Word (2015)** - With *The G Word*, a dynamic, user-generated story archive, Breakthrough inspired audiences to reflect on and transform gender norms. Over 600 people submitted stories, and the platform was nominated for a Webby activism award.

- **Queer Your Pride (2019)** - Featured in Out magazine, and coinciding with the 50th anniversary of the uprising at Stonewall Inn, Breakthrough’s campaign amplified the voices of queer and trans artists and activists of color and celebrated the radical roots of Pride.

**Our Partnerships**

Breakthrough believes that the best way to change culture is to partner with people who harness its power in fresh, innovative ways. We partner with young artists and activists who use platforms like YouTube, TikTok and Instagram, echoing, supporting, and propagating their narrative. We also partner with seasoned activists, creatives and issue experts: from filmmakers to comedy writers, youth educators to social media influencers, grassroots movement builders to lawyers defending human rights.

Across all our projects, we look to the wisdom of people most proximate to the systemic barriers we are working to overcome. We nurture deep, respectful collaborations, co-creating messages and media campaigns. While Breakthrough pulls one lever of change, our partners pull others, to create an enabling environment for the achievement of our common goals.

**Our Audience**

At the broadest level, we engage the ‘general public’ because we seek to reframe public discourse to advance social justice and uplift human rights values. We reach broad constituencies through mass media, including digital and social media, while simultaneously attempting to garner the largest possible press coverage of our campaigns and message frame.

More specifically, we are targeting three audiences:

- Young people, aged 14-35, who are tomorrow’s voters and decision makers, and who, through their creativity and tech savvy, are reshaping media and pop culture as we know it.
Community-based organizations who work across Breakthrough’s program areas and share our commitment to social justice.

Cultural producers who document and shape the cultural zeitgeist, including writers and content curators for television and film.

We engage our first and second audiences as creative collaborators, amplifying their work and disseminating our media products through their channels as well as our own. We offer our media archive as source material for our third audience, to support them in creating authentic, nuanced characters and storylines that depart from harmful stereotypes of the past.

**Our Activities in 2020 - 2022**

The work we embark on in 2020 - 2022 builds upon a twenty-year legacy of innovation and impact in the social change space.

We approach the next two years with renewed energy, but also an appreciation for the intersecting human rights crises we face. For our partners — women, girls and gender non-conforming (GNC) youth, from immigrant, LGBTQ+ and Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC) communities — the adverse impacts of the pandemic are dire, compounded by systemic issues like racism, poverty, and violence.

In 2020-2022, Breakthrough will:

- **Offer spaces for dialogue and movement building**, featuring artists and activists on the front lines of the COVID-19 response and the Movement for Black Lives. Recognizing that Black women and girls, especially Black trans women, face continued erasure, Breakthrough will redouble its efforts to uplift their leadership and stories.
- **Offer a megaphone to storytellers from marginalized communities**, with multimedia campaigns and a user-generated story archive that infuse the pop culture landscape with their ideas, experiences, and dreams for a more liberated world.
- **Maintain a creative incubator** for young artists and mediamakers, which provides opportunities for technical skills development and strategic guidance on messaging, branding, and audience growth.
- **Use media, art and tech to accelerate youth civic engagement**, in a critical election year.
- **Launch a storytelling fellowship**, to grow the next generation of culture leaders in the arts. The fellowship will offer funding, storytelling support, creative resources and mentorship from media insiders. Over the course of a year, we will support 10 storytellers of color, ages 18-24, in completing one self-contained artistic project, created through an intersectional feminist lens.
- **Lend continuous support to our partners**, as we build a diverse, nationwide community of organizations committed to advancing social justice, especially around issues that affect girls and GNC youth of color.
Measuring Our Impact

We employ a range of techniques to assess our impact, not only in transforming individual attitudes and practices, but also in shifting narratives and nurturing future culture leaders.

In evaluating our impact, we ask:
- Did we raise the profile of an issue or a community?
- Did we reach audiences at scale?
- By engaging with our content, did consumers begin to think about an issue in a new way? In other words, did we inspire attitudinal change?
- Did we spur action, or recruit new champions to a cause?
- Did we offer meaningful support and amplification to our partners? Did we help them to achieve their goals?
- Did our productions demonstrate artistry and have aesthetic appeal?
- Did we experiment or innovate, for example, with new technologies or forms of creative expression?

We employ a range of evaluation tools:
- Digital and social media analytics - To track responses to our campaigns, both for our native content, and relevant online discussions and trends.
- Partner feedback - Through surveys and interviews with our partners, we measure the effectiveness of our collaborations.
- We also follow how others have used our stories and media products, adapting or incorporating these into their own work -- whether it be through local campaigns, policy work, or fictional characters developed in TV writers' rooms.
- Finally, we curate reflection spaces to evaluate successes, challenges and learnings on an annual or biannual basis. Where resources permit, we collaborate with external agencies to evaluate specific campaigns.

Although Breakthrough has been a pioneer in this space, we (and the larger field) are still learning as we go. Movement building and culture change are complex, diffuse, non-linear and long-term processes, which don’t always lend themselves to traditional measurement tools. We also work in collaboration with many partners, so attribution is not always possible. We continue to refine our impact measurement approach, and hope to be a resource to other organizations in this field.

Join Us

When we grow a critical mass of changemakers to challenge a discriminatory norm, the culture at large -- our shared norms, beliefs, myths, and stories -- transforms too, accelerating and amplifying the work of movement organizers, advocates, and policymakers. In this way, Breakthrough activates people as catalysts of cultural change. Join us!