

THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHREYER HONORS COLLEGE

SCHOOL OF VISUAL ARTS

SEARCHING FOR REFORM

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A thesis
submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements
for a baccalaureate degree
in Interdisciplinary Digital Studio
with honors in Interdisciplinary Digital Studio

Reviewed and approved* by the following:

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ABSTRACT

For my senior thesis, I created and exhibited a mini-documentary, titled *Searching for Reform*. The film features the perspectives of various experts on health care policy and provides a new context for discussing health care reform. Although the United States' health care system has recently undergone reform, I believe there is more to be debated, more issues that need fleshing out. By deterritorializing the current conversation surrounding health reform, my film calls the viewer to reevaluate the United States' health policies.

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Background



What is the United States' policy on health care?

In the United States we have a combination of a public health insurance market and government programs, such as Medicaid and Medicare. Most adult Americans under 65 receive health insurance through their employers (Short).

What is Medicaid?

Medicaid is a government program that provides health insurance for those with low income and resources (Medical News Today). It was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson on July 30, 1965 along with Medicare, a government program that provides health insurance for the elderly and disabled (cms.gov, Eck).

What is the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA or Obamacare)?

Obamacare is a health reform law that was passed in March 2010. It allows children to stay on their parents' health insurance plan until they are 26, prevents insurance companies from denying coverage because of preexisting conditions, expands Medicaid, etc. (APHA, Obamacare Facts). In the United States health care accounts for about one sixth of our gross domestic product. Obamacare aims to reform the U.S. health care system without radically disturbing the economy (The White House). It created health insurance markets in which insurance companies compete under the supervision of the government (Short). Ultimately, President Barack Obama would like the United States to operate under a single-payer system in which the government acts as the insurance agency, providing access to health care for all Americans. Obamacare is, among other things, a gradual step toward a single-payer system (MedicareAgenTraining, The White House, Eck).

Goals



- To use health reform as a basis for understanding documentary filmmaking in social-political contexts.
- To create a short film in which I provide my personal take on the health reform debate.
- To explore ethical issues in filmmaking.
- To gain insight into the role of a producer-director in the filmmaking process.
- To hone my skills in research, cinematography and editing.

Collaborators



Alieta Eck, MD

Dr. Eck is a physician, who has been in private practice in Piscataway, New Jersey for 25 years. She and her husband, Dr. John Eck, founded the Zarephath Health Center, a free health clinic for the poor and uninsured.

Pamela Farley Short, PhD

Dr. Short is a professor of Health Policy and Administration at Penn State University. She is an economist and centers her research around the organization and financing of health care. She often studies the effects of public policies on health outcomes.

Dennis Scanlon, PhD

Dr. Scanlon is a professor of Health Policy and Administration at Penn State University. As a part of my ongoing research, I met with Dr. Scanlon to better understand America's health policies, especially Obamacare.

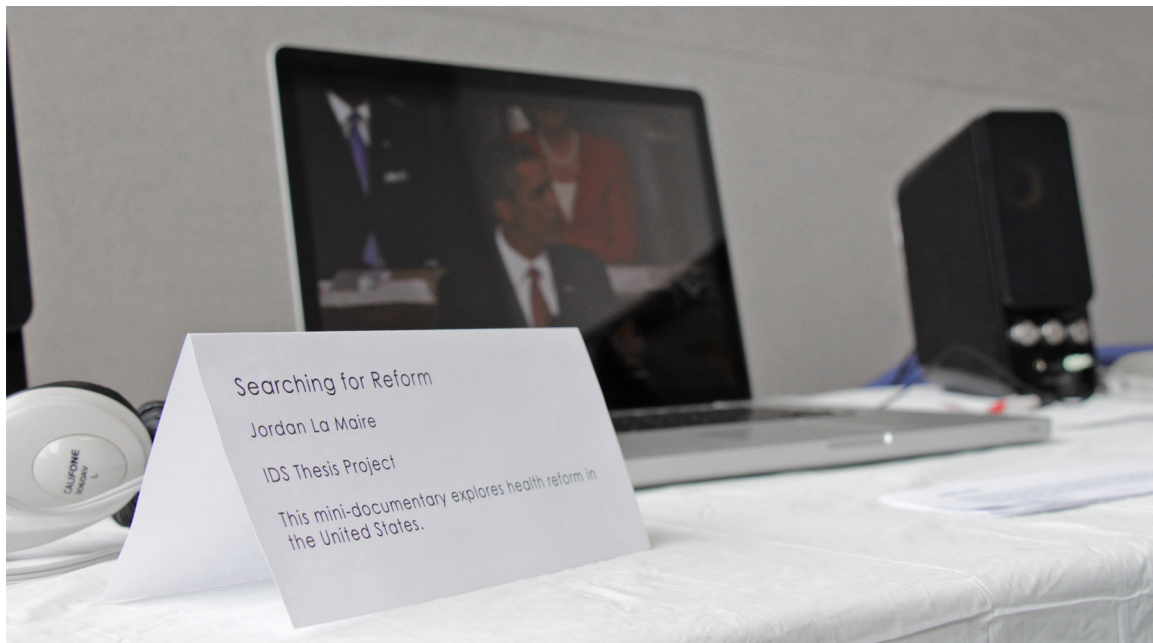
Jason Schuler

Jason Schuler is the owner of Awakened Films, a professional documentary-style film production company in the greater New York area. He has provided guidance and support throughout the filmmaking process. He was also a crewmember for my interview with Dr. Eck.

Barbara Bird

Barbara Bird is a professor of Documentary Filmmaking at Penn State University. She specializes in making films that address social issues and has a background in the health care industry. During my initial research, she provided me with practical storytelling advice that has shaped my approach to making this film.

Research and Outcomes



Searching for Reform, a 9-minute mini-documentary exploring health reform in the United States, is the result of my ongoing research in documentary filmmaking and health care.

Documentary Filmmaking

In preparing to make *Searching for Reform*, and throughout the entire filmmaking process, I immersed myself in documentary filmmaking by working on, reading about and studying documentaries. The summer prior to making the film, I worked at a small, documentary-style film production company in New Jersey, called Awakened Films. Under the leadership of Jason Schuler I learned much of the visual language of documentary filmmaking—lighting, talking-head interviews, b-roll, lighting, etc. I also learned on-set etiquette and how to create a comfortable atmosphere for interviewees. I

then solidified my hands-on experience with more theoretical knowledge by reading *Directing the Documentary* by Michael Rabiger. *Directing the Documentary* helped me get organized and prepare for production. Then, while I made the film, I watched dozens of documentaries on Netflix and through Penn State's DVD library. Watching films helped the language of documentary filmmaking to sink in. Decisions came more easily when I had a film reference to support my choices. For example, watching Ken Burns' *Baseball* and *The National Parks* series helped me see that moving photos are always more engaging than static ones. PBS's *Frontline* series showed me that even a slow zoom is enough to bring life to a graph or legal document.

Health Care

Throughout my research—reading articles and talking with experts—my understanding of health care changed. While reading about studies on the effects of health policies, I found that one can come to several different conclusions based on which data one emphasizes. For example, Oregon recently conducted a two-year, statewide study on Medicaid recipient health outcomes compared to the health outcomes of those without health insurance. The study found that, for those who received Medicaid, there was no significant improvement in health outcomes (e.g., blood pressure, cholesterol, etc.) after two years, but more patients used health care facilities and got tested and treated for diabetes and depression (Roy). Some used this study to point to Medicaid's inadequacies, while others used the study to emphasize its successes (Ashish). I found that cursory readings of newspaper articles, and even scholarly journal articles, are often misleading.

Collecting a wide breadth of data and opinions has helped me wade through individual biases and begin to understand the issues at hand. The result is a film that avoids supporting a single proposed solution to our nation's health care crisis.

Personally, I have yet to hear of a solution so compelling as to merit a film dedicated to its support. I do not believe there is a simple policy change that will solve the United States' health care crisis. This is an extremely complex set of issues that requires a multifaceted solution. I must admit that Obamacare is a multi-faceted solution. However, I am not convinced that it alone is enough—or that it is moving our nation in the right direction. Obamacare, as stated in the background section above, is President Obama's first step toward a single-payer system. Although other industrialized nations have adopted a single-payer system, I am not yet convinced that it would be the best approach for America to take in the long run.

Making the Film

My initial interest in health care began when I learned about a free health clinic on my church's property in Zarephath, NJ. I met with Dr. Alieta Eck, one of the co-founders of the Zarephath Health Center, and developed a deep respect for the work she and her husband do there. I asked my personal physician about the clinic and he began to tell me how the Ecks provide high quality care, how they really put in the time and effort to help their patients. I began planning a film about the health clinic and Dr. Eck's plan to help doctors donate their time. I thought I was going to be making a film about an underdog

physician, who fights to get legislation passed so more people can be treated at clinics like hers. I interviewed Alieta Eck and spent an evening filming at the clinic while it was in operation.

However, as I met with experts and went deeper into researching health reform, I found that Obamacare—something Dr. Eck opposes—has advantages that would be sorely missed if it were repealed. Over time—with encouragement from teachers and peers—I realized that I needed to show more than one side of this issue; charity care is not the only viable option for helping the poor, and my film should recognize that.

I met with a few professors of Health Policy and Administration at Penn State University and asked Pamela Farley Short to be in my film. She accepted and provided further sources for me to read to improve my understanding of our nation's health system. I began to see just how complex this issue is. She helped me see that, because health care makes up nearly 20 percent of our nation's economy, any drastic changes to the system—by implementing a single-payer system or strictly privatized system—could cause an international economic crisis. Too much money, and the livelihoods of too many people, are at stake.

I have worked to make a film that presents various options without supporting any single plan. I think there are things to be learned from Obamacare, a private option and charity care. Americans want a system that helps those who are sick, no matter their life

situation. However, we also need to consider doctors, who struggle to remain profitable, given the low compensation provided by Medicaid and high cost of malpractice insurance (Short, Eck). I believe my film provides ground for conversation about these issues, but does not force anyone to agree with a given side. It is up to the viewer to decide.

The Exhibition and Website

After the film was completed, I created a station at the Class of 2014 IDS Seniors Thesis Exhibition in 207 Patterson Building, where viewers could watch and read about the making of the film. At the opening of the exhibition the film was screened in high resolution on an LCD TV screen. About 35 viewers were present for the opening screening. Afterward, there was a time for questions and answers, during which the audience responded to the film by discussing the making and content of the film. The video was also published online at vimeo.com/93102084.

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ACADEMIC VITA

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Education:

The Pennsylvania State University (Schreyer Honors College)

2014

B.Design – Honors in Interdisciplinary Digital Studio (IDS)

Minor – Chinese Language

Film Production Experience:

Jordan La Maire Productions

2013-present

Owner

Freelance Video Productions for the Web

- Editor – Premiere Pro
- Cameraman
- Web Publisher

Awakened Films

Summer 2013

Production Work Credited On:

- Web broadcast of former secretary of state Madelaine Albright
- DVD of Dr. Oz's HealthCorps Gala 2013
- Live Shoot of FIRST® LEGO® League Global Innovation Competition
- Promotional web broadcasts for Dr. Joel Fuhrman's immunity products
- Promotional web broadcasts for Daniel Buttafuoco & Associates

Interned as video editor, second camera operator, motion graphics artist and live video switcher.

Worked with a small team in a professional video studio and on live video shoots.

Alliance Christian Fellowship

2013

Video Producer and Editor

- Worked with organizational leaders to produce and edit promotional video content.
- Edited video slideshows

Related Design Experience:

CityStateArts.com

Spring 2013

Intern, responsible for building a Directory of Artists and Venues in the greater State College area.

- Worked with clients to build personalized web profiles using WordPress (web publishing content management system).
- Promoted web content and made new contacts via Facebook, email and phone calls.
- Enhanced directory pages using HTML scripting.

Volunteer Work:

Jwlamaire.wordpress.com (blog)

2013-present

Art and Film Reviews

Software Tips and Solutions

Alliance Christian Fellowship

2013-2014

Small Group Leader

- Responsible for preparing material for and leading weekly small group discussions.

PSU Digital Media Group

2012-2013

Treasurer

Awards and Recognition:

The Pennsylvania State University (Schreyer Honors College)

2010-2014

Admission to the Schreyer Honors College

4-year Merit Scholarship

The Schreyer Honors College

2014

Research grant for mini-documentary, *Searching for Reform*

\$300 awarded for food and travel

The Schreyer Honors College/PNC

2012

Admission into the PNC Leader Assessment Center

The Pennsylvania State University

2011

President's Freshman Award

For maintaining an outstanding GPA in the first year of study