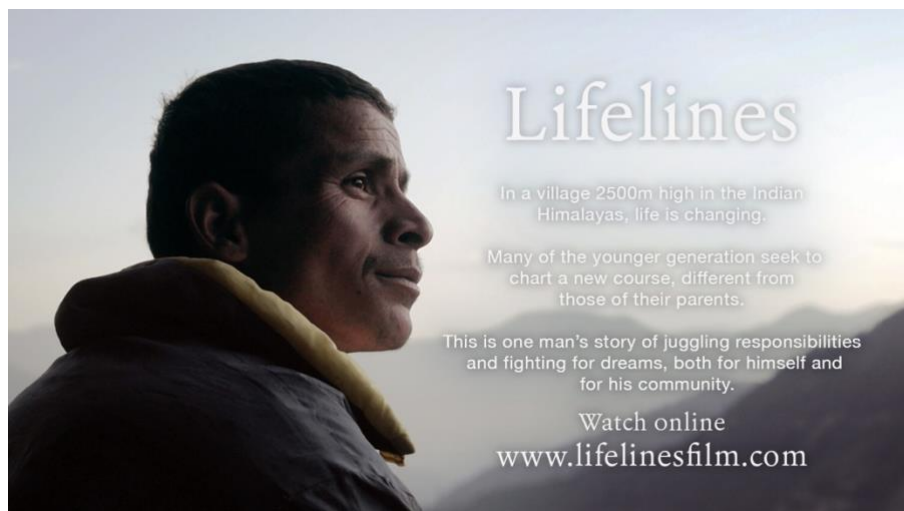


Lifelines: a visual solution to sharing research with diverse audiences

A communications mismatch

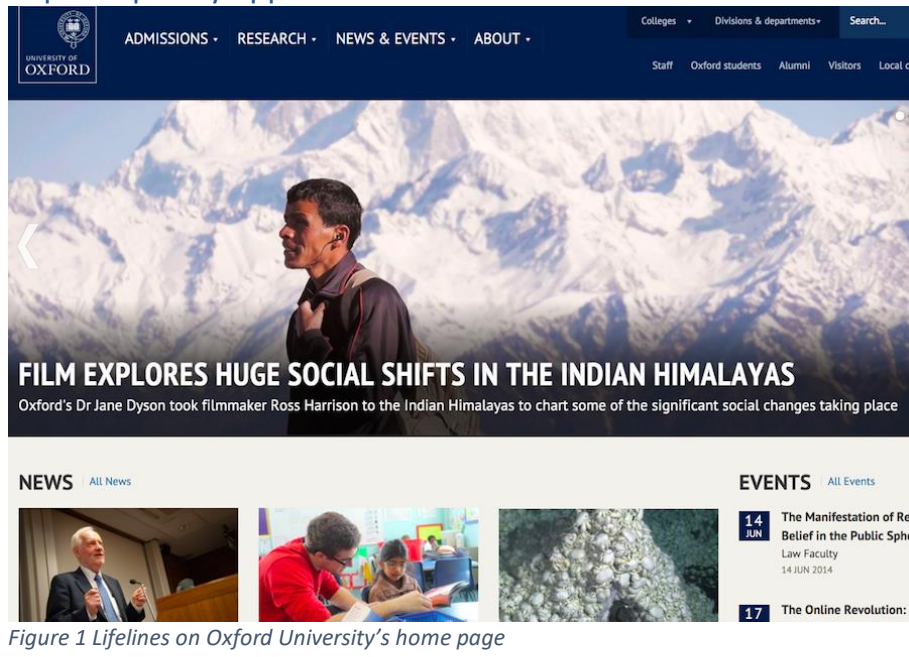
Funding bodies such as the ESRC enable researchers to explore issues of global concern, and public and policy interest. Yet it is suggested by some that there is a mismatch between the primary medium for communicating research results – the academic article or book – and the wider community. School teachers, policy makers and journalists are always looking for ways to generate discussion around these key issues; however, they lack strong, visual material with which to engage their audiences.

Dr Jane Dyson of the School of Geography and the Environment decided to address this mismatch by telling the story of her research participants through the medium of documentary film. Arranged as a portrait of a man named Makar Singh, *Lifelines* presents the experiences of being highly educated and yet unable to acquire salaried employment. Set in a remote part of the Indian Himalayas, the film documents the problems faced by many members of the young population as they try to achieve success in a world that is increasingly different to that of their parents.



Documentary film was chosen because the combination of the audio and the visual made the villagers' stories seem distinctly immediate. They could speak directly to the camera which, in turn, encouraged a deeper sense of empathy from viewers. Importantly, the medium allowed complex stories to be told in a short space of time: a key criterion for many audiences. Finally, film is extremely versatile and can be used in multiple ways: as a stand-alone piece, as a focus for discussion or in tandem with other educational resources.

A participatory approach to ensure maximum success



Once the film was completed, Dr Dyson sought help from Academic IT Services to promote the film as an educational resource and create a series of teaching packs to accompany it. These included a set of discussion cards and lesson plans, and were designed to fit directly into the geography curriculum. To connect these materials to an active network of teachers, she made them available on the [TES Resources](#) repository, an extensive online collection of educational resources for schools.

Dr Dyson additionally consulted with educators in Wales, the USA and India to produce adapted versions of the teaching packs to suit their varying syllabi.

Lifelines gains widespread recognition

Lifelines has been viewed online over 15,500 times in 127 countries. It has been an 'Official Selection' at five major international film festivals and screened to large audiences in museums, town halls and government buildings around the world. Furthermore, it has been shown on TV and featured on BBC Radio 4's 'Costing the Earth' programme.

The supporting educational materials have also attracted positive feedback from the teaching community, with over 538 views on TES Resources, and several encouraging testimonials such as this one from a secondary-school geography teacher:

Lifelines and the teaching resources are exceptional. The quality of the film and the range of teaching materials/resources stimulate students to empathise with the subject in a highly engaging and informative manner, in a package is that can be adapted to suit any ability level. It is rare for teachers to have access to such superb materials.

Lastly, *Lifelines* has been a useful teaching aid in higher education. For example, Pamela Shurmer-Smith, a leading scholar in cultural geography, described it as 'the best film about development I have ever seen.'

Advice for budding documentary film makers

Dr Dyson's film shows how film can be used to reach out and communicate a powerful message to different audiences. She offers the following advice for anyone considering a similar endeavour:



Figure 2 Dr Jane Dyson presenting *Lifelines* at the Kathmandu International Mountain Film Festival, Nepal, December 2014.

- Make sure you know your audience, and seek every opportunity to carefully tailor the resource to them.
- Adopting a participatory approach can help. Villagers were involved at every level of the planning and filming of the documentary. Likewise, Dr Dyson worked closely with teachers to make sure the film and accompanying resources were suitable for staff looking to use the materials in lessons.
- Try to set up your dissemination strategy ahead of the release date to ensure a big, initial impact. However, also be prepared to continue promoting your resource and diversifying your audience for some time afterwards.

Further information

- The [IT Learning Centre](#) in IT Services offers courses on media production and editing.
- [Lifelines](#).



Winner, OxTALENT 2015 award for support for outreach and engagement. Text and images in this case study have been adapted from Dr Jane Dyson's entry for the OxTALENT competition.