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The 30th Human Rights Watch Film Fest tackles data journalism, LGBT rights and refugee love stories

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A still from the film "Bellingcat" (Photo courtesy Human Rights Watch Film Festival)

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By VICTORIA DAVIS | Uptown News

Having showcased more than 700 films around the world in three decades, the Human Rights Watch Film Festival (HRWFF) has made a point to highlight not only the value of transparent documentary filmmaking, but also provide an unapologetic and intimate perspective into territories of humanity that are hard to digest.

“Often we think of human rights issues as just facts, dates or statistics,” said Kevin Linde, manager of Adult and Digital Engagement at Balboa Park’s Museum of Photographic Arts (MOPA), where the HRWFF has taken place for the last 10 years. “The power of the Human Rights Watch Film Festival is to provide an emotional window into first-person experiences of human rights abuse. Looking at the film’s local relevancies in San Diego is also a crucial component.”

The year-round film festival, now in its 30th year, was birthed out of the global-reaching news organization Human Rights Watch, whose journalists, investigators and advocates have been dedicated to “uncovering human rights violations by governments, armies and corporations to raise awareness and pressure for change in more than 90 countries for the last 40 years,” according to Human Rights Watch Communications Director Emma Daly.



San Diego’s branch of the festival takes place Thursday, Jan. 30, through Sunday, Feb. 2, with a total of five film screenings showcased. This year, the films cover a wide variety of stories never tackled before by the festival, such as a gay men’s choir journeying through the American South, the love story of two Iranian refugees who have a baby out of wedlock, and a deep dive into data-driven journalism.

“We select films that touch on human rights issues currently being worked on in the field,” said Jen Nedbalsky, deputy director of the HRWFF. “By the end of the five films, we see a lot of community members have attended all screenings and the conversations get deeper. San Diegans are so welcoming to having these conversations, which is so important in our world today.”

The festival’s opening night documentary film, “Gay Chorus Deep South,” is director David Charles Rodrigues’ response to the country’s continuous push for legislation against LGBT people in housing and the workplace. Three hundred singers in the San Francisco Gay Men’s Choir tour after the 2016 election from Mississippi to Tennessee, through the Carolinas and over the bridge in Selma, Alabama, performing in churches, community centers, and concert halls hoping to bridge long-standing divides.



“The topics of these films could not be timelier,” said Nedbalsky. “Like ‘Love Child,’ for example, takes place at the start of the Muslim travel ban. It touches on the refugee experience and those seeking safety in the United States. I think this story in particular is a really emotional take on how policies and refugee rights have a personal effect. Everyone can relate to this story in some way.”

This year’s film lineup also features the international Emmy Award-winning “Bellingcat – Truth in a Post-Truth World,” a documentary about citizen investigative journalists who use crowd-sourced information and technology to piece together answers — like the exact location of an Islamic State murder — and uncover stories of human rights violations. The investigative methods are highly similar to the journalists at Human Rights Watch, who used satellite imagery in 2017 to uncover the “strategic burning and bulldozing” of Rohingya Muslim villages in Myanmar, as stated by Daly.

“I think one of the beauties of technology is that everything is archived,” said Lorie Hearn, founder and executive director of iNewsroom, a nonprofit and non-partisan newsroom dedicated to improving lives in the San Diego region. “You can go back on YouTube and find government meetings and speeches that politicians have made which come back to haunt them years later. I’ve long admired ‘Bellingcat.’ The fact that this film won the well-deserved Machiavelli Award shows the power of citizen journalists and speaks to why people should see the movie.”

Other films featured at the festival will include “True Justice: Bryan Stevenson’s Fight for Equality” touching on racial injustices and “Slay the Dragon,” a film focused on the importance of voting participation and maintaining democracy. Each film will include a Q&A

at the end where audience members can ask local representatives about the topic's relevance in San Diego.



“We’ve seen audience members be so moved by the films that one by one, people will stand up and tell personal stories,” said Nedbalsky. “A lot of people are shocked by what they see, but they also feel empowered to let their voices be shared on a subject they don’t always get to talk about. That’s the festival’s true beauty. So, come out and see these films and be a part of the conversation.”

— Victoria Davis is a full-time, multi-media, freelance journalist. You can follow her on Instagram and Twitter @victoriadavisd. To contact Victoria, email at vedavisdepict@gmail.com.

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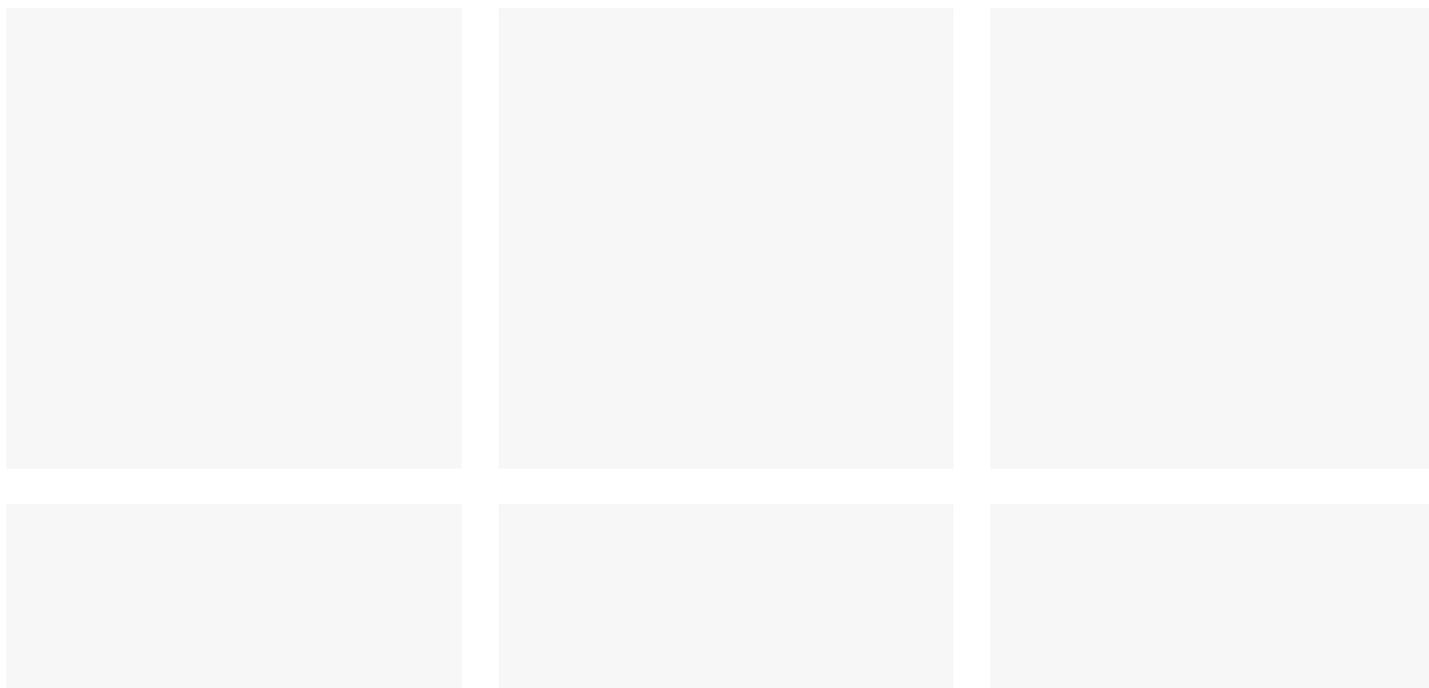
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