

BLACK SNOW

A FILM BY ALINA SIMONE



POV

DISCUSSION GUIDE





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Film Summary



In a remote Siberian coal town, homemaker-turned-journalist Natalia Zubkova investigates an abandoned open-pit mine fire releasing toxic gas into her community. When her online reporting goes viral, government officials launch an aggressive cover-up campaign, putting her directly in their crosshairs. Natalia must protect her family from Russian officials, eluding arrest as she spreads the word about the toxic disaster transpiring in her backyard.

Using This Guide

This guide is an invitation to dialogue. It is based on a belief in the power of human connection and is designed for people who want to use *Black Snow* to engage family, friends, classmates, colleagues, and communities. In contrast to initiatives that foster debates in which participants try to convince others that they are right, this document envisions conversations undertaken in a spirit of openness in which people try to understand one another and expand their thinking by sharing viewpoints and listening actively.

The discussion prompts are intentionally crafted to help a wide range of audiences think more deeply about the issues in the film. Rather than attempting to address them all, choose one or two that best meet your needs and interests. Be sure to leave time to consider taking action. Planning next steps can help people leave the room feeling energized and optimistic, even in instances when conversations have been difficult.

For more detailed event planning and facilitation tips, visit <https://communitynetwork.amdoc.org/>.

Note to Facilitators:

Dear POV Community,

We are so glad you have chosen to facilitate a discussion inspired by the film *Black Snow*. Before you facilitate, please prepare yourself for the conversation, as this film invites you and your community to discuss experiences of citizen journalists, environmental justice, activism, and mental and emotional health. These conversations require learning truths about society, culture, and political motivations that typically have not been taught in schools. We urge you, as a facilitator, to take the necessary steps to ensure that you are prepared to guide a conversation that prioritizes the well-being and safety of women whistleblowers, working-class communities, and youth in your community. Importantly, this film shares experiences through a lens of joy and resilience, rather than focusing on trauma, and we hope this guide will aid you in conversations that expand understanding while maximizing care, critical curiosity, transformation, and connection.

Tips and Tools for Facilitators

Here are some supports to help you prepare for facilitating a conversation that inspires curiosity, connection, critical questions, recognition of difference, power, and possibility.

Share Community Agreements

Community Agreements: What Are They? Why Are They Useful?

Community agreements help provide a framework for engaging in dialogue that establishes a shared sense of intention ahead of participating in discussion. Community agreements can be co-constructed and created as an opening activity that your group completes collectively and collaboratively. Here is a model of community agreements you can review. As the facilitator, you can gauge how long your group should take to form these agreements or whether participants would be amenable to using pre-established community agreements.

Opening Activity (Optional): Establishing Community Agreements for Discussion

Whether you are a group of people coming together once for this screening and discussion or a group whose members know each other well, creating a set of community agreements helps foster clear discussion in a manner that draws in and respects all participants, especially when tackling intimate or complex conversations around identity. These steps will help provide guidelines for the process:

- Pass around sample community agreements and take time to read aloud as a group to make sure all participants can both hear and read the text.
- Allow time for clarifying questions, make sure all participants understand the necessity for the agreements, and allow time to make sure everyone understands the agreements themselves.
- Go around in a circle and have every participant name an agreement they would like to include. Chart this in front of the room where all can see.
- Go around two to three times to give participants multiple chances to contribute and also to give a conclusive end to the process.
- Read the list aloud.
- Invite questions or revisions.
- Ask if all are satisfied with the list.

COMMON CONCEPTS & LANGUAGE

Authoritarianism

A system of government or approach to leadership in which power is concentrated in the hands of a single authority or a small group, with limited political freedoms or public participation. In authoritarian systems, leaders often maintain control through censorship, surveillance, propaganda, and the suppression of dissent. While such regimes may hold elections or have formal institutions, real power typically rests with those in authority rather than the broader population, prioritizing obedience, order, and control over individual rights and democratic processes.

Citizen Journalism

The practice of ordinary people—rather than professional reporters—collecting, reporting, and sharing news and information. It often involves individuals using tools like smartphones, social media, or blogs

to document events, expose injustices, or provide firsthand perspectives from within their own communities. At its core, citizen journalism expands who gets to tell stories and hold power to account, emphasizing participation, transparency, and the democratization of information in public life.

Environmental Justice

The principle that all people have a right to live in and benefit from a clean, healthy environment, and to be involved in decisions that affect them.

Equity

In basic terms, to achieve equity is to treat everyone fairly. An equity emphasis seeks to render justice by deeply considering structural factors that benefit some social groups/communities and harm other social groups/communities. Sometimes, for the purpose of

equity, justice demands an unequal response.

Political Gaslighting

A tactic used by those in power to manipulate public perception by denying or distorting facts, events, or realities in order to make people doubt their own understanding or judgment. It involves spreading misinformation, contradicting evidence, or rewriting history to maintain control, deflect blame, or weaken trust in independent sources of truth—such as journalists, scientists, or opposition voices. The goal of political gaslighting is not only to deceive but to create confusion and uncertainty so that citizens become less able or willing to challenge authority.

Propaganda

Propaganda is essentially false news or media that aims to push a particular political point of view or agenda, often by using biased or misleading information. Political groups will spread propaganda in order to influence people and serve their own interests.

There are many forms of propaganda, including posters, videos, text, and images. Propaganda is most often used in times of conflict. Governments will use propaganda to spread misinformation about their enemy, and also to make the public aware of rules and Propaganda is often used by political groups or activists who want to convince people to adopt their point of view. Often, propaganda contains loaded language that is designed to provoke an emotional response in the reader, rather than a rational response.

Totalitarianism

Totalitarianism is a political system in which the state asserts total control over every aspect of a citizen's public and private life. Unlike authoritarianism, which limits political freedoms, a totalitarian regime seeks to erase the distinction between state and society, imposing a single, official ideology that demands unquestioning loyalty. The term was originally coined in the 1920s by Italian Fascists to describe their ideal form of government.

Participants

Natalia Zubkova

A 42-year-old mother of three, whose YouTube channel — consisting mostly of live, self-narrated, cell phone videos — has become Kiselyovsk's only independent news outlet. When Natalia suspects that coal mines are burning underground in her town, she becomes a whistleblower, risking her life to fight the corrupt Russian officials who deny everything.

Sergei Tsivilev

The Governor of Kiselyovsk, and a coal oligarch married to Putin's first cousin.

Artem Zubkova

Natalia's son, who faces threats from Putin's thugs after his wife exposes the coal mines.

Vladimir Putin

President of Russia, fierce advocate and protector of Russia's multi-billion dollar fossil fuel industry, and an enemy of freedom of expression.

Key Issues

Black Snow is an excellent tool for outreach and will be of special interest to people who want to explore the following topics:

- State-sponsored environmental degradation
- Citizen Journalism/ Environmental Journalism
- Activism, Dissent, and political reform
- “Dirty” energy
- State-sponsored media and misinformation
- Fossil Fuel pollution



Background Information

Black Snow is a film about one woman's lonely fight against oppressive state control over natural resources. It is a film about State-sponsored greed in Vladimir Putin's Russia, where giant energy profits take precedence over public health, and alternative sources of clean-burning energy are ignored in favor of the aggressive cultivation of fossil fuels that despoil the planet while lining the pockets of oligarchs with dirty money.

It is about the power of a single passionate voice to become a red-flare warning for the world, and how a courageous citizen with no background in reporting can harness the internet's global reach and turn it into a megaphone for social justice, in bold defiance of a powerful state-run propaganda machine that stokes lies and valorizes corruption.

It is a film about freedom - the right to speak your mind, speaking truth to power, cutting through fake news with facts, and the right to breathe clean air and live a healthy life, to raise a family without state interference, to live justly and freely.

The Dirty History of Russian Coal

Coal mining in Russia contributes to widespread environmental damage, including land disturbance, air and water pollution, and significant greenhouse gas emissions. Coal has been the backbone of Russia's energy sector since the mid-19th century, when large deposits in the Don Basin ("Donbas") in southern Russia supplied 87% of Russia's coal. After the turn of the century, smaller mines near Dombrovo, Zabaikal, and Cheremkhovo in Siberia were opened. Coal production was controlled by Russo-British syndicates, and there were shortages of workers, so the companies set up welfare systems for them. The syndicates' smallish output and the weak Russian railway system centered on the Ekaterininskaia (Krivoi Rog) Railway held back the growth of Russian heavy industry.

In the Second World War, the Germans commandeered 60% of Russia's mining capacity, forcing the rapid expansion of mines in the Urals region, as well as greater use of mines in the Kuznetsk Basin in Siberia. Prisoners from the Gulags were sent to the mines; up to a third of the workers were women. Due to the forced labor, output doubled, and the share of the region in the total national coal production rose from 8% to 22%.

Coal production in Russia remained steady until the collapse of the Soviet Union and the conversion to a market-based economy in the early 90s. Fluctuations in the Russian economy in the late 90s and early aughts accounted for a dip in production.

In 2024, Russian coal production was 443.5 million metric tons, a slight decrease from 2023.

In April 2022, the European Union imposed sanctions on Russian coal imports in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Despite the EU ban, Asia continues to purchase Russian coal. In 2024, China imported 100 million tons of coal from Russia, and that number continues to grow.

Fossil Fuel Pollution and Russian Health

While many Western countries continue to explore alternative sources of clean energy, Russia remains firmly committed to fossil fuels, which are a primary driver of its high carbon emissions, contributing significantly to its dangerously high pollution levels. Consequently, *Russia is one of the world's worst polluters.*

Despite being a major exporter of natural gas, which is relatively cleaner than coal, Russia continues to depend heavily on coal-fired power plants, especially in regions where gas infrastructure is underdeveloped. Russia's continued coal dependence results in the release of vast amounts of carbon dioxide (CO₂), a potent greenhouse gas, exacerbating both local pollution and global climate change.

Energy extraction in Russia takes precedence over public health, so much so that the country experiences higher rates of coal-based lung disease than many other developed countries. According to a recent study, one out of five adults with a medical ailment was diagnosed with pneumonia, acute laryngitis, tracheitis, or bronchitis in 2016.

The fact that much of Russia's coal extraction occurs in densely populated regions of the country only makes matters worse. In coal-rich regions like Siberia and the Urals, which have a combined population of nearly 56 million, high levels of particulate matter (PM_{2.5} and PM₁₀) and sulfur dioxide (SO₂) emissions from coal combustion have led to higher-than-normal rates of respiratory disease in these regions. Additionally, the inefficient and outdated technology used in many of these plants increases their environmental footprint, as older facilities often lack modern emission control systems.

Russia's fossil fuel-dependent economy also hinders its transition to cleaner energy sources. The country's vast reserves of oil and gas have historically provided significant revenue, making it economically challenging to diversify away from these industries.

There is a compelling reason for this continued dependence on fossil fuels. Russia is the world's second-largest oil exporter, averaging over five million barrels a day. Its economy is greatly dependent on energy exports, which contribute to environmental degradation both domestically and internationally. Oil spills, methane leaks from pipelines, open-pit coal extraction, and the carbon footprint of shipping fossil fuels abroad add to the overall environmental impact. Despite international pressure to reduce emissions under agreements like the Paris Climate Accord, Russia's commitments have been criticized as insufficient, with a lack of concrete plans to phase out coal or significantly cut emissions. This reluctance to decarbonize its economy ensures that its reliance on fossil fuels remains a major source of pollution.

Russian Propaganda and The Big Lie about Fossil Fuels

Ever since the rise of Lenin and the Bolshevik Revolution in the early 20th century, Russia has resorted to state-sanctioned propaganda, commonly referred to as "fake news," to justify its heinous crimes against humanity and the environment. Its state-run propaganda machine has crept into every facet of Russian life, from education to the arts, seeking to appease the anxieties of its populace by using propaganda to legitimize its crimes. All official Russian media is controlled by the state, as are attempts to silence international reporting, and dissent is punishable by imprisonment, torture, and even death.

In an effort to rally people around their worldview, Russian authorities have tried to magnify the country's past victories while glossing over the more sordid chapters of its history. They have rewritten textbooks, funded sprawling historical exhibitions, and suppressed — sometimes harshly — voices that contradict their narrative. The voice of the State is the only voice that matters. In recent years, Putin has revived the personality cult of Josef Stalin, the former leader of the Soviet Union who is responsible for the deaths of over 20 million Russians. Putin has installed over 100 public monuments to Stalin during his rule.

Public dissent in Russia is stamped out. Putin has either jailed or murdered leading Russian dissidents throughout his 25-year rule. Alexi Navalny, Russia's most prominent 21st-century opposition leader and a global symbol of resistance to Putin, was fatally poisoned in 2024 while serving a prison term in Western Siberia.

Unsanctioned news reporting in Russia can be considered a crime against the state. The government owns all six national television networks, two radio networks, and two of the 14 national newspapers. Any citizen who dares to challenge official orthodoxy is subject to harassment, surveillance, prison, and physical threats. Russia's Federal Security Service monitors all emails, internet usage, and social media, which makes any effort to speak out against official Russian policy an act of great courage and bravery. In 2013, the media watchdog organization Reporters Without Borders ranked Russia 148th in its list of 179 countries in terms of freedom of the press.

Putin uses the media as a cheerleader in the country's efforts to extract fossil fuels for profit. Despite overwhelming evidence that the cultivation and widespread use of fossil fuels leads to bad health outcomes, Russia's official news outlets insist that the burning of coal has no deleterious health effects and that there is no causal link between the burning of coal and respiratory disease, cancer, and heart disease.

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DISCUSSION PROMPTS

Starting The Conversation

Immediately after the film, you may want to give people a few quiet moments to reflect on what they have seen. You could pose a general question (examples below) and give people some time to themselves to jot down or think about their answers before opening the discussion. Alternatively, you could ask participants to share their thoughts with a partner before starting a group discussion

- What feelings came up for you while viewing this film? What was familiar? What was unfamiliar?
- Were you aware of this issue prior to viewing the film? How has it changed your views on energy and the environment?
- What did Natalia risk for seeking truth and attempting to share that truth widely? Ultimately, was this quest for truth worth it? Why or why not?
- Prior to viewing the film, describe your familiarity with Putin's abuses of power.
 - What did this film teach you?
- Do you have any personal experiences with environmental abuse in your community? Has someone abused their power in your world?
- Do you have a friend or family member who has suffered poor health from unhealthy air or water?

ENVIRONMENTAL ACTIVISM

- What does the word “activism” mean to you?
- How does the film make you think about “cheap” energy: who pays for it, and what is the true cost?
- What would you do if you were in Natalia’s position?
- What lessons can Natalia teach us about activism in the US?
- Do the benefits of protest outweigh the dangers? Why or why not?
- What are some ways we can become activists in our communities?

POLITICAL LIES AND THE QUEST FOR TRUTH

- In what ways does the US media need to be scrutinized for its representations of “truth?”
- How does the documentary balance hope and despair? What does activism look like in conditions where risks are high?
- Where do you get your news from? Do you immediately believe what you read or do you seek alternate sources?
- Why do people in power abuse their power at the expense of people’s health and safety?

OPENING/CLOSING ACTIVITY

OPTIONAL

At the end of your discussion, to help people synthesize what they've experienced and move the focus from dialogue to action steps, you may want to choose one of these questions.

- What can you do as an individual to change energy policy?
- How can we use social media to raise consciousness about the environment
- How can we apply pressure on President Putin?

Optional: TAKING ACTION

If the group is having trouble generating their own ideas for next steps, these suggestions can help get things started:

The Sierra Club is actively fighting open-pit coal mines. You can sign up to become a member on their website.

The Center for Strategic and International Studies is an excellent resource for updates on environmental activity around the globe.

Climate Action Network International is the world's largest environmental network, with over 1800 non-governmental organizations in 130 countries fighting climate change.

Resources

A list of relevant social movements, non-profits, and organizations to learn more about issues presented in *Black Snow*.

Beyond Fossil Fuels

Beyond Fossil Fuels is a nonprofit organisation registered in Germany. The organization supports and coordinates work with civil society groups working across the European continent, including the European Union, the Western Balkans, Turkey, the UK, Norway, Switzerland, Moldova, and Ukraine. The Secretariat is funded by the European Climate Foundation, the ClimateWorks Foundation, the Schwab Charitable Fund, and the prestigious Climate Breakthrough Award, which Campaign Director Kathrin Gutmann received in 2021.

Black Appalachian Coalition (BLAC)

The Black Appalachian Coalition (BLAC) empowers Black communities in Appalachia to reclaim their health and advocate for racial, economic, environmental, and gender justice. By prioritizing storytelling as a precursor to policy making, we amplify the voices and lived experiences of Black Appalachians to challenge and dismantle harmful narratives that perpetuate systemic inequities. Through collective action and advocacy, we strive to protect our children and families, foster

community resilience, and create a sustainable future where all can thrive.

Экозащита | Eco Defense

EcoDefense is an independent advocacy group in Russia fighting environmental abuses across the country through education, protest, and nonviolence. They are fighting for a “clean and healthy environment” and advocate for “clean energy resources.”

Independent Media Association: Citizen Journalism 101 Training Toolkit

Independent Media Association collaborated with scholars from the University of Kansas to create training resources for citizen journalists. Citizen Journalism 101 is part of a library of recorded presentations and other resources drawn from the expertise of both citizen journalists on IMA's team and expertise from healthcare professionals across a range of subject areas. Topics covered include everything from the basics of citizen journalism to specifics on how to report ethically about topics like mental health, COVID, and more.

Resources (cont.)

Reporters Without Borders

Reporters Without Borders (RSF) defends the right of every human being to have access to free and reliable information. This right is essential to know, understand, form an opinion and take action on vital issues in full awareness, both individually and collectively.

Vladimir Sliviyak - Right Livelihood

Vladimir Sliviyak is one of Russia's most committed and knowledgeable environmentalists, who has been spearheading important grassroots campaigns against environmentally damaging practices for decades. He has stopped projects related to the exploitation of fossil fuels, the use of nuclear power and coal, and the shipment of radioactive waste from abroad.

Credits & Acknowledgments



About the Author, Marc Weingarten

Marc Weingarten is a writer and filmmaker. His work has appeared in *Rolling Stone*, *The Wall St Journal*, *The New York Times*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Economist*, *Monocle*, *Globe and Mail*, *Boston Globe*, *Salon*, and *Slate*, among others.

Among his books are *Thirsty: William Mulholland, California Water and The Real Chinatown*, an *LA Times* bestseller; *Station to Station: The History of Music on Television*, an *LA Times* bestseller and a finalist for the Ralph J. Gleason award for music book of the year. *The Gang That Wouldn't Write Straight: Thompson, Didion, Wolfe and the New Journalism Revolution*, a history of New Journalism which, wrote Mark Bowden in his review, "captures the swirl of youthful energy that produced...the prose equivalent of hand grenades."

Weingarten also worked as a producer on Shane Salerno's film *SALINGER* and as a creative consultant on Jeff Berg's PBS documentary *THE GREAT THIRST*.

DISCUSSION GUIDE PRODUCERS

Courtney B. Cook, PhD | *Education Consultant, POV*
A. Yarbrough | *Education Editor, POV*