Documentaries Making a Difference: Communication Effects of Environmental Film and Television

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Documentaries Making a Difference:

Communication Effects of Environmental Film and Television

Lindsey Register
Acknowledgements.

This paper benefited from the generous support of others. I would like to thank:

My ninth-grade environmental science course for introducing me to this encapsulated feeling of the need for environmental action gifted through the medium of environmental documentaries.

My mom and dad for instilling in me an appreciation for the Earth as well as film and the opportunity to explore my passions.

Dr. Robin Andersen for her inspiration and enthusiasm regarding my topic of research that sparked motivation in both the beginning and ending phases of this paper.

Dr. Garrett Broad for his survey and research guidance in collaboration between my two areas of study.

Dr. John Van Buren for his continuing insight and advice throughout the thesis process and my journey as an Environmental Studies major.
Abstract.

This paper addresses the motives of environmental documentaries and their influences on public opinion and action regarding environmental issues and ethics. It suggests that through the communication platform of the environmental documentary, environmental education can further one's understanding of the environment and the human relationship with nature. Chapter 1 uses quantitative data on contemporary documentary filmmaking, as well as on coverage of environmental issues in all communications media. This chapter also includes the data from a survey conducted at Fordham University, showing the influence of environmental documentaries on students’ mindsets and behaviors at this school/institution. Chapter 2 explores the history of documentary film and its representation of the environment, from the works of David Attenborough to the rising popularity of Netflix documentary films. Chapter 3 delves into contemporary communication theories on persuasion, as well as industry disinformation campaigns utilized by documentarists to target and sway audiences on environmental issues. Chapter 4 showcases the relationship between documentary viewership and environmental education, showing how viewership shapes one’s environmental worldview and actions and determines an individual’s contribution to environmental causes. Drawing on discussions and lessons learned in previous chapters, the concluding Chapter 5 addresses the overall success or failure of environmental documentaries to spark the minds and actions of the public to create positive change for the environment’s benefit and makes policy suggestions on behalf of this medium as a communication tool within education.

Keywords: documentary filmmaking, media influence, environmental issue, persuasion theory, communication campaign, environmental education, public opinion and action
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Introduction. A Call to Action

Environmental documentaries have the ability to expand environmental worldviews by educating on a specific issue to create a call to action on behalf of the ecological or social cause. I believe the truth in this definition because I have experienced it first-hand; environmental documentaries are what sparked the activist within me to lead me where I am today, merging my studies in the Environmental and Communication fields, striving to spread awareness and make positive change on behalf of the environment in need.

In my freshman year of high school, I was exposed to a select few documentaries focusing on controversial environmental issues taking place in the world. From *The Cove* (2009), *Gasland* (2010), and *Food Inc.* (2008), I became fascinated by these specialized ecological causes that were calling out to the public for recognition of the problems at hand. This recognition provides a platform for individuals to share this newfound information to others, furthering the communicative cycle and impact of the documentaries. As a young student, charged by the energy these films fed me, I began sharing statistics about the whaling industry in Japan, negative health effects of fracking on our east coast, and the unsustainable practices of mass meat production in the United States, while also shifting a few of my own habits to conform to these causes. I’ve followed and supported legislation and movements against hydraulic fracturing ever since watching *Gasland* due to the disturbing images of first-hand effects of the fossil fuel extraction process on communities and ecosystems. And the harsh, but real stories of food production and distribution in *Food Inc.* have caused me to limit my meat consumption and advocate for sustainable sources when it comes to selling and shopping.

However, more impactful than these, *The Cove* was the first environmental documentary I ever...
watched; although the presented whaling issues were moving, it was the efforts of the filmmakers and the production of the documentary itself that sparked my motivation to merge communications with environmental education and awareness for my life path moving forward.

The essence of the environmental documentary itself is striking as a unique communication tool to connect the public with underrepresented issues that they can ultimately impact in both positive and negative ways. An Inconvenient Truth brought the issue of global warming to the media forefront in 2006. Since its release, not only has the investigation on human responsibility for climate change been further revealed, but the rise in documentary films presenting varying environmental crises and issues has escalated dramatically. Now, with all of these existing environmental documentaries, we have to question how effective they really are in producing activism and change on the broader spectrum, beyond just my individual experience: “The role that the media have played in the communication of climate change issues has changed and developed alongside the evolution of the medium itself and people’s perception of the environment. The last decade has seen an explosion of sensational images and audiences are fatigued by this use of fear. Many look for media that includes “positive” messages rather than the traditional onslaught of facts and images triggering negative emotions. It has never been more difficult for environmental communicators to please viewers and readers in the midst of a never-ending flow of information available to them.”\(^2\) Even if these films produce a successful call to action, is it enough to conquer the issue at hand?

In this paper, I investigate the role that documentaries play in this modern-day concept of media-driven environmental education. Chapter 1 lays out the quantitative data behind the filmmaking, viewership, and overall popularity of the environmental documentary. Chapters 2-4

\(^2\) Michela Cortese, "Can Environmental Documentaries like 'An Inconvenient Truth' Actually save the Planet?" (The Independent, 2017).
explore the historical, communicative, and educational dimensions of environmental documentaries and their influence. In the final Chapter 5, I expand upon the success or failure of these documentaries to directly affect the environmental mindsets and actions of the public while addressing critiques of this non-direct, media-based relationship with nature through policy recommendations and reflection to benefit environmental education and communication efforts.

Chapter 1. The Ever-Increasing Popularity of Environmental Documentaries

Today, environmental documentaries exist to impact the human ideology regarding nature in a way that will benefit ecosystem services and environmental well-being in the future. The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment of 2005 addresses the direct effects our species has on the natural world, emphasizing the importance of lifestyle change to stop or reverse these impacts. “Ecosystem degradation can rarely be reversed without actions that address the negative effects or enhance the positive effects of one or more of the five indirect drivers of change: population change (including growth and migration), change in economic activity (including economic growth, disparities in wealth, and trade patterns), sociopolitical factors (including factors ranging from the presence of conflict to public participation in decision-making), cultural factors, and technological change.”3 Environmental documentaries utilize these indirect drivers of change to their production advantage in order to create dramatic messages and imagery. Each of these documentaries, whether focusing on a specific species, the topic of climate change, or even plastic consumption, expresses the importance of the four main kinds of ecosystem services and natural capital we receive from the Earth: “provisioning services such as food, water, timber, and fiber; regulating services that affect climate, floods, disease, wastes, and water quality; cultural services that provide recreational, aesthetic, and spiritual benefits; and supporting services such

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as soil formation, photosynthesis, and nutrient cycling.”

4 Our human use of and reliance on these services is increasingly rapidly; “approximately 60% (15 out of 24) of the ecosystem services evaluated in this assessment (including 70% of regulating and cultural services) are being degraded or used unsustainably.”

5 Filmmakers, fixated on a specific issue within this natural capital degradation, make it their mission to provide a narrative for these unspoken-for services and apply emotional rhetoric to the issues at hand as a call to action for the human species.

Beyond the filmmaking process, distribution and accessibility to documentaries is a key aspect to consider in evaluating influence and reach of the public. In the 2016 Survey of Documentary Industry Members conducted by the International Documentary Association, it was reported that “about 61 percent of documentary professionals say educational distribution and DVD sales are tied at the top of the list for revenue from documentary work (as a contributing or main source of revenue). Other top revenue streams (as contributing or main sources of revenue), in order, are: grassroots and community screenings (52%), speaking engagements (49%), international TV broadcast licensing (46%) and self-distribution (44%),” and, “film festivals are the primary form of distribution (73%), followed by grassroots/community screenings and educational screenings (both 49%), DVD sales (43%) and public TV (39%). Premium cable and cable VOD remain elusive.”

6 With the evolution of technology, access to documentaries has increased immensely, especially with the recent introduction of streaming platforms. In correlation with this, production of documentaries has multiplied, specifically in the environmental field, to address the issues discussed in the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment. In this modern age, funding these production efforts has

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5 Ibid., 39.

grown in cost due to the demand of higher-quality footage and increased-depths for research and imagery. According to the same survey, “half of the documentary film professionals surveyed report spending $5,000 to $50,000 on their most recent documentary projects. More than a quarter (27%) spent between $20,000 and $50,000 to fund their documentary work.” However, due to these demands, grants and network deals have emerged as top funders for these films as, “foundation grants remain the top option as a main source of documentary funding (33%), followed by personal finances (24%) and broadcast and cable TV licensing deals (21%). Entities that are not at all sources of documentary funding, according to these documentary professionals, are: Film studios, online streaming platforms and corporate funders.”

In exploring an overview of general coverage of nature and environmental issues in all communications media, we see rises centered around specific environmental events or crises, as with documentaries. For example, in 1989, following the Exxon Valdez oil-spill catastrophe, “The Tyndall Report, which tracks network news, reported that environmental stories that year saw an unprecedented 774 minutes, combined, on the CBS Evening News, NBC Nightly News, and ABC World News Tonight.” Looking at overall trends in environmental coverage spikes, after Silent Spring was released by Rachel Carson in correlated timing with the first Earth Day in the 1960’s, there was a parallel of environmental journalism to that of what was experienced in 2006 when An Inconvenient Truth, Al Gore’s environmental documentary, was released and brought the issue of global warming to the forefront of all environmental media coverage. In addition to the help of physical environmental activity, the Society of Environmental Journalists

(SEJ) was created in 1990, “whose mission “is to strengthen the quality, reach and viability of journalism across all media to advance public understanding of environmental issues.” Today, more than 1,400 journalists affiliated with the SEJ in the United States, Canada, Mexico, and 27 other countries are reporting environmental stories.” Environmental journalism can be accessed through a variety of communication platforms including television, radio, and newspaper, all paving way to the narratives and topics portrayed in environmental documentaries. With this rise of media technology and variation in communicative resources, it is interesting to note the variations between stations on environmental coverage. In a recent report published by the Project for Improved Environmental Coverage, the organization evaluated the representation of the environment in the mainstream news between the years of 2011-2012: “Despite its intrinsic importance, however, coverage of the environment represented just 1.2 percent of news headlines in the United States from January 2011 through May 2012 for the thirty nationally prominent news organizations ranked in this report,” however, “anecdotal evidence shows that independent news organizations are also prioritizing environmental coverage much more than mainstream news organizations; with some outlets averaging 15x more than the national average.” For example, “The Huffington Post was the environmental coverage leader for nationally focused news organizations with 3% of headlines (nearly 3x the national average),” demonstrating the efforts of an independent, and online media outlet. Additionally, “local newspapers prioritize environmental coverage nearly three times more on the average compared to nationally focused news organizations (with the Daily Herald [WA] leading at 7.3%),” which demonstrates the ability of local communication and action to have a more focused impact on the environment compared to that of the federal level. However, when evaluating the efforts of

9 Pezzullo and Cox, *Environmental Communication and the Public Sphere*, 93.
televised news programs in relation to environmental coverage, “Fox News had the highest percentage of headline environmental stories (1.57%) among cable and network news outlets, even beating out PBS (1.43%); with CNN having the lowest (0.36%).”\textsuperscript{10} This statistic is worrisome as “another study by the Union of Concerned Scientists indicated that Fox News and News Corporation often mislead the public about scientific facts related to key environmental issues. An analysis of Fox News’ coverage of climate change between January and July of 2012 found that ninety-three percent of the station’s coverage was misleading, and a similar analysis for the \emph{Wall Street Journal} found that it was misleading in its coverage of climate science eighty-one percent of the time.”\textsuperscript{11} This introduces the topic of communication disinformation campaigns in which bias and intentional misleading are strategies used by filmmakers, or in this case, media platforms, to direct the public’s mindset in an alternate direction, which will be explored later in this paper.

Overall, the presented data emphasizes the vast impact of environmental documentaries as well as their importance in covering national and global issues addressed in the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment that are often overlooked by mainstream news coverage. Environmental documentaries often prove to be successful in viewership and accessibility and stand as a useful information source to the public for spreading awareness on the happenings of the natural world.

To help further the background research of this paper for the benefit of my understanding of this topic, I conducted a survey to provide more quantitative and empirical data on the relationship between individuals and environmental documentaries. I created and sent out this survey in the fall semester of 2019 with a specific focus on students at Fordham University. Prior

\textsuperscript{10} Tyson Miller and Todd Pollak, "Environmental Coverage in the Mainstream News: We Need More" (\emph{Project for Improved Environmental Coverage}, 2013), 1.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 15.
to its release, I established points of research focus, design of the study, the sample population, and more specifically, the research questions, hypotheses, and ten survey questions.12

In total, I had 86 respondents to my survey, all of whom had watched an environmental documentary at some point in their lifetime, and were current students at Fordham University, with the exception of a few recently graduated individuals. The demographic breakdown was as follows: 20% males, 80% females; 23% freshmen, 15% sophomores, 22% juniors, 35% seniors, and 5% other (i.e. graduate students, recent alums, etc.).

In the first three questions set to evaluate viewing habits of environmental documentaries, through their responses it is evident that the sample population has an awareness of this subgenera of film and incorporate it into their media intake through choice and educational purposes.

12 Appendix. Survey Focus and Questions
Figure 1: Question on viewing frequency of environmental documentaries.

Looking at viewing frequency of environmental documentaries as showcased in Figure 1, over half of the respondents reported watching an environmental documentary 1-2 times a year. Following this, 36% of respondents watch an environmental documentary 1-2 times every couple of months. This can be analyzed to conclude that this sample population is not typically seeking out environmental documentaries as a media source but watch when the opportunity arises.
Looking at the reasoning behind choosing to view an environmental documentary as showcased in Figure 2, most popularly, respondents watch to learn more about a topic, for entertainment, or as a requirement. Respondents selected up to two answers for this question, resulting in a consistent response percentage across the options of “required to watch for class or work,” “watching for entertainment,” and “watching to learn more about a topic.” Among this sample population, it is assumed to be common for environmental documentaries to be required as course assignments, but studies, work, news, and popular culture can also be assumed to have an influence for reasoning behind watching due to the demographics of the respondents as college students.
When viewing an environmental documentary, which platform do you most commonly consume this media on? (select up to 2)

Answered: 86  Skipped: 0

![Chart showing consumption platforms for environmental documentaries]

**Figure 3: Question on where the media of environmental documentaries is being consumed.**

Looking at the how the sample population is typically consuming the media of environmental documentaries as showcased in Figure 3, it can be understood that streaming platforms are the most popular and widely used source for viewing purposes. To my surprise, YouTube follows behind which is not a typical medium of full-length film but could potentially be popular and more accessible to college students due to its free status and unlimited potential for variation in options. But overall, the popularity of streaming platforms over other options (i.e. cable television, DVD, etc.) is logical due to the shifts in television viewing trends beyond just with documentaries. With streaming services on the rise over cable, especially in the college student budget and campus-living atmosphere, environmental documentaries are more likely to
be accessed through channels such as Netflix or Amazon Prime, who are producing their own content in this subgenera as well as featuring a variety of films.

The next two questions were set on rating scales to help produce an overall evaluation of the mentalities of the sample population regarding environmental documentaries. These questions dug into the opinion side of the survey responses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>STRONGLY DISAGREE</th>
<th>SOewhat DISAGREE</th>
<th>NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE</th>
<th>SOMewhat AGREE</th>
<th>STRONGLY AGREE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Environmental documentaries are effective in spreading awareness of a specific environmental issue.</td>
<td>2.33%</td>
<td>3.49%</td>
<td>1.16%</td>
<td>55.81%</td>
<td>37.21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental documentaries are effective in generating action around a specific movement or cause.</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>20.93%</td>
<td>15.12%</td>
<td>46.51%</td>
<td>17.44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental documentaries are a waste of time to watch.</td>
<td>75.58%</td>
<td>20.93%</td>
<td>1.16%</td>
<td>2.33%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental documentaries are a useful educational tool.</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>1.16%</td>
<td>38.37%</td>
<td>60.47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental documentaries are just a form of media, and therefore do not help the issue at hand.</td>
<td>45.35%</td>
<td>38.37%</td>
<td>9.30%</td>
<td>4.65%</td>
<td>2.33%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 4: Question prompting responders to agree or disagree with five different statements.*
In asking the sample population to agree or disagree on a scale to the statements regarding opinions on environmental documentaries as showcased in Figure 4, it is evident that these kinds of films are mostly effective in spreading awareness and educating and are appreciated by the majority. However, it is interesting, and I appreciate the subtle mix of answers, with a handful of drastic disagreements to positive outlooks and agreements with negative opinions. This kind of variation in opinion is essential to help evaluate further if environmental documentaries are effective in sparking action, change, or worldview. It is important to take the skepticism and real-world opinions of deterring from these kinds of films as a form of regularly consumed media in order to better understand the success or failure of the communication effects in this subgenera of documentary films.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>STRONGLY DISAGREE</th>
<th>SOewhat DISAGREE</th>
<th>NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE</th>
<th>SOewhat AGREE</th>
<th>STRONGLY AGREE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Depressed</td>
<td>4.65%</td>
<td>11.63%</td>
<td>23.26%</td>
<td>45.35%</td>
<td>15.12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unhopeful</td>
<td>4.65%</td>
<td>32.56%</td>
<td>25.58%</td>
<td>32.56%</td>
<td>4.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shocked</td>
<td>2.33%</td>
<td>11.63%</td>
<td>8.14%</td>
<td>50.00%</td>
<td>27.91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspired</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>9.30%</td>
<td>12.79%</td>
<td>50.00%</td>
<td>27.91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motivated</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>6.98%</td>
<td>6.98%</td>
<td>58.14%</td>
<td>27.91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educated</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>1.16%</td>
<td>2.33%</td>
<td>45.35%</td>
<td>51.16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aware</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>0.00%</td>
<td>2.33%</td>
<td>43.02%</td>
<td>54.65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive</td>
<td>1.16%</td>
<td>20.93%</td>
<td>32.56%</td>
<td>36.05%</td>
<td>9.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative</td>
<td>4.65%</td>
<td>17.44%</td>
<td>34.88%</td>
<td>37.21%</td>
<td>5.81%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 5: Question prompting responders to agree or disagree with specific emotions that have the potential or not to be aroused when viewing environmental documentaries.
In asking the sample population to agree or disagree on a scale to the various emotions potentially aroused or not in the viewing of environmental documentaries as showcased in Figure 5, this rating scale question presented the opportunity to better understand what the sample population felt in relation to the effectiveness of an environmental documentary and the determined mindset that may result in the view or not. Through the agreements, a mix of emotions was reported and although it ultimately depends on the specific film, it is interesting to compare this mix. For example, the high agreement percentages between depressed and motivated is an intriguing correlation; although a topic and its demonstration through film may leave the viewer feeling upset about the status of this environmental issue, they may ultimately be more motivated post-watching to make a change in their lifestyle or environmental worldview to benefit this presented problem that emotionally effected them. Overall, this sample population trended towards feeling unhopeful, most likely due to the negativity of specific issues presented in environmental documentaries, but definitely educated and aware because of the presentation itself. Ultimately, as viewers we can still be unhopeful about the current and future status of an issue, but motivated and inspired to make a difference or take action to help.

The final required question of the survey wrapped up the investigation into the personal opinions inflicted from viewing environmental documentaries. After watching an environmental documentary, viewers have the potential to be emotionally affected and impacted by the issue and messages presented to a point of making personal lifestyle changes to reduce their own damage they cause to the environment. This taps into the ability of the communication effects within documentary film to create a physical change in society, even just as a form of consumed media.
After watching an environmental documentary, how willing are you to change your lifestyle to reduce the damage you cause to the environment in relation to the film's topic?

Looking at the responses to this question on personal willingness to take action as showcased in Figure 6, the majority of the sample population are willing in some aspect to make a lifestyle change in correlation with the messaging presented in a watched environmental documentary. It is encouraging to see that 44% of responders feel very willing to make this kind of change, but also understandable that some are less willing as opinions vary in regards to environmental documentaries as a communication tool. Overall, this question demonstrates the impact of film on one’s opinions and worldviews.

In finishing out the survey, the concluding optional question, which was write-in style, received 64 responses total. Through the various responses to the question of providing an example of a specific environmental documentary and its impact on lifestyle and worldview, I
was able to gain a better sense of specific films with shared trends amongst respondents to help
further my research. The *Planet Earth* series and *Cowspiracy* received the most recognition
through the responses, mentioned almost ten times each in individual answers. Following behind
with additional, multiple occurrences in the responses were the films *What the Health*, *Blackfish*,
*Food, Inc.*, *Paris to Pittsburg*, *Before the Flood*, *Chasing Coral*, *Symphony of Soil*, *Demain*, and
*An Inconvenient Truth*, as well as the *Blue Planet* and *Our Planet* series.

Examples such as *Food, Inc.*, *Cowspiracy*, and *What the Health* prompted a lot of
reflection on how individuals have converted to vegan or vegetarian diets after watching the
films and reported on their commitment to the lifestyle with attributing the documentaries as
their reason to make the change due to the presented images, knowledge, and messages about the
meat industry: “For a couple months I was trying to eliminate meat from my diet and follow a
vegetarian diet, however after watching *What the Health* on Netflix, I was inspired to adopt a
vegan diet and I started the next day after watching. I have now been vegan for over two years
and the documentary is what emboldened me to think about my personal causal relationship with
the environment. Because of this documentary, I went vegan and many of my friends were
inspired to eliminate meat and dairy from their lives; causing a ripple effect.”

Aside from focuses and repetitive topics, below are some of the most informative and
detailed responses regarding a wide variety of specific environmental documentaries and their
impacts on these individual’s environmental knowledge and worldview, as well as their physical
lifestyle shifts:

- “I have watched *Blue Planet* and others like it that focus on various species or
  ecosystems at a time and show their way of life. This has impacted me because it has
made me realize the profound purpose each individual species has in the larger environment and the impact it has when that species is removed or severely reduced.”

- “Gasland. I am now very aware of the negative impacts of fracking and natural gas use. I have not really done anything about my dislike for natural gas. If there was resolution to allow fracking in my state, I would vote against it, and if it were easy to move away from gas in my general life (home heating for example), I would, but I don’t see that happening anytime soon.”

- “Chasing Coral is the one that sticks with me the most as an avid scuba diver and marine biologist researcher. I have almost 100 dives under my belt all over the world and its devastating to see the effects of ocean acidification and temperature rise. I'm very aware of plastic usage and recycling when I do in order to prevent plastic pollution in the oceans and just aware in general of the changing corals though my reef check survey experiences.”

- “Tapped. This documentary changed the way in which I viewed the water bottle industry and its harmful impact. I knew they were bad, but I didn’t know how awful they were in terms of impacting communities of people and our oceans and other ecosystems. I was left feeling angry, but also very motivated!”

- “A few years ago, I watched The True Cost, and after I started thrifting a lot more. Now over half the time I am buying new clothes, I buy them second hand.”

- “Demain - a French/English documentary about different spheres of sustainability in different countries. The point of it was to inspire hope by showing what different communities are doing to combat these issues. It made me more aware of the systems thinking surrounding this topic and about how to reduce my own waste and increase my
impact. It actually was one of the triggers that made me want to pursue sustainable business as a career.”

- **“An Inconvenient Truth;** Simply being aware of the actuality of any sort of human impact on the environment and thus a need to rethink certain choices...really little and perhaps silly things like how long my shower is, using a reusable canteen versus disposable to-go cups.”

But aside from praise and attributions, a handful of respondents also acknowledged the lack of impact some of the films had on their behavior and mindsets:

- **“Planet Earth.** It was a while ago, but it really made me aware of how much humans are ruining the world for other organisms. However, I don’t think it had a significant impact on my behavior.”
- **“Cowspiracy really shocked me into not eating meat, but upon further education on the topic I realized that this was a particularly inflammatory documentary and that I can agree and disagree with various parts of one piece of work.”**

Overall these responses were all very interesting to gain a sense of other viewership opinions from those with demographics similar to my own. With my personal interest in environmental documentaries and individual passion for advocacy and environmental awareness, it was important for me to step outside of my own bias to better understand how others are affected by these films, presented issues, messages, and images. I was very excited to receive such engaging feedback and hear these snippets of how environmental documentaries have actually created lifestyle changes, perspective shifts, and increased knowledge amongst most respondents. I was also very appreciative of the contrasting opinions in order to properly evaluate the scale of successes and impacts of the communication efforts within environmental documentaries. To
conclude, the survey as a whole helped to achieve this goal of broadening my initial perspective on the relationship between viewer and film in relation to my paper topic. Some of the highlighted films from the survey results will be featured as examples throughout this paper, and the opinions presented in regards to the effectiveness and educational purposes of environmental documentaries will be readdressed to support as well as contrast my final arguments.

**Chapter 2. A History of Environmental Film Coverage**

Documentaries themselves have been around since the 1920’s and early 1930’s with the development of poetic experimentation, narrative storytelling, and rhetorical oratory in film. Documentary films utilize “the capacity of photographic images to render such a vivid impression of reality, including movement as a vital aspect of life,” telling stories about the images presented and the filmmaker’s relationship to this production. This essence of storytelling can portray a variety of subjects in a variety of forms. Documentaries can take on different styles to fit the desired rhetoric of the filmmaker and topic, to target varying public receptions and takeaways.

Bill Nichols, known as the founder of the contemporary study of the documentary film, established the six modes of documentary, distinguishing between the varying styles and traits of films. Although there are multiple different documentary classifications, the most broadly used and effective mode is the *expository* documentary; this style directly addresses the real in the situation presented, with a present narrative voice that explains and interprets the scenes and topics. Viewers in this case are positioned as passive, as this kind of documentary is built upon bias regarding the specific view, showcasing the opposing view as illegitimate. This is the most standard documentary style, having been around since some of the first films in the 1930’s and

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14 Ibid., 83.
can be found in most mainstream environmental documentaries. To put this into perspective, *An Inconvenient Truth* addresses the issue of climate change with the narrative presence of Al Gore to advise the audience of the issue and its portrayal through footage. The bias within this film is provided through the essence that climate change is a real and approaching issue and the human race is responsible for creating and fixing it through our relationship with the environment. Beyond the expository framework, documentaries can use alternative styles, or combine characteristics to utilize further creativity in representing their situation of reality. The *observational* documentary is the second most common mode which avoids commentary and instead observes events and situations as they happen, often through hand-held camera usage, having the meaning be represented through the editing and presentation of the footage. This mode results in an active participation from the audience to be attentive to the messages of the film and reflect upon them. Along similar guidelines, the *poetic* mode utilizes “tonal or rhythmic qualities” to create an experimental and personal take on filmmaking for the audience to connect with in their own way. These two modes are represented by films such as the *Qatsi* trilogy, a series of silent films released from the 1980’s to the early 2000’s depicting slow motion and time-lapse videos set to composed instrumental music to characterize the relationship between humans and nature. Through the footage alone, audiences are exposed to their own interpretations of human involvement in the environment, creating a very different communication effect than a film with a narration. The *participatory* documentary mode makes use of interviews, relying on witness to retell history. The recent Netflix documentary, *Fire in Paradise*, told the story of the 2018 Camp Fire in California solely through interviews with dispatchers, first responders, and survivors, as well as firsthand footage from locals in the community who experienced the natural disaster. The *reflective* documentary is a more extreme
version of this, questioning the documentary form itself using meta communication to
defamiliarize other modes. ‘Mocumentaries’ and behind-the-scenes footage are the most
common representations of this mode but are not usually found within the environmental
documentary subgenre. Finally, the performativé documentary stresses subjective aspects of a
classically objective discourse, with an emphasis on the relationship between the filmmaker and
the subject itself.¹⁵ For example, the 2010 documentary, Gasland, expands into this kind of
storytelling through film as the director, Josh Fox, incorporates his own banjo music and creative
footage from his backyard to emphasize the negative personal ramifications the issue of
hydraulic fracturing was creating in his living environment.

With an understanding of the composition of documentaries in general, it is important to look
at the specific evolution of the environmental documentary film throughout the 20th century.
Beginning trend in the 1920’s, the first environmental documentary, in addition to being one of
the first credited documentaries to succeed, was Robert Flaherty’s Nanook of the North in 1922.
This film documented the life of an Eskimo family and their daily battle with nature’s elements
for survival. A focus on individual character with a narrative grasped the attention of viewers but
stood out as unique with its portrayal of reality, a look into a very real lens on life that most of
the television-viewership audience did not have the opportunity to interact with before.¹⁶ Film
continued to take off from the 20’s with early technological developments and documentations
of nature and our interactions with the natural world. It wasn’t until the 1940’s-1950’s that we
saw our second wave of innovation, especially with the addition of the Best Documentary
Feature category in the Academy Awards during the year 1944. The most prominent

¹⁵ Nichols, Introduction to Documentary, 33-34.
Academic USA, 2017), 35-36.
environmental documentary of this time period was the film version of Rachel Carson’s book *The Sea around Us*, produced, distributed in theaters, and won the Academy Award title, all in 1953. This film, “portrayed mankind’s exploitation of the sea as a natural phenomenon, whether for food or animal capture for zoo display. The description of the sea’s domination of the world’s climate may have been the first cinematic hint of the possibility of global warming.”17 Around the same time, Walt Disney was producing a series of nature documentaries, providing live footage into the habitats and environments of animals in the wild. This series titled *True Life Adventures*, birthed six feature-length documentaries and various short films between the years of 1948 to 1960, achieving nine Academy Awards and multiple nominations. Throughout the expansion of the Walt Disney Company, these documentaries proved successful as educational programs for children and students on the topic of the natural world.18 In the second half of the 1950’s, the world was introduced to French ecologist and marine conservationists Jacques-Yves Cousteau through his film *The Silent World* in 1956, showcasing the sights of deep-sea exploration to the public for the first time. This film, developed from his 1953 book of the same title, demonstrated elements of the natural world below the surface that could now be achieved thanks to advances in film technology. Cousteau went on to become a face for the marine natural world and conservation, winning three Academy Awards and receiving multiple Emmy nominations throughout his career.19

The rise of television through the 1960’s to 1970’s created a new outlet for the production of environmental documentaries. These decades experienced the birth of nature television series, produced by public broadcasting networks in the United States, Canada, but most importantly in

18 Ibid., 39-40.
19 Ibid., 42-43.
the United Kingdom with BBC’s series programs in collaboration with David Attenborough. Through these series, this era was considered the golden age of natural history film making as technological innovations allowed filmmakers to reveal more of the natural world, now to a much wider audience through television sets.20 Continuing through the developments in television, the rise of cable in the 1980’s brought new channels and networks such as Discovery Channel, National Geographic Channel, Science Channel, Animal Planet, Documentary Channel, etc., that produced new and vast programming exposing reality and environmental themes to the public. In this same era, the public experienced the beginning of the propaganda style documentary film trend, specifically with the activist film, *The Animals Film* in 1981, addressing animal abuse in relation to farm management through gruesome images and behind the scenes footage, common amongst documentaries today, but a first for its kind in this decade.21 Activist documentaries continued to rise into the 1990’s, “establishing the basic approach to “environmental deterioration as sociopolitical crisis” reflected in so many of the films to be considered here.” At this point, the environmental documentary had truly established a name for itself, with the introduction of environmental film festivals around the world. The Environmental Film Festival in Washington, D.C. began in 1993 and has come back year after year as an outlet for this genre of film to thrive in.22 In evaluating this evolution of the environmental documentary, as reflected upon by author and filmmaker John Duvall, “most of the environmental documentaries of the twentieth century were framed as encounters with the world of nature through modes that attempted to combine education with entertainment. As the century wound down, however, innovative programs ventured into modes that were more pointedly

21 Ibid., 44-46.
22 Ibid., 47.
critical of the failures of modern civilization in protecting the environment, were more poetic and artistic in style, and sometimes both.”23

Into the 21st century, frequent and popular topics for coverage and focus within environmental documentaries includes climate change (within this, specific topics range from deforestation, rising sea levels, extreme weather events, ocean acidification, etc.), animal rights, food and agriculture industry issues, ocean conservation, and political action regarding environmental policies. In this overview of environmental causes, sustainability shines through as a prominent background focus, and as a main theme of environmental studies. This overarching idea “is about people caring enough to pass on a better world to all the generations to come.”24 Our planet’s ecology is made up of smaller parts: ecosystems, species, and organisms. As a rapidly growing population, humans have taken over most of these elements on Earth to support our lifestyles and basic needs but have damaged and degraded the environment in the process. An environmentally sustainable society “meets the current and future basic resource needs of its people in a just and equitable manner without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their basic needs.”25 Ultimately, humans have recognized their impacts on these issues and their role as the villain upon entering this century of new science and technology developments, but also the potential role as the hero to achieve an environmentally stable society; thus, using environmental documentaries as a communication tool to demonstrate the impacts, potential, and/or need for change in order to correct and help these issues has become increasingly popular for the filmmakers, but also for the audiences consuming this kind of media who are drawn to the concept of learning more to help make a different. Overall,

25 Ibid., 25.
environmental documentaries have been, and are created more often due to a passion and care for the issue at hand from the filmmaker rather than for profit and reviews.

Following this slow and steady history of environmental documentaries hand in hand with degradation, the year 2006 within the 21st century represents a breakthrough moment for a spike in environmental coverage, specifically in the case of film. Al Gore’s documentary film *An Inconvenient Truth* was released, exposing the dangers and realities of climate change to the public in a form never-before seen or interpreted. The problem had been known, but this fear-tactic presentation with images, statistics, and a basic breakdown of the scientific and social knowledge of climate change and its umbrella of impacts boosted coverage of the environment in the media and really got people talking.\(^{26}\) This exposure to the intensity of environmental problems in the modern world has been correlated with an evolution of technology and media that has resulted in an increased production and viewership of documentaries. Film technology has benefited the production values and cinematic effects that make documentary films so engaging, and the expansion of television and film through streaming services, such as Netflix, Hulu, and Amazon, have given the public a wider accessibility to existing documentaries, while serving as their own production companies for new films.

To expand upon this movement in the 21st century, beyond *An Inconvenient Truth*, there have been various other revolutionary documentaries for specific environmental topics of action. Documentaries such as *Food, Inc.* and *Cowspiracy* have left a mass cultural impact in regards to food movements and animal rights. Through both, we get a look inside the industrial agriculture systems of the United States within large corporate companies and come face to face with the differences sustainable agriculture has on the environment, human health, and the future of our

\(^{26}\) Pezzullo and Cox, *Environmental Communication and the Public Sphere*, 95.
food industry. These films showcase the truths and realities of the industrialized agriculture processes of our country and really bring into perspective the idea that we fail on a daily basis to question the source of our food; vegetarianism and veganism have emerged as contenders within the environmental movement and this kind of activism was promoted and triggered by these two films. Very prevalent in the mainstream media, *Racing Extinction* was an Emmy and Academy Award nominee, shedding light on the next mass extinction that we are ultimately bringing upon ourselves due to our treatment of the environment and natural resources. This 2015 film features various examples of our degradation of the Earth and its species through global warming, poaching, overpopulation, agriculture, etc., and these action’s impacts on specific organisms and their future existence. Because of its credibility and attention in pop culture in the Oscars, this film was widely recognized and followed a similar communication path as *An Inconvenient Truth* as it addressed an up and coming, and lesser known issue that more people should have been acknowledging and understanding. It also had a continued prevalence in media through installations and music beyond the film to continue to carry out the message, but also promote the watching of the documentary. Along similar lines, *An Inconvenient Sequel: Truth to Power*, was released in 2017 and features the necessity of Al Gore to continue his efforts to communicate the impacts of climate change, with a focus on the Paris Agreement. This literal sequel film to the first impactful one emphasizes the extremities being faced in the natural world, with its production and release oriented in keeping up with the changing environment and times to reevaluate the issues presented in the first film and address the worsening of climate change; the importance of this film is demonstrated in its existence itself, communicating that change is necessary and immediate by the fact that a second film was made and distributed.
Focusing specifically on streaming service platforms, Netflix has been extremely impactful in the 21st century environmental documentary movement through its partnership with BBC Earth in streaming their reinitiated Earth series: *Planet Earth, Planet Earth II, Blue Planet, Blue Planet II, and Frozen Planet* have proved popular amongst Netflix viewers, especially those who are not deliberately turning to an “environmental documentary” and serving as activists. These are more informational and visually focused forms of media that feature the iconic and familiar narration of David Attenborough to guide viewers through the knowledge behind these moving scenes of nature and tie it back to the human presence and impact that can be ultimately degrading to these places, species, and cycles. These series have an appeal to a much wider audience, and therefore have an unexpected environmental worldview impact on these audiences as well. In my survey results, many respondents credited these series with their attention to environmental awareness and activism efforts. Aside from these BBC Earth series, Netflix has produced and released its own similar series for streaming in partnership with the World Wildlife Fund for Nature, *Our Planet*, which also uses the same image event techniques and narrations to promote environmental education and worldviews.

Overall, the environmental documentary has made its mark on the film and television industry and has paved way for public exposure to environmental settings and knowledge that allow for a closer look on the natural world and the anthropocentric impacts we have as a society. As environmental causes become more intense, the popularity of this medium is on the rise; communication techniques used in environmental documentaries continue to be tweaked and improved in order to increase audience reachability. With the growing popularity of documentaries, the progression of persuasion has been an important development amongst
filmmakers to meet their needs of effectively connecting with and drawing in audiences through images and messages on screen.

Chapter 3. Persuasion Theories and Communication Campaigns

Documentaries are a form of communication for filmmakers to not only tell their chosen story, but relay it in a designed way to create specific messages for the audience to intake and interpret: “Since the birth of the medium, film theorists have sought to understand how cinema constructs and conveys its messages. But an awareness of how cinema communicates its messages to audiences is critical to understanding the nature of documentary representation, since presumably the representation of the actualities of the world should be held to an even higher standard than the cinema of the imagination.”

Various styles of communication help this process; public communication campaigns have the ability to turn the story into a social movement and call to action. Public communication campaigns are, “purposive attempts to inform or influence behaviors in large audiences within a specified time period using an organized set of communication activities and featuring an array of mediated messages in multiple channels generally to produce noncommercial benefits to individuals and society.” In correlation with increasing environmental problems and knowledge of the human relationship with nature, environmental documentaries have utilized public communication campaigns to target their audiences regarding these specific problems and pinpoints of action that could create positive change. Ultimately, public communication campaigns create a social rhetoric for the audience to relate to and engage with after the film as, “filmmaking takes place within a particular social context, assuming a certain level of awareness

and congruence of values within its audience. The nature of a film’s reception depends to a great extent upon the expectations, knowledge, and values of its viewers. So a filmmaker frames her approach to a topic based on the audience’s anticipated knowledge of and predisposition toward her topic. Beyond those concerns, the design of the film’s narrative may be influenced by other social or cultural elements, such as its sponsorship by an organization, the degree of collaboration with its subject, or coverage of the topic in other forms of media.”

Specific choices such as these by the documentarists in narrative development and filmmaking create the intended story to be consumed in their desired appeal by the audience as already, “viewers expect documentaries to potentially convey a message or have an impact on their actual lives, or at least on their understanding of the real world.” For example, the term “image events” refers to images of conflict or drama that have the ability to spark fear and discomfort with the goal of social change in mind. Environmental documentaries often use these kinds of images to create an emotional rhetoric with the audience, for example, animals in pain, landscape destruction, melting icecaps, etc., often image evidence for climate change.

Overall, these campaigns are successfully portrayed through film using the three fundamentals of a rhetorical argument to create persuasion and impact, dating back to Aristotle. *Logos* is the use of “factual evidence and reasoning through logical argument, empirical visual representation, and statistical evidence to embody or clarify ideas.” *Ethos* is the use of “authority, expertise, and ethical stature, established through testimony from recognized experts or those who speak from personal experience.” And *pathos* is the use of “an appeal to values and emotions, often through cultivating an identification with sympathetic subjects, or feelings of
anger toward their antagonists.” These three different forms of rhetoric used separately and together in “audio-visual presentation” construct a strong narrative for the audience to relate to and build upon on their own beyond the viewing of the documentary.32 Beyond the rhetoric of solely the narrative, visual rhetoric plays an important role in a documentary film to help define how audiences with interact with the film and its content. Visual rhetoric, “functions both pragmatically – to persuade – and constitutively – to conduct or challenge a particular “seeing” of nature or what constitutes an environmental problem.”33 By using this image reliant form of persuasion, it has the ability to be, “analyzed, on the one hand, by how producers are encoding a message and, on the other, by how audiences or receivers may be interpreting or decoding it.”34 Developed by communications theorist Stuart Hall, there exists three ways for an audience to potentially decode a message. The dominant position is, “when the consumer agrees with the text’s cultural biases.” The oppositional position is, “when the consumer rejects the text’s cultural biases.” And the negotiated position is “when the consumer accepts some of the text’s biases, but rejects others.”35 For example, an environmental documentary with veganism at its central focus could produce dominant positions of agreement with the diet as a solution to the environmental problem, or completely vice versa through an oppositional position, as well as a potential negotiated position of agreement to the environmental problem, but a disagreement regarding the answer of veganism in response to the communication campaign. Ultimately rhetoric, in form of narrative of visual, acts to develop the story and campaign effort of the documentary film and persuade the audience towards the social action and change surrounding the cause.

32 Duvall, Environmental Documentary: Cinema Activism in the 21st Century, 12.
33 Pezzullo and Cox, Environmental Communication and the Public Sphere, 71.
34 Ibid., 69.
35 Ibid., 70.
Besides the persuasion abilities of the chosen rhetoric itself, specific persuasive functions exist to guarantee the success of a social movement and public communication campaign: transforming perceptions of reality, altering self-perceptions of protesters, legitimizing the movement, prescribing courses of action, mobilizing for action, and sustaining the movement.\textsuperscript{36} In the specific case of environmental documentaries and movements, “environmental organizations are visible and active, and mobilization is happening on many fronts; however, there is a need for development of strong environmental identity that will allow for greater legitimization of environmental causes and ultimately spur mobilization and sustain the movement over time.”\textsuperscript{37} To achieve this goal in correlation with the six persuasive functions of social movement, six rhetorical objectives of the environmental documentary narrative and campaign need to be identified and carried out: 1) generate agreement on the fundamental sources of environmental degradation; 2) produce and project a consistent, positive and salient social vision of a sustainable society; 3) foster a values-based discourse that guides a diversity of environmental frames towards a common agenda for social and ecological justice; 4) balance past, present and future frames; 5) restore a sense of urgency to environmental crisis; and 6) aid construction of an environmental discourse that is hopeful, accessible and diverse. Altogether, these objectives create a pathway for social movement and individual action with the environment in mind that can be best presented and utilized through a documentary film narrative and audio-visual presentation.\textsuperscript{38}

A large inhibiting factor within communication effects is the existence of industry disinformation campaigns. Disinformation stems from the bias of communication as the “ways in

\textsuperscript{36} Rachel Gregg, “Environmental Documentary Film: A Contemporary Tool For Social Movement” (2011), 5.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 6.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 31-36.
which any given medium creates and limits the conditions of possibility across space and time in a particular culture.” Industry disinformation campaigns become prevalent when a bias is formed behind false information that then becomes the basis for a movement of rallying behind it and spreading its existence and public belief in it through communication efforts. As disinformation is built up in a campaign form, it has the ability to influence opinions and understood knowledge surrounding a specific idea or topic.

Documentaries have the ability to expose these disinformation campaigns and secrets of the industry; media can be used against these roadblocks. For example, through Food, Inc., we see how certain companies are trying to cover up what is really going on in the food industry. By showing behind the scenes footage and presenting knowledge and images that are not seen in everyday life to those being impacted by or ultimately impacting the problem, Food, Inc. falsifies the disinformation campaigns carried out by these major food corporations such as McDonald’s and Tyson’s, exposing their lack of sustainability and care for animals in the process of meat production. Environmental documentaries have the ability to present science-based facts in correlation with footage and messaging which allows for the clarification of industry knowledge and elimination of disinformation. But in contrast, there exists an accessibility for environmental documentaries to be the communicator for these campaigns. Films such as Cowspiracy and What the Health represent this kind of expression of disinformation campaigns; through biased production and messaging correlated with swayed and exaggerated science and facts that mislead viewers. Both films were written, directed, and produced by Kip Andersen and Keegan Kuhn, with Cowspiracy covering the environmental impact of animal agriculture, and What the Health covering the health and nutritional impacts of

39 Pezzullo and Cox, Environmental Communication and the Public Sphere, 68.
consuming meat. Both films present a very pro-vegan bias, which is not a negative approach on its own, but the claims and scare tactics for both situations have since been debunked and discredited by scientists and nutritionists.40 This is interesting to investigate because, as seen through my survey results, these two films are publicly recognized to spark change in people’s lifestyles and habits with increased awareness surrounding animal agriculture and its human and environmental impact. I still believe these changes are good and it is incredible to note how physically impactful these films are, however, they are misleading in regards to facts versus exaggeration and represent the push for disinformation campaigns to sway viewers mindsets and take control through effective communication efforts; although incorrect, they can still be effective. Once truth is exposed behind the presented disinformation, this can often lead to a lack of trust and reliance on documentaries as an informational and media source. I even came across this kind of realization and distrust amongst a participant in my survey, who’s write-in answer was reflected upon in Chapter 2.

A primary and ever-present example of industry disinformation campaigns is rooted in the idea of climate change disinformation. This stems from turning away from science and towards opinion when it comes to evaluating climate change and its causes and effects. This kind of disinformation is often politicized as well, as the acknowledgement of climate change as a human-caused issue and the drive to take environmental action is more so presented as a liberal and left-wing perspective while a conservative perspective stereotypically denies climate change altogether. This helps to drive the integration of this disinformation into everyday society, serving as a negative and counteractive communication effect on behalf of the environment.

Through the video, “The Ethical Abhorrence of the Climate Change Disinformation Campaign,” scholar Donald Brown describes that this campaign is built on the foundations of disinformation, ethics, and public policy. Political figures claim that the entirety of the climate change concept is a hoax, those including our current President as well as many US Senators. Scientific skepticism should be encouraged as science functions and advances due to questions; however, disinformation is an actual ethical dilemma and is problematic. The consensus view is that the global climate is warming, the causes are due to human activities, and impacts will ultimately be catastrophic. This is supported by every Academy of Science from countries all over the world. It is also supported by many scientific organizations across the globe that also contribute to climate research. The United States Academy of Science has issued five reports summarizing the advances of global climate change as well as human impacts. This view is not only supported by scientific groups, but also the facts and trends showcased throughout the years. Besides this, the disinformation campaign began in the 1980’s through literature. Ultimately, the funders of this campaign stand within the fossil fuel industry, cooperate American, and conservative foundations. This is a countermovement that is connected through the internet and funding. These climate deniers are found within think tanks, front groups, Astroturf organizations, PR firms, etc. Some of their tactics include a simple disregard for the truth, a focus on the unknowns while ignoring the knowns, making specious claims against science, etc.41

In the article, “Capitalism vs. the Climate,” Naomi Klein explores this alternative view of climate change, one that believes “that climate change is a Trojan horse designed to abolish capitalism and replace it with some kind of eco-socialism.” An interesting point brought up on

the reform of our approach to climate change is that “climate change used to be something most everyone said they cared about—just not all that much. When Americans were asked to rank their political concerns in order of priority, climate change would reliably come in last. But now there is a significant cohort of Republicans who care passionately, even obsessively, about climate change—though what they care about is exposing it as a “hoax” being perpetrated by liberals to force them to change their light bulbs, live in Soviet-style tenements and surrender their SUVs.” Ultimately, for the climate movement to have a positive impact and create change in benefit for the environment, “the left is going to have to learn from the right.”

Beyond their initial presence, "climate change disinformation" campaigns use the media for their own (mis)education purposes; advertisements for energy sources tend to showcase these climate change contributors as positive resource usages rather than the greenhouse gas emitting impactors that they are. For example, an ad from the American Coalition for Clean Coal Electricity pairs the idea of coal power with the idea of “Celebration” through a song, family time, and ultimately, a logical resource. Humans tend to be misguided by the way our resources are used as well as our global impacts on the environment because they fail to be shown or see the direct negative effects. Additionally, presidential campaigns, so focused on have a realm of climate policy or knowledge, now generate these kinds of ideas as platforms to run on. President Trump uses his anti-environment persona to further spread this disinformation campaign and generate supporters who believe in the lack of science through these rallying communication efforts that a political campaign brings forth.

In relating this to the medium of film, climate change disinformation has been at the forefront of a few environmental documentaries as its own environmental issue. The 2014 film, Merchants

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42 Naomi Klein, “Capitalism vs. the Climate” (The Nation, 2015).
43 America’s Power, “50% of America's Electricity Comes from Coal” (Arlington, VA: YouTube, 2008).
of Doubt, explores this idea of disinformation rooted in media and politics. It covers the ongoing public relations and governmental tactics carried out unknowingly to mask the lack of action regarding the regulation of greenhouse gas emissions. Beyond just the opposition of regulations and pro-environmental action, the 2017 biographical documentary, Bill Nye: Science Guy, reflects on the career of science communicator and television personality, Bill Nye, in this rise of climate change and opposition from evolutionists and climate change deniers. This film is particularly moving as, although more of a biographical film than environmental documentary, it addresses the drastic influence climate change disinformation has on people and how it sparks a retraction from science and a strong bias that doesn’t allow for stray. By focusing on Bill Nye’s commitment to communication the need for acceptance and action regarding climate change based on an understanding of science and human impact, this specific film is a great example of how we can avoid the issue of misinformation altogether. An emphasis on effective communication, whether verbal, visual, and/or media driven, provides a stepping-stone to eliminating industry disinformation campaigns that stand as a roadblock between environmental action and the future of our planet.

Chapter 4. Environmental Film and Education

Our environmental worldview dictates how we treat the Earth and ourselves. These worldviews can be developed through impactful aspects such as education, family beliefs, location, and even current events. Worldviews help determine our environmental actions and levels of awareness that are caused by knowledge and ultimately lead to our sustainability efforts. Environmental literacy is key to understanding how the Earth works and our effect on the natural systems of the planet that sustain our lives as well as other species. In order to live more
sustainably, we need to become more aware of our effects on nature, learning from the changes of the planet and living with a lesser impact.

Environmental education allows the human race to become more connected to and understanding of nature, its services to us, and our impact on it in return. Environmental education has the ability to further one’s understanding of the environment, need for lifestyle change and action, as well as their own personal environmental worldview. These steps combined ultimately determine an individual’s contribution to environmental causes in today’s society in which awareness is crucial in determining the future of our planet. Documentaries can help in this process by serving as an educational tool; showcasing a specific topic through a successful format and communication plan can impact the audience by sharing new information with an emotional appeal, ultimately educating on the issue at hand while making a case for its importance and direct relation to the individual viewer. This results in a better understanding of the environmental topic and leaves the audience with specific emotions and desires for actions as discussed in the previous chapters.

Environmental education became legitimized in the 1960’s-1970’s by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as well as the development of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN). “The 1968 UNESCO Conference called for the development of curriculum materials relating to studying the environment for all levels of education, the promotion of technical training, and the stimulation of global awareness of environmental problems. It also advocated the setting up of national coordinating bodies for environmental education around the globe.” Following this, in 1970 the IUCN defined environmental education as “the process of recognising values and clarifying concepts in order to

develop skills and attitudes necessary to understand and appreciate the inter-relatedness among man, his culture, and his biophysical surroundings. Environmental education also entails practice in decision-making and self-formulation of a code of behaviour about issues concerning environmental quality.”  

On top of the definition, UNESCO published a set of objectives for environmental education in 1975 that emphasize fostering awareness, presenting opportunities, and creating patterns of behavior of individuals, communities, and society as a whole in regards to the environment. In addition, the Council for Environmental Education succeeded in showcasing the potential for innovation and opportunity in execution of environmental education: “As an educational approach it (environmental education) can permeate a range of disciplines, both traditional and new, as well as form the mainspring of many integrated courses. With its methodology firmly inter-related it can impart the balanced understanding of, and active concern for, the whole environment which alone can enable man to plan and realise a world fit to live in. Environmental education is regarded as the embodiment of a philosophy which should be pervasive, rather than a ‘subject’ which might be separately identified.”

This approach demonstrates that environmental education can be produced and work effectively in different mediums, as “while a science-based and inter-disciplinary approach to environmental education is the first consideration of many, there are also important initiatives from the side of the humanities and from the full spectrum of individual subjects.”

Moving into the 21st century, the book “Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder,” written in 2004 by Richard Louv, was a groundbreaking work that elaborated on the increasing disconnect between education and the needs of the

46 Ibid., 7-8.
48 Ibid., 8.
environment. It output simple solutions, actions, and discussion points for the population to take part in to strive for this change in educational direction. This book stood as motivation for increased interest in environmental awareness for all generations; the No Child Left Inside Movement resulted from this as a motive for the funding for and promoting of environmental education. This movement supported the training of teachers to educate the youth of the United States, addressing environmental literacy, outdoor education, and healthy actions.

With this knowledge of the defining characteristics of environmental education as well as of the increased importance for environmental awareness, documentary films serve as the perfect tool in our technologically driven society to inform and inspire. Used in classrooms and as teaching tools embedded into curriculums, documentaries have a unique ability to help “achieve desired learning outcomes.” In an educational setting, there exists, “great potential of adopting and utilising documentaries in environmental teaching and learning to promote students’ knowledge, attitudes, and behavioural disposition.” Beyond this traditional educational atmosphere, environmental documentaries can share knowledge to audiences at home, on the go, etc. This makes this learning medium unique as there is no limit to how and when the messages of film can be shared and reflected upon.

In professor and environmentalist David Orr’s piece “What Is Education For?,” he lists six suggestions to benefit rethinking education in terms of the environment. He states, “all education is environmental education,” and, “the goal of education is not mastery of subject matter, but of one’s person.” A well-rounded education results in drawing connections from the aspects of the natural world as that is essentially where everything we have comes from. And the

50 Ibid., 2.
most important part of indulging in this curriculum is understanding our personal places in these connections to the natural world. He also emphasizes that, “we cannot say that we know something until we understand the effects of this knowledge on real people and their communities.”

Ultimately, documentaries allow for a unique window of education and influence of knowledge on the natural world and these situations of reality that Orr emphasizes.

A great example of this relationship between education and worldview as emphasized by Orr is the environmental documentary Mission Blue (2014). This film was created in collaboration with Dr. Sylvia Earle’s Mission Blue campaign that focuses on establishing marine protected areas worldwide. The documentary itself focuses specifically on Earle, looking at her life and career in marine studies and conservation while tying in the efforts of her campaign by featuring some of their expeditions to these ‘Hope Spots,’ the marine protected areas that they ultimately work to “inspire an upwelling of public awareness, access and support for.”

Mission Blue as a film is being used to mobilize public opinion and activism on behalf of the Mission Blue campaign and Silvia Earle Alliance. Through the campaign’s website, the public can donate, take action, while learning more and staying updated with the latest news and accomplishments concerning Hope Spots and ocean stories. Ultimately, this film is unique as it is directly tied to such an active and specific organization; there were 50 official Hope Spots following the release of the documentary, in 2018 there were 94, and now at the end of 2019 there are 122, showcasing the vast impact that Earle and her campaign have around the world, which has only been further by the presence of the Mission Blue documentary. The film is also being used as an educational tool via the National Geographic Society, making the documentary accessible for curriculum purposes with resources created and based around the film for grades

51 David Orr, "What Is Education For?" (Context Institute, 2011).
52 Mission Blue, "About Mission Blue" (Silvia Earle Alliance).
K-2, 3-5, 6-8, and 9-12. In expanding beyond this specific example, if/when environmental documentaries have interactive websites supporting the release and promotion of the film, such as Mission Blue’s, the sites at the minimum typically have listed ways to take action in supporting the presented issue and watching guides to learn further and develop knowledge on the topic. This kind of continuation of an environmental documentary into online and physical, ever-present platforms is key to advancing the communication effects a step further into the audience’s hands by engaging with lessons and activities to further knowledge about the topic, or activism surrounding the issue. The creation and execution of educational plans and interactive tools online tied to these kinds of films demonstrates the effectiveness of environmental documentaries as educational tools.

Alternatively, it could be interpreted that currently “at a time when humans have more technology and power than ever before to degrade and disrupt nature, most people know little about nature, and have little direct contact what it. Technology has led many people to see themselves as being apart from nature instead of being part of it all.” This media-based form of environmental education described through my research could be understood as increasing this disconnect, however, I argue that the messages we intake through environmental documentaries have the effect to promote engagement with nature. Images and footage have the ability to motivate and reconnect audiences to the natural world. And as “achieving environmental literacy involves being able to answer certain questions and having an understanding of certain key topics,” the narratives that are presented through film exist to serve this purpose of educating and promoting individual thought and opinion on environmental causes.53

Chapter 5. Can Environmental Documentaries Save the Planet?

Taking all of the different aspects of environmental documentaries into consideration, including the environmental topics and realities being covered, the persuasion and communication theories being utilized, and the existing relation to environmental education, one has to question if this form of environmental media is effective in stirring change in the general public. In the previous chapters, it has been emphasized the importance hidden in the purpose of this communication medium to spark the minds and actions of the public to generate positive change for the benefit of environmental causes.

Understanding the background and data behind environmental media coverage and global environmental issues and initiatives, environmental documentaries are an effective tool and information source for the public in regards to the natural world. Breaking down the defining characteristics of documentaries, the history and evolution of documentaries exposes the relationship between an increased exposure to environmental problems and the evolution of technology and media, resulting in an increase of production and viewership of environmental documentaries. Defining public communication campaigns and persuasion theories, the role of environmental documentaries in this form of social movement is presented and emphasized through different elements of rhetoric and persuasion functions to effectively achieve the goals of the filmmaker and live up to the use of these films as a communication medium. And in identifying the relationship between documentaries and environmental education, the overall connection arises for the ability of this media-driven form of public education to shape one’s environmental worldview and actions. To conclude, we must address the overall success or failure of environmental documentaries in this realm. Is this medium effective? If not, how can we fix this? How can we make this media platform stronger in terms of educating and spreading awareness to support environmental action?
Environmental documentaries often face criticism of their messaging and calls to action, as many, even in the environmentalist and filmmaking communities, question if it is quite enough to create change. Al Gore’s groundbreaking 2006 climate change documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*, is often at the center of this kind of attention. An article in The Conversation, a globally known independent, non-profit media-outlet, describes in relation to Al Gore’s film that, “while “big issue” documentaries do a great job raising awareness and developing attitudes on important issues, they often don’t go far enough in inspiring a “call to action” – especially one that leads to long-term behaviour change. Gore’s first film did inspire short-term action on climate change, but the effects soon faded,” and that, “less is known about the media’s ability to have a positive influence – such as encouraging environmentally friendly behaviours. Even when research is conducted, the long-term effects are rarely considered.”

Ultimately, the messaging and call to action from a film can be motivating and spark immediate change in the audience, however, lasting impacts and impressions may be lacking from the capabilities of these forms of media-education.

In relation to this observation, the non-direct, media-based connection to the environment provided through environmental documentaries often faces critiques from strong advocates of education via experience and hands-on learning. Although *Last Child in the Woods* by Richard Louv is an excellent supporter of environmental education as a whole, to criticize the use of media and technology as a connector to nature as the essence of Louv’s case is that hands-on, experiential environmental education is the best kind, that is ultimately being lost in this increasingly media-driven society. This contrasts with the previously emphasized, proved

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54 Kim Borg and Bradley Jorgensen, "The truth about inconvenient truths: 'big issue' documentaries don't always change our behaviour” (The Conversation, 2018).
importance and effects of environmental documentaries. A direct relationship with nature is important, but these kinds of films provide a medium to expose realities and experiences that society may normally not encounter in the mainstream media and news, or within daily lives and first-hand experiences or understandings of the natural world. In addition to this, environmental education incorporated into curriculums and teachings allow for the development of environmental worldviews, engraining habits and mindsets into the daily lives of those being educated. Environmental documentaries in partnership with lessons and curriculums allow for a more defined impact on the audience as they can further relate to the messages of the film and be motivated by or reflect upon the topics of reality in regards to their learnings and developing intellect on the natural world.

Utilizing the different disciplines embodied throughout my research and chapters, my suggested policy recommendations surrounding the execution and use of environmental documentaries are as follows:

First, based upon the statistics of documentary trends as well as my survey data presented in Chapter 1, government funding should be granted to filmmakers of environmental documentaries as it is with certain environmental organizations. Through the exploration of the past, present, and future of environmental documentaries in Chapter 2, it is evident that this medium is a form of legacy media, crucial as a campaign tool on behalf of environmental causes. If a film can positively effect an environmental campaign or organization by further promoting its cause and reaching wider audiences, then the research, production, and release of environmental documentaries on this behalf should have increased opportunities to receive support and funding. Having the government recognize the importance of this communication
tool, even if solely through monetary efforts, will help to make a difference in the increase of environmental documentaries and the future of environmental education.

Next, with the threat of disinformation campaigns as discussed in Chapter 3, policy needs to be implemented regarding scientific support and fact checking of information presented in environmental documentaries. This may be a difficult aspect to monitor on the scale of film production itself, but services that promote and help to release these films, such as streaming services and media companies, could utilize this kind of policy in their screening practices in order to output and showcase only reliably sourced films. This kind of filtering prior to public release would benefit the film industry as well as the audiences intaking this form of media as the line between fact and fiction would be fully clear when engaging with a film narrative of an environmental cause.

Finally, in referring to the topic of literacy in Chapter 4, environmental activist documentaries have a somewhat narrow viewership, so the expansion of environmental education itself may also expand viewership and use of this communication medium. This would require a creation of policy rooted in the curriculums and functioning of environmental education itself to ultimately incorporate the viewing and use of more environmental documentaries as a teaching tool. These documentaries, as previously discussed, allow individuals to relate to them from their current environmental knowledge and understandings to then personally act upon their lifestyle and environmental worldviews in result of being successfully affected by the communication and persuasion structures of the films. Policy engrained in state and local public education would serve a purpose of increasing the density and variety of environmental education through this unique medium of environmental documentary, and make curriculums fit
for media-driven society, with a still existing emphasis on exposure to the natural world and its necessary messages.

Beyond policy creation in the format of supporting documentaries, it is important to attribute the way environmental documentaries have influenced other policies and advocacy actions surrounding the issues presented and advocated for in the films themselves. The Cove brought global public attention to the issue of whaling in Japan and led to immediate demand for action amongst local communities and international celebrities, politicians, and ambassadors, resulting in decreases. Blackfish exposed the public to the problems and effects of animal captivity at SeaWorld, causing the organization to end its orca breeding program following the backlash created by the messaging within the film; beyond just SeaWorld, Blackfish effected mindsets and policy surrounding aquatic animal captivity on a global scale. Josh Fox, director of the Gasland films and the documentary How to Let Go of the World, is using his works as organizing platforms by traveling across the country to towns with connections to and issues with the fossil fuel industry, as this was what he presented first on screen, and is now physically lobbying and engaging with these communities to spark action regarding their environmental health. I covered various other examples of this kind of correlation between documentary and change in the previous chapters, such as with Food, Inc. and Mission Blue, and it can be examined that this trend of impact is common across a wide variety of other environmental documentaries, depending on their popularity and presence in the media.

Depending on the range of the topic, its reached audience and the communication efforts demonstrated within the film and beyond (i.e. education, resources, or pressure for activism),

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56 Appendix A. Key Concept Definitions
57 E. C. M. Parsons and Naomi A. Rose, “The Blackfish Effect: Corporate and Policy Change in the Face of Shifting Public Opinion on Captive Cetaceans” (Tourism in Marine Environments, 2018).
58 Ethan McCoy, “Funding Documentaries to Drive Policy Change” (The Center for Effective Philanthropy, 2016).
documentaries have the ability to sparks lobbying, community action, and political change. This exposes the root of my investigation into this topic; the creation of policy stemming from the activism that was the result of an environmental documentary demonstrates the chain reaction that I believe is what makes these films so important in our society, today more than ever with the increase of technology and platforms to create, watch, and share on. Making audiences aware of our impacts and negative effects through successful messaging and image events on screen can ultimately lead to this kind of large-scale change through implemented regulations, bans, reevaluations, etc., all through governmental policies that are pro-environment. To conclude, this chain reaction from film, to education, to activism, to policy is proof that an effective environmental documentary, with well-executed communication effects, can contribute to our overall efforts to “save the planet” by tackling one environmental issue at a time.

Appendix A. Key Concept Definitions

Environmental Ethics: Human beliefs about what is right or wrong with how we treat the environment.

Environmental Policy: Laws, rules, and regulations related to an environmental problem that are developed, implemented, and enforced by a particular government body or agency.

Environmental Worldview: Set of assumptions and beliefs about how people think the world works, what they think their role in the world should be, and what they believe is right and wrong environmental behavior (environmental ethics).

Appendix B. Survey Focus and Questions

Statement of Research Focus: I conducted a survey to provide more quantitative data within my senior thesis and potentially show if/how Fordham students and faculty are affected by environmental documentaries, the existing influence of documentaries, this media’s growing
popularity, etc. These trends could be examined amongst all participants as a whole for larger data examinations, but also within the specific niche communities that the survey was distributed amongst which could help to identify demographic trends.

Study Design and Sample Population: My study was conducted through an online, non-experimental survey. My survey focus was geared towards students in the Fordham University community. As I could not survey the entire Fordham community, this survey had the potential to be biased depending on the specific demographics of students within certain departments, clubs, organizations, grades, etc. However, I hoped that these variations could help contribute to demographic comparisons within the survey results. Overall, my main goal was to be able to evaluate additional accurate and interesting quantitative data for my study in order to set the stage for audience opinions and perceptions of environmental documentaries to be considered throughout the rest of my paper. I distributed the survey to the student population through various clubs and organizations, academic departments, and grade levels. Examples include a variety of environmentally focused groups (i.e. St. Rose’s Garden, Sustainability Committee, Students for Environmental Awareness and Justice, Humanitarian Student Union, Environmental Studies department), political groups (i.e. College Democrats, College Republicans, Every Vote Counts), freshman and senior class honors communities (i.e. the Manresa Scholars Program and Fordham Club), business school organizations (i.e. the Social Innovation Collaboratory).

Survey Research Questions and Hypothesis:

Research Questions:

1. Are environmental documentaries effective in that they:
   a. trigger an emotional response?
   b. increase environmental awareness?
c. generate action and change in lifestyle?

2. Are environmental documentaries a helpful tool for environmental education?

Hypothesis:

1. Environmental documentaries increase awareness of specific environmental problems/causes and interest towards these issues.

2. Audiences of environmental documentaries are likely to experience an emotional response but are less likely to physically take action.

Survey Questions: I required two qualifying aspects to my survey; first, participants must have watched an environmental documentary at some point in their lifetime. I provided context to help determine the choice of yes or no: “The documentary film is defined by Encyclopedia Britannica as a, "motion picture that shapes and interprets factual material for purposes of education or entertainment." The subgenera of the environmental documentary exists when an environmental issue is the featured topic of the film.” Second, participants had to be a current student at Fordham University. I followed with two demographic questions for the ability to analyze survey results based on gender, whether that be male, female, or other, and grade in college, whether that be freshman, sophomore, junior, or senior. I composed three questions to generate results on the respondents’ interactions with environmental documentaries and their viewing habits:

Over the course of the last year, how often have you viewed an environmental documentary?
Select the answer(s) that you best identify with: When viewing environmental documentaries, are you typically…

- Required to watch for class, work, assignment, etc.
- Watching for entertainment
- Watching because it was recommended
• Watching to learn more about the topic
• Other (please specify)

When viewing an environmental documentary, which platform do you most commonly consume this media on? (select up to 2)

• Cable television (i.e. NBC, ABC, CNN, National Geographic, Discovery Channel, History Channel, etc.)
• Streaming service (i.e. Netflix, HBO, Hulu, Amazon Prime, etc.)
• YouTube
• DVD
• In-Theaters
• Public Screening or Event
• Other (please specify)

Following these, I provided two rating scale style questions. The first was a scale to agree or disagree with five different statements about the effectiveness and importance, or lack thereof, of environmental documentaries:

1. Environmental documentaries are effective in spreading awareness of a specific environmental issue.
2. Environmental documentaries are effective in generating action around a specific movement or cause.
3. Environmental documentaries are a waste of time to watch.
4. Environmental documentaries are a useful educational tool.
5. Environmental documentaries are just a form of media, and therefore do not help the issue at hand.
The second rating scale question was based on a self-reflection of emotions in regards to this genre of films. Respondents were prompted to agree or disagree on a scale to nine different characteristics inputted into the statement, “After viewing environmental documentaries, I am typically left feeling…” The listed emotions required to respond to were depressed, unhopeful, shocked, inspired, motivated, educated, aware, positive, and negative. Both of the rating scale questions were used to help determine the relationship between film and audience beyond just viewership. This evaluation was concluded with the following question: After watching an environmental documentary, how willing are you to change your lifestyle to reduce the damage you cause to the environment in relation to the film's topic? This multiple-choice question was answered on a scale of willingness with the options being extremely willing, very willing, somewhat willing, not so willing, or not at all willing. Overall, these questions were necessary to get a sense of the feelings in correspondence with environmental documentaries. The survey ended with an optional, write-in question, prompting respondents to, “please provide a specific environmental documentary you have watched and its impact on your environmental awareness and/or lifestyle.” This allowed respondents to expand further on their connection to environmental documentaries in their own words and generate examples and trends for specific films and their impacts, or lack thereof.


“Chapter 1: Theories and Principles of Public Communication Campaigns.” *Public*


