Effective Storytelling Techniques in Environmental Documentaries to Promote Lasting Social Change: An Analysis of Blackfish and An Inconvenient Truth

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Abstract. In response to the pressing need to address climate change, there has been a growing interest in utilizing documentaries as a powerful tool for raising awareness and fostering social change. This study adopts a comprehensive approach to analyze two influential environmental documentaries, namely Blackfish and An Inconvenient Truth. By employing a qualitative research methodology, specifically content analysis, we aim to identify and examine the specific textual components and storytelling techniques employed in these films that contribute to their effectiveness in inspiring change. Our investigation focuses on elucidating the narrative techniques, visual storytelling elements, and persuasive strategies utilized in the documentaries. By investigating these aspects, we seek to provide valuable insights and practical recommendations for filmmakers to create compelling and emotionally impactful films that can effectively promote social change.

1 Introduction

The climate change crisis has been widely recognized as the leading ecological emergency of our time, with the collective scientific consensus on the severity of the crisis being overwhelming, to say the least, and its effects clearer than ever — each year sees growing temperatures (Figure 1), increasingly severe storms, rising sea levels (Figure 2), and more damage to ecosystems — making it imperative to take immediate action to mitigate its effects [1-2].

Despite this, the slow and gradual rate at which these effects occur makes the issue seemingly imperceptible to the public, and thus causes it to be harder to raise awareness and motivate people to take immediate action [3]. Even harder is to translate that immediate action into consistent action, which further translates to long-term change.

However, despite the many challenges of translating awareness into sustained action, many figures and institutions have attempted to do so. Among the many approaches they have adopted, an approach that is becoming increasingly popular, and the one the writers of this study seeks to highlight, is the use of documentaries [4].

This rise in popularity of documentaries as a tool for promoting awareness can largely be attributed to their ability to engage with viewers emotionally, reach a wide audience, and provide valuable information and insights. Additionally, documentary films possess the potential to, under the right circumstances, inspire people to take action and serve as an effective means of advocacy. [5]

That being said, the effectiveness and success rate of documentaries in achieving their intended goals and inciting long-term change varies greatly, and there remains much to be understood about the specific textual components of documentary films — such as narrative and narrative structure, characterization, editing, mise-en-scene — that contribute to their effectiveness. This, in addition with the aforementioned fact that the issue of climate change remains one that is seemingly imperceptible and difficult to address, presents a challenge for those seeking to create a documentary that effectively covers climate change and incites long-term change.

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Fig. 1. Yearly surface temperature compared to the 20th-century average from 1880–2022, indicating that the global average surface temperature is rapidly rising. [1]
This study seeks to address this gap in knowledge by analyzing the textual techniques utilized in documentaries that have been successful in promoting action that has translated into long-term changes, with the goal of answering the following research question.

**What are the key textual components that make documentary films emotionally compelling and successful in inciting long-term change?**

![Global Average Surface Temperature](image)

**Fig. 2.** Seasonal (3-month) sea level estimates. The values are shown as change in sea level in millimeters compared to the 1993-2008 average. The graph indicates that the global sea levels are rising. [2]

## 2 Literature Review

Before analysis and study on any level can be done, we must first examine the impact that can be attributed to either film and determine whether or not the two documentary films were successful in creating long-term change. To do this, the researchers utilized a comprehensive literature review of previous studies conducted on the two films’ impact.

### 2.1 The Significance of *An Inconvenient Truth*

Since its release in 2006, *An Inconvenient Truth* has undoubtedly left an impression. Beyond being a commercial success — the film is the 13th highest-grossing documentary feature to air in the United States until 2010 — it was also a critical one, receiving two Academy Awards, including one for Best Documentary Feature, and it earned Gore the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007 for his endeavors in raising awareness about human-caused climate change.

Furthermore, several studies performed on the film’s social impact reveal various short-term effects. A 2010 study by J. M. Nolan reveals that individuals who watched the film reported an increase in environmental concern knowledge as well as a willingness to act [7]. Additionally, a similar study found that, two months after the film was released, there was a 50% increase of carbon offsets purchases in zip codes within a 10-mile radius from where the film was shown [8]. Thus, it would not be an unfair assumption to make that the film was successful in inciting long-term change.

### 2.2 The Significance of *Blackfish*

On the other hand, *Blackfish*, though it did not receive as many awards as *An Inconvenient Truth* nor did it see the same amount of commercial success, has been similarly, if not more, successful in inciting long-term change. A study on the ‘Blackfish Effect’ has outlined a strong connection between the film’s release and a consistent drop in Seaworld visitors and SeaWorld’s stock prices, as well as a link between the film’s release and the discontinuation of SeaWorld’s orca breeding program [9].

The study then proceeds to provide evidence that both effects that were stated to have been caused by the film have persisted to this day [9]. Thus, it can be conclusively said that *Blackfish* was successful in translating short-term change to long-term change.

## 3 Methodology

With the previously-stated conclusions of both film’s impact in mind, our aim is to then perform an analysis on what components are consistent in both films.

This study will first determine the impact of two documentaries; Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* and Gabriela Cowperthwaite’s *Blackfish*, and whether they were successful in inciting long-term change or not, before then using textual analysis to identify and compare the components used in these films that contributed to each film’s impact. As previously inferred, in textually analysing documentary films, the components that can be analyzed include narrative, narrative structure, characterization, editing, mise-en-scene, the utilization of interviews, the utilization of archival footage, the utilization of voiceover narration, and visual aesthetic [5-6].

In order to examine the factors that contribute to the effectiveness of documentaries in promoting long-term change, this study will primarily utilize a comprehensive comparative textual analysis of the two aforementioned documentary films, Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* and Gabriela Cowperthwaite’s *Blackfish*, in which the researchers will have a close reading of the documentary, particularly the narrative structure and narrative components of each documentary as well as the characterizations utilized. This will then help us to identify how these elements contributed to the effectiveness of the film.

The writers of this paper have chosen to limit the research focus to narrative and characterization in order to delve deeply into these specific elements and provide a comprehensive analysis.

Recognizing the crucial role of narrative and characterization in evoking emotional engagement and fostering viewer empathy, this research seeks to uncover the strategies employed by filmmakers to create impactful storytelling experiences. Furthermore, the decision to narrow the scope to narrative and characterization is motivated by feasibility and manageability considerations, as these aspects can be effectively analyzed through close reading and
comparative analysis. The limitation of research to narrative and characterization in this study effectively addresses the research question of identifying the key textual components that make documentary films emotionally compelling and successful in inciting long-term change.

Narrative structure serves as the backbone of storytelling, shaping the sequence of events and framing the overall message of the film. By examining the narrative techniques employed in documentaries, such as the use of personal anecdotes, dramatic tension, or thematic arcs, we can gain insights into how filmmakers construct narratives that resonate with audiences and evoke emotional responses [6].

Similarly, characterization plays a crucial role in building empathy and connection with the subjects depicted in the film. Analyzing the portrayal of individuals or communities within documentaries can shed light on how filmmakers humanize their subjects, create relatable and multi-dimensional characters, and elicit empathetic responses from viewers [6].

Therefore, by focusing on narrative and characterization, this research seeks to uncover the textual components that contribute to the emotional impact and long-term efficacy of documentary films in inspiring social change.

Thus, our methodology, can be outlined as follows;

1. Film Selection Select two documentaries, "An Inconvenient Truth" and "Blackfish," as the focus of the study based on their impact and relevance to the research objective.
2. Data Collection & Literature Review
   Gather the necessary data for analysis, including the documentary films themselves, relevant scholarly articles, interviews, and critical reviews.
3. Familiarization
   Watch the selected documentaries multiple times to gain a comprehensive understanding of their content, narrative structure, and overall filmmaking techniques.
4. Textual Analysis
   a. Narrative
      Analyze the narrative structure of each documentary, examining the overall organization, progression, and storytelling techniques used; identify and analyze the specific narrative components employed in each film, such as personal anecdotes, scientific data, historical context, or emotional appeals.
   b. Characterizations
      Examine the characters portrayed in the documentaries, how they are characterized in the film, their roles, and the strategies used to develop their narratives and connect with the audience.

4 A Textual Analysis of An Inconvenient Truth and Blackfish

To conduct a textual analysis of the two films, we will examine two components of the film's text that contribute to its emotional impact, its narrative and characterization.

4.1 An Analysis of An Inconvenient Truth

4.1.1 Narrative

The narrative structure of An Inconvenient Truth largely revolves around a presentation given by Al Gore; in the presentation, he discusses the scientific opinion on global warming, its present and future effects, and stresses that it is a moral issue, not a political one. The film also includes segments intended to refute critics who say that global warming is unproven or that warming will be insignificant.

Additionally, the film interweaves Gore's slide show presentation, which includes detailed graphs, flow charts, and visuals, with anecdotes from his life that influenced his concerns about environmental issues. Within these anecdotes, Gore shares stories of his college education with early climate expert Roger Revelle, his sister's death from lung cancer, and his young son's near-fatal car accident.

Fig. 3. An Inconvenient Truth’s call to action

Finally, the film also includes a call to action, (Figure 3) as the credits roll that urges audience members to take immediate action that can contribute to saving the planet, which has been known to greatly enhance the impact of any documentary. By presenting specific and tangible actions that individuals can take, such as reducing carbon emissions or supporting policies that address climate change, the film empowers viewers to take ownership of the issue and encourages them to make a difference.

Furthermore, the call to action is strategically placed at the end of the film, which maximizes its impact. By this point, the audience has been emotionally invested in the film and has gained a greater understanding of the severity of the issue. This means that they are more likely to be receptive to the call to action and to follow through with the suggested actions.
4.1.2 Characterization

An Inconvenient Truth faces the challenge of having to tackle climate change, a villain that is faceless, complex, and lacks any clear or obvious characterization. To address this challenge, the film characterizes climate change as a destructive force by including scenes of the aftermath of the destruction at a smaller scale. By showing the impact of climate change on individuals and communities, the film makes the issue more tangible and easier to grasp. For example, the film shows footage of Hurricane Katrina and its devastating effects on New Orleans (Figure 4). This approach makes it easier for the audience to understand the severity of climate change and the urgency to take action.

Fig. 4. A scene from An Inconvenient Truth that depicts the devastation of Hurricane Katrina.

Additionally, the film characterizes Al Gore in a way that connects the audience to him on a personal level. The film includes personal anecdotes from Gore's life, such as the story of his son's car accident and how it inspired him to prioritize climate change advocacy (Figure 5). By sharing stories of his sister's death from lung cancer and his son's near-fatal car accident, Gore connects with the audience emotionally and highlights the personal stakes of inaction on climate change. This approach creates empathy for Gore and makes the issue of climate change more relatable to the audience.

The effect of characterizing climate change and Al Gore in this way is to make the issue more emotionally compelling and relatable to the audience. By making climate change more tangible and personal, the film motivates the audience to take action and be part of the solution. Furthermore, the characterization of Gore as a relatable and empathetic figure helps to build trust with the audience and increases the credibility of the film's message.

4.2 An Analysis of Blackfish

4.2.1 Narrative

The structure of Blackfish is deliberately designed to elicit an emotional response from the audience. The film begins and introduces us into the context of the narrative with an audio recording of a call made to 911 after Tilikum, the orca in which the documentary largely revolves around, attacked its trainer, Dawn Brancheau. By beginning with the audio recording of the emergency call made after Tilikum's attack, the filmmakers immediately establish a sense of urgency and danger that sets the tone for the rest of the film. This creates an immediate emotional engagement with the audience and helps to draw them into the film.

As the film progresses, the filmmakers intersperse footage of Tilikum and other captive orcas with interviews with trainers, experts, and witnesses, creating a sense of intimacy and immediacy (Figure 6). The use of personal anecdotes from former trainers who worked with Tilikum and other captive orcas helps to create a sense of empathy with these animals and underscores the tragedy of their captivity.

Fig. 6. A former SeaWorld trainer describes her experience with Tilikum.

In addition to these techniques, the film's non-linear structure also helps to create an emotional impact, as the jumping back and forth between different points in time creates a sense of suspense and tension.

The effect of this nonlinearity is perhaps best demonstrated in how the film depicts Tilikum's attack on trainer Dawn Brancheau. Instead of immediately showing the attack, the filmmakers first introduce Brancheau through interviews with her colleagues and family, discussing her passion for working with the orcas and her close relationship with them.

The film then jumps back in time to earlier incidents involving Tilikum, gradually building up the sense of danger and unpredictability surrounding the orca. Only after establishing the orca's troubled history and the risks of working with him does the film finally show the attack on Brancheau, creating a powerful emotional impact for the audience.
By presenting the events in a non-linear fashion, the filmmakers create a sense of suspense and tension that builds throughout the film, making the ultimate tragedy all the more devastating. *Blackfish* also uses flashbacks to Tilikum's capture and time at Sealand of the Pacific, where he allegedly suffered abuse from other captive orcas. By presenting these events out of order, the film creates a sense of unease and mystery, gradually building to the climactic moments of the attacks themselves.

4.2.2 Characterization

The characterization in *Blackfish* is another element that contributes to the emotional engagement of the audience. The film presents Tilikum, the orca at the center of the story, as a complex character with a tragic backstory. Through interviews with former trainers and footage of Tilikum's behavior, the film portrays him as a sentient being with emotions and intelligence, rather than a mindless animal.

In addition to Tilikum, the film also presents the former trainers who worked with him as sympathetic characters. They speak candidly about their experiences at SeaWorld and their relationships with the orcas they trained, providing insights into the emotional bond between humans and these majestic creatures. The film also includes interviews with scientists and experts who support the argument that orcas should not be kept in captivity, further contributing to the emotional impact of the film.

One particular example of characterization that contributes to the emotional impact of the film is the portrayal of Dawn Brancheau, a SeaWorld trainer who was killed by Tilikum. Through interviews with her friends and colleagues, as well as footage of her interactions with the orcas, the film presents her as a compassionate and dedicated trainer who deeply loved the animals she worked with. The audience is left with a sense of loss and sadness over her death, which is attributed to the captivity and mistreatment of Tilikum and other orcas.

By humanizing these creatures and highlighting their suffering in captivity, the film prompts the audience to question the ethics of keeping wild animals in theme parks and other forms of entertainment.

5 Results

Our analysis and effort to answer the aforementioned research question of “*What are the key textual components that make documentary films emotionally compelling and successful in inciting long-term change?*” have yielded the following results.

Firstly, the examination of narrative structures revealed that documentaries often employ a combination of chronological, thematic, and investigative approaches to present their subjects. This allows for a well-rounded exploration of the topic at hand while maintaining a coherent and engaging storyline.

Secondly, the characterization in documentary films was found to be a crucial element in establishing emotional connections with the audience. Filmmakers strategically portray protagonists, experts, and individuals affected by the subject matter, using personal stories and experiences to elicit empathy and create a sense of relatability.

Additionally, the research highlighted the significance of character development throughout the film, as it enhances audience investment and fosters a deeper understanding of the issues being addressed. By focusing on narrative and characterization, this research has shed light on the specific textual components that contribute to the emotional impact and long-term efficacy of documentary films in inciting change.

5.1 Limitation of Research

The limitation of this research lies in its focus on analyzing only the narrative and characterization of the selected documentaries, "An Inconvenient Truth" and "Blackfish." While narrative and characterization are important components of documentary films, there are other textual elements that contribute to their effectiveness in promoting long-term change.

Additionally, this research only considers two specific documentaries, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. By focusing on a limited sample, the research may not capture the full range of textual components and techniques that contribute to the effectiveness of documentaries in inciting long-term change.

To address this limitation, future research could broaden its scope by analyzing a larger set of documentaries and considering a wider range of textual components. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the specific elements that make documentary films emotionally compelling and successful in driving long-term change.

6 Conclusion

In conclusion, this research has focused on analyzing the narrative and characterization of documentary films, particularly *An Inconvenient Truth* and *Blackfish*, as key textual components that contribute to their emotional impact and long-term efficacy in inciting change. By examining how filmmakers construct narratives and portray characters, we have gained insights into the techniques employed to engage audiences, evoke emotions, and foster empathy. While our research is limited to narrative and characterization, it provides a solid foundation for understanding the elements that
make documentary films compelling and successful in inspiring long-term change. These techniques can be utilized by other documentaries to create a similarly impactful emotional experience for audiences. By telling compelling stories and engaging audiences on a personal level, documentaries can inspire action on important social and environmental issues. Other documentaries can learn from the success of An Inconvenient Truth and Blackfish by leveraging similar storytelling techniques. Further studies can additionally expand on these findings by exploring additional textual components and their role in shaping the transformative power of documentaries.

References


