

CONTEMPORARY ADVOCACY FILMMAKING:  
CAMPAIGNS FOR CHANGE

by

Christiana Marie Cooper

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## ABSTRACT

In recent years, advocacy documentaries have evolved to incorporate a range of tools and strategies to effect change. Unlike “social issue documentaries,” which are often produced to simply increase awareness around an issue, newer forms of advocacy documentaries not only strive to educate the viewer on an issue, but also to engage the viewer in specific actions. New media and digital technology provide novel tools for documentary filmmakers interested in creating these changes. Not all documentarians have the goal of creating change, nor should they. But for those that do fall into this category, there are certain approaches and tools that are invaluable for creating impact, as well as measuring the outcome. Ideally, the advocacy documentarian should consider the framework that is available and how to best utilize the available tools and methods to obtain the most successful outcome, and should do so well before onset of production. I analyze the leading approaches that successful contemporary advocacy documentaries have employed, as well as some of the pitfalls that others have faced. After identifying the defining characteristics of “successful” advocacy films, I analyze several advocacy documentaries to illustrate how these methods and approaches are utilized, as well as some measurable impacts. I specifically address environmental and social justice advocacy films as salient examples. Additionally, I discuss the current methods for measuring the success of advocacy documentaries and how these metrics can be applied.

## INTRODUCTION

“We realized that the important thing was not the film itself but that which the film provoked.” - Fernando Solanas, 1969

Film serves as a window into a world that many of us may never see and allows us to connect on deep emotional levels. Certainly, documentaries are a form of entertainment, but they can also serve to shift public perception in ways that many other forms of media cannot. Personal stories and their messages can bring about great impact, and many filmmakers hope that their work helps to change the world for the better. The generation of new media and digital technologies is slowly changing the way in which documentaries are used for advocacy. While films themselves have served to increase awareness around issues for decades, advocacy documentary filmmakers today are employing new tools and methods to move the impact of film from awareness to change. Many advocacy documentaries are now only the story component of a much larger campaign, and many of them include a direct “call-to-action” to the audience, which allows the viewer to more actively participate in the story in a variety of ways. By analyzing how these methods were used in several advocacy documentaries, as well as how the various approaches potentially affected their impact, I hope to gain a better understanding of how to create successful advocacy documentaries.

Throughout the history of film, documentaries have advocated for certain causes or beliefs and have been used to bring about awareness. Because of the power of film, however, to influence large groups of people, it quickly became a tool for governments

and political organizations to “sway relevant groups of people in order to accommodate their agendas” (Combs 32). For example, in the 1930’s, governments commissioned films to raise awareness about current social and economic issues.

In the United States, Pare Lorenz produced *The Plow That Broke the Plains* (1936) for the Roosevelt government to show American citizens how their agricultural decisions led to environmental destruction of the central plains and mass migration, as well as to advocate for Roosevelt’s New Deal. This film was followed one year later by *The River* (1937), a film highlighting the need for government intervention for water management and conservation. Despite the possible good intentions of the Roosevelt administration, there is an inherent fear that media created by or for the government is a form of propaganda because often the ultimate goal is to further a political agenda. A long list of documentary films now considered propaganda fall under this category – *The Battleship Potemkin* (1925), *Triumph of the Will* (1934), *Olympia* (1938), and *Why We Fight* (1942-5), to name just a few. In fact, many of the historical propaganda films were produced during wartime, with the intent of portraying “the enemy” as an object of fear and hatred, while depicting the sponsoring country as the hero.

Indeed, propaganda typically has a hidden agenda and often creates fictional realities. Throughout history, it has been used to promote a bias towards an ideological, political, or religious belief, and as Adolf Hitler so ironically stated, “Propaganda is a truly terrible weapon in the hands of an expert” (National Archives). Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* is one of the most iconic examples. Adolf Hitler commissioned the film, with the ultimate goal of glorifying the Nazi regime and Hitler as the supreme

leader who was capable of uniting the German people into a master race (Aufderheide 68). One could, however, argue that these films are also “advocacy” films.

It is clear that *Triumph of the Will* advocated for evil, but there is no rule that states that advocacy must only support good and justice. Authors, filmmakers, and photographers have time and time again lied for the purpose of advancing an agenda, “often by providing subjective content that may be deliberately misleading” (“Propaganda film”). Nevertheless, for the purpose of this thesis, I would like to work from the assertion that most documentary filmmakers do not wish to engage in propaganda. If anything, they have grown close to a topic or a person and feel that they could play a role as an advocate. I will focus on contemporary advocacy documentaries, with the assumption that these are not propaganda but are rather a depiction of reality and are used for the purpose of creating positive change. Should all documentary films also be advocacy films? No, I do not think so. But, I believe that it is important to differentiate between these categories. In particular, when one seeks to create films for social change, the lack of awareness of subjectivity could obstruct or even undermine the goals for that film.

In contrast to propaganda films, good advocacy documentaries can be described as films that state the subject and point of view up front, and then subsequently explore the various issues surrounding that topic (Martin). In recent years, however, a new form of advocacy documentary film has emerged, one that not only uses storytelling to bring about awareness but also integrates a multitude of platforms to support the storytelling, with the ultimate goal of change. These films not only address problems but also

advocate for a specific course of action. They often include “calls-to-action” for the audience to get personally involved in the change movement. Most importantly, the goal of advocacy films is “impact.” Every story has the potential to change some aspect of this world, and impact is the sum of these changes. An increasing number of organizations and film societies are conducting research to help define what these changes and impacts are, with a number of frameworks created to measure media performance and results.

Learning for Action describes it:

We define impact as change that happens to individuals, groups, organizations, systems, and social or physical conditions. Typically long-term and affected by many variables, impact represents the ultimate purpose of community-focused media efforts – it’s how the world is different as a result of our work (Learning for Action 1).

Through the use of social media, transmedia or various media platforms, and structured campaigns, advocacy filmmakers are now able to tap into novel tools that they can combine with their storytelling to increase their film’s impact. I posit that this form of advocacy filmmaking will likely continue to evolve as technology and media advances. Although there is a long history of documentary films serving to advocate for stories, the contemporary form of advocacy documentary films has become a tool in a much broader campaign scheme for change. Nevertheless, there are many questions that arise when one attempts to create change: What tools are needed to create change? Who or what changes? How can these changes be measured? What is the time frame in which change occurs? Is it possible to measure the impact of media within the context of a broad campaign? By working through these questions, I will attempt to propose some best practice guidelines for creating advocacy documentaries with the ultimate goal of impact.

## ADVOCACY FILMMAKING: TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Over the last few decades, many documentary films, such as *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) and *Super Size Me* (2004), have addressed important issues and garnered large audiences and relative box-office success. According to Box Office Mojo, *An Inconvenient Truth* grossed \$24,146,161 and *Super Size Me* grossed \$11,536,423 (Box Office Mojo). While these numbers might not be that spectacular for a narrative feature, they are very impressive for a documentary, even for one that has a theatrical release. Both of these films addressed issues that have huge negative repercussions on society. *An Inconvenient Truth*, which won the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature, was one of the first documentaries to address global warming and reach a broad audience. While I felt that the Power Point presentation-like style of the film was a bit dull and the personal story of Al Gore was weak, the film nevertheless drew large crowds. *Super Size Me*, which was also nominated for an Academy Award for Best Documentary, employed an entertaining performative style, with Morgan Spurlock as the protagonist. His journey of allowing his body and psychological well-being to completely fall apart while surviving entirely on fast food meals was compelling and convincing, as well as humorous and entertaining. Nevertheless, the social impacts of these films have been questionable. Unfortunately, much of the world, in particular the United States, has not made much progress in mitigating climate change or transitioning to sustainable energy. In fact, *An Inconvenient Truth* almost seemed to polarize the nation when it came to belief systems around anthropogenic climate change. In addition, the obesity epidemic and related diseases remain some of the leading causes of mortality in the United States.

Despite presenting some convincing, scientifically proven evidence of human-caused climate change and the health concerns of overeating and fast food, these two films alone did not greatly impact attitudinal or behavioral changes within our society.

This failure has led many filmmakers, as well as investors, to question the methods used to engage their audiences. Advocacy documentary filmmakers are facing a new world that requires not only great storytelling and fundraising, but also the inclusion of marketing plans, dynamic and broad communication, and collaborations with a variety of partners. The films have become only one component of the advocacy, albeit a very important one. Indeed, in the new world of advocacy filmmaking, the documentary film has become a tool that can help to mobilize audiences to take action and to form strategic partnerships that can provide a longer life and greater platform for the advocacy effort. Sam Gregory, the Program Director for WITNESS, a social justice/human rights organization that trains and supports activists and citizens around the world to use video safely, ethically, and effectively to expose human rights abuses in the fight for human rights change, describes “video advocacy” this way:

. . . video [is] an essential *tool* in social justice activism – one that can be deployed as strategically and effectively as more traditional forms of “advocacy” referring to the range of ways to exert pressure for a defined goal of change, including persuasion, relationship-building, lobbying, organizing, and mobilizing (Gregory et al. xii-xiii).

I will now address some of the key components of a successful advocacy documentary film campaign, using documentary film examples to highlight how these methods were strategically employed (or not). The three films that I will focus on are *The Invisible War* (2012), *Blackfish* (2013), and *Green* (2009). All three of these films were

aimed at advocacy, with powerful stories that connected to viewers through intense emotions. In addition, they each used a variety of methods for their strategic campaign. In particular, I chose *The Invisible War* and *Blackfish* because they both led to important policy changes. In contrast, the film *Green* was an incredibly powerful film that surely touched the hearts of everyone who saw it. It had all the filmmaking components of a great film and it told a good story, but this is a great example of how a great advocacy documentary can fail to lead to measurable impact. By analyzing these films and their outreach strategies, I hope to articulate what methods are key for successful impact.

### Film Case Studies

#### The Invisible War

The 2012 film by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering is a groundbreaking, investigative documentary into one of the most shameful secrets of the United States military – the epidemic of rape and sexual assault in our armed forces and the failure of the military to provide justice for these survivors. Intertwined with emotional and raw interviews of rape victims, *The Invisible War* reveals the full extent of the problem – a female soldier in today’s combat zones stands a greater chance to be raped by a fellow soldier than to be killed by enemy fire. Nearly all of the soldiers who were interviewed in the film have had major negative impacts in their lives ranging from suicide attempts and constant anxiety to excruciating physical pain and intimacy issues. The film also features hard-hitting interviews with high-ranking military officials and members of Congress, revealing many of the horrid conditions that seemingly allow rape to occur in the military. The film also

outlines what is needed to rectify this situation. The victims share how their only recourse is to report the assault to a higher up in the chain of command, who in many of these cases is the perpetrator's friend, drinking buddy, or even the assailant himself. Reporting on data from a 2010 study from the Department of Defense, the film describes that only an embarrassing 8% of military sexual assault cases are prosecuted. In addition, we follow a group of women soldiers who filed a lawsuit against the military. We see them come together and share their stories with each other, with the hopes of finding some resolution. In December of 2011, however, the court dismissed the survivors' lawsuit, ruling that rape is an occupational hazard of military service. This is the first documentary to explore rape in the military, informing the nation about the horrific cover-up of sexual assault within the armed services.

### Blackfish

The 2013 expository-style documentary *Blackfish* by director-producer Gabriela Cowperthwaite tells the story of Tilikum, a killer whale that has been in captivity since he was two, and the people that he killed. Dawn Brancheau enters the scene as a playful, young, charming trainer, who works at Shamu Stadium. From testimony, she was an incredibly competent trainer with a lot of experience. On February 10, 2010, something horrible happened. Dawn was dragged into the pool and killed by Tilikum, a 12,000-pound male Orca, who had been at SeaWorld since 1992. This was not Tilikum's first act of aggression, however. The viewer discovers that almost his entire life was spent in captivity – from his capture as a young whale, to his abusive time in a marine park in Victoria B.C., to the remainder of his life at SeaWorld. Interviews with the former

trainers help to paint the picture of a highly intelligent killer whale who loved to work and exuded curiosity, but was also incredibly frustrated and isolated as a result of the more dominant females not accepting him into the group structure. In the wild, there are thousands of miles of ocean to escape to, but in captivity, these unhappy whales are stuck in these close encounters. After Dawn was killed, OSHA filed a lawsuit against SeaWorld, claiming that swimming with Orcas is inherently dangerous. The film closes with the court decision on May 30, 2012: “Judge Ken Welsch issued a ruling on OSHA vs. SeaWorld. During shows, SeaWorld [trainers] must now remain behind barriers, separated from the orcas. SeaWorld has appealed.” Regardless of any blame or negligence that might have been associated with the death of Dawn Brancheau, one is left with a clear view that keeping these majestic creatures in the equivalent of bathtub-sized tanks simply cannot be humane or morally justified. At its core, *Blackfish* is an incredibly compelling and emotionally disturbing disclosure of the selfish need of humans to put animals in cages for our own entertainment and profit.

### Green

The 2009 film by Patrick Rouxel tells the story of Green, an orangutan struggling through her last days of life as logging quickly destroys her Indonesian forest home. Her health continuously declines due to the poisonous gases from the fires. The visual essay-style film begins with images of Green obviously ill and being cared for at a rescue facility. This is contrasted with segments of wild animals, intact rainforests, and the sounds of the jungle. Long shots of creatures take us through an experiential journey of life in an Indonesian rainforest, with families of orangutans playing in the trees. This

almost idyllic portrait is subsequently contrasted with the logging of huge trees, cutting of wood, and the industrial processes creating wood and paper products. The global demand for cheap wood and paper products is one of the largest contributors to worldwide forest destruction, and this is illustrated by countless images of trees being cut down and forests ravaged by loud, crushing machinery. Seemingly unaware, people on the streets read their books and newspapers, throw countless amounts of paper products in the trash, and go about their daily business as forest creatures, such as elephants, are shackled and put to work or removed from their homes and imprisoned in cages. As the forests are slashed and burned, Green obviously becomes sicker, refusing to eat and staying barely conscious. All the while, palm oil plantations are planted where majestic forest habitats once stood. The palm oil is extracted in enormous quantities, soon to be ingredients in a vast array of food and cosmetic products. The orangutans remaining in the destroyed forest seem to also be destroyed. After finding her trapped in mud and struggling to free herself, Green is rescued from a palm oil plantation and taken back to the sanctuary. She has, unfortunately, suffered brain damage and continues to languish at the refuge. Despite all the help the sanctuary could provide, Green dies, showing the cruel reality of the destruction and violence of consumerism.

### Know Your Audience

Niche audiences can help to create the changes for which these films advocate. These target audiences care deeply about the issue and can be persuaded to work as “soldiers” for the cause. The filmmaker should spend time researching the key groups – communities, partners, politicians, etc. – that will engage in the film and invest in needed action. In terms of bringing about change, the primary target audience should be the “decision-makers,” but “influencers” should also be targeted to influence the decision-makers. The more specific the filmmaker is in identifying the various audiences, the more effective the engagement will be (Bunting 20). It is important to identify what story elements will resonate and how much background and context is needed. How should they feel after they’ve watched the film? What should they do? Of course, it should also be a goal to connect with audiences beyond the “choir,” but the call to action is going to resonate to a greater extent with the target audiences, and they will help to bring about the needed change.

All three films – *The Invisible War*, *Blackfish*, and *Green* – targeted specific audiences, hoping to bring about awareness to the atrocities highlighted in the films. In Aljazeera’s *Witness* program, Rouxel discusses how his decision to make *Green* available for free download on the Internet and copyright free for public screening use was part of his goal to help the film to reach a wide audience (Rouxel). Undoubtedly, the availability of his film certainly allowed for a broader audience. At the time of *Green*’s release, I had seen very few advocacy documentaries of this kind that were free to watch online. For

advocacy purposes, I think this is a great strategy and hopefully serves to engage a broader audience that can act as “influencers” to put pressure on the “decision-makers.”

The content of *Green* spoke to a broad audience as well, because even without wanting to contribute to the demise of the rainforest, each and every one of us is a consumer and inadvertently contributes to the environmental destruction. Wood and paper use, as well as the use of palm oil, is so engrained in our culture that a “general” audience is a perfect target audience for this film. Ultimately, though, the goal should also be to reach the decision-makers, who have the real power to create change. In this case, these are the wood and paper producers, as well as a plethora of food companies that incorporate palm oil into their products.

From the very little information I could find about Rouxel’s outreach and impact plans, it seems that he was more interested in the film reaching a general audience; the previous films that he had made did not reach a wide audience because the broadcasters were not interested in distribution (Rouxel). While the film did eventually get sold to multiple TV stations, I think the film could have enjoyed a bigger impact if Rouxel had strategically targeted either governmental agencies, such as those in Indonesia, who have the power to bestow protection to rainforests, or companies that use these products. The film credits did a good job of shaming these industries and calling them out on their part in the destruction, but this also compromised his ability to get the show onto many of the United States networks, such as PBS, as many of these companies are broadcast underwriters. While I understand his desire and the reasons behind the inciting credits, Rouxel’s desire to address the offending individuals is part of the French tradition of

cinema verité filmmaking – to use the camera to convince viewers of a truth or something incontrovertibly real (Aufderheide 55). Although Rouxel undoubtedly hoped for lasting change, his approach was similar to Resnais’ style in *Night and Fog*, where the heinous monstrosities of genocide were used to elicit an emotional response (Nichols 207) and images of French officers were used to insinuate the role of France in the holocaust (Wilson 25). For Resnais, this resulted in censorship and distribution problems. For Rouxel, his choice to leave the company names in the credits likely affected his ability to acquire distribution in the United States, thereby impacting his ability to reach a much broader audience.

In the case of *Blackfish*, the producer Manny Oteyza writes, “We did not aim for any particular region, country and the idea of reaching the world was not even in our mind. We just wanted to people to see our little movie—it didn’t matter where” (“Blackfish”). Because the filmmakers were concerned about independence, their marketing and distribution strategies were much more traditional, and they did not set out to create a campaign around their film (“Britdoc Impact Award 55-56”). Although it is certainly acceptable and justified for a filmmaker to aim for a broad and general audience, the trend for contemporary advocacy films is to create a strategic plan around the outreach and distribution. As I mentioned previously, in order to create change, it’s important to reach influencers as well as decision-makers, and a plan should be in place to make this most effective. Nevertheless, the filmmakers were hopeful that by reaching a broad audience through traditional means, they would be able to create an outcry around the conditions at SeaWorld. They were certainly successful.

*Blackfish* is an interesting example of how a documentary film can be used for advocacy, even if the original intent was not necessarily to create an advocacy film. The director-producer Gabriela Cowperthwaite initially became interested in the story after reading the detailed article about Tilikum in *Outside Magazine* (Zimmermann), and her goal was to bring this story into mainstream consciousness, even though this was well-known in animal advocacy and whale conservation groups (“BritDoc Impact Award 54”). As I mentioned earlier, not all documentaries are advocacy films nor should they be; however, if the desire is for large change, then it is probably wise to create a strategic outreach plan. In this context, *Blackfish* is an interesting case study because the filmmakers’ marketing and distribution strategies were much more traditional and their goal was more centered on broad viewership. Nevertheless, the film ultimately became a powerful tool for advocacy. The film’s message was aligned with the whale and animal rights communities, and their action helped to move the campaign forward. In addition, several advocacy groups used the film for their own campaigns, which subsequently helped to promote *Blackfish*. Because this took place independently from the film and the filmmakers were not involved in this distribution, it provided the additional benefit of allowing the filmmakers to create some distance from any perceived partisanship (“BritDoc Impact Award 56”). This film is the perfect example of the need for some documentary filmmakers to retain their artistic and individual expression without the major goal of advocacy. Nevertheless, by creating a powerful story that viewers connected with on a deeply emotional level and by vividly portraying the injustices of

whale captivity for entertainment and profit, the film ultimately was a very successful advocacy documentary.

In contrast to the seemingly unplanned strategic targeting of “decision-making” audiences for *Green* and *Blackfish*, the directors of *The Invisible War* set out very early during pre-production to determine who their target audience should be. They not only wanted to bring about awareness to the general population, but also wanted the film to specifically reach decision-makers and people responsible for creating policies. This is a very different approach than *Green* and *Blackfish*, which calls attention to the different creative impulses that documentary filmmakers might decide to take. While different approaches to filmmaking might bring about awareness on an issue and result in behavioral changes in audience members, there is a difference between creating a documentary film that is a reflection of the filmmaker’s individual artistic expression vs. a documentary film that is specifically created to serve as an advocacy film within the context of a broader outreach campaign. This most obviously affects the distribution and outreach strategies, but could also impact the filmmaking style. All of these choices and styles are valid and worthy, but it is important to identify the difference between a documentary film that brings awareness to an important issue and an advocacy documentary with the specific agenda to bring about behavioral and/or policy changes.

*The Invisible War* team initially set out to reach the Sundance Film Festival audience, hoping that if they did well there, it would help to make a greater impact in Washington D.C. The film made a great impression on the Sundance viewers, as indicated by the Audience Award for Best Documentary. Their subsequent Academy

Award nomination helped to propel the movement forward and open the doors to their primary target audience, the decision-makers and policy advisors on Capitol Hill. As was pointed out in the press, “The filmmakers organized 30-40 private screenings for policymakers and devoted much of their time reaching out to politicians, advocacy organizations, journalists and military personnel” (“Case Study: The Invisible War”). The filmmakers also wanted to reach a broader and more diverse audience as well as the underserved veterans and minorities, and this was attained through a PBS broadcast on *Independent Lens*. Through this platform, they focused on building awareness at the grassroots with the hope that this secondary target audience would put pressure on the decision-makers.

The effort that the filmmakers made to reach not only a wide audience, but also an influential one, had a big impact and brought about increased awareness to the issue. They knew very early that they were going to have to reach policymakers in Washington D.C. in order for the film to have any impact, and the fact that they knew who their target audience was from the beginning of production certainly helped them even in the creation of the story line. They knew that they would have to create a film that would not be too polarizing if they were to reach decision-makers. For this purpose, they attempted to always represent the issue and the film as bipartisan (“BritDoc Impact Guide 4”).

In addition, although the filmmakers did not shy away from addressing the injustices, they were strategic in not vilifying the US military. Rather, the interviews helped to point out the flaws in the military justice system. This was an important strategic move because it allowed them to target military personnel without alienating

them, ultimately validating what so many other victims of sexual assault in the military were going through and allowing them to feel like they were part of improving the military, rather than destroying it.

*The Invisible War* is a great example of the importance of not only identifying a target audience but also having that as part of the strategic plan. Because the targeted outreach was part of that plan during the campaign planning stage, the filmmakers were able to immediately begin targeting the Capitol Hill audience with private screenings once the film was finished.

### Connect to Your Audience

#### Storytelling

If there is one element of filmmaking that has been hammered into my head throughout my film education, it is the importance and effectiveness of “story.” Obviously, this is the case regardless of what kind of film we are addressing, but the role of storytelling in advocacy filmmaking is probably one of the more critical elements when discussing how to connect to an audience. Throughout history, by tapping into a whole range of emotions, storytelling has been the most effective ways to engage audiences. The stories help people find a personal connection to the characters and subjects, and allow the filmmaker to reach a broader audience. The stories can even help to advance the conversation on polarized issues, because “people ‘take sides’ on an *issue*, but it’s much harder to ‘take sides’ on a *story*” (VanDeCarr 4). In each of the three films discussed (*Green*, *Blackfish*, and *The Invisible War*), it is the stories that resonate, not

necessarily the issue at hand. If Rouxel had simply discussed the impacts of palm oil, wood, and paper production in a scientific and informational way, the viewer still might feel compelled to re-think their use of these products, but the story of Green was so much more compelling and undeniable. Without a doubt, Green was directly affected by the devastation to her rainforest, and she serves as visible proof. Similarly, in *Blackfish*, it is difficult to deny that Tilikum's living conditions are anything but atrocious and barbaric, and the victims' stories in *The Invisible War* are undeniable evidence that the policies on military sexual assault need to change. Without the power of the personal story, the viewer might still be left with their viewpoint on the issue, rather than being able to identify with an individual and the repercussions to that specific individual. If we think about it in terms of the topic of climate change, one might question the veracity of anthropogenic climate change, but it is pretty hard to argue with the personal stories of communities suffering from rising sea levels, starving polar bears, and intense droughts and wildfires.

One of the components of storytelling that allows the viewer to form an emotional connection is character development. Longer-form films typically allow for more space to introduce the character or subject and properly develop the character and story arc, as well as to adequately address the facts and information at a level that will bring about a better understanding and increased awareness. This does not mean that short-form advocacy films do not connect with viewers, but it does mean that the information and story line are extremely condensed. In some cases, this can be a good thing. For many social media purposes and online streaming, viewers are more likely to watch a short

film. In fact, studies have shown that shorter videos are more engaging than longer videos, although after a certain point (ca. 20 minutes), the engagement average flattens out (Ruedlinger).

Storytelling has transcended across cultures and generations, and modern studies using functional brain imagery have suggested that compelling storytelling might even have provided us with an evolutionary survival advantage (Nigam 567). According to a group of neuroscientists, who studied hormonal release in participants asked to watch short PSAs, “attention is a scarce neural resource because it is metabolically costly to a brain that needs to conserve resources. If a story does not sustain our attention, then the brain will look for something else more interesting to do” (Zak 6). The authors were also able to show a correlation between emotive stories and oxytocin release, which seems to be associated with empathy for story characters. These results suggest that the stories that get us to pay attention and connect to the characters are more likely to move us to action, which is ultimately the goal of advocacy filmmaking.

Much can be learned by analyzing how stories are told and which stories are effective with regards to impact strategy. A film is most likely to gain the needed traction for an impact campaign if it can connect to the audience and generate empathy. In many cases, the best documentaries “illuminate the human experience. Films can bring audiences inside stories and communities that they might not otherwise be familiar with, provoke dialogue and inspire people to take action” (“Documentary Impact 6”).

*The Invisible War*. Although the vast majority of the documentary consists of a constant stream of survivor interviews and talking heads, the story is a compelling one.

There is very little B-roll or verité footage that would allow the viewer to connect to the lives of the survivors; however, the film was so well edited, creating a strong story arc and providing very personal testimonies, that the viewer becomes invested in their story and in their search for justice. The content is emotional and heart-wrenching, and the stats revealed in the film graphics make one take pause as to the gravity of the situation.

In a ridiculous moment of the film, Major General Mary Kay Hertog, the head at the time of the Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office, advises the survivors to address their congressmen/women if they are not satisfied with how the military dealt with their case. Moments such as these highlighted for me the loophole that many of these victims find themselves in, creating an emotional and infuriating experience for the audience. Yet, at the same time, the filmmakers do a terrific job of not demonizing men or the military, which allows the film to advocate on a non-partisan level and reach a broader audience.

Throughout my limited experience as a filmmaker, I have been taught to shy away from films with talking heads – these types of films often feel “preachy” and the story line can be incredibly boring. Although interview after interview is often not considered to be the best storytelling approach, the emotional content of the survivor interviews in *The Invisible War* begs for empathy, revealing the power of a good story and the characters to tell it.

*Blackfish*. The choice to begin the film with a harrowing audio clip of SeaWorld employees calling 911, claiming that a trainer was just killed by a killer whale, immediately sets the tone for the film and was left anticipating the horrors that were to

come. The introduction begins with a rapid succession of former trainers from SeaWorld, who talk about how fascinated they had been with SeaWorld and had always wanted to work with killer whales. The manner in which these testimonies were revealed suggested that SeaWorld was much more concerned about personality than actual experience or marine education. Because the former trainers that were interviewed for the film all had no prior experience with killer whales and admitted to this, the viewer is left thinking that SeaWorld was not primarily concerned about the health and happiness of the killer whales; otherwise, they would have hired experts in the field.

Through the use of emotional testimonies from former trainers and killer whale experts, the film provides compelling evidence that killer whales should not be kept in captivity. Additionally, archival footage and interviews with some of the individuals who capture whales for a living shows how the younger calves are horribly separated from their mothers. In one devastatingly emotional scene, a youngster is taken away from its mother and the family, all of whom remained in the bay in a tight pod, breaching the surface to catch glimpses of their loved one, obviously grieving and distressed. The audience is acutely aware that a similar situation happened to Tilikum and that the separation between a mother and her calf must be incredibly traumatic, especially with the knowledge that males stay with their mothers throughout life. While this type of storytelling might seem anthropomorphic and takes advantage of human emotions, the actions nevertheless come across as brutal and inhumane. The anthropomorphic insinuations are actually quite effective because we most identify with human emotions

and traits; however, this approach has also been highly criticized in nature films (Mitman 109-131).

By showing scientific evidence of the curiosity and highly elaborate emotional capacity of killer whales, the viewer is left with a powerful negative and emotional reaction to the selfish need of humans to put animals in cages for our own entertainment. The story comes across as a critique of the industry involved in captive marine mammals, with SeaWorld as the main target. The goriness was left to the viewer's own imagination, although the interviews clearly painted the picture. Despite having an understanding of what the film was about prior to seeing it, the images of these beautiful creatures in these tanks, exploited for our own entertainment, were so much more powerful than had it simply been a written story. It is difficult to walk away from the film not completely exhausted and incredibly angry, ready to advocate for the killer whale's cause.

Green. The poetic, non-narrative, essay style of *Green* is really what makes the film so compelling and impactful. Rouxel chose, rightfully so, to tell the story through *Green*, the dying orangutan. While imagery that depicts the horrific death of the rainforest and its inhabitants flows past, the sad eyes of Green make it obvious that Green is also slowly dying. There is no narration and the structure of the film is rather nonlinear; however, the message is clear and the story is strong. The juxtaposition of the destruction of the rainforest with images of books, furniture, and various food products makes it unmistakable that the choices that we make as consumers directly impact this precarious ecology. The violence with which the forest is torn down, and the heartbreaking, almost detached images of one orangutan being transported in a truck with

its head repeatedly hitting the floor of the truck, and the image of her stretched out on the bare earth of what was once the rainforest floor, strapped down by cords tied to her wrists and ankles, are almost too shocking to watch. At one point, Green seems to be stressed by the sound of the gardener mowing the lawn, and the subsequent shot of a chainsaw cutting down a tree insinuates that this is what Green was remembering. The viewer cannot remain detached, because the filmmaking style forces the viewer to be “in” her head, seeing and hearing what she does. The choice of imagery was purposeful and intended to create empathy and activism, to galvanize an uprising and a ban on rainforest-derived products, and the beautiful cinematography makes the suffering even more haunting.

One “advocacy” moment that really made the film so unique was the list of “credits” at the end of the film. It begins: “Deforestation of Indonesia is made possible by” followed by a long list of the major international companies involved. Rouxel basically called each and every responsible party out for their role in the death of Green. This was a powerful statement and led to greater awareness about the damaging industry practices involved in palm oil extraction and paper products, as well as the corporations using these products. As previously mentioned, this choice likely also cost him broad television viewership in the United States. While in some ways, he approached the film like an activist, wanting to single out individuals responsible for the damage, he likely would have had a greater advocacy impact had he removed the end credits and aimed to reach a broader audience of consumers. For the most effective change, it is important to identify who the target audience is – is it the decision-makers, who have the power to

save the forests? Or is it the influencers (the consumers), who have the power to drive a movement and demand products that do not destroy our rainforests? I would argue that in this case, increasing awareness and changing consumer behavior is likely to have the greater impact.

His closing statement also made it personal...I, the viewer and consumer, am one of the responsible parties. Ultimately, by telling the story through Green and her slow demise, the audience feels connected and extremely empathetic, and in the end, responsible for her death. His more artistic style of telling the story was likely the most effective way to connect to the audience; it was so much more personal than a talking head scientist telling us what is happening. In this style of advocacy filmmaking, imagery and story are so much more effective and compelling than words.

### Humor

Although many of the topics in advocacy filmmaking are serious and dire, there is no reason that humor cannot play a role in the storytelling process. Humor is a form of entertainment, and oftentimes today's society responds better to entertainment than education. So, in some instances, maybe it is better to wrap education in a blanket of humor. It is an easier pill to swallow—the sugar that helps the medicine go down. Many people connect through humor and are able to deal with stress and uncomfortable situations by incorporating humor into their lives. As Sheila Curran Bernard suggests, "... audiences cannot take a program that is unrelieved misery. Watch any of the top documentaries of the past few years, and notice not only how often you're on the verge of tears, but also, even within the same film, how often you're laughing" (10). Nevertheless,

there are still some points to consider. The humor should be appropriate for the target audience; age, demographics, sex, political stances, and interests can significantly impact the audience's ability to relate to the humor.

In recent years, John Stewart and Stephen Colbert have been enormously successful in using humor as a means to distill current topics and news. There is no reason that advocacy documentarians cannot use these same techniques to bring their message to a larger audience. As Michael Moore said, when asked about his use of humor, "...if humor can be used in a devastating fashion to shake people out of their seats and do something, well, it will be worth it" (Moore). He certainly has made this case in his films. As an example, as horrible as the story of the shooting at Columbine High School was, Moore managed to bring in a significant amount of humor into *Bowling for Columbine* (2002). Through the use of satire and poking fun, he was able to show how ridiculous America's need to protect the second amendment right is (Sørensen).

Moore's films are very successful in the box office and he is one of the most successful documentary filmmakers in history, in terms of financial success, but I would argue that Moore's films are polarizing and the facts are at times questionable. He often picks on people and makes fun of them on camera. As a consequence, many viewers now see his films as pure entertainment, rather than depictions of reality. *Fahrenheit 9/11* is another Moore film that kept humor at the forefront of the film. Moore's intentions were to create controversy around George W. Bush and squelch his chances at a re-election. While the film was wildly successful at the box office, it was one of the greatest advocacy failures. Not only was the film highly critiqued, but also the ultimate goal of

preventing a Bush re-election did not come to fruition (Senda-Cook). Nevertheless, humor can be a useful tool for delivering a message.

To date, while documentaries in general have made great use of humor and many have done so very successfully, there has not been much use of humor in long-form advocacy documentaries. In fact, the three film examples that I have chosen to analyze for my thesis do not use humor at all as a means to engage with the audience. The filmmakers present the horrible conditions in which these protagonists survive, none of which are humorous. I imagine that it would be very difficult to present topics of sexual violence in the military, animal abuse, and ecosystem destruction as humorous without coming across as flippant. Nevertheless, there is certainly a time and place where humor can be employed in an effective manner. As mentioned earlier, many documentaries, such as *Super Size Me* and *The Yes Men*, have employed humor as part of the storytelling.

Some of the best use of humor in advocacy filmmaking has been in short films and PSAs, and these are often tied to a larger campaign. A great example is *Meet Mr. Toilet* (“Meet Mr. Toilet”), a short film (03:25) about the oft-neglected crisis affecting 2.6 billion people...the need for toilets. The film starts out with Jack Sim, a businessman-turned sanitation-superhero who has won multiple awards for his work, saying, “When we are children, our parents tell us not to talk about shit.” The film continues with Jack talking about how proud he is to be known as “Mr. Toilet,” because it gives his work an identity. The filmmaker then cleverly works in the important statistics and information that the viewer needs to get informed about the issue, such as 40% of the world’s population does not have toilets, all the while allowing the Singapore businessman to

continue to talk about “shit.” By not shying away from the awkward topic and allowing this seemingly serious businessman to use profanity in this way, the filmmaker allows the topic to be approachable and even humorous. Clever 60s-style animations are used to provide visuals for the topic, and most of them are pretty goofy. We even see Mr. Sim at one point squatting on an embankment next to the sea, as if to demonstrate the use of a squat toilet. I found myself laughing at how unabashedly and unapologetically Mr. Sim talked about the subject. Nevertheless, the very powerful message of the need for toilets comes across loud and clear – we see people in poop-infested waters and people simply squatting wherever they feel the need. Because of the humor, I felt that it was easier to see the imagery and to focus on the numbers and information that was relayed. I mention this film primarily because it cleverly takes an embarrassing topic (poop) and packages it into a digestible form for the viewer, all the while still relaying the intended advocacy messages. While it is a short film and likely not to have the broad reach of a successful theatrical release, it was commissioned by GE Focus Forward’s *Short Films, Big Ideas* series as part of the 18-month Focus Forward campaign and enjoyed success in film festivals around the world (Fera). Mr. Sim has also been able to use the film as part of his campaign to improve sanitation conditions around the world.

## Transmedia

While previous documentaries helped to shed light on important issues, the newer model of advocacy documentary filmmaking takes the impact to a new level. Films have become campaigns that incorporate multi-platform strategic outreach approaches. Transmedia storytelling was initially described by Henry Jenkins as the “process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience” (Jenkins 944). In this emerging field, however, there seems to be different understandings of the proper definition and description. For the purposes of this discussion, I refer to “transmedia” as the use of multiple media platforms to engage an audience. Whereas the original use was defined by creating media to distribute various pieces of a single story across multiple platforms, the term is now more loosely used to describe various media platforms that one might utilize to get their message to a broader audience and to engage people to a deeper level. Transmedia can serve as an entry point for audiences to become immersed in the content by utilizing a variety of tools (Glenn-Burns). The audiences are no longer simply being communicated to, but are invited to become collaborators, co-creators, and partners in the movement. This also helps to extend the shelf life of the film and its message. Furthermore, in the case of more traditional documentaries and films, marketing can be prohibitively expensive, whereas marketing and bringing about awareness through social media is almost free.

While *Green* did very well in festivals (e.g., Golden Panda Award, Wildscreen Film Festival; Grand Teton Award, Jackson Hole Film Festival), I think that the strength

of the story was lost by the lack of follow-up. Although Rouxel had a limited budget, his film and its message would most certainly have made a greater impact with a small campaign. A large audience exists that cares about the survival of orangutans and the precious rainforests, which he could have tapped into. I believe that the content and the craftsmanship of his storytelling allowed viewers to form an emotional connection to the story, but then there was nowhere for them to go to act on the devastation that they had just witnessed or to learn more about the topic. Rouxel seems to have missed out on the opportunity to connect with his viewers on a deeper level.

In his defense, when *Green* was released in 2009, this was just the beginning of the use of transmedia to support and elevate film campaigns. Kickstarter was only founded that same year, which has served as a catalyst for a lot of film campaigns, bringing on an audience that literally becomes invested in the film. Upworthy, a website that supports media with a mission, was founded in 2012. By November of 2013, their goal of getting compelling videos and stories to go viral was achievable with 88 million unique views (Taylor and LaCom). Even Facebook, although it had been around since 2004, did not have the reach that it has today; in 2009, Facebook had 360 million users per month (Sedghi), whereas in August of 2015, Facebook reached the new peak of 1 billion users on a single day (Matney).

It seems, though, that in his current project about Sun Bears, he is taking better advantage of some of the available social media tools. Not only did he found an organization solely dedicated to protecting these creatures (Sun Bear Outreach), but he writes blog posts on a regular basis to stay connected to his followers. *Green* definitely

could have benefited from something like this. Rouxel originally had a dedicated website for the film, but the link no longer works and there is currently no permanent home for the film. For the Sun Bear project, he created a series of short films to support the campaign, which is a great way to keep people aware of the topic and maintain momentum. The use of shorter films throughout campaigns, almost like little appetizers that the audience can follow and look forward to, is another use of media and can prove valuable.

Both *The Invisible War* and *Blackfish* enjoyed more success through the help of other media platforms, although in the case of *The Invisible War*, it was a more directed and orchestrated effort. The *Blackfish* filmmakers, however, did not necessarily initiate a social media campaign; it was taken over by some of their distribution partners and activists in the field. In addition to a strong presence on social media sites, in particular *Blackfish*'s, the *Invisible War* filmmakers made a personal commitment to fight for change and made numerous personal appearances at events after the film's debut. One of the PR firms that they worked with set up non-theatrical, community screenings with panel speakers and Q&A sessions related to sexual violence in the military. Many of these screenings took place on military bases and the film has since then been incorporated into their training programs ("Case Study: The Invisible War"). The filmmakers also created an additional platform that viewers are directed to: [www.notinvisible.org](http://www.notinvisible.org). The site contains a variety of resources, which address policy, healing, help lines, and advocacy. Moreover, since the release of the film, there have been a number of hearings by various committees, and at each hearing, the film team

showed up and tweeted what was taking place. They combined this strategy with petitions and DVDs that were delivered to legislative aides and staffers talking to their members, all of which had an impact (“BritDoc Impact Guide 4”).

Although the *Blackfish* directors did not intentionally set out to create a transmedia platform around their film, the campaign seemed to take on a life of its own. After completing the film, CNN came on as a broadcast partner. They had seen that the film had generated a significant Twitter conversation after its debut at Sundance, so they wanted to leverage this and attempted to create a synchronous experience between Twitter and the TV broadcast (“Success Stories”).

The film was also cross-promoted through other CNN shows, such as *Crossfire* and *Anderson Cooper 360*. Following the broadcast, Anderson Cooper had a post-show debate, encouraging viewers to share their opinions. If filmmakers can create these kinds of events with their distribution and outreach partners, it is great way to create another level of experience for the viewer. Several celebrities, as well as PETA, jumped on the Twitter wagon and kept the momentum going (“Success Stories”).

The night that *Blackfish* aired on CNN, more people talked about the film on Twitter than any other non-sports TV program on that evening besides *Scandal*. In fact, it was the most talked about show on Twitter in October 2013 (“Success Stories”). In response, activists and viewers began numerous campaign petitions to not only cancel musical acts at SeaWorld, but to end killer whale captivity and stop the promotion of SeaWorld by various companies (“Blackfish”). Most of these campaign petitions were

successful and are examples of the effective use of other media platforms to help create the change inspired by the film's message.

### Open and Accessible Media

Advances in technology have made film more accessible and a more widely used format for storytelling. Availability and access has increased to the point that one can watch pretty much any documentary in the comfort of their own home. In the past, box-office success was often the primary metric to measure the success of a documentary film. One could argue that box-office success leads to greater viewership and exposure, which very often might be the case, but I believe this trend might be changing.

Free and accessible release of advocacy films can be combined with many other actions. For instance, online streaming of a film can be combined with social media action, pledges, letters to senators, connections with other networks and partnering organizations, etc. In addition, free community screenings can be combined with lectures and further education, as well as network building and community actions.

*Green* was produced and distributed on a different scale than *The Invisible War* and *Blackfish*, and I can understand the need for filmmakers to recoup their production costs, but if we are evaluating the effective methods and tools for advocacy, there is no doubt that free streaming or screening allows for access to a much broader audience and can have a much greater impact. Again, while theatrical release has always been a metric for success in traditional documentaries, the newer model of getting TV distribution has allowed for greater viewership, even if it is not always necessarily free. For instance, many people have cable subscriptions that include the vast majority of the TV channels.

In addition, with the advent of mobile devices, there is a greater opportunity for filmmakers to reach a broad audience.

The fact that *Blackfish* was picked up by CNN Films definitely helped in the distribution and outreach; with the combined viewings on CNN, the film reached nearly 21 million people (Kuo and Savidge). *The Invisible War*, on the other hand, aired on PBS's Independent Lens and is free to stream online. While the film did not reach as many viewers (2.1 million cumulative television reach) ("BritDoc Impact Guide 2"), likely due to the content, the filmmakers organized free screenings of the film on Capitol Hill, where their primary target audience was. If the filmmakers had relied on the off chance that the target audience might pay to watch the film at a cinema, the effect of their advocacy outreach would have been miniscule compared to what they were able to accomplish by bringing the film to the people they wanted to deliver their message, and to make it easy and free for them to watch.

### Engage Your Audience

One of the most important elements of an advocacy documentary is to have a clear "call to action." This is without a doubt one of the aspects of advocacy filmmaking that is so unique and so important. Documentary films can inspire, educate, entertain, and create a variety of emotions, but the call-to-action in advocacy films allows the audience to form an even deeper connection to the subject and become an engaged audience and feel that they are part of the solution. There are plenty of excellent documentaries that tell

a compelling story of something that is wrong in our world, but if it does not propose an answer or an action plan, then some viewers may feel frustrated.

The contemporary form of advocacy documentaries is most effective when it is combined with other forms of actions that include things like petitions, letter signings, hosting screening or community events, making phone calls to decision-makers, sharing the film, etc. This is where *Green*, as I mentioned earlier, differed greatly from *The Invisible War*. Even though companies were called out in the credits, and this provided some awareness to avoid certain products, the film did not result in great change. It was a successful film and earned numerous prestigious awards, but it does not necessarily fit the current requirements of a successful advocacy documentary. It is possible that partnerships with strategic organizations fighting on the ground could have resulted in greater impact.

Forming collaborative partnerships during the early stages of development of the film is important. Together, filmmakers, advocates, and policy shapers can create goals and advocacy tools that make the documentaries more affective for addressing the issues and changing public policies. Specifically, the policy advocates can provide expert input on the issues and the filmmaker can provide powerful stories that are connected to the change. In addition, the strategic partners already have an audience or members that they have identified and work with. These partnerships were crucial for the success of *The Invisible War*. The filmmakers began very early to build alliances with key members of the House and Senate. Again, this was possible because they had focused on representing the issue in a bipartisan manner. Their relationship with Senator Gillibrand was

especially important; she has been a tireless advocate for this cause by helping to pass new legislation, the Military Justice Improvement Act, which forced the military to move the decision-making of whether to investigate and prosecute Military Sexual Assault to independent, trained, professional military prosecutors and out of the hands of those in the chain of command (“Comprehensive Resource Center”). The film team worked together with Senator Gillibrand on this bill by asking grassroots supporters to contact their senators to ask them to cosponsor the bill. Additionally, Protect Our Defenders was an outreach partner for the film, and they worked together with survivors and advocates to host local screenings to help bring about awareness in communities across the country (“Case Study: The Invisible War 10”).

Although the *Blackfish* filmmakers did not directly partner with advocacy groups, the film was aligned with the whale and animal rights communities, whose action helped to move the campaign forward and promote the film. In addition to the various supporters that created petitions on *Change.org*, PETA set up a dedicated website called *SeaWorldofHurt.com*, where they had a list of take-action items, such as petitions to SeaWorld to release the animals to sanctuaries, Instagram posts, petitions for companies to stop promoting SeaWorld, specific tweets to use, and examples for Snapchat shares. Because this film was so effective at connecting on a deep emotional level with the viewer, the activists were able to tap into that emotion to try to cause real harm to SeaWorld’s financial success and reputation.

Although the message of the film was clear and directed, and SeaWorld clearly was the bad guy in this story, the filmmakers purposely distanced themselves from

partners, because they did not want to have a perceived partisanship that could possibly impede reaching a broad audience (“BritDoc Impact Award 56”). This decision was likely taken to avoid some of the pitfalls that filmmakers can face with taking partners on board. For example, in certain instances, when certain organizations or networks become production partners, it greatly reduces the chances of acquiring distribution. PBS has very strict guidelines for this because they want to ensure that the filmmaker’s integrity is not compromised and that the film is not created for the purpose of someone’s agenda (“Editorial & Funding Standards 2”), which could be perceived as propaganda. Moreover, it is important that filmmakers retain their individual artistic integrity and are able to express themselves through their film without the interference of partners. Nevertheless, in terms of an advocacy film campaign, it is advantageous for the filmmaker to develop relationships with partners that will assist with the outreach and distribution.

### Measure Impact

The stories portrayed in films are powerful advocacy tools for creating social change; however, how does one measure the success of these film campaigns? An increasing number of organizations are creating platforms and tools to better understand and measure the various impacts that advocacy documentaries have on pressing issues. The following list is an example of some of these organizations: The Harmony Institute ([harmony-institute.org](http://harmony-institute.org)), who created the document “Impact Playbook – Best Practices for Understanding the Impact of Media” and Story Pilot ([storypilot.org](http://storypilot.org)), a website that maps

the social impact of a large list of documentary films; The Media Impact Project ([mediainimpactproject.org](http://mediainimpactproject.org)), who created the “Offline Impact Indicators for Documentary Film” guide; The Center for Social Media & Social Impact ([centerforsocialmedia.org](http://centerforsocialmedia.org)), who created the “Social Justice Documentary – Designing for Impact” report; and BritDoc ([britdoc.org](http://britdoc.org)), who created “The Impact Field Guide & Toolkit – From Art to Impact” online resource. These resources provide a wealth of information as to how to develop a strategic film campaign, as well as how to measure the outcomes and determine the success of the campaign. For many advocacy projects, creating changes in policies or behaviors is the ultimate, longterm goal; therefore, it should be clear from the onset what those goals are and what is needed to get there, and this obviously depends on the purpose of the film.

In the case of *The Invisible War*, the filmmakers knew that if they were going to have any impact with their film, they needed to target military officials directly, as well as decision-makers on Capitol Hill. Probably one of the greatest impacts was the result of a private screening on Capitol Hill with Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, who was so moved by the film that he called a press conference and announced that he would enact changes to military policy for how sexual assault cases are handled by the military. The new policy stated that the unit commanders or direct supervisors were no longer allowed to decide whether assault charges should be investigated or prosecuted; rather, the decision must be made by someone further up in the chain of command.

The film went out to have enormous impact in the House and Senate, with various politicians making it part of their agenda to change the military policies on how they deal

with sexual violence in the military. Since the release of the film, numerous military personnel have been dismissed as a result of sexual misconduct, and the head of SAPRO (The Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office of the Department of Defense) and the Commandant at Marine Barracks Washington were both reassigned/fired – both of whom were featured in the film. One can only assume that this was a direct impact of the stories and facts that were revealed by the film.

By shedding light on the monstrosity through the personal testimonies of the survivors, the filmmakers were able to draw an enormous amount of negative attention to the military practices in place. The film brought the issue so much into the spotlight that the disgrace could no longer be ignored. Even President Obama, after he saw the film, said that he had ‘no tolerance’ for this kind of behavior in the military and called for immediate reform:

If it is happening inside our military, then whoever carries it out is betraying the uniform that they’re wearing. For those who are in uniform who have experienced sexual assault, I want them to hear directly from their commander in chief that I’ve got their backs. I will support them (Muller).

While all of the problems associated with the military and sexual violence have not been ameliorated, *The Invisible War* shined a critical spotlight on the issue, and the filmmaker’s continued advocacy work eventually led to some critical changes and measurable impact. Not every advocacy documentary will necessarily lead to these kinds of sweeping policy changes, but this film campaign can be viewed as a powerful example of how large and continued efforts put forth by the filmmakers and their partners can lead to measurable impact.

It is important to note that even perception changes of issues are very important impacts and can also eventually lead to behavioral changes. For instance, in the case of *Blackfish*, in December 2013, the Orlando Business Journal posted an unscientific poll asking, “Has CNN’s ‘Blackfish’ documentary changed your perception of SeaWorld?” Of the 1700 votes, 70% of the participants responded with a “yes” (Gross). From the filmmakers’ standpoint, and their initial goal of increased awareness to groups other than animal activists already involved in the issue, this perception change was a successful impact. It is possible that not every advocacy documentary will necessarily lead to behavioral or policy changes, but changing perceptions is where the impact starts.

As the story continued to resound in the press, the public awareness began to translate into behavior changes of individuals and corporations. The outcry of petitions led to the cancellation of numerous musical acts at SeaWorld, as well as companies like Taco Bell, South West Airlines, and Virgin America severing their promotional ties with the company. Although the filmmakers had never anticipated that policy changes might be some of the impact outcomes, New York and California both proposed bills to restrict the use of orcas. The California bill was a direct result of Richard Bloom, the California state Assemblymaker, who was moved to action after seeing the film. In addition, the US House of Representatives voted unanimously to provide US\$1 million toward studying the effects of captivity on orcas (“BritDoc Impact Award 62”).

The impact on SeaWorld’s bottom line is certainly a true test of the impact of *Blackfish*. The recent headline from February 2015, “*The Blackfish effect: SeaWorld loses \$25.4 million after documentary criticizing treatment of killer whales cuts park*”

*attendance,*” provides continued evidence of the impact of the documentary *Blackfish* (Klausner). However, the ultimate and real change will only come if and when SeaWorld realizes that it will make more money and be more successful by deciding to end the killer whale entertainment business. If that were to happen, then *Blackfish* would have a life beyond simply impacting audiences - it would have a lasting effect.

## CONCLUSION

As is evident, there are commonalities between advocacy documentary films; however, there are also many differences in terms of the approaches and styles. The spectrum of documentary films that are involved in advocacy highlights the evolving nature of this sub-genre. The contemporary advocacy documentaries engage in certain practices that enable them to reach their intended audiences, and for the vast majority, the major commonality is a clear call-to-action for the viewer.

By nature, some advocacy documentaries employ journalistic techniques; however, a clear difference remains between journalists and documentarians – documentarians have much more control over the creative and artistic choices that allow them to express how they want to tell the story, which transcends journalism. While documentaries still might employ journalism (fact finding), ultimately they utilize storytelling techniques that reveal something about the human condition. Documentaries remain an art form. Hence, documentary filmmakers have options in terms of how they choose to tell their story. In addition, in the case of advocacy filmmaking, there are even more choices to make. Not only does the advocacy filmmaker need to *connect* with the audience (which most documentarians aim for as well), but they also need to specifically *identify* who the audience is, as well as *engage* the audience. For instance, the three films explored in this thesis (*Green*, *Blackfish*, and *The Invisible War*) all had the clear intent of connecting with their audience members and increasing awareness about the issues at hand. There are, however, clear differences in their approach and the outcomes.

If we simply look at impact, *Green* failed as an advocacy documentary. Rouxel created a beautiful, artistic film that was emotional and connected to the audience, but his choice to leave the credits in the film likely cost him the broad reach that this film needed to be most effective. The heart of his film was the story of consumerism and blatant disregard or ignorance about where our products come from and how this is capable of killing fragile creatures and wiping out their ecosystems. In order to make the necessary changes that Rouxel advocates for, the vast majority of consumers would need to be aware of this issue. Nevertheless, for those who did watch the film, the message was clear and it was educational. Rouxel was clearly advocating for change, but maybe he was a little ahead of the game. *Green* obviously had a much smaller budget than the two other films, and he did most of the work on his own, for which he should be commended. He also was innovative in his approach of releasing the film for free streaming and download, with the intent of reaching as many people as possible. Nonetheless, many of the cross-platform media tools, from which his outreach could have benefitted, were not yet available and the film did not reach the broad audience that was needed for change.

The *Blackfish* filmmakers took a slightly different approach. While the filmmakers clearly intended for the story to increase awareness and hopefully change the practices at SeaWorld, they also made the conscious choice to not create a strategic outreach campaign around the film, but to rather take the traditional distribution approach. The filmmakers set out to make a film about a topic that they felt passionate about and to create a great film, but they did not begin this project with an advocacy campaign mindset. Nevertheless, the film had enormous impact and worked beyond what

was originally intended. Not only did the film reach a very broad audience due to their distribution partnership with CNN Films, but other organizations and advocacy networks also latched onto the story and used it for their own purposes, which happened to align with the film's message. CNN's use of social media platforms, such as Twitter, resulted in huge audience engagement, with many viewers and celebrities getting involved in petitions for SeaWorld to either change their practices or for other companies to end their partnerships and sponsorship of SeaWorld. The end result, or impact, has been huge and continues to resonate throughout this community. SeaWorld has faced major financial losses and sponsors, and they very recently decided to end their theatrical orca shows in San Diego (Neate). While much still needs to be done with regard to animal captivity and entertainment, *Blackfish* clearly had a great impact on how the general public perceives the captivity of killer whales. This perception change ultimately led to behavioral changes, which is one of the hallmarks of a successful advocacy documentary.

In the case of *The Invisible War*, the filmmakers set out with the clear intention of change. They knew that for their film to make a difference, they would have to specifically target the decision-makers and policy changers in Washington D.C., so this greatly affected the approach that they took very early on in the production phase. By strategically partnering with organizations that were aligned with their mission, they had a team of advocates that used the film and its message to reach their constituents. They not only had a specific target audience (the decision-makers), but engaged the secondary audience of influencers as well. The filmmakers also made good use of social media and various media platforms to keep the story alive and the viewers engaged.

It is important to remember that the emphasis does not necessarily need to be on audience numbers or creating viral videos, but rather to target specific audiences, which in some cases could even be a single person. In today's world of information overload, not all advocacy filmmakers should be competing for huge audiences and they may not need to. *The Invisible War* is a great example of a how in-depth and immersive storytelling can influence a very specific target audience, namely policy-influencers on Capitol Hill. The result was a change in how sexual assault is addressed in the military.

These three films serve as examples of how films can be utilized as a tool within a broader advocacy campaign – one had a great advocacy message, but failed to reach the targeted broad audience; one did not intend to create an advocacy film, but the message was so powerful that it worked beyond what was intended to create change; and one set out specifically with the intention to create change and did so through the powerful use of storytelling.

Documentaries have made their mark in the world, but the new form of advocacy documentaries is opening doors into awareness and change that can never be shut. They plant seeds in the minds of the viewer, provide feasible actions, and turn society into change-makers. With all that is needed in today's society, this new form of advocacy filmmaking represents something unique...the tools for change.

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