The Impact Of Powerful Documentary Films To Instigate Policy Change

Documentaries are extremely important sources used to depict some of the world's biggest issues through the medium of film. Particular issues are segregated to highlight areas of controversy, and in certain circumstances, can result in policy change. Simon Kilmurry, executive director of the International Documentary Association believes there is an "urgent need for the stories of people's real-world experiences". Compelling documentary films such as Fahrenheit 9/11, Supersize Me and An Inconvenient Truth deal with various themes, all having a social impact on their audiences.(Karlin et al., 2011) The growing popularity of documentary films was supported by advancing technology, engaging a wider audience. As quoted by NYU film professor, George Stoney: "50 percent of the documentary filmmaker's job is making the movie, and 50 percent is figuring out what its impact can be and how it can move audiences to action". (Karlin et al., 2011)The Fledgling Fun constructed five-point criteria, calculating the possible impacts of documentary films on the viewers, expanding out to further groups. (Barrett and Leddy, 2009)Societal change is the ultimate goal expressed, but it is not always a goal achieved. The captivating documentary film "Blackfish" perfectly illustrates the power of documentary films in instigating and creating policy change.

The documentary film 'Blackfish' was released in 2013 at the Sundance Film Festival, directed by Gabriela Cowperthwaite. The documentary is concerned with the captivation of deadly orca's, with one Orca named Tilikum, taking the lives of three people in SeaWorld Florida. The most recent fatality being Tilikum's trainer, Dawn Brancheau. As a means to escape responsibility, it was suggested that Dawn's ponytail was to blame for her own death. It transpired that this was no fault of Dawn Brancheau herself.(Parsons and Rose, 2018) Following the tragedy, it was argued that SeaWorld logbooks failed to sufficiently reflect accidents that related to dangerous orca behaviour. The director Cowperthwaite cleverly includes testimonials from the director of science with the Nonhuman Rights Project. There is also an argument disregarding SeaWorld's claim that captivated orcas' lifespans are comparable with life expectancy in the wild.(Parsons and Rose, 2018) It is apparent that the 'Blackfish' documentary has been the most credible in raising awareness of orca captivation and welfare, whilst also highlighting the importance of trainer safety. The wave of response to the documentary was known as the 'Blackfish Effect'.

The open scene of the documentary contains real audio clips from 911 calls made regarding orca's attacks on staff members. The startling audio sets out the theme of death as it prepares the viewer for the turn of events approaching. Such harrowing audio contrasts with blissful videography of whales performing tricks in Seaworld. The stark contrast demonstrates the inability of individuals to recognise the immense danger that such animals can cause and perhaps, how such confinement can spark aggression within the animals. The director's choice of an opening scene is truly appealing in itself. It lures the viewer in, as they await foreseeable consequences. (Jones, 2015)

The use of interviews in the documentary film is what makes 'Blackfish' as impactful as it is. Cowperthwaite cleverly used people with experience in similar careers to provide information on the wrongful conduct of SeaWorld, or similar operations, in holding orcas' captive. The

Hypodermic Needle Theory is visible as a film studies student in the director's use of different close-up shots.(Fourie, 2007) At moments of high intensity such as Carol Ray reflecting on the story of a mother losing her leg, was reflecting in the use of a close-up shot. The audio from the interviews was used throughout the film, adding authenticity and the immediacy of danger surrounding wild animals. The use of expertise audio further clarifies and supports Cowperthwaite's problem with capturing and confining wild orca whales. As apparent in the documentary, the audio is often complemented with actuality footage to promote the issue raised. John Hargrove's voice spoke through incidents of whales attack each other as a clip of a bleeding whale substantiates the conversation.(Jones, 2015)

As previously mentioned, Blackfish incorporates a vast amount of actuality footage. There has been footage taken by tourists, illustrating orca attacks. The director also includes a recording of a report on Dawn Brancheau's death, a method used to captivate the viewer and evoke empathy within them. The footage is real and raw, thus subconsciously forcing the viewer to believe Cowperthwaite's argument is honourable. It demonstrates the power of the director to convince the viewer to support their argument. It could be construed that the power awarded to a director can be used manipulatively to gain following for their views, but the cold hard facts and actuality footage provided in a documentary such as Blackfish, provides the audience with evidence assisting the assertion.(Jones, 2015)

In the absence of footage, Cowperthwaite uses a series of graphics as a substitution. The short animation clips are carefully constructed as it is the director's ambition to reinforce that captivity of orca's is morally wrong. Cowperthwaite uses animation to illustrate Ms. Kelly Clarke's presence at the US Occupational Safety and Health Administration trial. By not carving out her facial features through graphics, it purports the illusion that this person is irrelevant. The use of dull colours reflects a depressive atmosphere in correlating the deaths of SeaWorld trainers with the incarceration of deadly whales.(Jones, 2015)

Gabriela Cowperthwaite uses a variety of agile elements to expose the risk of detaining wild orcas in artificial environments and the threat to staff who work with these animals. It is clear from its release at the 2013 Sundance Film Festival to its nominations for a variety of awards, most importantly the BAFTA Award for Best Documentary, Ms. Cowperthwaite portrayed the image of 'never capturing what you can't control' perfectly to the thousands that engaged with the documentary.(Parsons and Rose, 2018) Magnola Pictures and CNN picked up the documentary for a wider release. Various reviews applauded the fierce approach Gabriela took describing 'Blackfish' as "an aggressive, impassioned documentary that will change the way you look at performance killer whales".(Swann, 2014) The Desert News also described it as "a gripping example of documentary filmmaking at its finest".(Sundance review: 'Blackfish' is an alarming film - Deseret News, 2013) Although award nominations and supportive reviews were warmly welcomed, the impact 'Blackfish' had on policy change was the most rewarding of all.

Richard Bloom, an assembly member introduced a Bill (AB 2140) to prohibit "hold in captivity, or use, wild-caught or captive-bred orca for performance or entertainment purposes". (Parsons and Rose, 2018)Although no further action was taken in 2014, the bill was reintroduced as AB 2305 and it was passed. It was named the 'Orca Protection Act" that came into law in January in 2017.(Parsons and Rose, 2018) April 2015 saw SeaWorld San Diego apply to extend Shamu Stadium called "Blue World". The California Costal Commission agreed to grant permission under the condition that SeaWorld would conclude its orca breeding programme and restricting the transportation of orcas. SeaWorld opposed the conditions, arguing that the California Costal

Commission had exceeded its power under the California Coastal Act. SeaWorld chose to engage discussion with The Humane Society of the United States, which saw the withdrawal of their application against CCC. Although not all laws introduced and potentially inspired by the 'Blackfish Effect' as it was known, it is obviously apparent that the world has become more aware of such entrapment. New York saw the introduction of the Senate Bill 6613 which sought to ban the incarceration of orca whales in the United States. Similar Bills in Washington prohibited the captivation of any cetacean.(Parsons and Rose, 2018)

SeaWorld's response saw the implementation of policy changing regarding no orca breeding across all parks in the United States. It was also stated that the false pretences that engulfed an orca's natural behaviour would be replaced with "more natural looking habitats, and with a focus on the whales' natural behaviours", placing greater emphasis on educating tourists rather than exploiting orcas' for their performances.(Parsons and Rose, 2018) SeaWorld has also decided to dedicate 50 million dollars to a programme associated with marine conservation. They have also donated 1.5 million dollars to research projects concerned with oceanic creatures, after receiving a vast amount of criticism for their lack of contribution to cetacean preservation. SeaWorld has suffered greatly since the launch of 'Blackfish', with some arguing that it is justifiable for the way sea creatures were treated. Their estimated worth has been halved. The company insist that they will continue to facilitate ocras despite surrounding controversy, however due to restrictions on breeding, they will be forced to place them in seaside retirement facilities in the future.(Parsons and Rose, 2018)The knock-on effect in relation to the entrapment of orcas has seen similar environments hosting cetaceans to change their morals. Baltimore saw the National Aquarium announce the closure of the dolphin display and plans to construct a seaside sanctuary. Popular chains supported seaside sanctuaries with the CEO of Munchkin Inc. donating a sum of one million dollars. (Parsons and Rose, 2018)

It is obvious that the 'Blackfish Effect' has not only affected the captivation of orcas but has enabled awareness of other oceanic creatures. Not only has this documentary created awareness of unnatural environments for whales, the danger that staff are exposed to, but it also demonstrates the captivating techniques of documentary creation in creating such a public reaction. By carefully analysing the documentary film 'Blackfish', the dominance and importance of such media exposed conflicting entrapment of ocean creatures and demonstrate its significant impact on social policy.

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