NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND AUDIENCE MOTIVATION IN DOCUMENTARY FILM

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This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Donald J. and Ann Windsor Smith.

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ABSTRACT

Documentary film is meant to inform viewers on an issue and prompt them toward a change in behavior. In the environmental documentary, filmmakers charge audiences with affecting the world around them through an agency of greater understanding. The creators of the message must understand the most effective way to communicate the issue and how actions create change.

Guided by narrative theory, which places the emphasis of effective communication on the ordered presentation of story elements, the researcher screened two environmental documentaries for 20 viewers and subjected them to a two-phase data collection via written questionnaires and focus group discussions to determine what elements viewers perceive to be the most impactful for presenting a crisis, motivating them to become involved in its resolution and the actions they were willing to take.

The researcher found while viewers recognized narrative structure as one component for presenting this information, the identity of the creators and use of emotionally appealing human subjects were also influential for inspiring or preventing a desire to address environmental issues. The actions research subjects considered taking, when they felt so moved, were most strongly aligned with increasing their awareness of the issues and the environmental stances of local politicians.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

The ideal documentary answers to a higher calling than other subgenres of the film medium. It seeks not only to inform viewers of a current issue, but also to move them toward a desired action (Simpson 2008, p. 106). This logic of purpose implies that a viewer is actually somehow responsible for influencing, or is at least complicit in influencing, the perpetuation of the issue and assumes that the proper presentation of information will make a persuasive appeal to the audience’s desire for affecting a relevant change in the subject matter.

But what makes the documentary form an effective method of communicating messages to the point that it is able to transform in the mind of the audience member the passive experience of viewing into the active process of doing? What filmic elements can turn the relation of hard scientific fact into a self-fulfilling passion for responsible human behavior toward specific conditions long after the film is finished playing? The manner in which the content of a documentary film is organized and presented is the manner by which it is able to invoke from the viewer a sense of empathy for the subject, the primary purpose of which is to create a sense of connection through the subject’s narrative or a sequential structure that the audience then interprets as a certain subjective reality (Cohn 2013, p. 413).

To answer what makes a documentary film effective in a practical context of making the viewer perceive a need to change their behavior is a matter of filling the deficiencies in the existing literature on the topic of documentaries and their perceived
effect on the audience. The specific problem area of this research directly explores an audience’s perception of messages that exist within examples of the documentary form, what aspects of the film the audience identifies as transmitting these messages and whether the viewers find the filmic aspects in these examples effective at prompting them toward considering or even affecting changes in their behavior.

The overall research problem guiding the study asks what aspects of narrative in documentary film create a mental connection for viewers between informational content and motivational factors that would encourage audience members to become active participants toward the subject or issue on display. The study also examines how audience members deem the presentation of factual information to be a contributing factor in the way in which they identify with the documentary subject matter and feel a need to act upon the information they view and process. Specifically, the study seeks to identify through audience viewings, responses to written questionnaires and focus group discussions how the documentary’s structure – the ordering of the story elements – recurring storytelling patterns, and visual perspectives within the film shape the audience’s understanding of their role as being complicit in the issues on display. The study also considers to what degree those forces move the viewer to contemplate modifying their behavior for the benefit of that documentary’s subject.

In the context of this study, the research assumes the definition forwarded by Nichols that the documentary film form might be considered “as evidence from the world [which] legitimates its usage as a source of knowledge” and as a form “of instrumental power [that] can and should alter the world itself” because a film that is seen as a factual
and an easily identifiable representation of the world and presents data that may “effect [sic] action and entail consequences” (Nichols 1991, pp. x, 3). Nichols identifies four primary organization patterns within the documentary genre: expository, observational, interactive and reflexive (Nichols 1991, p. 32). Because the two films used in the study, discussed in greater detail in the methods section of this research, were both produced by a news media group and presented in the traditional associated style of a news exposé – wherein the journalist serves as both narrator and field reporter – the documentaries most closely align with Nichols’ definition of the expository mode, using the viewer-directed commentary style to position people against an issue (Nichols 1991, pp. 32, 34).

Nichols also notes that the “prevalence” of this style’s use in documentary films because it is an agent of advocacy, “facilitating comprehension” by utilizing “spoken word to convey the film’s perspective from a single, unifying source” that guides (Nichols 2010, p. 154). The filmmakers’ voice, sometimes literally through narration, becomes the audience’s “guide” through the film, ideally persuading them to align with a preferred stance on the issue (Nichols, 2010, p. 158). When successful, it accomplishes this through “images edited in accordance to the narrator’s script, providing visual evidence to what is generally considered an expert and objective opinion” (“Television documentary: Overview,” 2006, p. 1304). The resulting texts are films that “seek to inform and instruct” (Barbash & Taylor 1997, p. 18).

The goal of leading viewers toward an intended conclusion through expository means can be an objective of filmmakers working in the genre of environmental documentary, where an instance of crisis is presented and the audience is asked not only
to understand the issue at hand but also to take some personal action of activism or change in behavior, that will change the current state of affairs. A key to that connection is explaining the issue to such a degree of coherence that the viewer attaches a feeling of responsibility vis-à-vis the material. This can be achieved through the filmmakers showing those who have been “traumatized by ecological events and devastation,” but it doesn’t end there: the filmmakers “are concerned with the bigger picture and the future implications and trajectories of these local instances” (Musser 2015, p. 47). On the whole, the appeal of environmental documentaries as both documentary subjects for filmmakers and preferred viewing materials for viewers appears to be growing: Musser states at the end of the 2000s, “the environmental documentary had emerged as the pre-eminent genre” of documentary based on a multitude of films – *The Cove* (2009) and *Food, Inc.* (2008) among the more well-known examples – that were released amidst an increased global awareness of several issues, including “global warming, energy, pollution and our food supply” (Musser 2015, p. 46).

Among the studies that have been conducted in this broad area, other research has worked around the edges of the research discussed in this thesis. Such a study examines the types of environmental documentary programming that elicit pro-active behavior toward an issue and the prevalence for self-described fans of this material to seek it out (Holbert et al. 2003). Another directly examines how the proximity of an environmental issue in relation to people living nearby affected their perception of a need to become involved and work toward a resolution, and in the process hints at the factors those people consider when deciding whether or not to act on an issue (Fuller 2014). Still
another questions the role of sympathy and emotional reaction to environmental film – positing that the viewer is complicit toward affecting positive or negative consequences in a certain setting – but only from a standpoint of human-animal interaction (Haynes 2013). Previous research discussed in the following chapter then shows that while some studies have approached the question of “what” makes an effective documentary and “why” audiences respond to films of the environmental genre, few, if any, address the role of narrative structure in or the influence that expository presentational style has toward conveying a message or prompting a perception that a viewer should be moved toward action.

An overall objective of the study is to provide both documentary filmmakers and scholars with information regarding what aspects of narrative filmmaking are the most effective at communicating messages to an audience from that audience’s own perspective. This is achieved by providing some qualitative measure of how audiences respond to the structural presentation of expository documentaries. Secondly, the research seeks to identify any pre-existing factors that may serve to affect the audience’s susceptibility toward favorably receiving the ingrained messages. Finally, the research seeks to ascertain the degree of action viewers are willing take in the event they become engaged with the material, and if any aspects of narrative storytelling are commonly cited among the research subjects as motivating factors for doing so. The research is intended to serve as a humanistic study of how viewers perceive they are being directed to act in the course of watching a documentary, and not as a measure of how subjects were successfully persuaded to actually perform or affect a change in behavior after the study.
was concluded.

This research is important for primarily two reasons. The first is that the study, while limited in the size of its subject sample and incapable of presenting any measurement or representation toward a definitive answer of what makes an effective documentary, is capable of providing some direct examples for what filmic elements audiences respond to as well as how viewers believe they will act toward certain environmental issues after viewing. If the purpose of this representative form is to affect some change in present conditions with regards to a topic, then it stands to reason that an audience’s reactions to the form are an accurate gauge for determining – in the sense of communicating a message – whether the chosen examples are effective, if only in the individual and subjective sense.

The remaining factor motivating the research is the relative lack of literature in the problem area specific for this topic of study. This statement is not intended to slight the work discussed in this study’s literature review, but even within the available background of research little exploration has been done to discover the existing links between what the audience perceives while viewing and immediately after viewing a documentary with how they perceive they are being directed to behave in the future after that viewing. The clearest benefit of this study then is not only that it fills a gap in the existing literature, but also might present some foundational information for the crafting of documentaries and providing data for future studies in the problem area by building upon the previous research that has been performed and thereby aiding future research in this field.
The following chapter is a literature review of previous research in the same problem area as this study, beginning with the foundations of narrative theory, its development with regard to storytelling and extending to its specific application in environmental documentary films and the effects those documentaries have on their audiences. Chapter 3 discusses the method used in the study, in which research participants viewed two environmental issued-based documentaries in a group setting, answered first a series of written questions and then took part in a focus group discussion. Chapter 4 examines the answers gathered during the written questionnaire, grouped, around thematically similar answers. Chapter 5 separately examines the audiences’ impressions during the focus discussions, separated by group, containing some notable observations that occurred outside the scope of data collection. The final chapter reviews the significant findings of the research, the limitations of the study and possibilities for future research building upon the findings of this study.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to approach the question of how the narrative structure in the documentary film form presents a discourse intended to affect viewer behavior and also determine what aspects of the narrative have what effect on viewers, the research will address this problem area through narrative theory.

The literature review for this study will first present the purpose of addressing the problem area from the standpoint of narrative theory, a brief history of the development of that theory and its application in film studies. Finally, the literature review will present the research questions and justify them from the standpoint of established prior studies as well as demonstrate the needs for further research in the form of this study due to a relative lack of previous work that directly applies to the problem area.

Narrative theory is rooted in the importance of a story’s structure, the archetypes of which date back to Aristotle. Chatman identifies the philosopher as the origin point for the definition of structure as “the arrangement of incidents” – because Aristotle first identified the archetypes of stories which continue to permeate narrative storytelling in the present day across multiple mediums including literature, film and television – and further that the ordered structure of events is what constitutes a story (Chatman 1978, p.43). Chatman argues that the purpose of structure “is to emphasize or de-emphasize certain story-events, to interpret some and leave others to inference” (Chatman, p. 43).

This assertion implies not only that there is purposeful intent behind the ordering of the events in a story by the story’s creators – in the case of this study, the filmmakers –
but that there is also a generalized and preferred reading of the documentary that the creators wish the viewer to assimilate. Joseph Campbell famously expounded on Aristotle’s *Poetics* with the notion that stories (in his reading, myths) are essentially cyclical, and that while each iteration of a story features repeating common elements, the interpretations of these stories – sometimes even the same stories retold over time – are capable of gaining “secondary interpretations” in order “to fit local landscape, custom or belief” of the audience (Campbell 1972, p. 228). In this way, stories take on two forms of a preferred reading; the interpretation that creators intend to be received by audiences, and through the repetition of similar interpretations over time, another that is created by the audience members.

Narrative theory as a specific course of study was developed through the work of Propp, who similarly identified patterns of characters and actions across a body of texts which functioned as the means of the telling the story and making the story both accessible and familiar to the reader as they encountered the same patterns in different narratives (Propp 1958, p. 6). Propp expanded on this notion of preferred readings, asserting that certain structures were specific to stories of certain genres, and this similarity across works “is immediately felt…even though we may not be aware of it” (Propp 1958, p. 6). He also supported the stance that what is contained within the narrative structure is more important than the questions of who is creating the structure (the character or perhaps the filmmaker) and how the narrative is structured, such as the more commonly experienced chronological or three-act ordering of events with a beginning, middle and end (Propp 1958, p. 67). The documentary plays a role in guiding
viewers towards a set of these favored actions to positively influence the problem at hand and implies the assumption there are also actions that may be or have already been taken which caused or negatively influenced the same issue.

The repeated use of a certain structure, to the point where it becomes part of the iconography of a genre, reinforces the idea that there is an established order for presenting the story spurred by the collective and repeated response of its audience. In the documentary form, we might understand this as its own sort of linear structure: the issue is presented, followed by current abnormalities and then by the possibilities for change. As audiences of these documentaries become more accustomed to this sequencing of events, the more they may become more consciously – or as Propp might suggest, even unconsciously – aware of this narrative structure in future viewings of other examples within the medium (Propp 1958, p. 6).

Regardless of the content or the importance placed upon it by the filmmakers, the representative form of the documentary is the primary tool being used to direct the desired action, and so the way that narrative is presented is what makes it accessible to the audience. Because the same words and images in different orders may likely have different effects, so the filmmakers have presumably sequenced their offering in the most comprehensible manner because they are creating the work with the objective for others to view it and understand it – albeit through their own subjective lens. We’ve come to expect the linear sequence of events with a beginning, middle and an end from most film forms – documentary or narrative – in the sense that a current state of affairs comes into conflict and a resolution is then reached at its conclusion. No matter the variations, the
accepted and generally understood aspect of every narrative is therefore dependent on what Barthes refers to as “the common model” (Barthes & Sontag 1982, p. 252).

In the documentary form the story doesn’t really end when the credits roll and the ultimate conclusion is sometimes left up to the audience to determine, as is demonstrated in the texts used within this study. Between the viewers’ backgrounds, their previous experiences and the specific framework and conditions that are presented to them through the film, the audience forms some understanding of reality with regard to the documentaries and may more readily identify with it (Cohn 2013, pp. 416-417). While other viewers may not find cause to respond to the content of the documentary, such a film’s formal expression is the primary conduit for making its position on the issue known to the viewers (Aaltonen 2014, p. 61).

While the linear narrative most associated with three-act structure is a relevant way to display the associated information, which includes the character (a specific subject, idea or environment), what current state is antagonizing them (another specific group, mode of thinking or social practice) and what specific actions the viewer must take to reverse the present situation – Propp’s hierarchy of structure over content or creator implies it is the viewer’s understanding of this structure and not their ability to empathize with the contents of the narrative that most influences their comprehension of and attachment to solving the problem as presented (Propp 1958, p. 67). This is most readily reflected in the expository mode of writing and reporting defined by Nichols as “the primary means of relaying information and persuasively making a case since the 1920s” (Nichols 1991, p. 32).
Building on the idea that certain structures become prevalent across texts that are similar in nature, Bremond asserts that the actions and events within the narrative structure are the vehicles which represent the message, be it the characters and events or the actions the filmmakers want viewers to take (Bremond 1964, pp. 11-12; Pier 2003, p. 78). Levi-Strauss, Jacobson and Schoepf write that understanding a textual structure “is necessary…in order to obtain a principle of interpretation valid for other institutions and customs”, which again speaks to the notion that narrative order permeates stories across cultures, time periods, languages and forms (Levi-Strauss et al. 1963, p. 22). In this way, the “form takes precedence over the content of the narrative” and allows for audiences to glean their own meanings from the same texts (Levi-Strauss et al. 1963, p. 22).

These elements can only be received in a commonly readable manner if they are arranged in a way that maximizes the audience’s ability to recognize the information and then synthesize the information into thought and action. If the information is presented in an order that the filmmakers believe will be understood by the greatest number of viewers, they then are theoretically maximizing the potential successful transmission of their message. In documentaries utilizing the expository mode, the element of narration ties interviews and imagery together in order to effect an “economy of analysis, allowing points to made succinctly and emphatically” in a manner that supports the filmmakers’ ideology and goal (Nichols 1991, p. 35).

Barthes makes a case for this ability of transmission in his statement that “realism supposes…a presence of structure” (Barthes 1972, p. 191). Through an ordered sequence of events, the text in question is given some inherent meaning because it was
purposefully constructed this way by the text’s creator – in our example of documentary, the filmmaker – in order to make the text “open to analysis” and communicate the creator’s message (Barthes & Sontag 1982, p. 210, 253). Even in the news documentary setting – just as the two texts used in this research were produced for a television news program – the filmmakers may present one or both sides of a polarizing issue that intentionally or unintentionally forces the viewer to decide with which side they agree.

For the viewer, the text uses functional elements that are signifiers of meaning, the exact details and associated connotations of which may vary from text to text and audience to audience, but in sum total always serve this communicative purpose (Barthes & Sontag 1982, p. 261). These functional elements are cumulative in that they build the story through sequential progression with each part of the whole building upon the last to hold the viewer’s attention and also move the story along at the same time – evidence of the “epic pattern” from ancient storytelling still at play within modern narrative (Barthes & Sontag 1982, p. 275). Whether audiences deem that the text being presented in the expository mode carries an objective or persuasively subjective point of view, the narrative establishes the setting, the conflict and the attempts at resolution.

Narrative theory is upgraded to a paradigm by Walter Fisher, whose proposal of the narrative paradigm is “a theory of symbolic actions...that have sequence and meaning for those who live, create or interpret them” (Fisher 1984, p. 2). Fisher’s theory hinges on the universal truth both he and Campbell separately posit; that humans are storytellers and that stories are the primary method by which we come to understand and develop our own ideas of the world and other people around us. The “stories” under this paradigm are
not limited in their representation to what we read, hear or view but include all forms of everyday communication. No matter what precise elements are used in terms of the story’s characters, settings, or style, and whether or not the stories are “recounting” – such as histories – or “accounting” – such as explanations and arguments – Fisher says these are the manner by which we as humans “establish a meaningful life-world” and reveal “truth(s) about the human condition” (Fisher 1984, p.6, 7). Stories in any form then become the primary means of communication and human empathy because we tell them and listen to them in order to gain a greater understanding of another human experience, perhaps to corroborate an experience we have already had or to vicariously access an experience for which we have no prior familiarity and would enable us to better understand the actions of others and perhaps put ourselves in their shoes.

Under Fisher’s paradigm, stories “[constitute] the fabric of the social reality for those who compose them” assuming they fulfill two conditions: that of rationality, or coherence, and fidelity, meaning that the story rings consistently true and disseminates a message that is truthful and relatable to other people (Fisher 1984, pp. 7; Griffin 200, p. 302-304). Perhaps the most important aspect of the narrative paradigm is that it considers the process of interpreting the message a collaborative effort between the author of the text and the audience engaging with it. To Fisher, “the audience is not a group of observers but are active participants in the meaning-forming of the stories” (Fisher 1984, p. 13). This assertion effectively places just as much responsibility on the viewers of the documentary as it does the filmmakers in terms of the degree to which each ascribes message and meaning to the film’s content.
These definitions of the narrative structure and of narrative theory that has developed alongside it might be applied to any type of text that can be arranged in a structured order for popular consumption – which would in the modern context naturally include the form of film and the genre of documentary. Narrative theory relates to the research problem of audience motivation in that, according to Branigan, the documentary film is created with the intention of provoking the audience “to take action with respect to a social problem or political issue” (Branigan 2013, p. 206). The information presented within the film is structured in such a way as to “focus the spectator’s attention on the specificity of events” (Branigan 2013, p. 204) and, ideally, elicit an action in response to the visual and aural stimuli. Jahn refers to this intentional ordering of information for interpretation by the audience as “the theoretical agency behind a film's organization and arrangement, assumed to be guided by maxims of giving efficient, sufficient, and relevant information” (Jahn 2003).

Because this preferred reading is inherent to the documentary genre, those ways in which the film’s presentation stimulates the viewer’s knowledge and emotions regarding a subject and which requires some form of intervention to solve are the aspects most worthy of narrative scrutiny. As Burnett states, “stories are never limited whether by the medium used to express them or by the viewers or listeners” (Burnett 2004, p. 4). Bal supports the appropriation of narrative theory in film by way of referring to its use outside literature as a natural extension of the theory for addressing issues in other mediums with “comparable power” (Bal 1985, p. 167).

Volger later appropriated much of Campbell’s work explaining the ancient and
enduring hero myth into a business memo, which served as a sort of miniature snapshot of the then-current Hollywood film industry during the mid-1980s, identifying Campbell’s text as a guiding force for screenwriters of the period because the archetypes have remained the same from the time of Aristotle’s Poetics to the present day: they speak to universal concerns that we as humans inherently look for when we process the information of everyday life (Volger 1985, pp.6-7). Burnett speaks to the power these narratives have given their ability to create “the world” for the audience, captivating their attention and exposing them to new information or thought in an effort to alter their perceptions – which is specifically the point of a documentary that calls its viewers to action (Burnett 2004, p. 6).

Like Volger’s movie industry memo, contemporary studies of narrative structure in film have traditionally focused on fictional representations of popular cinema, as represented by much of the work of eminent film scholar David Bordwell (1985, 1989), and colleague Kristin Thompson (Bordwell & Thompson, 2011), who echo Barthes in supporting the idea that narrative structure is the primary means by which an audience is brought into the world of the film and positioned to more freely accept its messages. As previously mentioned, Bal made an early allusion to the potential for the application of the study of narrative theory to texts of different mediums (Bal 1985, p. 167). Similar logic has been applied within contemporary studies of narrative theory in specific fictional films by well-known auteurs, including Martin Scorsese’s The Age of Innocence (Kozloff 2001) and David Fincher’s Fight Club (Volker 2005) to examine how the narrative structure and presentation of the film’s content to the audience are meant to
frame their understanding of the characters, plot and ultimately the meaning of the film as a whole.

But to apply the study of film narrative to only fictional examples is short-ranging use of the theory because documentary film utilizes the same basic tenets of its arguably more popular and mostly fictitious sibling: moving images that are arranged in a specified order and that make use of sound and sometimes text (in the form of subtitles) in order to impart a story. Therefore, narrative theory may be just as easily applied to the study of these nonfictional types of narratives as it is to the fictional fare of popular cinema.

Moreover, unlike fictional representations earmarked mainly for the purpose of escapism and diversion to entertain viewers, documentary leans on an overriding sense of urgency – ostensibly, that the viewer needs the information contained therein in order to cultivate a well-formed opinion on the topic and perhaps even do something about it based on those newfound realizations. Verstraten & Lecq posit that some documentaries are capable of achieving their own style of oratory by presenting “an argumentative structure supported by continual parallels and contrasts” in order to present a relevant issue in such a way that the viewers are influenced, presumably, to side with the filmmakers in terms of the stance and action they should take in the matter (Verstraten & Lecq 2009, p. 20).

The expository documentary is well-suited to this tactic of directly approaching the viewer with information in an attempt to strike up active dialogue, as opposed to the passive viewing experience. Silent film era documentarian John Grierson advanced the
expository style – a basic tenet of which is the presence of a narrator that “implicitly address[es] an audience” and is “somewhat set apart from the rest of the film” – as the preferred form for “propagandists” to disburse their messages (Barbash & Castaing-Taylor 1997, pp. 17, 19). With such an emphasis placed on the voice of the filmmakers behind the documentary, imagery in the expository mode serves to enhance this auditory element, “edited as a complement or counterpoint to an argument being articulated” (Barbash & Castaing-Taylor 1997, p. 18). The importance of imagery to the film medium can never be entirely removed, but the main method by which a film’s authors present this argument is verbally rather than visually dependent.

The research questions to be answered by the study are:

RQ1: To what degree does the narrative structure of expository mode documentaries influence viewer perception of a need to act upon the information being presented?

Generally, documentaries within the environmental subgenre are intended to incite the audience “to take action with respect to a social problem or political issue”, and motivate them to consider the subject actively rather than submitting to the passive experience typically associated with the act of watching fictional film produced for the purposes of leisure and entertainment (Branigan 2013, p. 206). In their most basic form, these types of documentaries present viewers with a problem affecting some aspect of the natural world, demonstrate or espouse the consequences if the problem is permitted to continue and then places the viewer within the context of becoming a solution to the issue at hand in an effort to alter their current perception or conduct (Simpson 2008, p. 106).
the case of expository documentaries, that aspect of placement may be unduly influenced by the manner in which the problem, the consequences or antagonists and the protagonists – or stakeholders – in the issue at hand are presented against one another (Nichols 1991, p. 32).

In a qualitative study of the relationship between television environmental programming and audience behavior, Holbert, Kwak and Shah identified different categories of such programming that featured environmental issues as the subject (Holbert et al. 2003, p. 178). They found that the two types of programming that entreat positive actions toward the environment from their audiences – television news and documentaries – also make emotional appeals. News programs featuring documentaries often prompted by a recent or ongoing disaster scenario present the occurrences as being symptomatic of a negative and prevalent climate condition affected by human negligence, in addition to documentaries that only serve to underline for the viewer the results of positive and purposeful interaction with the environment (Holbert et al. 2003, p. 190).

Both of these representations point viewers either away from or toward an action, respectively, but the authors’ study does not consider the structure of presentation. News programming presents viewers with a possible cause-and-effect scenario and is presented in a linear story format, which in the case of this study is perceived as both chronological and spatial order. The spatial order employed in both documentaries focuses on fracking and mining, respectively, in two examples of rural small town America, then gradually moves outward to explain the effects and perceptions of both processes on a state level, and – in one of the research texts – on the national scale.
Fundamentally, the news report is an instance in time, and while it may be told in a long form bordering on documentary presentation still includes recognizable elements of structure: The characters, setting and events or actions are examined in the context in which they became newsworthy. This again implies a sequence of events that created the cause and the effect. Similar to the documentaries that will be discussed in the methods sections, these news reports involve some manipulation at the hands of the producers and filmmakers in order to present the media in a length and format that adheres to the temporal limitations of a television news show (typically 30 minutes to an hour), as well as to guide the viewers through the material “within a frame of reference that need not be questioned or established but simply taken for granted” (Nichols 1991, p. 35).

Selheim offers a counter critique to this type of causal link between attitude and action with regard to recent examples in environmental documentaries, including popular selections such as An Inconvenient Truth (2006) and The Cove. The author states that the attitudes and behaviors of the documentaries’ viewers were unaffected in a practically measurable sense by what they saw and that even the supposition audiences would be somehow affected is “misguided” (Selheim 2013, p. 131, 135). As these views conflict in relation to how effective the environmental documentary subgenre is at provoking “real action” – the definition of which might vary from subject to subject and study to study – this study does not propose to hoist one perspective on the topic over the other, but instead seeks to add to the limited scope of available research in both a contemporary and localized context.

Documentaries that focus on only the benefits of being involved in the
environment put the cart before the horse: The end result of behavior becomes the motivating factor with the opportunity to demonstrate a pathway of how that behavior occurred. A simple example is to show what the character accomplished, the existing circumstances or problem and why the characters chose to involve themselves in beneficial behavior. Holbert, Kwak and Shah were able to measure to what degree audiences agreed with pre-formed statements about their environmental behavior and television viewing habits based on a six-point scale, but the quantitative study did not allow for open-ended responses from the over 3,000 respondents regarding what aspects of the documentary programming affected them or in what ways.

An interesting side note to this study is that the authors found that viewers who are considered to already be environmentally conscious intentionally seek out this genre of documentary programming (Holbert et al. 2003, p. 181). It might be argued that no viewer accidentally submits to watching a documentary - they all seek the programming out, whether it’s actively choosing a title to watch or stumbling across it and lingering a moment while channel surfing. However, the mindset of a viewer who purposefully chooses documentaries for viewing because they are a familiar or preferred source of entertainment, and that of one who chooses a documentary based on a desire or interest to learn the factual information might be affected differently by the story they are being told, and consequently, might act differently based on that viewing experience.

This finding illustrates that even in a purely subjective interview process regarding what aspects of the documentary viewers find to be effective motivators for changes in thought and actions, there exists the possibility for a biased attitude from those
who might be considered pre-determined fans of the genre and, conceivably, those on the opposite end of the spectrum who intentionally avoid such programming for their own reasons, whether it be disbelief of the information available on the topic or simply not finding documentaries an interest-provoking medium.

RQ2: What aspects of narrative structure present in expository mode documentaries do viewers perceive as influencing an intended change in behavior or action?

Because the act of viewing is a one-way dialogue, even in an active setting where the viewer is engaged with and absorbing the information, it is the order and manner in which these simplistic stages of logic – problem, consequences, and solution - are presented which bear examination, because the way in which the story is presented is the only way a documentary can be an effective mode of communication. The audience may have the ability to play the documentary again and review what they have been told or seek out more information on the topic from other sources, but they may only be motivated even that far if they first are engaged with what they are seeing and hearing.

As the documentary form becomes the guiding force in pointing its viewers toward an intended action, it is imperative that in order for the form to be an effective agent of motivation for change that viewers understand they have some level of complicity, empathy or stake in the matters on display (Nichols 1991, p. 32). Depending on the audience member, this access point could be found in any number of factors including an acquaintance with the filmmakers’ previous works, past direct experience with the issue being discussed or at least some general familiarity with the topic.
Factors outside of documentary viewing may also play a common role in determining how a community responds to environmental issues. Fuller’s mixed methods study using interview responses and surveys gathered from residents of two communities in urban areas of Indiana determined that a concept of attachment to the environment in peril corresponded with those groups taking steps towards effecting physical change in an existing condition: One of the communities affected by toxic waste contamination actually formed an organization and initiated discussions with community leaders on implementing programs to mitigate the effects of further pollution in their neighborhood (Fuller 2014, p. 31).

Although the actions of the community were not prompted by a documentary, this degree of attachment still points back to a crucial fact about the way actors engage with their environment – an active agent must move them to do so. The aspect of a documentary that a viewer identifies with is not only formed from the way information is structured and presented but also the way in which the viewer processes this information against their own background, experience or familiarity with the subject. No viewer is a blank slate: as Berger states, “we never look at just one thing; we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves” (Berger 1972, p. 9).

RQ3: How do viewers perceive they are being directed to act by environmental documentaries using the expository mode?

Propp’s early work in the field of narrative theory as applied to text suggests the ordered structure of the narrative and the elements contained therein are more influencing factors than the structure’s creator or even the background of the viewer (Propp 1958, p.
67). Even the viewer who has no prior experience with or knowledge of the documentary topic may act on what they witness if they feel moved to do so, implying that some degree of identification occurs in the viewing process. This occurs not only when a viewer recognizes the factual information being dispensed but also receives a message instructing them that they have the responsibility and ability to act on the information through positive, proactive behaviors. Ideally, the well-crafted documentary is able to achieve this type of conversion, but the ability to do so rests with the ability of the filmmakers – and by extension their content – to make a meaningful and lasting connection with the viewers. Narration and editing tether the interviews and information that support the filmmakers’ goals for the text: If an expository documentary seeks to prompt an audience to action – be it a physical behavior or deeper level of thought regarding the chosen topic – it must set the “tone and perspective” that will enable the viewer to make these connections (Nichols 1991, p. 37).

Previous studies on how the documentary film form effectively transmits proactive messages to audiences have identified several filmic elements as possible points of contact between the viewer and subject matter – particularly in the environmental documentary subgenre. However, due to the subjective nature of how each viewer processes and responds to visual information, Rose states there are no guarantees that each viewer will have the same interpretation as the preferred reading (Rose 2001, p. 15).

Haynes took a somewhat different approach in an analysis of the emotional responses provoked in audience members by the dolphin hunting documentary *The Cove,*
which depends on a feeling of sympathy between the human viewer and the subjects of the film – both human and animal – and their co-existence and interaction (Haynes 2013, p. 28). But Haynes notes a significant difference in that The Cove frames the story through the perspective of former Flipper dolphin trainer Ric O’Barry, who through his work in the documentary is seemingly making amends through his contemporary efforts to aid in abolishing Japanese dolphin hunting for what he perceives to be his own complicity in the past exploitation of the environment (Haynes 2013, p. 29).

The Cove relies heavily on gruesome imagery the hunts that is meant to shock and offend, but the audience also is asked to go on the journey through the eyes of O’Barry by understanding his background before the cameras started rolling, then by seeing the gory practice of the hunters and thusly being primed by this juxtaposition to understand that in the eyes of O’Barry and the filmmakers the actions of the hunters need to be stopped. There is a cause-and-effect relationship on display – that the commercial interests exploiting the dolphins perpetuate an inhumane and ecologically detrimental practice – and knowing this, the viewers understand they have physical recourses even if they lack the governmental power to outright ban said practice. These remedies range from the online actions of spreading the word by signing petitions or sharing links to view the documentary on social media to more extreme examples such as O’Barry and company’s covert operations to install secret cameras for documenting the dolphin hunt and making the resulting documentary.

Although the analysis makes an explicit connection between presentational framing and intended or desired resulting actions, Haynes’ analysis does not interview or
take into account the perceptions of the audience, either to determine if they found O’Barry’s story to be an effective vehicle for conveying the story/subject’s drama or even to measure if the viewers took any of the above actions or alternatives after viewing the documentary.

Given the limited scope of previous study regarding the effects of narrative structure on viewer perception and behavior, as well as the potential for varied and disparate responses from individuals about how this structure affected their viewing experience and takeaways, it is appropriate that a qualitative study be performed to provide some reference for what narrative elements audiences respond to and why they find these elements noteworthy. Because narrative theory has not – to the knowledge of the researcher – been previously applied to studying audience perception of expository documentary narrative structure in a qualitative form, this study seeks first to create a more nuanced understanding of how this filmic component influences viewers’ feelings about the issues presented and may internally motivate them to action. Second, the study seeks to provide a base of information that might be measured quantitatively in future studies by other researchers to determine if these catalysts for action might be commonalities among additional research subjects.
CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODS

If the structure of a film is the primary way in which the audience not only accesses and understands the discourse of the documentary subject, then it must also be the vehicle that asks the viewers to act upon the same information. Examining the ways in which the information communicated within the structure of a narrative nonfiction film appeals to a viewers’ sense of responsibility toward or feeling of complicity in a given situation – such as social justice or environmental concerns – and their duty to act directly upon those feelings is a problem best approached through qualitative study and directly interviewing the research subjects.

According to Creswell, “in the entire qualitative research process, the researcher keeps a focus on learning the meaning that the participants hold about the problem or issue,” (2014, p. 186). The underlying intent of the research then is to discover what aspects of the documentary form the research subjects find to be effective conveyors of an appeal to take an action or alter their behavior. This answer could conceivably be different for each viewer, and so can only be effectively studied through a qualitative, open-ended process.

The research involved screenings of two short documentary films that utilize Nichols’ definition of the expository mode to present a persuasive argument that seeks an agreement from the audience: “Wisconsin’s Mining Standoff” (2014) and “Fracking in America” (2012) produced for the television documentary series Fault Lines by the Al Jazeera English division of Al Jazeera Media Network (Nichols 1991, p. 34). The films
are both produced for half-hour television programs – each running roughly 24 minutes in length – and are presented by narrator and reporter Josh Rushing, who over the course of the films investigates questionable corporate energy and commodity practices, respectively, in rural American communities.

The structure of each film is similar: Rushing presents the perceived threats of hydraulic fracking for oil and iron ore mining and their introduction in Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, respectively, and establishes some history for how each perceived threat came to exist in the local area. Rushing then interviews local citizens, who are for the most part opposed to these processes, as well as government and business representatives involved in each issue’s continuance and some scientists who can describe the processes and lend fact to certain claims that are laid forth within the documentaries. Each episode is framed strongly from the perspective of the citizens’ struggles against processes, which they perceive to be disrupting the surrounding environment and affecting their medical and economic livelihood, through organization and protest.

The episodes are ultimately open-ended, suggesting that the conflicts remain unresolved and continue into the present day. As news-produced television programs, the films strive to “(emphasize) an impression of objectivity” to the viewer, while at the same time being directed in the editing and narration to align with the over-arching design of supporting the program’s point-counterpoint presentational style (Nichols 1991, pp. 35, 37).

Because the study is centered around gaining a greater understanding of audience reaction and perception of the effective aspects of documentary viewing and also how
that understanding may affect the viewers’ future behavior – all, by their very nature, likely to be subjective answers – the study required a research method that would allow for varied and individual responses. Through the screening experience the researcher hoped to capture the attention of the subjects and engage them in an active process of engaging with the material, while also allowing for the fact that the presence of the researcher might inevitably affect the resulting responses (Creswell 2014, p. 192). As later stated in the conclusion section of this study, the interactive experience of a number of viewers within each screening group yielded some interesting observations in terms of how the viewers engaged with the documentaries.

The participants were collected via public notice posted at public library branches, college buildings and retail establishments containing area event bulletin boards in the Springfield, MO. metropolitan area. This approach for finding participants was chosen in an attempt to randomize the research subjects for the study and with the hope that the researcher could gain a wider variety of demographic backgrounds than if the notices were posted in only area of the town or restricted to a college campus. The researcher believes the timing of when the notices were posted – early January, while most undergraduates were likely on winter break and out of town – may have contributed to a lack of willing participants ages 18 to 27. Also, the research participants were not pre-screened by the researcher during the recruitment process for pre-existing biases – either for or against the genre, topic or film authors. This factor would be highlighted later in the data collection phase of the study.

Although the documentaries exist as freely available video files online and might
be most easily accessed via a laptop or desktop computer, the researcher projected the films on a screen using a laptop connected to a projection system and television, respectively, in order to more easily facilitate group screenings and focus group interviews with multiple audience members. According to Stromgren & Norden, this approximation of the typical film viewing environment - the theater setting – helps the viewer more readily concentrate and absorb the information of the film and, hopefully, ignore potential distractions (Stromgren & Norden 1984, p. 205). Lacking access to an actual theater to screen the films, the researcher chose to approximate the screening environment in a public events room on Jan. 23 and a combination conference-meeting room on Feb. 2 in Springfield, MO. Both environments were of a size to comfortably accommodate the screening groups for the data collection phases of the research as well as the break in between phases. They also provided the use of a common seating area in the screening room as well as afforded the researcher control of room lighting and documentary sound levels and the use of a large projection screen and large television, respectively. The way in which data was to be collected for the research meant that it needed to be conducted in a personal environment the researcher was physically present to administer the screenings, questionnaire and follow-up questions. This also allowed for the research participants to attend the screenings at an appointed time and the researcher to have some ability in planning for the size of each group.

Although the data collection phase of the study was initially expected to net a maximum of 15 subjects, the researcher eventually expanded this number and the research was conducted among a group of 20 subjects between the ages of 28 and 72. The
reason for this was due to only three of seven scheduled participants taking part in the first screening on Jan. 23, 2016, and the attendance of five additional subjects over the 12 that were originally scheduled by the researcher during the two screenings conducted on Feb. 2. The data collection phase of the research was concluded following the third screening because the researcher had obtained more than the proposed number of 15 participants, but this decision was reinforced by a slight saturation of similar answers given in the written questionnaires and focus discussions following the second and third screenings. The gathering and scheduling of research subjects began following the research proposal’s final approval in late December 2015 and screenings were scheduled for weekend viewing blocks in late January and early February 2016 when a sufficient number of participants – a minimum of 15 – had been gathered for each screening. The blocks were scheduled in 90-minute increments to allow ample time for viewing of the short documentaries, answering the questionnaire, the following break and the focus group discussions.

Of the 20 research subjects who took part in the screenings and data collection 12 were female and eight were male, with ages of the participants ranging from 18 to 72 and a median age of roughly 40 years old. Eighteen of the subjects were Caucasian and two identified as being of Latin descent.

On a socioeconomic scale, participants reporting an annual income of more than $65,000 were the slight majority at seven, followed by the $25,000-$35,000 bracket at six. Remaining viewers were evenly distributed below $25,000 and between $35,000 and $55,000 with only one subject declining to disclose this requested information. On the
predisposition of viewers toward the documentary form, the study’s participants were nearly evenly split between those who said they “never” or “infrequently” viewed documentaries – numbering nine – and those who said they watched documentaries frequently, or were even a preferred viewing selection – totaling 11.

The subjects completed the documentary viewings in a roughly 48-minute period, and were given an additional 10 minutes following the screenings to complete their answers to the written questions. After a 10-minute break for refreshments, the group reconvened for approximately 20 minutes to answer additional questions in an open discussion format, as prompted by the researcher and derived from the short answers given on the participants’ questionnaires. The researcher reserved the opportunity to cease data collection in the anticipated eventuality that focus group participants might demonstrate some sign of data saturation by reiterating the same thoughts and answers in both written and verbal answers, thus failing to take the research findings in new directions (Charmaz 2014, p. 214).

Although the videos are available online, and the questionnaire and focus group interview questions may have been more conveniently forwarded via email for the participants to complete at their discretion, this did not constitute a desirable research setting for two reasons: 1) the immediacy of the impact that the documentary texts have on their audiences may be lost if the interview questions are completed at too late a date following the documentary viewings – and audience recall may also be affected in some way by this lapse in time – and 2) the researcher would not have any way to ensure through an electronic submission process that interview answers were given by the
subjects that actually viewed the texts or the participants who had signed up for the study were actually the parties answering the questions.

Refreshments in the form of food and drink were served as part of the compensation for the subjects’ time and willingness to participate in the research. Given the length of time required to view the films, administer and study the questionnaires and conduct the focus groups, the researcher also compensated the subjects with a small monetary sum that was pro-rated depending on the subject’s level of willing involvement so as not to influence a subject’s decision to continue participation or cease participation at their own discretion as well as to compensate them duly for their time. A sum of $10 USD was to be given to subjects completing only the viewing portion and questionnaire portion of the research, with an additional $10 given to those continuing participation through the secondary focus group phase. All 20 participants completed both phases of the research data collection to a satisfactory degree and were granted the full $20 compensation at the conclusion of the screenings. No participants ceased participation at any point during the research nor advised the researcher that they wished to cease their participation.

At the beginning of the screening, the researcher provided the group respondents with an informed consent form. A signature of consent was be the only material gathered specifically identifying the subjects other than names and phone numbers that were obtained by the researcher and deemed necessary to contact participants. While the researcher asked that the subjects continue participation in the viewing and focus group interviews until completion, subjects were also informed as to their ability to cease their
participation at any time during the research process with the request that they notify the researcher so as to receive their appropriate level of pro-rated compensation.

Following the screenings, while the participants took a short break for refreshments, the researcher looked over the answers given on the questionnaires to guide a brief discussion among the respondents following the break and manually recorded the subject answers to be used as additional information when combined with the written questionnaires.

The written questions were as follows:

1. What did you think was the overall message of the documentaries?

2. To what degree did the documentaries cause you to reflect on the way you relate to the environments being depicted?

3. What story elements prompted these thoughts or feelings? For instance, did the journalist presenting the questions and narrating the story, the subjects being interviewed, or the organizers and protestors working against outside interests persuade your feelings on the topic in any way?

4. What other aspects of the film outside the story elements – such as the images or sounds - made the biggest impression on or greatest emotion appeal to you?

5. In your opinion, what elements of the film make the strongest call to action or best elicit a change in behavior from the viewer?

6. To what degree do you feel that as the viewer you were being directed to take an action toward the subjects presented in the documentary? If so, what action(s)?

7. To what degree do you think your behavior toward subjects depicted will
change after watching these documentaries? What actions, if any, do you think you would take in the future?

8. While watching were you aware the documentaries being presented were part of a news program? How do you think the news style of presentation affected your viewing experience?

The choice to conduct the research through subject focus groups over the individual interview setting was intended to aid the subjects’ processing of the information by simulating a more natural setting for viewing films, as suggested by previous research (Stromgren & Norden 1984, p. 205). Morgan notes a “particular strength” of focus groups over the individual interview setting when “the goal of the research is to gain an in-depth understanding of a person’s opinions and experiences” – as was the case with this study (Morgan 1998, p. 11). Because the focus group was conducted after the written questionnaire, the researcher was able to base some loose structure for guiding the focus groups off of the previously provided questions while also allowing for a freer, more natural form of conversation surrounding the topic. Without the rigidity of the written questions that partially direct a subject as to how to craft their answer, the focus group setting allowed for viewers to voice their impressions of the documentaries in their own words, which was the overarching intent of the study (Morgan 1998, p. 11). The choice to place both the written questionnaire and focus group phases of data collection immediately following the screenings allowed viewers to express these opinions “while the experience is still fresh in their minds” (Greenbaum 1998, p. 51).
At the same time, the format of a written questionnaire provided a less intimidating setting for answering the questions and allowed each participant the opportunity to express clear and full answers to each question, while also serving as an effort toward preventing more dominant personalities from influencing the initial answers of other respondents. Although the possibility exists that some subjects responded more readily to this setting and the corresponding questionnaire questions than others, it was the hope of the researcher that an environment for open discussion and interaction in the second phase of the research would present the opportunity for more nuanced opinions to be drawn forth and heard rather than a one-sided question-then-answer format inherent to the one-on-one interview.

The researcher requested that participants provide pertinent demographic information for the process of potentially grouping responses to age, gender, race or ethnicity, occupation and, if applicable, their level of income. This was intended to be done in order to later determine if there any common responses occurred amongst those grouped subject demographics, and also to present as wide as possible a cross-section of subjects for the focus group – given the relatively limited geographic area from which they were obtained. However, because there was not a great deal of variety amongst the research subjects in terms of age or race or ethnicity, the responses were actually grouped based on level of relation or receptiveness to the documentaries and sources.

Following the viewing and completion of the questionnaires, the researcher examined the written questionnaires findings to identify common answers or interesting observations. Because a qualitative study method split across two parts was employed in
data collection to discover subjective and open-ended answers from the research subjects, the researcher used both established and emergent styles of data analysis. The researcher evaluated, transcribed and grouped the data as it was collected, and as a result the focus group questions were augmented during the collection process when the researcher determined the questions were too commonplace or limiting in nature and contributed only to a perceived “early saturation” of the data (Charmaz 2014, p. 215). The researcher asked and manually recorded the focus group answers so that the viewers were able to focus only on answering the questions and engaging in an open dialogue with the other participants and with no further writing involved.

After reconvening with the group, the researcher asked the subjects an icebreaker question, “What did you think of the documentaries?” to get the conversation going (Creswell 2014, p. 194). The question was purposefully open-ended and not specific to the texts or viewer experiences in order to appropriately prime the subjects to answer with more depth and thought in the group session than was likely given during their completion of the written questionnaires. As the research-oriented follow-up questions that followed this icebreaker were largely dependent on the responses given by the research subjects during the written questionnaire portion of the data collection, these questions were anticipated to vary from group to group in keeping with the style of emergent analysis and using the research questions and conceptual framework of narrative theory as a guide (Miles & Huberman 1994, pp. 29-30). Even in the instances where similar answers were given by participants in different screening groups and thusly prompted similar follow-up questions, the participants’ expanded answers in the focus
group discussions often centered on only a few aspects of the documentaries that they found provoking and even off-putting, as discussed in the following section of this study.

Responses were primarily grouped based on the similarity of answers given to each of the questions. For example, viewers who believed they were being directed to take specific action by the visual texts they are shown were grouped by that belief and by similar action; viewers who cited the same aspects of the films as making an impression on their understanding of the materials were grouped by those similarly cited aspects. While the individual responses varied slightly, the researcher anticipated that the questions were worded in such a way as to present enough similarities that they could be grouped by theme, such as those who anticipated taking some sort of action based on the viewings, or those who did not feel their behavior would be changed by what they had seen. The focus group setting in the second phase of the research was designed to provide more qualitative data and reasoning on the part of the subjects to explain the given written questions during the questionnaire, presuming even those subjects giving similar written answers might experience varying degrees of difference or similarity in terms of their motivations behind those answers.

After transcribing and grouping both the written questionnaire answers and opinions expressed in the focus discussions, the researcher compiled the findings and results into the narrative study form presented in the following section. Although Creswell advocates the narrative study for a relatively minor number of respondents – “one or two individuals” – the researcher anticipates that a collection of more than this number of viewers’ answers will be necessary to a) come to some determination of
saturation and b) account for an as of yet unknown number of variations and themes in responses (Creswell 2012, p. 278; Creswell 2014, p.189).

The narrative form is also a desirable presentation of the findings because the focus of this study was to take stock of the ways in which “people make and use stories to interpret the world” – in this case, how the documentary informs the viewer’s place in the world against a particular issue or problem (Lawler 2002, p. 242). The compilation of reactions and answers from the research subjects cannot relate a complete or all-encompassing portrait of audience reactions vis-à-vis the documentaries to be applied across the board to other audiences and other documentaries. Instead, the research is a snapshot of the moment in time of the subjects’ experiences and must be presented as such: an account of the observations made through questions and answers in this specific environment.

The study findings are approached through the narrative theory, under the anticipation provided by previous research that the ordered presentation of information will be the primary way the viewer identifies with the text and creates meanings from it (Fisher 1984, p. 2). However, because the findings are the subjective opinion of the subjects, a narrative approach to the qualitative study also allowed for the viewer/research subject to drive the formation and collection of the data through their answers to both the questionnaire and to the open-ended questions (Czarniawska 1998, p. 29). Because the answers given to both the written questions and in the focus group discussions were subjective opinions, this allowed for the viewers’ answers to agree with or refute the presumption of narrative importance, and even to identify other filmic
aspects of importance.

The use of the documentaries described here directly approach the research questions, both confronting the viewer with factual information intended to incite them to pro-environmental actions. But the intent of the filmmakers and the reception of that intent by viewers may not always necessarily overlap and this was found to be the case during the data collection phase of the study, as will be discussed in the following sections. The study method is then intended as only one way to examine how narrative structure in each visual text is effectively imparted to viewers in their own estimation – allowing for the fact that the subjects may just as easily not deem their viewing experience was worthy of prompting a change in their behavior. The viewer, not the filmmaker or the texts, are ultimately responsible for any actions they take after viewing the documentaries and therefore their perception of how the documentaries do or do not achieve this effect, and to what degree were the most important sets of data to collect in the course of this study.

A disadvantage of the methods used in this study is that although they allow for the researcher and subjects to engage in conversation directly after viewing the documentaries, the subjects naturally were aware they were being interviewed and this knowledge may have shaped the answers they gave in an attempt to provide what they thought the researcher might have wanted to hear, what the answers of others in the group may have influenced them to answer or in order to make themselves appear to be very behavior-conscious (Berger 2014, pp. 173-174). The study must also take into account the research subjects’ familiarity with and perhaps preference for the documentary genre.
as a factor which predetermined or lent some bias to resulting emotions and behaviors, as it might be safely assumed that a self-described fan of this sort of material would be more likely predisposed to act on what they are shown when compared to a viewer who does not intentionally seek out this particular style of programming and therefore may be less susceptible to experience any resulting feelings or take any resulting actions.
CHAPTER 4: WRITTEN QUESTIONNAIRE DATA

The researcher ceased the data collection phase of the study after obtaining more than 15 participants and as well as perceiving some saturation in the written answers and verbal discussions during the focus group portion of the final two screenings. Some general similarities were noticed among the 20 different sets of responses from each phase of the research, and this was considered to be a possibility, given that even the initial target number of 15 subjects so greatly exceeded Creswell’s advised target of “one or two” (Creswell 2014, p.189). However, despite some commonalities, the findings overall represented a wide variety of subtle differences in reactions and responses to the documentaries in terms of their content, presentational style and even the party behind their creation.

Among these latter findings from the written questionnaires, the most significant finding was associated with a feature other than narrative structure; the role that the filmmaker or author plays for the viewer in determining the validity of the documentaries’ content. The issue of bias as introduced by a section of the audience exposed the possibility that some viewers might not have been open to reflection based on their reaction to the creator of the documentaries.

Viewers were asked whether they were aware the documentaries were part of a news program production, and how they thought the expository style used in the films affected their viewing experience. This question of how the news or expository documentary affected viewers’ perception – more than any other on the written
questionnaire – exposed a wide swath of opinions on the effectiveness of both the specific news agency that produced the documentaries and the expository style employed in both. As such, it became a point of discussion to a greater degree in the focus groups, the findings of which will be discussed in the next section.

Although the Al Jazeera logo is constantly displayed throughout each film in the lower left hand corner of the screen, four participants were not aware by the end of the screenings that the documentaries were produced by a news media organization. Of the remaining participants that were aware a news agency produced the documentary, there was a strong division of opinion on whether or not the films’ style aided or circumvented an intended sense of objectivity. While only four of respondents cited an awareness of Al Jazeera specifically, even these opinions were split as to the issue of bias on the part of the producers.

Of immediate note to the researcher was the sentiment among seven viewers, primarily concentrated in the third viewing group, that the perspectives on display in the documentaries were largely “one-sided” and indicative of a specific agenda. Many of the viewers who mentioned this feeling in both writing and discussion cited a perceived bias on the part of Al Jazeera as a news agency that crossed over into the Al Jazeera America-produced documentaries used in the research. Furthermore, these subjects expressed an opinion that the films and the interviews and data contained therein were “an appeal to emotion rather than to logic” and led the “viewer to a pre-determined conclusion”. These observations serve as a counter example to Nichol’s idea that the “frame of reference” within expository film would be “taken for granted” (Nichols 1991, p. 35).
These feelings were of particular note to the researcher because they also refute, at least for these participants, Propp’s claim that the structure of the narrative itself is more important than the content contained within or the creator: Here, the research subjects directly identified the creator through company branding and the perceived bias they associated with it as the factor overriding their ability to completely engage with the documentaries’ subject matter (Propp 1958, p. 67). Because the documentaries represented a viewpoint these audience members had presupposed based on the agency behind the production of the films, it played a strong role in positioning them counter to that viewpoint and likely blocked them from being accepting of the films’ contents. Ultimately, this preconceived bias also likely prevented the subjects from considering their own actions against those on display, because they failed to connect with the films’ messages at the outset of the screening process.

Nearly half of the subjects, despite their awareness that the programs were produced for and by a news media source, experienced positive reactions to the style of the documentaries. Attesting to this fact, subjects wrote that they felt the documentaries facilitated “open-minded discussion” and appeared to have “more credibility” or were “more honest” and “trustworthy” because they came from an “international” perspective that one viewer felt “(is) better than most American journalism.” One subject noting the position of the filmmakers vis-à-vis the issues in the films actually found the documentaries more accessible because of the perceived agenda, writing that the “passionate and biased perspectives (touched) me on a more personal level.” These statements draw some connection between an environmentally conscious viewer’s
willingness to seek out documentaries that already reflect their own beliefs; such viewers may also be predisposed to think and act on content because they readily identify with the message and perspective of the films (Holbert et al. 2003, p. 181).

The remaining queries from the written questionnaire not related to the films’ authorship more directly address the audience members’ perception of narrative structure as communicating message and causing a perception of a need to act. As such, the remaining answers to those questions are centered around the appropriate research questions.

When measured against RQ1 – “To what degree does the narrative structure of expository mode documentaries influence viewer perception of a need to act upon the information being presented?” – the participants’ answers to the relevant questions from the written portion of the data collection reflected a wide range of views.

When asked to what degree the documentaries caused the participants to reflect on the way they relate to the environments depicted, 18 of the research subjects felt that the documentaries caused them to think about their interaction with the environment to some degree, either in the sense of a desire to learning more about the issues on the screen or prompting a true reflection of how they relate to environment at large. Six participants noted the documentaries made them to want to learn more about the processes of fracking and mining, the effects of these practices on the environment and even the environmental issue positions of local candidates for public office. Two subjects wrote that they wanted to do more independent research on the issues depicted as they felt the documentaries were heavily biased toward the anti-fracking and anti-mining
contingents represented by families affected by the ensuing public health issues and those protesting and demonstrating against the perceived perpetrators.

The single voice of dissent with regards to whether or not the films caused any inner reflection stated that the documentary “didn’t really change the way I feel” with regards to the viability of renewable energies and that the actions of the energy companies, depicted with a sense of antagonism by the filmmakers, served a mass need. A quarter of the participants voiced opinions in direct opposition to this lone sentiment: Five participants noted their perception of government and businesses – as they were depicted in the documentaries – were that of all-powerful entities, “with no regard to people’s basic needs”, noting they felt “helpless” and “scared” with regards to both groups.

The remaining seven subjects – the majority of those who responded to the written question – stated that the documentaries caused them to reflect on their own environmental impacts, evoking feelings of “respect” and “compassion” for the environment, in a general sense. Within this group, a few respondents wrote that the films made them reflect on the local environment and “what I would do if I were in those situations.” One of the research subjects said the films, “caused me to reflect on my personal convictions and the lengths to which I might go to ensure they are upheld.” The statements corroborate to some degree with Holbert, Kwak and Shah’s findings that the emotional appeals made by the films were effective at prompting a level of deeper thought and perhaps even a sense of morality about positive behavior toward the environment (Holbert et al. 2003, p. 178). This also coincides with Berger’s statement
that the viewers did not merely watch the films passively, but were inwardly comparing
the situations in the documentaries to their own behaviors (Berger 1972, p. 9).

The second research question – “What aspects of narrative structure
present in expository mode documentaries do viewers perceive as influencing an intended
change in behavior or action?” – directly approaches this discussion of what the aspects
of the documentaries resonated with viewers. One of the written questions openly asked
participants to identify what story elements on screen prompted their feelings of
reflection in regards to the content and messages of the films and effectively split the
group into nearly perfect thirds with regards to emotional appeal, well-rounded
presentation of stories, facts and actions and a third group that felt the tone of the films
was biased to the point that it prevented them from reaching the point of reflection.

Seven participants cited the emotional appeal caused by hearing the stories of
those affected negatively by the fracking or mining operations as the primary catalyst for
such reactions, writing that the “personal narratives” concerning the “disruption of the
family business” had the strongest impact. One participant noted a sense of bias “but I
felt like I agreed with most of it,” singling out interviews with government and company
representatives who seemed “nervous and unprepared” as having an equally strong
impact when viewed against the “well-spoken and compassionate” voices from the
environmental side. This participant went an extra step into the role of structure by noting
that the editing process of the film on the part on the producers or filmmakers probably
led to this perception of imbalanced viewpoints, as the film was arranged with the
intention of championing the filmmakers’ agenda (Nichols 1991, p. 35).
It is worth noting that one viewer felt the emotional appeal of personal stories was ineffective at pulling them into the story, writing, “Subjects being interviewed are anecdotal. When it comes to documentaries I prefer hard facts and evidence to sway me.” Another four viewers reiterated similar sentiments, that the documentary “didn’t change my feelings” or “dismissed all opposing viewpoints” and “skewed to the extreme” the pro-environmental arguments. Three subjects noted a sense of awareness that the documentaries or narrator were biased to the point that they felt manipulated and weren’t swayed by the stories, facts or actions of the protestors and demonstrators. Two of the three cited that they felt this bias so “extreme” it became uncomfortable. This strongly subjective voice as perceived by the viewers served a deterrent to their acceptance of the producers’ preferred reading of the documentaries (Rose 2001, p. 15).

Another contingent of viewers noted multiple aspects of the documentaries, when combined, were effective at engaging them with the content. Such answers were common in citing Rushing’s role as the narrator, the inclusion of scientific sources and footage of pro-environmental demonstrations as the important factors. “The journalist”, as Rushing was often referred to in these comments, asked “open ended” and “knowledgeable questions” of both sides, which in the opinion of the viewers lent credence to the film’s argument when measured alongside the inclusion of “actual test results identifying toxins in the water” from studies performed in both films. One subject who noted multiple elements they found to be most effective noted empathy not with the families who were losing clean drinking water at their homes and farms due to fracking and mining, but with “the organizers and protestors [who] made me feel like I could play a part or at least have
a say in these matters.” These statements align with Bremond’s proposal that audiences will latch on to certain components of the film – in the latter case the protestors serving as “actors” – and the aspects viewers identify with become the vehicle for conferring the film’s message (Bremond 1964, pp. 11-12; Pier 2003, p. 78).

Although the second research question is stated from the perspective of the narrative structure, it stands to reason that viewers might find other elements of the films as effective at communicating a message, striking an emotional chord and prompting some thought as to what actions might need to be taken in both scenarios. During the questionnaire portion of the study, participants were asked what other aspects of the film, including image or sound, made the biggest impression or emotional appeal – and only one subject maintained a stance that they felt unmoved by the documentaries because, in their opinion, the films didn’t show enough examples of damage caused by the supposedly anti-environmental practices. For this viewer, the reality shown in the documentaries did not accurately reflect what they believed to be the true state of affairs (Lawler 2002, p. 242).

The overwhelming majority of the subjects, fifteen in all, cited imagery as the aspect of the documentary that gained and held their attention. Twelve of the fourteen mentioned the same shots of dirty well water or water straight from a tap that was able to be set on fire from “Fracking in America” as making the strongest impact, while three others cited long shots of the landscape as making an emotional appeal and lending a sense of what was at stake in each instance presented by the films. Three respondents cited the soundtrack as having some effect on their reception of the messages, although to
different effects and degrees of efficacy; one subject called the music “stressful” while another said the “auditory ambience” influenced the “propensity sentimental statements and lots of close ups” found in “Fracking in America.”

A handful of answers to this question were of note because they seemed to paradoxically identify elements of the narrative as “other” effective aspects of the films. These opinions were indicative of the smallest group of viewers who still felt some inner reaction to the films, whatever the specific element, but seemed to corroborate similar answers given by other viewers with regards to actual elements of the narratives, as opposed to visual or aural elements. Similar to other answers given to the previous written question, viewers cited “the emotions on display of the more impassioned protestors” and the pathway of the “make lots of money philosophy” leading to environmental and human harm. In order for the intended angle of emotional appeal to be effective, the viewers required some reasoning as to why they appeared so impassioned or were harmed by the actions of the corporations and local or state governments that were effectively put on trial by the documentaries. One research subject expanded on the “progression of the arguments presented” as an effective method of audience engagement, outlining that both documentaries were “Covering reasons for events, presenting facts and showing events in a clear and credible way.” Two subjects noted the presence of the “Native American” characters in “Wisconsin’s Mining Standoff” as being a significant factor in how they responded to the documentaries, and subjects in the post-screening discussions reiterated this aspect. These final observations show that for some viewers the narrative structure was the effective aspect of the documentaries, but also that
the content of the films was considered equally effective the narrative structure, not superseding it as might be anticipated (Levi-Strauss et al. 1963, p. 22).

Finally, as an attempt at determining what built a connection between the viewers, the documentary and the messages they gleaned from the viewing, the participants were asked what elements of the documentaries were the strongest at eliciting a call to action or an anticipated change in behavior. The question was included for the dual purpose of discovering whether narrative structure and story elements held sway over sensory input, and also to determine if there were other points not mentioned by the viewers in the earlier two questions.

Here, the participants’ answers centered around two primarily positions that they found engaging with slightly more weight given to the opinion that the stories of the people affected by losing their land to mining or access to clean water through fracking were at the heart of the matter. Half the respondents voiced opinions that “The hopelessness of the individuals with brown tap water being told nothing is wrong with their water” in addition to images of the water itself and the “the interviews with people affected” combined to create a sense of empathy for those being interviewed about their plight. This lack of water and perceived lack of respect from entities like government or businesses toward the citizens also generated a sense of outrage, with one respondent calling their treatment “entirely unacceptable”. Yet another subject designated “the story of Native American impact” along with the white residents interviewed in “Wisconsin’s Mining Standoff” as elements of note during the screenings. The orderly presentation of these components to the viewers demonstrated enough of a sense of realism regarding the
situations that members of the audience were able to connect with and interpret the documentaries’ messages (Barthes 1972, p.191, Barthes & Sontag 1982, p. 210, 253).

The other half of the research participants assigned the greatest amount of importance to the political and social activities as performed by the demonstrators and protestors in both documentaries, with some smaller degree of significance placed on the role of the state and federal government, also as it was depicted. Within this group, answers were again split as the group responding to protestors voiced opinions of optimism and positivity at the “imagery of grassroots organizations taking action”, “the conversations about the political impact” and “the passionate engagement of the locals and the focus on the future.”

Countering this was a strong sense of nihilism exhibited by some viewers regarding the “hopelessness” facing the individuals affected by the fracking and mining. Another subject perceived the “breakdown of the democratic process” where the government either acted willfully negligent toward the people or unabashedly in support of legislation supporting the businesses that were perpetrating the acts. In their opinion, the documentaries “led viewers to feel angry, sad” wrote one viewer, while another felt the biggest impact was a message that “only money and politics make a difference.”

Having voiced varying responses as to whether or not the viewers perceived a need for action or behavioral change as well as a diversity of opinion on what aspects of the films caused them to identify or consider those needs – or in some cases what prevented them from doing so – the final set of items on the questionnaire was poised to ask the research participants how they felt they were being asked to act and if they
thought they would follow through on this perceived request.

Whereas most of the other answers on the written questionnaire prompted at least two or three general lines of response from most of the participants, nearly all responses to the third research question of message – “How do viewers perceive they are being directed to act by environmental documentaries using the expository mode?” – fell into the same category.

Most respondents, 18 of 20, felt that the overall point being made by the documentaries were that government represented “wealth industrial interests” that were “in pursuit of profits.” Some answers harkened back to the sense of “the powerlessness of the people versus the corporations” and that said corporations “control our political processes.” However, 11 of the 18 placed the environmental message at the heart of the matter, writing that “the local environment is being affected”, or as another viewer noted “demolished”, “by politics and business.” Most of these opinions also noted a message that the “extraction of fossil fuels” on display in the films – fracking and mining – needed to be replaced with “new” or “alternative energy resources”.

Only two viewers made no mention of government or business being involved in the central message of the films, noting both a general focus on “environmental awareness” and a “very important need to protect our environment.” Similar to this last comment, another viewer noted a call to action at the center of the documentaries’ messages, albeit toward the democratic process of government: “People must exact power to maintain democracy – be aware, act, vote!” As the first query on the written questionnaire, which made no mention of direction toward a change in behavior, these
The concept of an active message returns to the written question asking the research subjects if they felt directed to action by the documentary viewing experience. Being receptive to the messages inherent to documentaries is only part of the path toward whether or not the viewing affects as change in the viewer. The audience decides whether or not they are interested in the content, whether or not it piques their interest to the point of seeking more information on the topic of their own volition and whether or not they will ultimately act on what they’ve seen or learned. When asked to what degree they felt that the documentaries were directing them to take an action in regards to the situations on display, seven audience members responded that the films were directing them toward a concrete action, with four specifically stating a need to be more conscious as voters and “to have discussions…on events taking place”. Two other respondents said they felt they would research the issues on their own to a greater degree and even share the documentaries with others.

A majority of twelve participants, however, said they felt the messages behind documentaries were not so much advocating a direct action vis-à-vis the events in the films, but rather promoting a general awareness of the issues. Within this group, five respondents felt the documentary was weighted on the pro-environmental perspective to the point that they felt viewers were “compelled” and even manipulated” into a position
of awareness that supported that side’s argument against the fracking and mining practices through “scare tactics” and “heavy-handed” rhetoric.

Even one viewer who reacted less negatively toward the viewpoint espoused by the films’ producers admitted to feeling “sympathy, but not a direction to act.” For the purpose of the study and this research question in particular these dissenting answers with regards to a direction to action where important because they illustrated a sense among the majority of the viewers that while they were being requested to make an emotional connection with the subjects on the screen, it was apparently not a strong enough connection that they felt directed one step further toward a change in behavior. The reasons preventing this follow-through from thought to action on the part of viewer were clearly varied, as some of the subjects were instantly put off by the authoritative voice of Al Jazeera while others who lacked foreknowledge of the process of fracking seemed to find some informational value in the material but felt no impetus that they needed to affect some type of change in the physical world. As the documentaries were presented as news programs, it’s possible this presentational framing might be more likely to lead viewers down the path of educating themselves rather than make an overt case for the audience to become environmental advocates.

This root aspect of finding out what the viewers connected with, and by implication what prevented them from connecting with the perceived messages of the films, is at the heart of the research study and was expanded on in greater detail with subsequent written questions and in the verbal discussions that followed. These responses indicate that the viewers experienced some sense of disbelief or disconnection with the
events of the films because they did not represent a tangible problem with which they could identify (Lawler 2002, p. 242).

The final written question asked the viewers if they thought their behavior would change and what type of action they might take in the future based on what they had seen. Similar to most of the other written questions, this query elicited a variety of responses that fell into three main categories: those that did not feel moved to action, those that said they would consider learning more about the issues discussed and finally those who said they would take some action relevant to the subject matter.

Given the negative reactions toward the documentaries from those viewers who felt the overall tone was biased toward a pro-environmental argument, it was perhaps to be expected that a section of the audience was unresponsive to the point that they would take no actions or make any changes in behavior. The only research subject who expanded on this opinion stated they felt there was “not much I could do” while another participant who made no statement of commitment one way or the other noted that the documentary “just supports how I already feel.” Two respondents stated that the films were “significant” in informing them of an imminent “threat” – but also made no mention of either ruling out or considering a change in their behavior or environmentally pro-active action.

Nine of the respondents noted that the documentaries had at least piqued their interest in the topics, although for different reasons. One respondent who “(doubted) I would take much if any action due to watching this” noted they might “(look) to see how valid their claims of the danger are”, likely referencing the group responsible for creating
the films, although they did not directly identify those making the claims. Those who sought to become more informed were also divided on what subjects they felt they needed to become more educated toward. Three cited a desire to learn more about the process of fracking in particular, with one subject noting a desire to seek “safer ways” to extract resources in order to reach a compromise between energy demand and public health. One of these voices also indicated a need to stay informed, particularly on “local elections impacting our day-to-day life”. These opposing reactions, both positively and negatively aligned vis-à-vis the call to action, demonstrate that while the films engaged the audience members in the viewing process they did not successfully follow through in achieving a change in behavior (Branigan 2013, pp. 204, 206).

This emphasis on greater awareness of politicians and their environmental policies was another area in which multiple respondents felt they could become better informed. One respondent who expressly noted their behavior and actions would not change wrote, “as a person who likes to research politicians issues courses” there was a “need to figure best ways to make things safe.” Similar statements echoing that sentiment felt the need to “educate myself further with regards to politicians and their stance on the subject” and even applied some self-reflexivity when considering that the documentaries “made me more aware of my own actions when it comes to my effect on the environment.”

For viewers who did feel an urge toward behavioral response vis-à-vis their documentary viewing experience, the overwhelming majority noted that they felt the documentaries presented involvement in and awareness of politics – particularly at the
local level – as being the primary means by which viewers could have some effect on the environmental concerns presented in the films. Roughly a third of the respondents who noted a goal of becoming more informed and educated on the government and politicians, current environmental issues and their own actions felt stimulated to take the next step toward action – at least in regards to answering the written questionnaire.

Seven respondents wrote that they thought they would take some form of action constituting a change in behavior. The actions described were primarily related to political activism, with five viewers writing that they felt “more [of an] initiative in getting involved in local politics,” “give participation to choices in local government” and “vote to support environment.” Although the protestors and demonstrators appearing in both films were highlighted as an aspect of the narratives that made an impact on some viewers, none felt a need to engage with the issue on this same scale – likely because the films did not involve a public forum or environmental issue that was local to the same area where the research was conducted and where the participants lived – except one viewer who noted a need to “vocalize horrible natural consequences.” Two viewers also considered another form of action, making a decision to “pursue green energy” – although there was no elaboration on whether this was a personal decision or an effort toward activism on a larger scale - and “(support) with my dollar renewable resource groups”.

The format of the written questionnaire allowed for the viewers to give thoughtful consideration to the films, their own reactions and the possibility of acting on what they had seen. However, the format was somewhat limiting in terms of the ability to provide
only short written answers that were directly prompted by the questionnaire as well as in terms of the space with which to provide written answers and the time frame for answering questions immediately following the screenings or during them, if so chosen by the viewers. The participants were unable, but also not expected to, explain or expand upon why they responded a certain way to a certain questions. To facilitate a more open conversation about the motivating factors for why viewers responded to the films in a certain way and to explore some of the answers given with more depth and attention, the research subjects reconvened in the screening room after a short break for refreshments for a focus group discussion.
CHAPTER 5: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS

This most significant finding from the discussion, as was first hinted at during the review of the written questionnaire answers, was tied to the perceived legitimacy and knowledge of Al Jazeera as the author of the documentaries: Viewers who were unaware of the organization’s logo on screen and role as the facilitator of the *Fault Lines* series seemed to wholeheartedly accept the films’ positions on the issues and the claims made by the interviewed subjects on screen, whereas those who had some familiarity with Al Jazeera instantly aligned themselves with or against the content. Of these latter two groups, both noted that the content of both films reflected a biased point of view; for one group, this foreknowledge was a point of access and for the other it was a barrier. For the research participants, there was clearly a set of pre-requisite conditions that had to be met before they were willing to consider the ability of the films’ narrative structures.

This division of opinion based solely on the creator of the documentaries reflects Nichols’ position on “the three ‘C’s’ of rhetorical discourse by being credible, convincing and compelling” (Nichols 2001, p. 51). In the case of the viewers who were accepting of the program, either as a legitimate news program or as a biased but necessary set of opinions, they perceived the documentaries’ claims as credible, and were therefore able to make their own determination as to the ability of the films’ narrative structure to convince and compel. But for group of viewers who identified Al Jazeera as biased in a negative light, the supposition that any content contained within a documentary that was produced by that organization was completely nullified; if these viewers couldn’t first
deem the source of the information credible, there was no possibility that the source’s claims were substantial – and therefore the narrative structure contained within both films became a moot point.

Because the three screenings were conducted separately from one another, the central points of conversation in each of the subsequent focus discussions differed because of the way subjects in each group responded to the preceding written questionnaire, as well as the way in which they engaged each other in the conversation. Each discussion section started with the same general icebreaker question that sought general reactions from the viewers, but the talking points presented by the researcher were specific to each group and based on the written answers that provoked the most interest vis-à-vis the study’s research questions. The groups as a whole each perceived different narrative and non-narrative elements as the most or least effective means that engaged them with the films, as well as different messages and calls to action.

The fact that each focus group as a separate whole exhibited ideas of the films’ perceived effectiveness that were similar between the member viewers but also separate from the other groups’ conclusions speaks to the theory posited by Walter Fisher, Kenneth Burke and others, that “reality is the result of our interactions with society and other individuals” (Borchers 2013, p. 54). Each viewer brought their own interpretation and foreknowledge of Al Jazeera as a media organization or fracking and mining as energy harvesting practices into the screening environment with them, which affected their understanding of the material. In the same way, the discussion of viewers amongst each other and the sharing of that knowledge and their variations on the interpretations of
the material help to co-shape their understanding of what the film is perceived to be communicating. Each of the viewers, likely without knowing or intending to, interpreted the films in their own way, but also helped to construct and “change the ideas” that the others had about their own interpretations (Borchers 2013, p. 54). Consequently, while the filmmakers have arranged the documentaries into a form of reality they believe will be the most persuasive, the focus group discussions added another dimension to this process and ultimately placed the assigning of reality in the hands of the subjects (Borchers 2013, p. 54).

The researcher found commonalities among the three participants of the first screening and group discussion in that the subjects either “never” or “infrequently” chose documentaries as a preferred genre for viewing. All three participants also gave similarly positive responses revolving around the perceived credibility of the programs, and noted a theme of political processes enhancing business interests at the expense of people and environment as the primary message of the films they were shown.

Given that the subjects did not consider themselves to be fans or at least frequent watchers of documentary films, the researcher followed the established icebreaker focus discussion with a query as to why the participants did not prefer this particular genre for viewing. One of the viewers started the discussion by saying “Sometimes they’re like a train wreck: You don’t want to watch but you can’t look away”, which prompted the other respondents to note they felt environmental documentaries were “emotionally laboring” and “emotionally taxing” to watch because “it’s hard to deal with something that is so beyond your power.” These comments prompted a miniature discussion
amongst the participants regarding the theme of “[government as] being in the back pocket of large industry” and relating the events of “Wisconsin’s Mining Standoff” to the current contaminated water crisis in Flint, Mich. One participant, noting that they do not actively watch documentaries but during the screening came to a self-conclusion: “if you’re quiet, not aware and not paying attention, then you’re really complicit in the evil.”

This prompted the researcher to ask if the viewers felt moved to any action by the films, although these particular incidents were not within their geographic or political sphere of personal influence. One viewer noted that “it doesn’t have to be in Missouri for me to care about it” and added that the personal decision to use clean or renewable energy was a way to “invest into something that’s going to not ruin an entire ecosystem.” The second viewer noted the films made a strong point about “the local political process and getting involved”, but also presented the attacks made on those who did speak out against the perceived corrupt actions of the state governments and offending businesses. The third viewer added that the counter moves made by the industry amounted to “(paying) people to vote”, which added to the feeling of helplessness about what viewers could do even when made aware of the problem. This partially speaks to the proximal nature of the problem: These viewers felt empowered to take part in what aspects of blocking fracking, mining or conceivably any other practice with any-environmental effects they could change at the local level, but paradoxically felt disempowered to do anything about the broader problem of industrial and government interests (Fuller 2014, p. 31).

During the written questionnaire, all three viewers voiced different opinions as to
what actions they thought they would take after watching the documentaries, ranging from becoming “more involved in local politics” to “looking further into this” with regards to “Fracking in America”. The third respondent did not note an action they would take, but mentioned that the moral argument made by both films “made a huge impression on me.” The researcher then asked these subjects in the discussion if they thought, in general, that greater awareness contributed to any actions or behaviors on the part of viewers. One viewer said “if people are aware of this they will speak out about this”, noting that they felt inclined to pass the information along about the documentaries to friends in online activism groups. The respondent who said they would become more involved in local politics referred to the films “as almost a call to action or general awareness” and seemed to reflexively refer to some bias toward a perceived bias in the film, adding that the film tone “seems like it has an agenda as opposed to being a case study – and it’s an agenda I totally agree with.” This statement reintroduces the notion that viewers already inclined toward pro-environmental behavior would respond favorably to films whose messages advocate protective actions (Holbert et al. 2003, p. 181).

The researcher then asked what aspects of the film were most effective in communicating this perceived need for awareness. One viewer – as many others later would respond – said the imagery of one family’s tap water, colored brown from the alleged actions of the fracking company caused the strongest emotional response, but noted “identifying the politicians and their associations with the industry” made the issues on screen tangible. The viewer who vocalized personal alignment with the
“agenda” presented in the films said they were “skeptical” with regards to the emotional appeals made by empathizing with families, “as much as they made a good logical argument.” That viewer went on to identify the films’ narrative structures, without ever specifically labeling them as such, as “well composed” and in its reference of the two issues at hand: presenting each issue, what is causing each issue in a localized areas, the processes behind it, resulting damage to the environment, the affected parties and their reactions – all of which combined constitute the film’s narrative structure (Jahn 2003). The remaining two viewers echoed this more pronounced explanation to various degrees, noting the scientific data cited, the open-ended nature of the interview questions and visuals of scenery in each area.

One aspect of the films that all three viewers cited as moments that were effective at engaging them were Rushing’s interviews with either government representatives or company spokesmen. These interview subjects were referred to by viewers as “evasive” and “dubious.” One research participant, singling out this moment from “Fracking in America”, voiced an awareness of the power of editing in this sequence, “I’m sure they probably talked for 40 minutes and they only showed those 30 seconds. We get the gem out of all of it.”

The final question considered by the first screening focus group asked the viewers if the fact the documentary was presented as news affected their viewing experience. Two of the viewers, unaware the program was produced by a news agency, noted what one perceived as lacking the aspects of “spin” in Rushing as an interviewer as opposed to “Fox News, MSNBC or CNN”. The second viewer stated they thought Rushing “asked
legitimate questions of both sides” and “didn’t lean one way or the other.” A third viewer referred to this feeling of impartiality as “an outsider’s view of America with more credence” because it was a product of Al Jazeera. The comments suggest possible bias on the part of the viewers – either against what they already perceive as “mainstream” news” or toward what they already perceive to be unbiased – that could have greatly affected how they received the documentary’s contents.

In the second screening group, all eight participants were generally more frequent viewers of documentaries and all except for one had some familiarity with Al Jazeera. This latter aspect seemed to correlate with sharply divided opinion as to the effectiveness of the documentary as a vehicle for active change, as expressed in the written questionnaire. The researcher started the focus discussion by asking the participants how they thought the news exposé perspective affected their reactions to the film, and again the discussion was divided. Four of the participants reiterated the written feeling that Al Jazeera’s perspective was “biased” and “one-sided”, which made them wary of totally accepting the claims made in the documentary as fact.

One of these participants voiced their own bias against the tone of the documentary noting they don’t enjoy watching “produced packages” and were “not a fan of this style of presentation because I need both sides to make up my mind.” By the same criteria, two other participants “found the investigative style of reporting compelling” and “interesting because it drives a disadvantaged point of view”. The final two participants had a more nuanced position somewhere in the middle, with one viewer admitting that while the documentary perspective was heavily biased it promoted a “third world point of
view…a slant against western democracy” whereas a “typical American news channel would present things the other way.” The remaining viewer noted that while both sides were interviewed, a truly unbiased news story “needs two people who aren’t trying to spin it the other way and are searching for the truth to try to solve the problems.”

Opinions remained disparate among the viewers when asked if they felt they were being asked to help solve those perceived problems. Two of the viewers who reacted negatively to Al Jazeera’s presence in the production of the documentaries anticipated they would take no actions based on the screenings, and that the intent was to make audiences “anti-mining” or “against fracking, but everything seems very futile.” Half of the viewers said they felt the intent of the documentaries were to inform viewers of the two energy practices and resulting environmental issues, and that their participation in solving the problems involved paying closer attention to local politics., as one viewer responded, “educating oneself by watching these and then to be critical where you vote”.

The remaining two viewers noted the relationship between business and government as the problem to be solved – “because money is driving this whole thing” – and could be remediated by “taking renewable sources of clean energy off the back burner and making them cost effective”. One participant noted the documentaries spoke to “a larger conversation we need to have with ourselves as a country” about current energies, their environmental effects “and how much we can tolerate to be ruined”, making it evident that films were overall effective at communicating a message, even if it was not the intended meaning of the filmmakers (Aaltonen 2014, p. 61).

Nearly all of the subjects in the second group responding to the written
questionnaire singled out the burning tap water from “Fracking in America” as a key aspect of the film that grabbed their attention, but also noted such story elements as “the effects on locals getting clean water”, “grassroots organization taking place” and “civilian protest” as equally effective means of prompting thoughts about how they relate to the environment. The researcher asked if the information was presented in such a way that it gave respondents a clear sense of the problem’s origins, effects and resulting actions. One viewer said the documentaries illustrated the “spreading” of the issues from a local community in the beginning to the effects at the state level and finally on to the protests that occurred nationwide, particularly in “Fracking in America”.

The two viewers most strongly positioned against Al Jazeera’s perceived bias again voiced opinions that the documentaries were “intriguing, but ignored any possible alternatives or improvements” to the situation. This prompted a fourth subject to note that “with documentaries like this, there’s not going to be a resolution”, because as long as the practice creating the conditions for protest continue, the protests and anti-fracking or anti-mining demonstrations would also continue. Yet another subject picked up on “the recurring theme” in both documentaries of the attempts to “discredit” any scientist who voiced opposition to the energy harvesting processes that were occurring. These observations though disparate correspond with the basic structure of the environmental documentary, and conveyed that some viewers were more cognizant and accepting of the nature of this structure than others (Simpson 2008, p. 106).

During the written questionnaire, the third screening group presented the strongest opinions as to the effect the documentary style had on their personal feeling of a call to
action, with nearly all recognizing a sense of bias: As with the second group, some viewers reacted negatively to the perceived lack of a complete perspective on the issue while others found the perceived bias more closely aligned with their own. One of these viewers inadvertently prompted the focus discussion by stating, after the group had reconvened, that they were “confused as to what our call to action in either one of those was supposed to be”, to which another viewer added despite seeing “the process of protesting” they “were never given an in to that”. One viewer perceived the directed action as getting involved in local politics, calling it a “good solution for causing greater change upwards”. This was met with another viewer’s response that the films – in particular “Wisconsin’s Mining Standoff” showed “the real danger in local politics because it doesn’t take much money to totally manipulate” the office holders. The presentation of the energy companies and government officials as antagonists versus the affected families, scientists, protestors – and by extension the viewers who agree with the pro-environmental agenda – as protagonists greatly influenced the way in which the participants accepted or dismissed the claims that made in the documentaries (Nichols 1991, p. 32).

The weight given to the argument that viewers were not allowed to identify with a directed action prompted the researcher to ask what the documentary lacked which might have made the call to action more specific or pronounced. Another viewer noted the nature of the documentary as both intentional on the part of the filmmakers and a product of the timeframe in which they were made, saying “they’re always open ended, so normally you’re going to feel angry about it”. This seemed to briefly reverse the
conversation, with other subjects noting the “imagery with all the protestors” and emphasis on involvement in local politics was effective when added with the personal stories of those affected by the unclean water and in the case of the local Native American community in “Wisconsin’s Mining Standoff”, the loss of ancestral lands.

Some viewers identified the film’s lack “of any opposing views” as preventing them from identifying with a direction to action or change or behavior, with one participant adding more footage of the interviews with citizens who were in favor of the added jobs produced by the mining industry in “Wisconsin’s Mining Standoff” would have given the films a stronger call to action by being “a little bit more balanced.”

Localization of the problems were also noted as a barrier to entry for some viewers, as one stated the documentaries “take a micro look at larger issues” and “a longer piece with more viewpoints would probably produce more diverse feelings” on the events, insinuating that filmmakers’ perspective was limited in scope and thereby ineffectual as a means of prompting viewers to accept it.

The researcher asked if other subjects agreed with this statement, in particular if the fact that the environmental issues on film were not relatable because they were taking place in different locations, also years prior to the present day. This prompted some opposing viewpoints from participants that “looking at those individuals made you feel a lot more tied there”, “humanized” the issues and “brought up a good point about the long-term effects” of environmentally unsound actions. These counterpoints repeated viewers’ sentiments that the localization of the issues vis-à-vis their own environment was not a strong factor in determining how they thought about and reacted to the documentaries.
As with the second screening group, when asked if the documentaries had a sense of story that presented a sequence of events along with the argument, viewers noted a variety of story elements that influenced them toward greater engagement with the material, but also reiterated that the documentaries “seemed to lack a climax” or an “end to story”. One subject who stated the lack of climax said it was a necessary piece to have because “the families, the people fighting for the cause” were the films’ “heroes”, but the viewers didn’t get to see how their stories ended. Other viewers identified the structure of the films as “following the paper trail” from local incidents to the broader ramifications that fracking, mining and the resulting dissent toward those practices had around the nation. These statements served to support the notion that the structure of narrative in the environmental documentary has a utilitarian purpose to not merely present an issue but to sway viewers into a position of complying with the ascribed remedies for changing it (Simpson 2008, p. 106).

At this point in the study, the researcher had identified a wide array of viewer opinion as to the influence the narrative structure had on their perceptions of need, the filmic aspects that prompted these perceptions and their opinions as the purposeful change, or lack thereof, that was sought by the documentarians. However, by the end of the third screening discussion group it was apparent that most of the opinions both written and verbalized were commonly held by at least one or more other members of the total group, pointing to some saturation of the data and the decision was made to end the data collection phase of research (Charmaz 2014, p. 214).
Although not gathered as part of the data collection phase, the researcher did take note of some audience behaviors during, in between and following the screenings that pointed to another form of engagement with the documentaries that was not previously considered. The viewers in all three groups had a tendency to verbally interact with the documentary material and each other, spontaneously reacting to something said or shown in the films. While these observations are not capable of serving as an adequate enough form of information to make assured determinations of their significance – as positioned against the research, written or focus group questions – it at least served to demonstrate to the researcher that the viewers engaged with the material.

These communications for some participants were limited to mere noises, which while difficult to categorize objectively, might best be generally described as verbalizations of sarcasm and contempt. This was often the case amongst participants while watching an interview with an energy company spokesman in “Fracking in America” and political ads that were included in “Wisconsin’s Mining Standoff” presented by the documentary personality as possible evidence of a corporate-funded smear campaign against a local politician. Most verbal comments made during these particular sections of both texts by other viewers were brief and reactionary, such as a “Yeah right” when the spokesman was perceived to dodge questions during what one viewer deemed the “gotcha!” moment of “Fracking In America”. In at least one other case, one of the research subjects in the first group turned to another participant and said, “Can you believe that?” in the fashion of a rhetorical question. To a lesser degree, the participants also utilized each other to repeat phrases or statistics they missed on a few
infrequent occasions during the screenings. For the researcher, this illustrated that despite some participants stating that they did not regularly or purposefully pursue documentaries as preferred viewing materials, all of the viewers gave the films due consideration.

Whatever the inner thoughts or intentions of the participants who made these comments and verbalizations, their interactions demonstrated to some effect the idea presented by Stromgren & Norden; the power the viewing environment has on an audience’s ability to concentrate on and engage with the material being shown on screen (Stromgren & Norden 1984, p. 205). However, the study did not present the opportunity for an alternate viewing environment for the purpose of comparison, and so cannot measure precisely how the setting of the screenings may have affected the results.

Another tendency that occurred across all three groups was the tendency of at least one viewer to ask questions of the researcher after the screening concerning the outcome of the events in the films. This initially occurred following the first screening of “Fracking In America” and before the screening of “Wisconsin’s Mining Standoff” when a participant in the first group inquired as to whether the researcher knew if fracking was a pending local threat because the subject matter and name of the program – *Fault Lines* – made them think of the New Madrid Fault Line in Missouri. Although this particular statement wasn’t made in writing during the written questionnaire or stated in the following focus group session, it was a clue to the researcher that at least one viewer in the first study group was applying some self-reflexive thought or consideration towards the first documentary. Posing no perceivable effect on the data collection process, the researcher responded to the question that they were neither aware nor knowledgeable of
any similar operations in the state.

The predominance of researcher-viewer interaction in this manner occurred following the final screenings as the researcher reconvened the discussion sections. One viewer from each group, without prompting from the researcher, asked the outcome of both documentaries. Having followed up on the stories after their approval for the study, the researcher told the subjects these outcomes to the best of their knowledge as it was deemed this knowledge wouldn’t affect the already completed questionnaires, where it was already noted by some participants that they felt the documentaries “lacked a resolution”. At the time of both research screenings, the mining company portrayed in “Wisconsin’s Mining Standoff” had ceased plans to open a mine in the Iron County community depicted, while the fracking company from “Fracking in America” was still involved in a lawsuit mentioned in the film. As of March 10, 2016, the case was settled in federal court with two families being awarded $4.2 million in damages by Cabot Oil & Gas Co. (Dekok, 2016). The knowledge that “Wisconsin’s Mining Standoff” had ended favorably for those opposed to the mine’s implantation drew a small cheer from members the third focus group, signifying that despite a lack of geographical relevance the viewers were sympathetic to the human-environmental plight in the films.

The third observed behavior and perhaps least surprising given the format of the focus group sections was that the viewers engaged each other in the resulting conversation, again, without prompting from the researcher to do so aside from the verbal questions that were asked. This dialogue in all three cases took on what the researcher perceived as a type of natural flow: Despite an unfamiliarity with each other and being in
the slightly unconventional environment of a formal discussion setting, the viewers presented supporting and opposing viewpoints to each other, verbalized their own conclusions from what others said and assisted each other in remembering details or aspects from the films they found effective communicators or else strongly manipulative.

Although the format of the screenings was intended to recreate as best as possible a typical movie watching environment where a viewer would typically not engage those unfamiliar to them in conversation during the film, let alone convene together afterwards for a discussion, the participants in the study seemed to readily accept the conditions of the research environment. The researcher considered that for the viewers, the reasoning behind their attendance and the format of the screenings would both possibly have some effect on how the viewers absorbed the material and answered the resulting questions.

However, because this question was not asked of the research participants, the researcher cannot conclude exactly what effects those variables may have had on viewer perception and their inner level of engagement with the films (Creswell 2014, p.189).

Another stray observation that was of interest to the researcher was found amongst answers provided on the demographic information forms: of the 18 participants in the study who said they watched documentaries to some degree – neglecting two subjects who said they “never” sought out documentaries as a viewing choice – all except the two viewers over the age of 56 noted “steaming media” as the method by which they viewed documentaries. The two older participants said they watched documentaries on television. While this observation did not seem to weigh heavily into the answers that were provided – either in the written questionnaire or the verbal format of the focus
groups – the researcher noted documentary viewers’ preferred viewing format as another component possibly worth further examination in future studies, perhaps centered around how viewers perceive documentary messages based on the source from which they are derived.
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

The research identified that some viewers did identify aspects of the narrative structure as the means by which they understood the message of the documentaries and connected with the material, but these subjects did not – for the most part – label these elements as parts of the narrative structure. While the audience may have lacked the formal knowledge or vocabulary to identify these points specifically as aspects of narrative, they were still clearly aware of these elements as separate communicators of the films’ messages rather than part of a cohesive whole, excepting one viewer in the first discussion group who distinguished the arrangement of the film’s content as a key component of its effectiveness. Many viewers noted multiple aspects of the film’s narrative – scenes of protesters, stories told by affected families, testimony from scientists and explanation of political connections to unsound resource gathering practices – and the role the chronological or geographically spatial sequencing of events played in their overall understanding of a perceived message (Cohn 2013, p. 413). This reflects Propp’s idea that audiences are subconsciously aware of these elements: Narrative is necessary for viewers’ basic understanding, but when asked to identify the content that is critical to communicating the story’s message – and how impactful that message is – the memorable, separate pieces carry greater consideration than the role of the story’s overall structure (Propp 1958, p. 6).

Among these pieces that carry equal if not greater consideration for audiences were two non-narrative elements; the extent to which they experienced an emotional
appeal or sympathized with characters who were portrayed as victims by the films and
the way in which they perceived Al Jazeera America as the entity behind the films’
production. The two points were mainly at cross-purposes: the viewers who were moved
by the families who lost clean drinking water or land to businesses and government
practices that favored them were those who felt compelled to take some type of action,
which varied in degrees of involvement. Those who were unfavorable to the presence or
role of Al Jazeera as a communicator refused to engage with the material as presenting
valid claims and felt moved to take no action. The narrative structure, particularly for this
last segment of the audience, becomes inert because the viewers cannot move past their
perception of the message maker.

In the practical field of documentary production these findings do not constitute
the creation a checklist of elements every work should contain. Although the repetition of
patterns within and across works is one way by which a genre or subgenre establishes its
iconography according to Campbell, submitting the creative process to a standard model
defeats the point of the expressive medium (Campbell 1972, p. 228). Rather, filmmakers
should be aware that while the structural flow of the documentary is of obvious
importance so that the audience understands what they are viewing there is also a
tendency for viewers to identify and respond strongly to instances within the film. In the
process of crafting the final product, documentarians should consider what emphasis they
place on the individual components of their story and how that contributes to the whole.
At the same time, it benefits the filmmaker seeking agreement from the viewer for the
audience to see something of themselves in the documentary – a character with which
they might directly identify or at least be able to figuratively trade places with in the course of watching the film. At the same time, filmmakers also have to consider how their audiences may already perceive them. Although not all documentary filmmakers may be as readily recognized or categorized – favorably or not – as Al Jazeera was in the course of this research, the findings illustrate the importance that audience perception has on determining their receptiveness to other filmic elements and instilling a feeling of being manipulated by the authors rather than educated or empowered.

The research questions presented directly examine audience perception of the presence of documentary messages, their method of presentation within the form and the influence of both on motivating viewers towards a possible change in behavior toward the documentaries’ subject matter. Because the structure of the documentary is the means by which the audience perceives the existence of the message, it is also the primary way in which they understand that message – as processed against a host of unknowns that might include their previous knowledge of the subject or filmmakers or background of previous behaviors or attitudes toward the subject matter (Barthes & Sontag 1982, p. 261; Fisher 1984, p. 2). It is therefore this act of perception by the audience that becomes the determinant of whether or not a filmmaker’s agenda or the documentary’s message or theme of change is able to take hold and possibly manifest itself as an action. The action has roots in the way by which the film’s message is structured, but the audience’s comprehension and acceptance of the message is the bridge between that presentation and a resulting change in viewer behavior and because of this bears consideration as an avenue of research and study (Czarniawska 1998, p. 29).
With regards to the first research question, this study concluded that narrative structure does play a role in influencing viewer perception of need in environmental documentaries, along with non-narrative elements such as imagery and audio. The tendency for viewers to note visuals as an impactful aspect of documentaries is perhaps naturally presumed; film being a visual medium the image that received the most notice – that of the burning tap water – can be considered both symbolic, in terms of standing in for the environmental and public health damages the documentary claims fracking causes, and also as a standalone noteworthy image. No viewers gave further reasoning for why they chose this particular shot over the many others contained in both documentaries – except perhaps one viewer who commented the flaming water was “a great visual” – pointing to the captivating nature of the image. This observation that a single moment from one of the films was the defining filmic element of the screening experience for many of the viewers diverges from the power of recurrent patterns in narrative as established by Campbell and Propp – which would indicate pieces that were more common to both films, such as the similar actions of demonstrators and protesters, interviews with the affected parties or images of pastoral scenery were likely to be the strongest elements (Campbell 1972, p. 228; Propp 1958, p. 6).

This suggests that the perceived hierarchy or importance structure has in a narrative, as suggested by previous research, does not apply for some viewers when the narrative takes place in a visual medium. The tendency of audiences to identify this one image as being the strongest impression that both films made on them, combined with the various aspects of narrative structure that were identified but never labeled as such by the
viewers, means that in the visual medium, narrative structure seems to be an almost subconscious consideration compared to striking visuals. The story of the participating characters in the films, while considered by some viewers as an effective element of the onscreen argument for audience involvement, wasn’t as universally remembered as the flaming water. For filmmakers, the implication is similar; structural presentation might stick out in some viewers’ memories, but a strong and lasting image can become the aspect of the film that viewers find themselves remembering and identifying as the most impactful part of a film, even if they have differing opinions toward the validity of the claims or effectiveness of the message. At the same, the fact that so many viewers voiced their favoritism toward this single visual out of the roughly 48 minutes of combined running time speaks to a sense of iconography as the image becomes a signifier for the narrative – at least with regards to the “Fracking in America” episode.

It was clear also that some biases within the research subjects, both in support of the presentational tone that was employed and against the company that as behind the documentaries’ creation, played some role in how strongly the viewers were able to connect with the information being presented: Those viewers who exhibited a foreknowledge of Al Jazeera found the films one-sided to the point of not engaging with them, or despite noting this pro-environmental slant found the documentaries a worthy counter-argument to what they assumed would be produced by other media outlets. Still other participants aligned with a pro-environmental perspective or who were inspired by a message of need for participation in the local democratic process and government change. Any of these viewpoints might greatly increase or decrease the likelihood that a
viewer will identify the film’s message and the aspects of the film that are effectively communicating that message. Acceptance or dismissal of a message then becomes the second gateway where a viewer may feel moved to action or be unaffected because they have already adopted a standpoint aligned with or counter to that of the documentary based solely on their reaction to its creator, which in those cases takes on greater importance the structured narrative (Propp 1958, p. 67). This implication may also serve as a caution for the filmmaker because it suggests that while viewers might perceive the narrative structure within a documentary as a critical pathway for engaging with content, their as impression of the film’s author can, for some, supersede any informational or logical appeal being made.

This divergence of opinion also lends some insight to the second research question of what aspects of narrative structure in expository mode documentaries influenced the viewers toward an action or change in behavior. Considering only the answers on the written questionnaire, it becomes clear that the viewers unanimously chose visual elements that which engaged them with the films, if not always to the point of prompting an action. Even the viewers who anticipated they would take no actions cited the burning tap water as the enduring image that made the biggest impression.

Among the elements of narrative structure, many different aspects of the documentaries’ stories were perceived as persuasive to the point of affecting the viewers’ feelings. Those features listed most frequently included the personal stories from people perceived to be portrayed as victims, the details of connections between big business interests and government negligence, the explanation and history of fracking and mining
in the respective environments shown and the multiple scenes of protest and
demonstration that exhibited local reactions to the perceived wrongs. Although some
viewers said these factors represented the “logical argument” of the films, most addressed
the effectiveness of the emotional appeal made by the films in connecting them to the
damage done to both humans and the environment (Haynes 2013, p. 28).

On paper, both non-narrative and narrative elements were given equal weight by
the viewers in determining which aspects voiced the strongest call to action. This
suggested a necessary interplay between coherent, logical structure of a story and the
compelling imagery that is capable of attracting or maintaining interest in a detailed, fact-
laden film. However, in the focus discussions, although the fiery image was mentioned, it
was given comparatively short attention versus the group conversation regarding the
various, previously mentioned story elements. The process by which viewers connected
with the films was through visual input, but the method by which they understood the
information and overall messages of the films was entirely dependent on the orderly and
logical presentation of information and messages and their repetition across both films
(Campbell 1972, p. 228; Propp 1958, p. 6).

By virtue of the fact it is an inherent feature of the film medium, the image’s
importance can never be entirely discounted when considering how an audience reacts to
a documentary, but within the scope of the study it was not the sole influence on behavior
and action. Although beautiful scenery might contain the merits to make its own
argument for stewardship of the planet, without the critical details surrounding disputes
over the environmental effects of fracking Pennsylvania or mining in Wisconsin – when
and where did these controversial action occur, what were they, why were they allowed or made necessary and how can they be changed – the images lack the data supporting such a call to action.

To a certain extent the research cannot answer the question of what filmic aspects influenced viewers toward a personal change definitively because it is not within the scope of data collection to determine whether or not those viewers who said they would take some type of action followed through on that personal assertion, or vice versa. But considering answers to the third research question – how viewers perceived they were being directed to act by the documentaries – the study can provide a gauge for what the participants felt moved to do directly after watching the films used in the study. These actions were primarily focused on self-education regarding politicians and businesses and their effects on the environment.

Some subjects stated flatly in the written questionnaire that they would likely not take any actions or change aspects of their behavior based on what they had seen – an example of inaction prompted by their negative bias against the documentary. As previously stated, the largest collective voice in the questionnaire and focus discussion groups said that they felt inclined to educate themselves further on the fracking and mining issues and their respective environmental effects or the environmental stances of certain politicians – which reflected a more moderate reaction to the films that was both accepting and skeptical. Finally, a smaller contingent planned to engage more fully in local elections and make steps toward pursuing clean energy alternatives on a personal basis based on the strength of the films’ arguments that the issues presented require
immediate attention.

The viewers emulated these three general responses – inaction, awareness building and direct action – to the same broad degree during the discussion section. Taken into account with the data collection and conclusions centered around the first two research questions, it becomes apparent based on viewer perceptions that both the varying degree of influence the narrative structure of the expository documentaries had on creating an impression of need and also the number of different film aspects labeled as being most effective – related to the narrative structure or otherwise – that the viewers would likely also have varied responses as to the actions they might take. Even viewers who perceived the same needs within the documentaries’ content might feel they were directed to different actions or behaviors based on what elements they found effective, deviating from the preferred reading of the films as intended by their creators (Rose 2001, p. 15).

All of the research participants saw the same two documentaries, but perceived they were to take different forms of action – to educate themselves further on the nonrenewable energy processes and resulting environmental issues, change their own energy usage practices or participate more in local elections – or take no action at all. Beyond this, viewers perceived entirely different intentions on the part of Al Jazeera by creating the documentaries, ranging from the simplistic call to move away from fossil fuels to more idealistic to nihilistic commentary on Western culture to idealistic notions of democratic change. This breadth of audience responses to perceptions of action and message corresponded with their reaction to certain elements, whereas from the
perspective of the filmmakers the arrangement of all of these elements together is intended to produce a common, preferred reading across viewings and viewers (Barthes & Sontag 1982, p. 210, 253).

Still others would perceive the films to have no effective aspects and find or anticipate no call to further action if they were somehow positioned against the perspectives championed in the films, such as harboring a dislike for Al Jazeera as a news producer or the one-sided perspective on the issue that is strongly influenced by editing. The viewer who is already skeptical to the point of disbelief about the films’ or the claims made therein is ill-positioned to find any element of the films persuasively argumentative and unlikely to perceive they are being asked to do anything about the issues at hand – partially because they don’t trust that there is an issue that needs to be addressed. This study demonstrated that any effectiveness to be wrought from imagery, sound or narrative structure in terms of prompting change and action in the viewer is unfailingly linked to how receptive the viewer is to accepting the information that will be presented (Verstraten & Lecq 2009, p. 20).

Structured narrative is a basic part of this equation, but in a documentary it also contends with the viewer’s capacity to empathize with characters and in a modern context the level of trust or validity they place in the voice presenting the information. As sequenced in Fisher’s paradigm, the structure of the narrative allows viewers to receive the content, but the audience still performs some personal interpretation of the events (Fisher 1984, p. 2). Narrative theory’s role in storytelling then is still a necessity for presenting information in a sequence that will allow the story to be understood by the
audience in a basic sense, but the findings of this study suggest that role – for a majority of the viewers – was a background consideration against these other two factors which allowed them to ascribe meaning to what they were seeing. In a practical sense, for the documentarian this expands the scope of what must be considered when creating the film. Editing for viewer coherence is an inherent consideration of a documentary that seeks to be understood and acted upon, but filmmakers should consider additional factors that carry the film’s message. As participants in this study indicated, a compelling topic is perhaps enough to incite some additional fact seeking on their part but visceral connections also were formed when they could see the human cost of the environmental crisis and evidence of others already acting in attempt to stop it. Moreover, the study demonstrates that filmmakers should consider how their own image affects the making of message and meaning amongst viewers, as this became a polarizing aspect of whether or not the audience was even willing to engage in a dialogue with their product.

To determine whether or not watching films of this style are likely to prompt behavioral change in some viewers is strongly dependent on the type of action viewers might be anticipated to take and the extent to which they feel moved to act. The opinions expressed by the research subjects of this study however, do present some possibilities, primarily in the areas of gaining more knowledge about the subject and the values of local elected officials, as well as expressing at least a desire to change voting habits. The limitations of the research conducted here are that, as a qualitative study, narrative theory can make no measurement or numerical account for what aspects of film viewers find effective motivators: It can only examine how viewers react on an individual basis to the
effects of the documentary’s presentation, which is ultimately anticipated to be a subjective experience for each viewer in each instance. The subjective nature of viewer opinion as to what narrative aspects of documentary film moved – or did not move – each of them to some degree of action cannot be considered true for all individual documentary viewers as each will likely hold some subtle differences when examined separately. As such, the study cannot account for which viewers will or will not physically act upon the content of the film.

The documentaries used for the study screenings are also limited in quantity and therefore in scope: The research explores two films created by the same source and using only the expository mode of presentation, and therefore cannot serve as an indicative example of how other creators might influence audience reaction or how other modes of documentary affect audience perception. Perceptions of effectiveness cannot be cross applied to other documentaries not used for research in the study just as they cannot be indicative of all audience reactions to those that were used. This, however, is a point from which future quantitative study may be directed as different texts, audiences and even screening environments might produce different results (Burnett 2004, pp. 4, 6).

However, rather than serving as a formulaic design for creating a purely mythical “perfect” documentary in terms of inciting viewer response, the research is intended to be an exploration of how two examples of expository narratives effectively communicate the messages of activism present in such examples of the documentary genre. The research also serves as an example to filmmakers that the way a viewer identifies with them as the mediator of the message has some impact on their reaction to the film, and for some
viewers this point may supersede or disqualify any consideration of the film’s content. For the purposes of this study, it was apparent that the some audience members had enough foreknowledge of the entity behind the films’ production that it changed the way they received the message – for better or worse. The study also points to the power that the portrayal of victim characters has an empathetic pull on how the audience relates to their plight. In this case of the two Al Jazeera documentaries the environmental crisis and those affected by it existed well outside the everyday life of the viewers, but some research subjects nonetheless “sided” with these characters in the films because they experienced a sense of pity and compassion in relation to their situation.

Whatever its deficiencies, the benefit of the study is that it provides some insight, gleaned by consulting the viewers of the documentary, into which narrative elements are repeated within these documentary films and to what effect, again presenting the possibility for later studies to measure their perceived effectiveness at provoking or causing action on the part of the viewer and the difference among those actions (Chatman, p. 43). Of particular note would be to address a significant limitation of this research by conducting nearly the same type of study using two separate control groups of viewers to determine the extent to which Al Jazeera’s presence affects the answers of the viewers. In this specific type of study, one group would view the films as these participants did, with Al Jazeera’s logo intact onscreen, while another would view a slightly manipulated copy of the films with no identifying markers.

A similar study might potentially explore the same topic used in this research from a quantitative point of view and attempt to measure how long messages advancing
behavior change persist in the memory of documentary viewer research subjects by conducting the viewing and interview sessions at separate intervals after varying lengths of time. Building on this idea, a subsequent study might attempt to measure the effect the viewing environment has on audience’s engagement with the material, or their fellow research participants.

Additionally, altering forms of the modes defined by Nichols – observational, interactive and reflexive – might be studied and contrasted or compared in a similar qualitative setting to determine how mode affects subjects’ responses to similar environmental documentaries (Nichols 1991, p. 32). Another quantitative study might attempt to measure the role that the act of viewing the documentaries played in producing resulting behaviors, that is, whether or not the viewers who watched the documentaries later engaged in any pro-active behavior based on their experience.

Although the research conducted here, along with these potential points for expansion, are not capable of proving the effectiveness of the documentary form nor can they provide a foolproof formula for documentary creation, quantitative studies could conceivably provide some measureable data that point toward a correlation – or lack of correlation – between documentary viewing and changes in audience behavior. Although the research conducted here gives some insight on a small scale whether or not these elements are common or divided amongst the participants, a similar study might be conducted with this question at the forefront of the research to be answered quantitatively.
REFERENCES


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VITA

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