

Public Abstract

First Name:Zachary

Middle Name:Andrew

Last Name:Smith

Adviser's First Name:Keith

Adviser's Last Name:Greenwood

Co-Adviser's First Name:

Co-Adviser's Last Name:

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Title:Narrative Structure and Audience Motivation in Documentary Film

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.