Provoking a huge backlash against SeaWorld known as the ‘Blackfish Effect’.
Blackfish tells the story of Tilikum, a performing killer whale that killed several people while in captivity. Along the way, Director-Producer Gabriela Cowperthwaite compiles shocking footage and emotional interviews to explore the creature’s extraordinary nature, the species’ cruel treatment in captivity, the lives and losses of the trainers and the pressures brought to bear by the multi-billion dollar sea-park industry. Blackfish challenges us to consider our relationship to nature and reveals how little we humans have learned from these highly intelligent and enormously sentient fellow mammals.

WHAT THE CRITICS SAID
“A mesmerizing psychological thriller with a bruised and battered killer whale at its center... Righteous, captivating and entirely successful.” — Variety

Satellite Award Winner
Best Feature Documentary

Tall Grass Film Festival
Best Documentary

Green Film Festival Seoul
Audience Award
THE CAMPAIGN
The filmmakers did not set out to campaign with their film; their main goal initially was to create mass public understanding of a previously unrecognised issue, with a behaviour change goal developing post broadcast as the distribution rolled out.

**Context**

The team wanted to generate mass awareness of what had hitherto been only known to animal advocacy and whale conservation groups: what happens to whales in captivity. To bring this issue into mainstream consciousness was the overarching goal.

**Impact Dynamics**

As a tool for analysing campaign strategies, BRITDOC has devised what we call the Four Impact Dynamics; broad categories for the kinds of change you can make in the world. This has been developed by studying the films that we have worked with as well as working with NGOs and activists to understand how they conceptualise their work. More information on the impact dynamics can be found in impactguide.org

Below we apply the impact dynamics to the campaign goals of *Blackfish*.

**Changing Minds**

Mass awareness and understanding – creating a shift in public attitudes.

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**Changing Structures**

Top down change – whether in politics or business, directly influencing law and policy to change the context.

In making the film the filmmakers hoped that SeaWorld would change some of their more archaic practices, such as breeding whales in captivity.

**Changing Behaviours**

Actively mobilising people to do different not just think different, whether that’s to buy or boycott, donate or volunteer.

In making the film the filmmakers hoped that SeaWorld would change some of their more archaic practices, such as breeding whales in captivity.

**Building Communities**

Grassroots organising – providing the focal point around which people come together.

In making the film the filmmakers hoped that SeaWorld would change some of their more archaic practices, such as breeding whales in captivity.
Blackfish

The media coverage—news, speculation, comment—generated around the film has been directed by the filmmakers of Blackfish, among them Humane Society of the US, Born Free Foundation, Voice of the Orca and PETA. This was not directed by the filmmakers but happened in response to the broadcast and public discussions, although other advocacy groups and celebrities such as Ariana Grande, Stephen Fry, Zach Braff and Michelle Rodriguez also helped. As a result, the hashtag #blackfish on CNN trended; this has been attributed to PETA’s active marketing team that was live tweeting while watching the broadcast and public discussions, and whoonasomuch as CNN intended; this has been attributed to PETA’s active marketing team that was live tweeting while watching the broadcast and public discussions, although other advocacy groups and celebrities such as Ariana Grande, Stephen Fry, Zach Braff and Michelle Rodriguez also helped. A key point was to solidify her line on what the solutions should be to the SeaWorld issue as she was called upon for her opinion. Recognising that the field itself was divided on the issue, they sued SeaWorld in federal court on behalf of captive orcas. PETA argued that five wild-caught orcas deserved protection under the Constitution’s 13th Amendment, which prohibits slavery. While they may have always expected to lose the case, they gained media coverage and visibility as a result.

When the film was released PETA leveraged their huge supporter base on social media to set a new record for retweets from their account, 4190. The hashtags #blackfish and #BlackfishonCNN trended; this served to keep SeaWorld and Blackfish in the news. Meanwhile, as the campaign evolved, Gabriela felt the need to distance herself from perceived partisanship. As a result, she came to a position that was ultimately a personal judgement call.

As well as traditional distribution numerous community screenings took place, initiated by schools, animal groups and universities who contacted Gabriela directly. These included NY Law School, Cal State Northridge, San Diego Diez, California, high school orcas deserved protection under the Constitution’s 13th Amendment, which prohibits slavery. While they may have always expected to lose the case, they gained media coverage and visibility as a result.

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CAMPAIGN IMPACT
Blackfish as a film has been especially successful in moving individuals and organisations to action, from passive watching to active engagement with the issues. As the distribution roll-out continued, actions small and large accumulated around the film, creating the now oft-cited “Blackfish effect”.

There have been numerous campaigns on multiple orca/SeaWorld issues on Change.org, a measure of how far the issue has become part of the public consciousness.

The campaigns include:

— “Humane release the Orca whale known as Tilikum to a sea pen for rehab” (172,025).
— “Shut down the movie Blackfish” (52).
— “Remove Blackfish from your streaming line up” (870).
— “Ask SeaWorld to release their orcas and dolphins to ocean sanctuaries” (29,133).
— “British Airways: stop selling trips to SeaWorld. End your support for these cruel orca circuses” (167,571).
— “SeaWorld: End captive breeding program” (81,913).
— “American Express: stop promoting SeaWorld animal cruelty” (26,322).

Notable successes include:

— “Please watch #blackfish and cancel Busch Gardens” (1023) which resulted in The Beach Boys cancelling a gig at a SeaWorld owned park.
— “Why is Taco Bell supporting SeaWorld animal abuse?” (20,426) which resulted in Taco Bell severing promotional ties with the company.
— “South West Airlines: stop promoting animal cruelty” (32,467) which resulted in SW Airlines dropping their SeaWorld association.
— As of October 2014 British Airways has agreed to meet the Change.org petitioners to discuss their concerns.

In addition another 50 tour operators signed a pledge stating that the captivity of cetaceans for entertainment is morally wrong and the board of Vancouver Park has voted unanimously in favour of ending captive breeding of cetaceans at its aquarium, unless they are a threatened species.

In October 2014 Virgin America became the latest corporate to end their association with SeaWorld dropping them from their airline reward programme.

In addition, the film has enjoyed support from multiple celebrities, who have tweeted and announced their opposition to SeaWorld practices.

@MileyCyrus Please watch BLACKFISH #befree
8,961 RETWEETS 10,418 FAVORITES

SeaWorld’s response until very recently has been to continue with business as usual. While not responding with any intention to change their practices, it has in effect initiated this by default by agreeing to drop their challenge of a federal order that has kept trainers away from killer whales during performances at its water parks. Declining to pursue their challenge to the OSHA (Occupational Health and Safety Administration) ruling all the way to the Supreme Court SeaWorld acknowledged for the first time the damage the publicity from the film had done to the company:

“We have elected to not pursue further appeal… In connection with this incident, we reviewed and revised our safety protocols and made certain safety-related facility enhancements such as revising training protocols used in show performances.

“This incident has also been and continues to be the subject of significant media attention, including extensive television and newspaper coverage, a documentary and a book, as well as discussions in social media… This incident and similar events that may occur in the future may harm our reputation, reduce attendance and negatively impact our business, financial condition and results of operations.”

SeaWorld is a huge operation; it owns 11 parks in five states. The major shareholder of SeaWorld is Blackstone private equity group who took the company public in April 2013 when it was valued at $2.5 billion.

A year later Blackstone reduced their stake from 43% to 25% with SeaWorld buying back stock. This was in part by most financial commentators as a retreat from a previous strategy:

“What is not in dispute is that Blackstone has been busy cashing out of SeaWorld.” — Wall Street Journal

This followed a 13% drop in attendance, a fact SeaWorld pinned on higher ticket prices and the timing of the Easter holidays.

Meanwhile, SeaWorld quietly updated its risk factors in regulatory filings to include a new definition of risk, crucially adding a thinly veiled description of Blackfish:

“An accident or an injury at any one of our theme parks or at theme parks operated by competitors, particularly an accident or an injury involving the safety of guests and employees could significantly harm our reputation, reduce attendance and negatively impact our business, financial condition and results of operations.”
cause a loss of consumer confidence in the Company, reduce attendance at our theme parks and negatively impact our results of operations."

By August 2014 shares had fallen by 37% since the IPO, a fact attributed by financial observers to the negative publicity incurred by *Blackfish*.

A month later, SeaWorld’s denials of the *Blackfish* effect came back to haunt them when a shareholder class-action lawsuit was filed in California federal court. The action centred around claims that SeaWorld’s Registration Statement and Prospectus around its IPO “failed to disclose that SEAS (a) had improperly cared for and mistreated its Orca population causing mental distress to the Company’s Orca population affecting trainer and audience safety; (b) continued to feature an Orca that had killed and injured numerous trainers; and (c) consequently exposed the Company to material and uncertainties that could adversely impact attendance at its family oriented parks.”

Furthermore, “SEAS falsely claimed that the drop in attendance was a product of the timing of Easter, when in reality, the bad publicity from the *Blackfish* film caused families to stay away from SEAS parks.”

In August 2014, SeaWorld announced their first initiative responding to the *Blackfish* effect; that it will build new, larger environments at its theme parks and will fund additional research on orcas, along with programmes to protect ocean health and whales in the wild. SeaWorld denied that these were a response to the film and the measures stop extremely short of what campaigners and the public have come to view as an ethical solution.

**LEGAL CHANGE**

While legal changes were not on the horizon of the filmmakers it should be noted that New York and California are both proposing bills restricting the use of orcas. While New York does not currently have any orcas in captivity the move is seen as a supportive gesture and further negative publicity for SeaWorld.

The California bill is being proposed by California state Assemblymaker Richard Bloom who saw the film and was moved to action. While Bloom contacted Cowperthwaite and she co-presented the bill, the film team did not collaborate in the drafting of the bill; instead an independent panel of scientific experts was convened to conduct their own research proposing a bill which bans the use of orcas for “entertainment purposes,” seen as a restriction directly aimed at San Diego SeaWorld, which keeps 10 orcas.

The bill has stalled temporarily for the purposes of further research but it is hoped will be re-presented. Meanwhile, US House of Representatives voted unanimously to provide US$1 million toward a study on the effects of captivity on orcas.

The proposed legal changes coincided with a shift in consensus amongst the general population, according to a poll conducted by The Animal Welfare Institute and Whale and Dolphin Conservation in May 2014 which showed that half of Americans oppose keeping orcas in captivity for public display. The poll indicated an increase of 11% in opposition and a 5% decrease in support for orca captivity from an identical poll which had been commissioned in July 2012.
The day after the film’s initial screening on CNN, Google searches for the term “blackfish” also jumped to their highest level, and since then have remained slightly higher – occasionally spiking, probably during subsequent screenings – than search levels in the preceding months. Twitter said it was the most talked-about show on CNN in October, with 67,673 tweets seen by 7.3M people. (It was the second-most tweeted non-sports program that night.) Followers of the CNN Twitter account jumped from 1000 to 2000 the day after broadcast.
**2013**

**APR 2013**
SeaWorld IPO is valued at $2.3 billion.

**JULY 2013**
SeaWorld releases first PR defence three days before premiere. Filmmakers respond in detail.

**OCT 2013**
SeaWorld places full page ads in 8 newspapers.

**2014**

**MAR 2014**
Blackstone sells stock back to SeaWorld.

**APR 2014**
SeaWorld reports 13% drop in attendance.

**JULY 2014**
Southwest Airlines ends its 40-year partnership with SeaWorld.

**AUG 2014**
Shareholder class action lawsuit is launched against SeaWorld.

**SEP 2014**
Virgin American drops SeaWorld from its airline reward programme.

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### Real World Events

**JAN 2013**
Blackfish premieres at Sundance.

**JULY 2013**
US theatrical roll out. LA premiere is presented by The Humane Society.

**OCT 2013**
CNN broadcast.

**NOV 2013**
PETA organises protests and stunts around SeaWorld’s float in Macy’s Thanksgiving Parade.

**DEC 2013**
Musical acts pull out of SeaWorld’s Orlando concert series.

**MAR 2014**
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### The Campaign

**DEC 2013**
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### Impact & Achievements

**JULY 2013**
SeaWorld releases first PR defence three days before premiere. Filmmakers respond in detail.

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### The Film

**JULY 2013**
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### Blackfish Timeline

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- AUG 2014: Shareholder class action lawsuit is launched against SeaWorld.
- SEP 2014: Virgin American drops SeaWorld from its airline reward programme.
Gabriela Cowperthwaite is a documentary filmmaker who for more than 12 years has directed, produced and written documentary programs for television networks including ESPN, National Geographic, Animal Planet, Discovery and History. In 2010, Cowperthwaite completed the award-winning feature-length documentary, City Lax: An Urban Lacrosse Story, which was acquired by ESPN and DirectTV. In 2009, Cowperthwaite completed a film for UCLA International Medicine in conjunction with the International Rescue Committee, which focuses on clinics in war-torn regions, with the emphasis on providing ground-breaking medical care for victims of violence. It has been translated into three different languages and will be distributed in eight countries.

Manny Oteyza has produced a diverse body of work, from scripted shorts to documentary and fiction features. Prior to Blackfish, he produced Wayne Quinton: Engineering Life, a documentary for BYUtv; line produced Amazon Gold, a documentary short on the destruction of the Amazon; and a six-part webisode series, Solving for X with Bill Nye for Disney. Oteyza has also served as a producer, line producer, and field producer on various series for television networks including National Geographic Channel, Military Channel, Discovery Channel and Travel Channel. An alumnus of the American Film Institute’s graduate producing program, Oteyza has worked on fiction films for both studios and independent companies. Under his company Manny O Productions, based in Los Angeles, he is currently developing feature-length documentaries and narrative scripts to produce.
CAMPAIGN PARTNERS

While there were no traditional campaign partners the following organisations used the film to launch their own campaigns, including but not limited to:

BLUE FREEDOM
BORN FREE FOUNDATION
PETA
THE HUMANE SOCIETY
VOICE OF THE ORCAS

BUDGET

Film Budget: Not disclosed
Outreach Budget: $0

CONCLUSION

A painstaking journalistic investigation into a trainer’s death at SeaWorld, Blackfish was initially produced as a film which aimed to spark awareness around our complex relationship with and responsibility to marine mammals. However, the dynamic between the overwhelming popularity of the film, and a corporation’s response to it, took on a life of its own, and coined a new phase, the “Blackfish Effect,” a clamour for change that swelled from individual outrage about how orcas are kept for human entertainment. The film inspired individual action in the form of protests and petitions, and multiple celebrity endorsements. More traditional campaigning elements were provided autonomously by issue-aligned groups, in the form of profile-raising stunts and social media work.

The impact on one company and its bottom line, and reputation, has been unequivocal.

PEER REVIEW COMMITTEE

“Given the lean team and very modest expectations for reach and impact, the film’s success is pretty remarkable. In terms of having a broad audience the film was extremely successful in raising awareness and changing opinion as well as harnessing the power of social media.”

BLACKFISH VIEWER

“I just went to SeaWorld and I will never go again. The higher ups at SeaWorld disgust me, blaming the trainers in these incidents.”

WATCH THE FILM

Buy your copy from Amazon
Stream on iTunes

FOLLOW

@Blackfishmovie
facebook.com/Blackfishmovie

CONTACT

Kimberly Ventre
kimventre@yahoo.com
A small press sample which illustrates the quality of conversation around the issues raised in the film.

NEW STATESMAN
Did a Killer Whale Doc Just Kill an Industry?

USA TODAY
California Bill Would Ban SeaWorld Orca Shows

BUZZFEED
‘Blackfish’ Will Make You Rethink Everything You Thought You Knew About Killer Whales

HOLLYWOOD REPORTER
The ‘Blackfish’ Effect: California’s Proposed Orca Ban, Artists Cancelling Theme Park Concerts

THE NEW YORK TIMES
SeaWorld’s Unusual Retort to a Critical Documentary

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THE NEW YORK TIMES
SeaWorld’s Unusual Retort to a Critical Documentary
“Blackfish” Will Make You Rethink Everything You Thought You Knew About Killer Whales

The documentary film, in theaters next week, details the dark side of keeping killer whales in captivity. That dark side also includes the mistreatment of humans.

posted on July 19, 2013, at 10:08 p.m.

Ariane Lange Buzzfeed Staff

I Had a Stroke at 33

Connect with BuzzFeed Entertainment

“Downton Abbey” Season 5 Begins A Jolt

Orlando Jones Acts Out The Internet Favorite Emojis

Kelly Parker Clark, a trainer at SeaWorld, and Dr. Christopher Oat, vice president of veterinary services, with one whale at SeaWorld in San Diego

SeaWorld’s Unusual Retort to a Critical Documentary

Kelly Parker Clark, a trainer at SeaWorld, and Dr. Christopher Oat, vice president of veterinary services, with one whale at SeaWorld in San Diego

In an unusual pre-emptive strike on the documentary “Blackfish,” set for release on Friday in New York and Los Angeles by Magnolia Pictures, SeaWorld Entertainment started the film world last weekend by sending a
A proposed bill in California would force SeaWorld San Diego to stop using killer whales in its live-ebola performances and requires them to be transferred.

USA TODAY NETWORK
Pad James, USA TODAY
9:44 a.m. EDT April 6, 2014

SACRAMENTO — A documentary that claims to expose the treatment of orcas and problems with trainer safety at SeaWorld has spurred action in a California state assembly.

Assemblyman Richard Bloom, D-Santa Monica, has proposed legislation banning the use of orcas for performance purposes at California aquatic theme parks as a result of details revealed in the movie Blackfish.

The documentary, which has drawn global attention since its 2013 premiere, chronicles the 2010 death of SeaWorld trainer Dawn Brancheau, who was pulled into a pool and drowned by an orca as she performed a routine. Bloom, a parks in San

The 'Blackfish' Effect: California's Proposed Orca Ban, Artists Canceling Theme Park Concerts

USA TODAY

"The G3 is the perfect new gadget for a gadget-adopter," LG says.

USA TODAY NETWORK
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