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## **Abstract**

While much research has been done on the relationship between film and social change, studies on audience responses to animal rights films are scarce. In light of current international debates surrounding the capture and dissemination of footage of animal slaughter and mistreatment, this article explores audience receptions of *The Cove* and *Bold Native*. A number of academic studies of *The Cove* have been conducted, and numerous interviews and opinion pieces on both *Bold Native* and *The Cove* have been published online. However, previous discussions of *The Cove* and *Bold Native* have focused on a textual analysis of the films rather than audience reactions. This article expands upon previous audience studies research to consider audience responses to animal rights films. Two small focus groups were conducted to provide a detailed foundation for future, broader, studies of audience engagement with animal rights films. Thematic analysis of focus group transcripts was used to explore how participants' lifestyles, demographics and prior beliefs influenced their responses to *The Cove* and *Bold Native*. These areas were examined because they were the most prominent topics in the data. This study considers the importance of culturally appropriate and non-judgemental arguments, and the influence of participants' pre-existing beliefs about animal use and mistreatment. Further, this paper discusses how participants' ideas about the health and practical aspects of consuming animal products informed their responses to *The Cove* and *Bold Native*. In addition, this article investigates the tension between participants' interest in knowing about animal treatment, and their desire to avoid viewing disturbing footage. Participant reactions to *The Cove* and *Bold Native* suggest that two key factors guide audience reception of the films. Firstly, participants' responses are mediated by their pre-existing beliefs and attitudes. Secondly, the persuasiveness of *The Cove* and *Bold Native* was tempered by participants' need to balance their awareness of animal mistreatment issues, and ethical beliefs, with a lifestyle that is healthy, functional, and economically viable. This study concludes that participants who were most likely to make changes after seeing *The Cove* or *Bold Native* were those who were already inclined to do so. This suggests that these films, in and of themselves, are not enough to significantly change peoples' beliefs or behaviours towards animal use industries.

## The Effects of *The Cove* and *Bold Native* on Audience Attitudes Towards Animals

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**Lara Newman**

**Abstract:** *While much research has been done on the relationship between film and social change, studies on audience responses to animal rights films are scarce. In light of current international debates surrounding the capture and dissemination of footage of animal slaughter and mistreatment, this article explores audience receptions of *The Cove* and *Bold Native*. A number of academic studies of *The Cove* have been conducted, and numerous interviews and opinion pieces on both *Bold Native* and *The Cove* have been published online. However, previous discussions of *The Cove* and *Bold Native* have focused on a textual analysis of the films rather than audience reactions. This article expands upon previous audience studies research to consider audience responses to animal rights films. Two small focus groups were conducted to provide a detailed foundation for future, broader, studies of audience engagement with animal rights films. Thematic analysis of focus group transcripts was used to explore how participants' lifestyles, demographics and prior beliefs influenced their responses to *The Cove* and *Bold Native*. These areas were examined because they were the most prominent topics in the data. This study considers the importance of culturally appropriate and non-judgemental arguments, and the influence of participants' pre-existing beliefs about animal use and mistreatment. Further, this paper discusses how participants' ideas about the health and practical aspects of consuming animal products informed their responses to *The Cove* and *Bold Native*. In addition, this article investigates the tension between participants' interest in knowing about animal treatment, and their desire to avoid viewing disturbing footage. Participant reactions to *The Cove* and *Bold Native* suggest that two key factors guide audience reception of the films. Firstly, participants' responses are mediated by their pre-existing beliefs and attitudes. Secondly, the persuasiveness of *The Cove* and *Bold Native* was tempered by participants' need to balance their awareness of animal mistreatment issues, and ethical beliefs, with a lifestyle that is healthy, functional, and economically viable. This study concludes that participants who were most likely to make changes after seeing *The Cove* or *Bold Native* were those who were already inclined to do so. This suggests*

*that these films, in and of themselves, are not enough to significantly change peoples' beliefs or behaviours towards animal use industries.*

**Keywords:** *film audiences, animal rights, activist cinema, audience reception, audience studies*

Recently, arguments regarding the right to show unlawfully obtained footage of animal slaughter and mistreatment to the public have been hotly debated in Australia (Latham, McAloon, Guiffre, Beetles, Probyn-Rapsey, ACT Government). In addition, various politicians, animal use industries and lobbyists have pushed to outlaw the capturing or dissemination of footage of certain forms of animal use (Beetles, McAloon) for fear that the images may result in the public choosing to cease consuming certain animal products. Similarly, pressure from animal use industry groups in the US saw the passing of the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act (AETA) in 2006 (Salter). The AETA outlawed some forms of animal rights activism, including the unauthorised capturing and public distribution of footage of animals from within farms, medical labs, etc. (Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act, U.S.A, s. 3880). While there has been much debate in media and government circles over whether or not footage of animals being harmed should be allowed to be captured and shown to the public, there have been few academic studies that examine the impact that such footage, and animal rights films more generally, have upon viewers. This article expands upon previous audience studies research to consider audience responses to animal rights films. Focus groups were conducted prior to and after film screenings and discussed participants' beliefs, behaviours and attitudes towards animals.

Initial studies of audience responses to media focused on propaganda in war efforts and led to a belief, which still persists in some ways today, that the public were highly susceptible to being swayed by media messages. However, some research on audience responses to film suggests that viewer reactions are complex and influenced by multiple factors (Bobo, Brereton and Hong, Khorana, LaMarre et al., Mazur and Emmers-Sommer, Nichols). In light of these competing conclusions, this article examines the impacts which two animal rights films - *The Cove* and *Bold Native* - have upon audiences. Both films use undercover footage of animal

slaughter and mistreatment in an attempt to persuade viewers to stop such treatment of animals.<sup>1</sup>

*The Cove* examines the annual dolphin slaughter in Taiji, Japan in an attempt to end the practice. Here dolphins are captured, and while some are sold to perform in marine parks or ‘swim with dolphin’ programs, the vast majority of the dolphins are slaughtered in a small cove, away from public view, and sold for food. *The Cove* follows the story of former dolphin trainer turned activist, Ric O’Barry and his attempt to end the dolphin slaughter. Previous studies of *The Cove* (e.g. Ahuja, Brill, Freeman, Haynes, Rubin, Walker) focus on the film itself, rather than viewers’ responses. To date, there has been little research into audience responses to *The Cove*.

*Bold Native* is a fiction film that incorporates documentary footage taken from hidden cameras inside animal farms, abattoirs, and laboratories. Bill Nichols suggests that audiences expect documentaries to be educational or persuasive, but do not have these expectations of fiction film (38–40). This assumption may be one reason that activist filmmakers choose to use the documentary format. *Bold Native* was selected to be a part of this study in order to examine whether a fiction film could influence people to change their beliefs and behaviours towards animals. *Bold Native* focuses on the journey of Charlie Cranehill, a middle class, white, male animal rights activist who is being chased by the Federal Bureau of Investigations for crimes committed under the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act. *Bold Native* utilises Charlie’s story to examine issues of animal rights, particularly focusing on animals that are used for food and clothing, or medical and other experiments in the United States. While a number of film reviews and interviews with the filmmakers have appeared on various websites, blogs and activist media sites (e.g. Kay, Smith, Winton, *Bold Native: The Movie: An Activist’s Perspective*), to date no academic studies on *Bold Native* have been published.

Earlier studies on animal rights films (e.g. Ahuja; Brill; Freeman; Haynes; Nichols, 23; Rubin; Sloniowski; Walker) also focus on the films themselves rather than on audience responses to the films. Kerstin Jacobsson and Jonas Lindblom discuss the way some people utilise graphic footage of animal suffering to sustain their dedication to animal rights activism (63). However, the focus of their study is on people who are already involved in the cause rather than how people who consume animal products respond to animal rights films. This article

examines audience responses to *The Cove* and *Bold Native* in an attempt to further explore the effects of animal rights films upon audiences that consume animal products. This paper will show that audience responses to the films are dependent upon pre-existing beliefs, and a variety of demographic factors. These factors influence the effectiveness of *The Cove* and *Bold Native* in attempting to create social change. Participants who were most likely to make changes after seeing *The Cove* or *Bold Native* were those who were already inclined to do so, suggesting that these films, in and of themselves, are not enough to significantly change peoples' beliefs or behaviours towards animal use industries.

### **Graphic footage, demographics, ideology and audience responses**

Several audience studies theorists claim audiences actively participate in the creation of a text's meaning (Fiske 115; Hall 163–65, 171–73; Turner 163–64). Further, it has been suggested that we cannot presume that two people will interpret one message in the same way, nor know how much, or whether, those interpretations can be generalised to other audiences. Jacqueline Bobo (308) and Bill Nichols (35) also observe that different people can have different reactions to the same film. Similarly, a number of studies have found complex and varied responses amongst audience members (Khorana 224–25; Mazur and Emmers-Sommer 169). The results of these studies suggest that beliefs and attitudes are affected by multiple layers of influences and that audience responses cannot be predetermined or generalised.

Some scholars argue that it is crucial to consider a person's social location when examining audience responses to media (Bobo 309; Mazur and Emmers-Sommer 170). Juan-José Iguartua also suggests that audience identification with characters in fiction film significantly affects the extent of narrative persuasion (3, 13). However, David Morley has argued that while demographic factors will influence audience responses, audiences that share similar demographics will not necessarily all derive the same readings of, or reactions to, a media message (92). This suggests that demographic impacts upon audience reactions are complex and difficult to predetermine.

The use of animals for consumption, experiments and entertainment is contextual, and culturally specific. Ideas about nutritional requirements; availability and cost of alternatives to

animal products; the perceived relationship between diet and gender; religious, moral and ethical beliefs; and the economic and environmental impacts of animal use industries are examples of factors regarding animal consumption that may differ between demographic groups. In relation to the current study, it is necessary to consider that students from western cultures are viewing one of two films that explore two different cultures (Japan and the US) and that social differences may impact upon the meanings participants derive from *The Cove* and *Bold Native*. In particular, attitudes towards the consumption of dolphins, who are not consumed in Australia or the US, are context dependent and this needs to be examined when comparing the responses of the two groups.

In addition to the influence of demography, several researchers suggest that audience responses to media are heavily influenced by pre-existing thoughts (LaMarre et al. 226–27), and behaviours (Mathieu 95; Nichols 110) and that these influences should be taken into account when analysing audience behaviour. For example, it has been argued that people tend to select information from media that supports their pre-existing behaviours or beliefs (LaMarre et al. 226–27; Mathieu 95). However, Austin (179–81) and Nichols (194) both contend that documentary cinema can influence viewers' behaviours and create social change.

There has also been much discussion over the effectiveness of using graphic footage of suffering to motivate audiences to create social change (Sloniowski, 171–72). Lyle Munro suggests that being exposed to arresting images of animal mistreatment is one of the key reasons people become involved in the animal rights movement (85). Similarly, Michelle Bogre contends that confronting images can shift people's opinions and lead to social change, and Nichols argues that images are what affects audiences most (9). These studies suggest that explicit images of suffering can give rise to social change. However, Kathie Jenni (10) also states that some people avoid engaging with confronting information in order to maintain good mental health. Amy Hardie (15) and Kerstin Leder (291) likewise found that participants in their respective studies did not want to watch distressing films unless doing so served a greater purpose. In addition, some scholars suggest viewer responses to films that encourage social change are dependent upon audiences' willingness to explore confronting issues, and are linked to the provision of additional information and tools to create change (Brereton and Hong, 183–84; Christensen, 89; Haynes, 7).

This study focuses on how and why participants respond to films that are designed to persuade audiences to stop animal exploitation.

## Data Collection

This study utilised one pre-screening and one post-screening focus group for each film. There is disagreement about how many participants are required for a small project, with recommendations for focus group size ranging from 3–12 participants (Bryman, 506; David and Sutton, 138–39; Guest, Namey and Mitchell 176). There is also significant debate over how many focus groups are needed to provide adequate data (Bryman 505; David and Sutton 142–43). While saturation is often used as the guideline for determining how many focus groups to run, it is specific to experiential, positivist qualitative research and is only one of many criteria on which to base sample sizes (Braun and Clarke 56). Given that smaller groups provide greater depth of information than larger groups, and allow participants to meaningfully contribute to the discussion (Guest, Namey and Mitchell 176), numbers were limited to four participants in *The Cove* focus group and three participants in the *Bold Native* focus group. The specific and directed focus on small groups was also designed to provide a detailed foundation for future, broader, studies of audience engagement. Because all participants were students of the University of Newcastle, sampling strategies were designed to target that population only. Non-sequential, a priori sampling was used to recruit participants.

Participants were selected on the basis that they met certain criteria: firstly, that they were actively consuming animal products. This could be in the form of food, clothing, hygiene or personal products, or furniture; or in the consumption of items that were tested on animals, for example medical products or toiletries. Volunteers who consumed some animal products (e.g. eggs) but refrained from consuming other animal products (e.g. cosmetics tested on animals) were still included. This was done to assist in determining if the films disrupt participants' ideas about their consumption of animal products. Volunteers who identified as animal rights activists, were involved with animal rights groups, had an extensive knowledge of animal rights issues, or had seen the films before were not included in the focus groups. In addition, in order to prevent participants being harmed by taking part in the research, persons who may find footage of animal suffering distressing were asked not to participate. While this

may have had considerable impact on the results, the exclusion of these potential participants was necessary for ethical reasons.

Suitable participants were assigned to one of two focus groups based on their common availability. Each group viewed a different film – either *Bold Native*, or *The Cove*. The films were selected to determine whether different film structures and techniques elicit different responses from participants. Participants were not told which of the two films they would be watching prior to viewing the film, although participants were asked to advise if they had seen any of the films prior to participating to ensure that they had not seen the one to be screened.<sup>2</sup>

Each group engaged in discussion for one hour prior to the screening of the film and again for one hour after the film. In order to determine participants' current beliefs and behaviours, pre-screening discussion focused on participants' relationships and interactions with animals, understanding of animal farming and hunting practices, beliefs about animal rights and welfare, consumption of animal products and participant expectations of the film. Discussions after the film screenings focused on participants' responses to the film viewed: whether participants' beliefs about animal treatment or use had changed, and if so how and why; and whether participants felt they would change their behaviours as a result of seeing the film.<sup>3</sup>

Focus group discussions were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed. Complete coding was employed across the entire dataset to identify key themes and produce a thematic analysis. Once a number of codes were identified, I reviewed the codes and established themes that were most relevant to the research questions.

## Results

Four key themes arose from focus group discussions. Participant responses to *The Cove* and *Bold Native* were influenced by pre-existing beliefs about respectful behaviour; animal use and mistreatment; and the health and practical aspects of animal use and consumption. Additionally, participants struggled to balance competing desires to know about animal mistreatment, and to avoid unpleasant or unproductive experiences, and this impacted upon the effectiveness of *The Cove* and *Bold Native*.

### *The importance of respect*

The responses of five participants in this study indicated that their beliefs about, and attitudes towards, racism, cultural imperialism, and judgemental behaviour impacted upon their reception of *The Cove* and *Bold Native*. These participants stated that scenes where interviewees or characters behaved in a manner that participants felt was judgemental or culturally imperialistic was inappropriate and undermined each film's persuasive power.

The issue of cultural imperialism was only raised by *The Cove* focus group. These participants suggested that it was inappropriate for foreigners to impose their own viewpoints on other cultures. Prior to the film screening, Lucy<sup>4</sup> from *The Cove* focus group stated that the use of any animal was justified, particularly if doing so was part of a persons' cultural background. Mark and Lucy also indicated pre-screening that they were concerned that the filmmakers might engage in racist behaviour in *The Cove*. Post-screening, three of the four participants from *The Cove* focus group were offended by the comments of John Fuller, a former International Whaling Commission (IWC) delegate for Antigua and Barbuda. In *The Cove*, Fuller referred to poorer nations in the IWC, who voted in favour of whaling in return for financial investment from the Japanese government, as prostitutes who 'had their red lights on'. Participants stated that this was 'gross', 'rude' and 'uncool', maintaining that the argument against whaling had already been effectively made in *The Cove* and that Fuller's comments were unnecessary. These responses indicate that the expectations and mindset of viewers can change a story's meaning. Further, they suggest that the participants have rejected the filmmaker's attempt to discredit nations such as Antigua and Barbuda, instead interpreting Fuller's comments as inappropriate behaviour on behalf of the filmmakers. This oppositional reading of the scene with Fuller indicates that for *The Cove* to be persuasive, it needed to present the argument in a manner that was in line with participants' pre-existing beliefs about, and attitudes towards, racism and cultural imperialism.

Similarly, two of the three participants in the *Bold Native* focus group felt that the film's dichotomous depiction of people as either dedicated animal rights activists or animal abusers was too judgemental and would alienate audiences who occupied the 'middle ground'. During the pre-screening discussion, Nathan stated that if a film was trying to convey a message, it was important for arguments to be made in a manner that was 'respectful', 'intelligent', and not

‘preachy’. In the post-film discussion group, both Nathan and Matt felt that the dichotomy set up between activists and animal abusers, which did not allow for people to exist in a ‘middle ground’ between the two extremes, was a negative element of *Bold Native*. Matt, who had been trying to follow an ‘ethical meat-eating’ diet, did not like the way *Bold Native* ignored ethical animal farming practices, or that ethical farmers were ‘lumped in’ with ‘animal abusers’. Matt was most interested in the character of Jane who attempts to get fast food companies to provide better living and slaughter conditions for the animals used in their products. In two scenes in *Bold Native* Jane is disparaged by both a reformed fast food company executive and some of the other animal rights activists for being too soft in her approach to animal rights activism. Matt advised that he related to Jane the most because she was in a similar space to him. However, Matt felt that while Jane was ‘strong’ and ‘had a voice’, *Bold Native* treated her in a manner that turned him off the film. Juan-José Igartua argues that audience identification with characters in fiction film influences the persuasiveness of fiction film (13). Matt’s response to the other characters’ treatment of Jane supports Igartua’s claim, and indicates that by portraying Jane as more accommodating than the more uncompromising activists, *Bold Native* alienated Matt somewhat. Similarly, Nathan felt that *Bold Native*’s refusal to consider the ‘the commoners’ perspective...as opposed to...[the]...dichotomy’ of abuser/activist weakened *Bold Native*’s argument, and that *Bold Native*’s treatment of ‘the middle ground’ turned him off the film. It has been argued that audiences reject texts with a direct and clear moral message, and prefer the presence of multiple perspectives when discussing moral issues (Krijnen, 65-67). Both Matt and Nathan’s responses to *Bold Native* substantiate this claim and indicate that the filmmaker’s reluctance to address the middle ground in *Bold Native* impaired the film’s influence on Matt and Nathan because it did not engage with their pre-existing beliefs about human use of animals in a manner that they felt was non-judgmental. However, in contrast to Matt and Nathan, Alice stated that the other characters’ treatment of Jane was not disrespectful and that Jane was ‘quite dignified’. The variation between Alice, Matt and Nathan’s responses to the other characters’ treatment of Jane in *Bold Native* indicates that it is important to participants that the film presented the argument in a non-judgmental manner and provided multiple perspectives on the issue of human use of animals. However, participants’ definition of judgmental treatment differs.

### *Impacts of beliefs about animal use and treatment*

Several authors have argued that audiences focus on information in films that supports their pre-existing beliefs, and filter out information that contradicts these beliefs (Bobo, Mathieu, Nichols). This is evidenced in the results of this study. While participants' ideas about what constituted animal mistreatment differed, participants who indicated prior to film screenings that a particular type of animal treatment, such as factory farming or using animals for entertainment, was undesirable, were most responsive to *The Cove* and *Bold Native*'s appeals to cease such treatment of animals. For example, prior to the film screening, Alice from the *Bold Native* focus group described factory farming and the tests that were done to animals for cosmetics, cleaning products, medicine etc., 'horrible'. Alice also actively avoided purchasing products that were tested on animals. Alice identified herself as 'kind of vegetarian'. Alice was the only participant to advise she might try veganism after watching *Bold Native*. Meanwhile, prior to the *Bold Native* screening, Matt stated that he did not feel killing animals for human consumption was problematic if it was done humanely. Matt demonstrated a welfarist viewpoint where human use of animals is considered acceptable provided animals are not subjected to unnecessary suffering (Francione, Regan). After watching *Bold Native*, Matt advised he would try harder to stick to an 'ethical meat-eating diet', but would not forgo animal products altogether. While Matt agreed with *Bold Native*'s argument that humans should not treat animals cruelly, he rejected the animal rights argument that humans need to avoid all animal products. Given that *Bold Native* is an animal rights film that argues that human consumption of any animal products is wrong, Matt and Alice's responses indicate that while both advised they would make changes after watching *Bold Native*, those changes were small shifts in pre-existing dispositions towards mistreatment of animals.

Similarly, in *The Cove* focus group, participants' responses were influenced by pre-existing beliefs. All four participants advised prior to the screening of *The Cove* that they were against some forms of animal cruelty and use. However, their definitions of what constituted inappropriate treatment or use of animals differed. In the post-film discussion, all participants in *The Cove* focus group indicated that they were negatively affected by the scenes of dolphin corralling and slaughter, and the idea that dolphins were slaughtered, and that they wanted to do something to stop the slaughter. However, in contrast to the *Bold Native* focus group, in *The Cove* focus group, responses to the dolphin slaughter surrounded the utility of animal use.

Participants advised that the fact that the dolphins were killed for what seemed like ‘senseless’ reasons made them feel ‘horrified’, ‘sad’, ‘confused’, ‘angry’, ‘disappointed’ or ‘disturbed’. Most participants indicated prior to the film screening that, although they did not condone mistreatment of animals, they were not averse to animals being killed for human consumption. However, participants were concerned that the flesh of dolphins slaughtered in Taiji had high mercury levels and yet was fed to school children. Additionally, the ‘brutality’ of the slaughter, the fishermen’s rejection of an economic alternative to killing the dolphins, and the significantly lower sale price of slaughtered dolphins compared to dolphins sold into captivity, made the slaughter of dolphins seem unjustifiable to participants. The responses of participants indicate that while they condoned the use of animals for human food in pre-film discussions, they were not comfortable with mistreatment of animals that they felt had no function or could be dangerous to humans. This suggests that beliefs about animal use are based not solely on animal welfare, but also on human needs or wants, indicating a welfarist viewpoint. It is worth considering that while *The Cove* attempts to disparage the economic, health, cultural, and animal welfare aspects of the dolphin slaughter, *Bold Native* focuses almost exclusively on the animal welfare aspects of consuming animals. This difference between the films may account for the contrast in participant responses to arguments made in *The Cove* and *Bold Native*. In pre-film discussions, participants in both *The Cove* and *Bold Native* advised that health, economic and animal welfare issues informed their beliefs and behaviour regarding the consumption of animals. While participants in *The Cove* focus group were uniformly against the dolphin slaughter after the film screening, two of the three *Bold Native* participants were not persuaded by *Bold Native*’s argument that humans should avoid consuming all animal products. This supports Nichols’ argument that compelling films activate our predispositions to ‘enhance their affective power’ (97-98). While the results of this study indicate that those who were most concerned about animal welfare prior to watching *The Cove* or *Bold Native* were most persuaded by arguments about the need to stop mistreatment of animals, it appears that beliefs about health and the practicality of avoiding animal products also informed participants’ responses to *The Cove* and *Bold Native*.

### *The health and practical aspects of animal consumption and use*

Herzog and Golden have noted that there are inconsistencies in people's stated beliefs about, and actual behaviours towards animals, and that many people who said that they agreed with the goals of the animal rights movement (which aims to stop human consumption of animals) also consumed animal flesh (494). The results of my study of audience engagement suggest a similar paradox, indicating, perhaps, that participants' responses to both *The Cove* and *Bold Native* are influenced by pre-existing beliefs about the health and practical aspects of consumption of animal products as well as concerns about animal welfare. While none of the participants in this study stated that it was necessary to consume animal products in order to be healthy, five of the seven participants stated that it would more difficult to be healthy when completely avoiding animal products. Three participants felt that the accessibility and cost of living ethically are barriers to change and that this needed to be addressed in *The Cove* and *Bold Native*. Although Matt from the *Bold Native* focus group wanted to change his diet, he advised that 'I really struggle with money' and stated that financial limitations were a barrier to changing his diet. Matt felt that filmmakers need 'to appreciate that common people are going to find it hard to change'.

Interestingly, a number of participants also indicated that they felt there were some health risks associated with consuming some animal products. Prior to the film screening, all participants in *The Cove* focus group voiced concerns about the biomagnification of mercury in large fish. However Lucy stated that the consumption of any animal was justifiable. In the post-film focus group, Lucy and Mark demonstrated concern that the high mercury levels in the dolphin flesh may have adverse health impacts upon the people of Taiji who consumed it. This made the slaughter of dolphins for human consumption unacceptable. Mark and Lucy's comments suggest that their aversion to the dolphin slaughter in Taiji encompassed concern for humans as well as other animals, and that *The Cove* successfully tapped into their pre-existing beliefs about the detrimental impacts of consuming mercury-tainted animal flesh. In *The Cove*, Michael Illiff of the Institute of Antarctic and Southern Ocean Studies states that the Japanese government believes Japan is running out of food and uses dolphin flesh to prop up food supplies. Mark, Lucy and Sarah stated the toxicity of dolphin flesh undermined the argument that it should be used to bolster food supplies. Nichols notes that documentaries create 'credible, convincing, compelling accounts' by enlisting 'an audience's pre-existing values and beliefs for specific ends' (98). Some participants' pre-existing concerns about the consumption of mercury-contaminated animal flesh influenced their responses to the film, and *The Cove's* engagement with, and reinforcement

of, those pre-existing beliefs assisted in building the case against the dolphin slaughter in Taiji. Given that participants were already uncomfortable with the human consumption of mercury-tainted animal flesh, it is difficult to determine how much *The Cove* influenced participants to disapprove of the slaughter of dolphins in Taiji. However, Nichols argues that persuasive documentaries use pre-existing beliefs *for specific ends* (98, my italics). While *The Cove* may be merely reinforcing participants' negative attitudes towards the consumption of mercury-poisoned animals, the film engages those negative attitudes specifically to garner support for the ending of the dolphin slaughter, not in order to benefit humans.

However, despite their aversion to the dolphin slaughter, and their desire to stop it, most participants felt *The Cove* did not provide them with enough information to turn their thoughts into action. Sarah and Mark felt that their geographic distance from the dolphin slaughter prevented them from being able to stop it, and that if *The Cove* was addressing a non-Japanese audience, it needed to include information on how people outside Japan could assist in stopping the slaughter. While *The Cove* recommends non-Japanese audiences boycott marine parks, most of the participants did not attend marine parks prior to the film screening and therefore felt their non-attendance would not stop the slaughter.

In contrast to *The Cove* focus group, participants in the *Bold Native* focus group varied in their ideas about the health benefits and practicality of consuming animal products. In the pre-screening discussion, Nathan and Alice stated that a vegan diet would be beneficial, if not healthier, than an animal-based diet. Matt, however, felt that eschewing all animal products would be impractical and that he needed animal protein to be healthy. In post-film discussion, while Alice indicated she was willing to consider veganism, and Nathan stated that he wanted to know more about *Bold Native's* claim that 'Every vegan saves 90 lives', Matt indicated he wanted to be more diligent about ethical meat-eating. Matt, Nathan and Alice's comments suggest that beliefs about the health impacts and feasibility of avoiding animal products influenced their responses to *Bold Native*, and the participants who considered veganism after watching *Bold Native* were those who were already inclined to do so. Participants' comments about the health ramifications of consuming, or forgoing, animal products echo their above-mentioned ideas about the functionality of animal use. The responses of all the participants indicate that there is a tension between their pre-existing beliefs about human needs or wants and animal needs, and that these beliefs inform their reception of arguments in *The Cove* and *Bold Native*.

### *Responses to graphic footage and distressing information*

As previously noted, there has been debate over the effectiveness of using graphic documentary footage to attempt to change viewers' beliefs and behaviours. The uncertainty over whether utilising graphic footage of animal mistreatment will empower audiences to change, or overwhelm and lead to audience apathy is reflected in the responses of participants in this study. A number of participants from both *The Cove* and *Bold Native* focus groups advised that using graphic footage of animals being harmed was necessary to support the argument that animals should not be treated in this way. Sarah indicated that seeing the footage of the dolphin slaughter in *The Cove* elicited 'a completely different reaction' to hearing interviewees talk about the slaughter. Likewise, Kristy felt she had to see the slaughter footage. Sarah and Kristy's responses suggest that explicit images of animal suffering can encourage people to improve the lives of animals.

Similarly, participants from the *Bold Native* focus group indicated that the utilisation of real footage was 'powerful', 'necessary' for the film and 'supported' and 'validated' *Bold Native's* argument against animal mistreatment. Participants' responses indicate that including footage of animal suffering within a film is a key part of creating and sustaining an argument against animal mistreatment. The utilisation of footage of the dolphin slaughter in *The Cove*, and the various scenes of animals being harmed in *Bold Native* was considered by all but one of the participants to be an effective way of getting them to reflect on their current beliefs and behaviours towards animals. The participants' comments indicate that images have the ability to shift public opinion, and may suggest that the use of graphic footage of animal mistreatment could be a persuasive means of encouraging people to reconsider their ideas about human treatment of animals.

However, while acknowledging the effectiveness of showing graphic footage of animal mistreatment, six participants simultaneously expressed a desire to avoid viewing such footage. All the participants in *The Cove* focus group indicated that they considered leaving the room either just prior to the scene where the dolphins are killed or just after the scene started. Matt from the *Bold Native* focus group also felt the graphic footage was necessary, but advised that he wished there was less real footage of animal mistreatment used in the film. This tension between believing in the importance of watching confronting scenes in *The Cove* and *Bold Native*, whilst

simultaneously wanting to avoid watching the footage, underscores the complex nature of audience responses to the use of graphic footage in *The Cove* and *Bold Native*. This complexity makes it difficult to determine the effectiveness of including such footage as a means to change audiences' beliefs or behaviours. Participants' willingness to further engage with issues of animal mistreatment after seeing *The Cove* or *Bold Native* was influenced by their concerns about their ability (or lack thereof) to reconcile this tension.

Four participants indicated that their desire to further explore animal use industries was influenced by their intention and ability to make changes to align their beliefs with their actions. Five participants advised they were reluctant to investigate issues surrounding animal treatment because of the possibility of being overwhelmed by distressing information. These participants also expressed concern over how exposure to information about animal mistreatment could lead to them feeling guilty or having a negative view of themselves because they were not prepared to, or capable of, making the changes required to stop animal mistreatment. Six participants indicated that *Bold Native* and *The Cove* could offset the distress that viewing footage of animal mistreatment could create by providing realistic and appropriate information about how to create change. Six participants indicated that neither *The Cove* nor *Bold Native* provided the necessary tools or information to make changes.

## Conclusion

While there has been much debate regarding the use and effects of unlawfully obtained graphic footage of animal use and mistreatment, few academic studies have considered the impacts of such footage. This study specifically addresses audience responses to two animal rights films, *The Cove* and *Bold Native*, in an attempt to determine whether or not animal rights films can change audience perspectives on, or behaviours towards, human use of animals. The findings presented here may have wider implications for activist cinema, film studies, and activism itself. The results of this study indicate that viewer reactions to animal rights films are complex and determined by multiple intersecting influences. In line with the claims of Henry Spira and Peter Singer (217), this research suggests that 'raising awareness is not enough'.

Participant reactions to *The Cove* and *Bold Native* suggest that two key factors guide audience reception of the films. Firstly, participants' responses are mediated by their pre-existing beliefs and attitudes. Although some participants were convinced to make changes after watching either *The Cove* or *Bold Native*, these changes were small and in line with pre-existing beliefs. Secondly, the persuasiveness of *The Cove* and *Bold Native* was tempered by participants' need to balance their awareness of animal mistreatment issues, and ethical beliefs, with a lifestyle that is healthy, functional, and economically viable. Demographic factors, such as socio-economic status, influenced participant responses, with several participants highlighting the importance finance had upon their reactions to *The Cove* and *Bold Native*.

While the findings of this study provide an important starting point for further investigation of the social impacts of animal rights films, there are a number of caveats concerning the representativeness of these results. Some of these limitations could be addressed by future research. Firstly, using a larger and more diverse group of participants may provide further insight into how more diverse audiences respond to animal rights films. Moreover, future research may benefit from investigating how audiences respond to more sustained exposure to media about animal slaughter and mistreatment, rather than just exposure to a single feature film. Furthermore, future research could examine how audiences respond to animal rights films that discuss the health, environmental, economic and practical aspects of veganism rather than solely focusing on animal welfare. Additional studies may also wish to investigate how audiences respond to films that utilise Australian footage of animal slaughter and mistreatment. Conducting such studies may help to improve current knowledge in this field and, in doing so, allow lawmakers and activists to better understand the impacts of footage of animal slaughter and mistreatment upon the general public.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Neither *The Cove* nor *Bold Native* (or, indeed, most animal rights films) could have been made without the use of undercover footage.

<sup>2</sup>The focus of the study is on the impacts of footage of animals being harmed and on animal rights films more generally. Because of this focus, no control group was used.

<sup>3</sup> Participants were advised that their participation was voluntary and they could leave during either focus group or the film, and return to participate in the second focus group if they left during the screening of the film. In order to prevent participants disclosing valuable information that could not be recorded, participants were asked not to engage in discussion during the screening of the film, and the researcher sat in the room during the screening to ensure this did not occur.

<sup>4</sup> Participants' names have been changed.

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