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### Documentaries for Farm Animals

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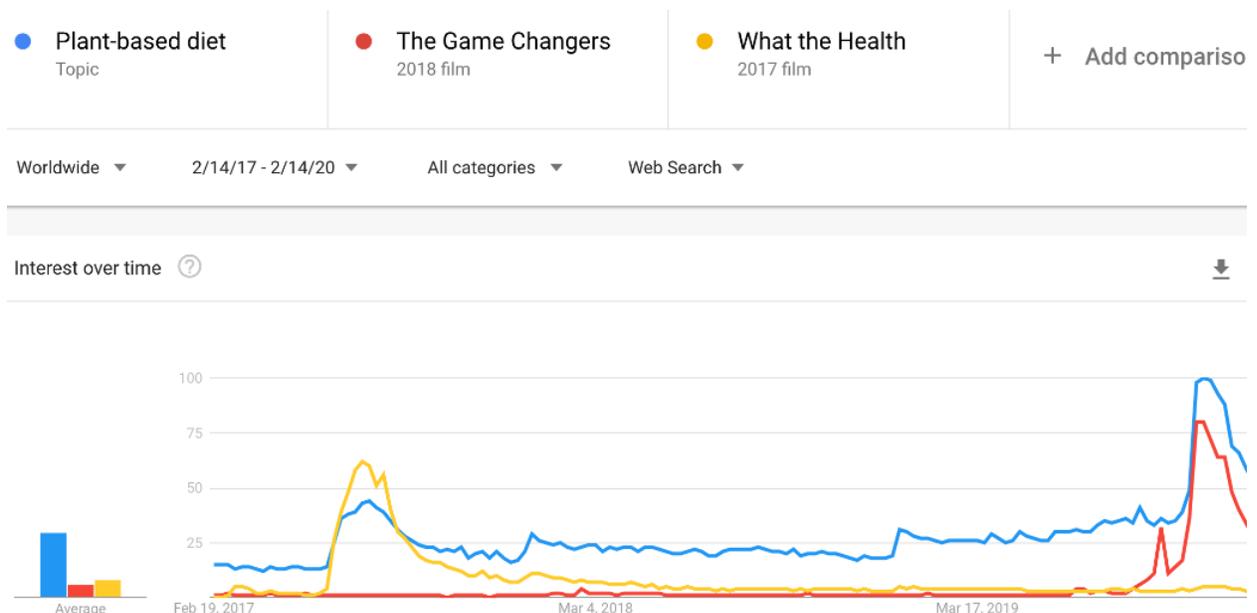
## Documentaries and Farm Animals

*The Game Changers* has celebrities talking about plant-based diets. Backed by a star-studded [list](#), including Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jackie Chan, the film's premiere attracted [NBA stars](#), [Dr. Oz](#), and [Serena Williams](#). The captain of the Indian cricket team even [promoted](#) the documentary to his 34M Twitter followers. Google search data suggests the film drove a global uptick in searches for plant-based diets (see chart below).

*The Game Changers* is just the latest documentary to raise the profile of factory farming and plant-based diets. *Eating Animals* (2018) drew [glowing reviews](#), [won awards](#), and attracted [national media attention](#). The more [factually-challenged](#) *What the Health* (2017) inspired Formula One legend [Lewis Hamilton](#), NBA star [Kyrie Irving](#), and fashion designer [Tom Ford](#) to go vegan, and likely also boosted Google searches.

*Blackfish* (2013) is credited with causing SeaWorld to cease breeding captive orcas entirely. After CNN aired the documentary on repeat, SeaWorld attendance plunged, bands canceled performances there, and a communications representative privately [described](#) the park's reputation as "positively radioactive." When SeaWorld finally acknowledged the "Blackfish Effect," its share price fell by a third. Two years later it [settled](#) with the SEC over its failure to disclose to investors the documentary's impact.

So should we double down on documentaries to end factory farming?



*Google searches on plant-based diets rose around the release dates of *What the Health* and *The Game Changers* (the release dates are shown here by the upsurge in searches for the films at the time). Note this*

shows relative interest on different topics over time, not absolute popularity, and that the topics had a relatively low search volume, e.g. search traffic on “plant-based diets” was 30-50X less than traffic on “veganism” over the same time period. Source: Google Trends.

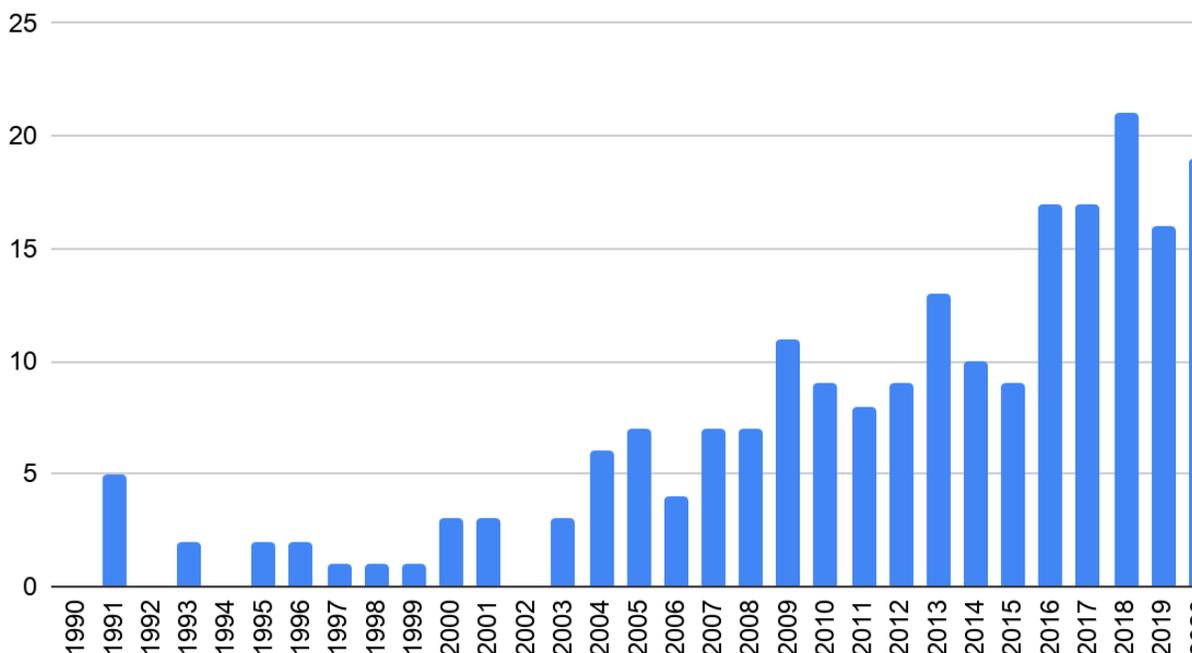
Maybe. But to understand the success rate of documentaries we need to look not just at the numerator (the number of hits like *The Game Changers*) but also the denominator (the number of relevant documentaries). Thankfully, Farmed Animal Funders’ analyst Kieran Grieg and Open Philanthropy researcher Persis Eskander have done just that.

Kieran and Persis compiled the first comprehensive [dataset](#) of documentaries with a pro-plant-based or anti-factory farming message. They identified 217 such farm animal or vegan documentaries released over the last few decades. The number released annually has increased sharply since the 2000s, with 19 already announced for 2020 alone.

Of those 217 documentaries, just seven are on the most popular streaming platform, Netflix, and fewer than 10 were on each of Hulu and iTunes. A more impressive 73 are on YouTube and 42 are on Amazon Prime, which host more titles in general, though most of the farm animal documentaries had fewer than 10K views or 10 reviews on those sites. And that leaves another 97 farmed animal documentaries that Kieran and Persis couldn’t find streaming online at all.

This is not atypical. The Internet Movie Database tracked [4,131](#) feature-length documentaries released in 2019 alone. Given Netflix only adds [~550](#) documentaries/year (and removes as many), most documentaries will be seen on Amazon or YouTube if at all. And given the rarity of theatrical runs for documentaries, this often means many are doomed to barely be seen at all.

## Number of Farm Animal Documentaries Per Year



*The number of documentaries released each year on factory farming and plant-based diets has increased significantly since the early 2000s. Source: Kieran Grieg and Persis Eskander [dataset](#) collated based on IMDB data.*

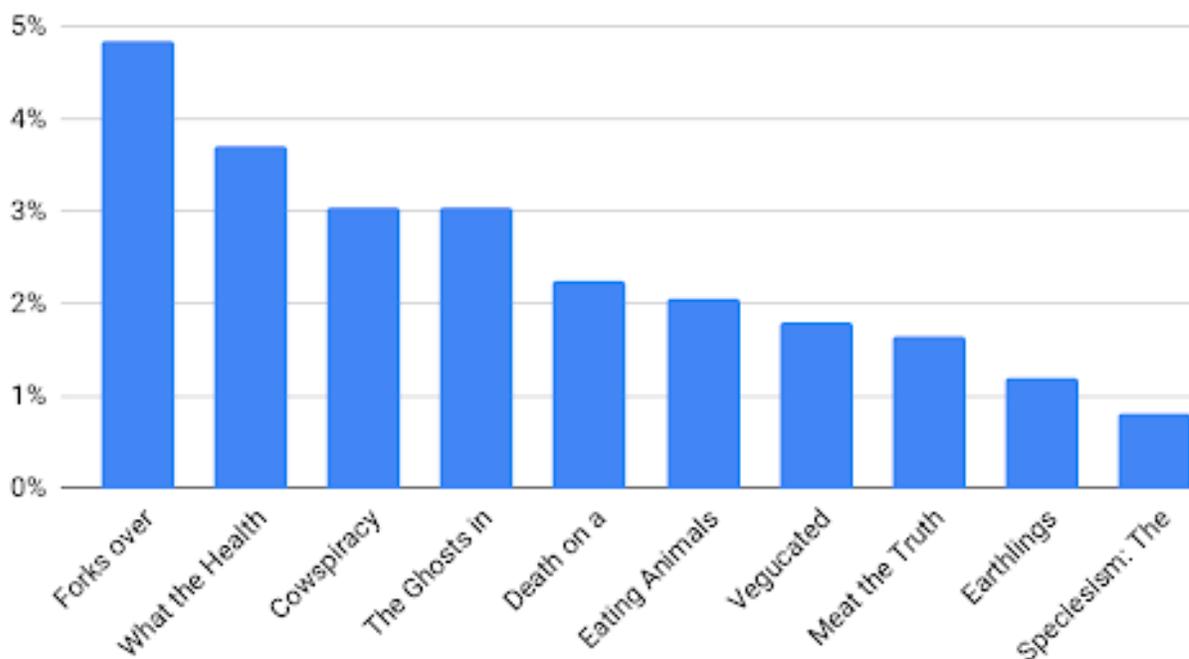
Nor are costly or well-made documentaries guaranteed a better reception. Consider a documentary you've never heard of: *At The Fork*. This 2016 documentary cost \$3M, featured powerful interviews with leaders from across the farm animal movement, and scored a Rotten Tomatoes score of 100%. But its trailer got just 29K views, and the movie never made it to theater screens, and only very belatedly to Amazon Prime.

We also need to understand what "success" means. With the exception of narrowly-focused documentaries like *Blackfish*, it's hard to know what impact a documentary has. I focused on celebrity endorsements and Google trend data above largely because of the lack of other public indicators of success. Indeed, even making it on to a streaming platform doesn't guarantee that anyone will watch a documentary — or that it will have any impact on those who do.

For farm animal documentaries, though, Kieran's research provides some insight on viewership. He asked Civis Analytics to survey 800 Americans on whether they'd seen various documentaries. (As a check Civis excluded respondents who claimed to have seen documentaries that hadn't been released yet.) Overall, 11% of respondents reported having seen one of the factory farming or plant-based documentaries listed. The most popular documentary at the time — and the survey was run in 2019, before the release of *The Game Changers* — was *Forks Over Knives*, which 5% of respondents said they'd seen.

We also have more limited insight into the impact such documentaries can have on viewers. [Several surveys suggest that](#) 10-40% of vegetarians and vegans credit documentaries as a top reason they went veg. And a [survey](#) of 15,157 people recruited from the email list and websites promoting *Food Inc.* (2010) found that viewers were significantly more likely to donate time or money to advocating for food system reform than a demographically and ideologically similar group of non-viewers. An impressive 84% of this (skewed) sample also agreed with the statement that "*Food Inc.* changed my life."

## % of Americans Who Say They've Watched Film



*The most viewed factory farm or plant-based diet documentaries have been viewed by 1-5% of the US population, according to a 2019 Cavis Analytics survey of 800 Americans weighted to be demographically representative. Source: Cavis Analytics data, compiled by Kieran Grieg.*

In the light of this sparse evidence, what's a funder or activist to do? I don't know, but I think Kieran and Persis' research suggests a few things:

First, documentaries are a hits-based business. A few documentaries get seen by lots of people, but lots of documentaries get seen by few people. The Cavis survey results suggest that millions of Americans may have watched *Forks Over Knives* alone. There are few other routes to reach this many people at once — or to have a targeted impact as striking as *Blackfish* has had on SeaWorld.

So we need documentaries, but it's unclear how many. I roughly estimate that about ~5-10% of our movement's funds and efforts are currently spent on documentaries, of which we produce ~20/year. Whether you think that's too high or too low will likely depend on your theory of change — especially how you value individual attitudinal change against institutional reforms or technological progress.

Second, the best predictors of a documentary's success may be track record, professionalism, and cost. Kieran studied what factors correlated with success in a [subset](#) of farm animal and vegan documentaries with available data. He found that documentaries that used a professional production company were 60% more likely to appear on a major streaming platform, while those with a director who had previously secured a distribution deal were 40% more likely.

My analysis also suggests that production cost correlates with success, but not enough to offset the higher price tag: a \$1M documentary on average does better than a \$100K one, but not 10X better. This

suggests favoring cheaper documentaries. This matters given documentaries can vary hugely in cost: *Blackfish* cost \$76K, *Cowspiracy* \$117K, *What the Health* \$273K, *Food Inc.* \$1M, *An Inconvenient Truth* \$1.5M, *Bowling for Columbine* \$4.3M, and *The Game Changers* reportedly over \$7M.

Third, supporting impact campaigns may be especially effective. Documentarians tend to understandably focus on financing the film's production, leaving few resources to promote it. Funders and activists focused on promotion have two advantages: (a) they can see whether the film turned out well before getting involved, and (b) they can focus exclusively on amplifying the film's impact.

EJF Philanthropies' impact campaign for *Eating Animals* is a model. They organized promotion at film festivals, screenings for film critics, and film events for influencers across the world (including institutional investors invested in factory farming). They also underwrote a social media campaign involving high-profile people associated with the film, such as Natalie Portman, and provided funding for the film to be screened by over 500 university and community groups.

All this talk of documentaries got you wanting to watch one? I recommend [The Game Changers](#), [Eating Animals](#), and (the unfortunately titled) [Death on a Factory Farm](#). I also recommend two non-documentary films that have helped our cause: [Okja](#) and [Chicken Run](#).