

24 Online Documentary

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In the 1990s, exponents of the theory of media convergence predicted that in the coming together of telecommunications and broadcast networks there would soon cease to be a distinction between such things as 'television' and 'the internet'. They were correct about the physical infrastructure of networks: many homes now rely on only one connection to deliver telephone, internet and television, and use online services like Skype for telephony. Content is following suit more slowly: television is becoming detached from schedules with hard disc recorders and TiVO-type services, and online video websites proliferate. The internet is a medium increasingly characterized by moving images, but these moving images themselves carry the character of the internet.

The rise of YouTube and Google Video in 2005, and the acquisition of the former by the latter in 2006 did not themselves create a boom in online video, but these sites did increase the ease of distribution, taking the burden of hosting away from the content provider and providing near-universal embedded Flash video players in a marketplace riven by competing codecs and players. YouTube, with its 10-minute limit on uploads, tagging and blog-friendliness initially embraced the popular and amateur end of the market, while Google Video sought to establish relationships with distributors and studios.

In the context of this burgeoning world of online video, documentary has a place, but it has to be considered in a wider sense than in film and on television: limits on length, amateur production values and emergent aesthetic forms mean many things are found online that would never make their way to a television or cinema screen, and some forms of non-fictional moving image flourish only on the web. The questions for makers, consumers and scholars of moving images are what distinguishes documentary online from documentary made for other channels, and whether the internet has any distinct, useful or unique characteristics that offer documentary anything more than just another means of distribution.

Four such sets of characteristics are outlined below. First, in organizing geographically diverse individuals around a common interest in watching or making documentaries, there are new forms of community; second, new means of creation and distribution are given to political and campaigning documentaries that seek to either change people's minds or reinforce a viewpoint; third, we have increased access to 'dirty reality' in the form of footage of current events and violent conflict; and, fourth, video diaries and other moving images give us an increased range of intimate access to the lives of other people.

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Community

While the phrase 'Web 2.0' is used in many contexts, at its core is the idea that a new generation of web technology enables people to share more easily what they make and think, and moves the power to shape definitions and links between content from the hands of professionals into our own. Through these links and sharing, communities are built. While linear video itself isn't an inherently Web 2.0 form, websites built around video frequently contain these new tools of community.

YouTube is a community for the world at large, but for UK-based documentary makers the most notable online community is FourDocs. The site works as a starting-point for budding documentary-makers, offering tutorials on the entire filmmaking process from cameras to compression, interviews with leading documentarists, and even open source stock clips. This more focused community brings a more sophisticated level of feedback and discussion about individual pieces of work in the forums devoted to them.

With a trademark 4-minute length limit, films tend towards the intimate and reflective: moments in life, simple themes elaborated, and thumbnail sketches of individuals. FourDocs has pushed the envelope inwards with an additional strand of 59-second films (with a televisual precedent in the early 1990s' BBC2/Arts Council 'One minute TV' scheme), which pare observation and reflection to their bones. As with short film funding schemes in the early 2000s, which replaced grants for making 35mm films with a larger number of smaller budgets for digitally-shot work, there is a danger, however, that sites like FourDocs may become the only, rather than a complementary, outlet for new documentary work, and that either the overall quality of the field or the quality of individual work may suffer as a consequence.

Campaigning documentaries

The success of big-screen documentaries with a political angle like *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), *Super Size Me* (2004) and *The Corporation* (2003) has inspired others to make political or campaigning films that will never acquire theatrical distribution. The internet is the most obvious alternative means of distribution for those inspired by Michael Moore but who lack his reach or recognition. Two successful documentaries seen only on the internet exemplify the issues of production and distribution for such filmmakers.

Dylan Avery's *Loose Change* is an independently-produced documentary which asserts that a large and rather improbable US government conspiracy was responsible for the events of September 11th 2001. The film uses news footage, talking heads and an insistent, provocative voice-over inviting viewers to question the 'official' version of events. Built on shaky foundations, it has been attacked from both left and right, but its call for the 'truth' in response to its unanswered questions has a certain amount of pull to an audience already aware that it has been lied to about the war in Iraq. The controversy that surrounds it would almost certainly deny it mainstream distribution of any sort, but on the internet it can claim an audience in the millions.

'*We*' *The Unauthorised Arundhati Roy Musical Documentary* is a very different kind of documentary. It uses footage of a speech Roy made in 2002, a year after the attack on the World Trade Center, in which she takes issue with the US military domination of the world, the polarization of the War on Terror and the disregard paid to the world's poor. The film mixes sound and image of her talk with footage of world events and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, blending them together in a form somewhere between a music video and *Koyaanisqatsi* (US, 1982). Where *Loose Change* appeals to the curious intellect, *We* appeals to the emotion and conscience.

Earlier political and campaigning documentaries embodying similar issues were much harder to disseminate. Peter Watkins' *The War Game* (UK, 1965), made for but not shown by the BBC, was a tremendously influential propaganda tool for the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, but its distribution was tortuous: 16mm prints from the British Film Institute were physically ferried around the country by individuals and shown in community and church halls, laboriously building the kind of political and affinitive network that is instantaneously available today.

The internet makes low-budget documentaries like *Loose Change* and *We* easier to make, as well as distribute. Both operate on the edge of intellectual property legislation in using a large amount of archive footage. Documentaries that rely heavily on such footage usually have that footage cleared for broadcast only, making redistribution and reissue difficult: none of Adam Curtis' television work (*The Century of the Self* (2002), *The Power of Nightmares* (2004), *The Trap* (2007)) is commercially available on DVD, for example. By contrast, the easy availability of material to work with online is matched by the ease of remixing and redistributing it.

YouTube and Google Video are also used to publish short works which campaign or agitate. YouTube carries a 'news and politics' channel in which users post television clips, their own footage, or talk to camera in support of their political position or activism. However, the immediacy and 'everydayness' of postings on YouTube, combined with the relative anonymity of posters make it fertile ground for a phenomenon known as 'astroturfing': the fabrication of fake grassroots activity. *Al Gore's Penguin Army*, a short animated attack on Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* (US, 2006), portraying the former US Vice-President as the Batman villain boring even his own army of tuxedo'd penguins to sleep turned out to be the work not of a passionate lone activist but of a PR agency whose clients included oil giant Exxon.

Dirty reality

Documentary often offers us unpalatable and unpleasant facts and experiences, uncovering tales of war, abuse and torture. Usually, these are given a political or moral context by narrative, which frequently strives for reconciliation and justice either within the film or as a call to action. Even the sensationalist 'Mondo' series begun with *Mondo Cane* (Italy, 1962) which juxtaposed barely thematically linked 'outrageous' anthropological footage, had a coherence in their very promise to shock or amaze. The internet makes it possible to encounter images of atrocity directly, without such comforting frameworks.

The video of the execution of American journalist Daniel Pearl in Pakistan is available on www.LiveLeak.com. The footage of his execution itself is over in seconds; the majority of the video consists of Pearl talking under duress about his Jewishness, intercut with images of American aggression, and a list of his captors' demands. Its immediacy is shocking, but it is nevertheless a highly-mediated representation of the act and a very deliberate piece of propaganda. The form is effectively mocked by Amir Jamal's Hanif Kureishi-scripted *Weddings and Beheadings* (UK, 2007), which likens the hackwork of filmmakers forced to capture beheadings to ubiquitous wedding videos.

In Iraq, the documentary output of American soldiers equipped with video cameras and internet connections has become quite prolific. In ifilm's 'warzone' channel, soldiers' oral testimony about significant events in their service ('Watching my Company Commander Die', 'Short Order Body Retrieval', etc.) are brought together by the site under the banner 'Back From Iraq'. Alongside these are 'Soldier Music Videos' in which servicemen edit video footage of assaults and conflict to music. Parts of the war, such as Fallujah and Ramadi become at once intensely personalized as testimony and turned into spectacle, as explosions, attacks and even moving acts of solidarity and friendship are cut to a soundtrack. In some cases soldiers' videos are part of a larger project, such as Deborah Scranton's *The War Tapes* (US, 2006), (which, while a feature film and winner of a Tribeca Best Documentary award, has eschewed established distribution models in releasing a 'preview' DVD before a theatrical debut), that knit together several stories into a more traditional narrative whole.

Neither jihadi nor soldiers' videos are naïve or unconstructed (an instinctive Eisensteinian grasp of montage now seems commonplace) nor unmediated (almost all the war videos carry an implicitly political point of view), but they do share a quality of immediacy unique to online video in their accessibility and lack of wider balance or framework.

The lives of others

Almost as soon as the world wide web and its graphical interface, the web browser, appeared, so did the 'personal home page'. People made information about themselves available on the internet in such a way that theoretically anyone could see it, but in practice few did. In this fashion, the web has always offered one of the fundamental aspects of documentary: a way to see into the ordinary lives of other people, but added its equalizing correlative: anyone can give as much of their own lives as they wish to the world in general.

In 1996, Jennifer Ringley, an American college student, began living her life under the gaze of a webcam. Her website provided a sequence of still images rather than moving image, but the relentless subjection of every moment of her life to surveillance, from sexual activity to hours spent watching the television, gathered her a large following for the next five years. Unusually for an internet phenomenon, her project prefigured the popular use of the webcam by commercial pornographers. Online pornography, with a large and guaranteed customer base, has usually been the first of the internet's business sectors to marketize new technologies. The webcam in

particular offers the ideal combination of the illusion of intimacy and exhibitionism to customers who are flattered to see themselves as voyeurs rather than mass audiences.

In the late 1990s, blogging became an everyday activity for millions. The technical bar to entry was lowered, and the dimension of seriality was added, turning personal revelation into a diary, with a subscription facility and the incentive to return for constant updates. Though the 'blogosphere' has generally come to refer to amateur political punditry, personal journals remain a significant phenomenon, and with the further lowering of the bar to entry on moving image, some bloggers have become video bloggers, or vloggers, talking about themselves or their lives on camera.

The vlogging style is quite formulaic: vloggers talk straight to camera in a piece that usually lasts less than five minutes; it is often scripted, and follows an argument, a story or a point to be made. YouTube allows users to post a video as a 'response' to another video, and many of the personal posts are in the form of answers to others' personal posts, though the tone often descends into either abuse or merely expressing respect to the original vlogger for having 'made it' (achieved a large audience) on YouTube.

One personal diarist, Peter Oakley, using the name 'geriatric1927' began vlogging on YouTube in his eightieth year, self-consciously drawing attention to the difference between his age and YouTube's youthful demographic. Sitting in his living room, wearing headphones and beginning each episode with 'Good evening YouTubers', he recounts the story of his life, misspent youth and career in weekly episodes entitled 'Telling it all'. He rapidly gained star status, despite being initially reluctant to forego his anonymity or take his fame any further than YouTube itself.

Vlogging's episodic form also holds some of the same attractions as serial drama. Lonelygirl15 was another YouTube phenomenon, the bedroom diary of a 15-year-old girl, covering friends, family, emotional anxieties and her parents' involvement in a strange religious cult, which proved to be a work of fiction. A predictable brouhaha followed, but the series successfully continues as overt drama: the aim of the hoax was not so much to deceive as to gain an audience, and in a crowded moving image marketplace, apparent authenticity was the factor that made it stand out.

Conclusion

As new forms of moving image and audiences for it flourish online, documentary in its widest sense has acquired unique and captivating aspects. The elements that we are used to seeing in documentary films as a mode of representation: talking heads, archive footage and verité are being reconfigured into new, often fractured and fragmentary forms, mostly by amateurs. The kinds of documentary we find on the internet follow forms that the internet has established such as brevity, community, seriality and personal connectedness as much as they follow forms established in the field of documentary filmmaking itself.

The immediacy of new online forms should not be mistaken for a lack of mediation: they are as deliberately constructed as any existing documentary forms, if

not more, because of technical constraints. By contrast, authenticity is highly prized by audiences: the feeling that what one is watching is 'real' is valuable enough to be faked for either political or commercial ends.

Some of this material pushes the boundaries of what we might be used to calling 'documentary'. Forms considered surpassed in the linear 'evolution' of documentary such as propaganda documentaries and uncomplicated 'truthful' verité have re-emerged, or reminded us of their continued presence as a modes of documentary making. Certainly, few strive for the kind of anthropological objectivity that characterizes many contemporary feature-length documentaries. This is not to say, however, that scholars of documentary should discard or ignore what falls beyond the traditional boundaries of their study. When we look for how soldiers fighting the war in Iraq have understood and apprehended their experience using moving images, for example, it would be unwise to privilege recorded first person testimony over edited music videos, not least for the realization of the subjective perspective inherent in the editing.

Indeed, the definition of 'documentary' as a whole might usefully be stretched in the direction of this new kind of material. The combination of intimacy and dirty reality in particular feeds the appetites that popular audiences have always turned to documentary in order to satisfy. Conversely, the fragmentation of forms and 'naïve' production of moving image is best studied by those who have a knowledge and understanding of the forms being adapted.

To return to our starting-point, platform convergence may be followed by true content convergence: the launch of Al Gore's youth-oriented Current TV, an 'interactive' television channel where viewers create news and factual stories might be either the YouTube principle reaching the mainstream or merely the old model of public-access cable television on a global scale. In either case, new forms and modes of documentary production established online may outlast their specific medium.

Websites

Google Video: video.google.com

YouTube: www.youtube.com

FourDocs www.channel4.com/fourdocs

Loose Change: www.loosechange911.com

We www.weroy.org

Al Gore's Penguin Army www.youtube.com/watch?v=IZSqXUSwHRI

LiveLeak www.liveleak.com

iFilm's Warzone www.ifilm.com/warzone

Peter Oakley: geriatric1927 www.youtube.com/user/geriatric1927

Lonelygirl15 www.lonelygirl15.com

Current TV uk.current.com