
Modes of interactivity: analysing the webdoc

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Abstract

The webdocumentary positions itself as documentary re-mediated for the internet age. Not only does the name webdocumentary consciously reference film and television documentary but it is possible to trace continuities in representational strategies, purpose and production practices that situate the webdoc within the documentary tradition. In spite of this family resemblance, however, the webdoc challenges current thinking about documentary representation. Interactivity in particular has consequences for theorizing in relation to modes of representation and user engagement. This article considers interactivity as a representational strategy, suggesting three dimensions for assessing its contribution to documentary. Following on from this it is suggested that, like film and television documentary, webdocs exhibit patterns of textual organization. It is suggested that there are at least three interactive structures found in webdocs: the narrative, the categorical and the collaborative. Each can be further divided – indicating the diverse uses of interactive features. A challenge of researching interactive texts is that the whole text is never completely available for analysis. Each viewing has the potential to be different from the last. Although necessarily provisional, this article seeks to demonstrate what might be achieved through close reading of the interactive documentary text.

Keywords

collaboration, documentary, interactivity, internet, theory, webdocumentary

The screen is black. Suddenly white text begins to race across its surface as though issuing from some unseen keyboard. ‘The race towards economic growth is often uncompromising’, it states, ‘for those that must suffer the consequences.’ The sounds of a busy Chinese railway station become audible. Soon after, distant, crackling music is heard. As the writing continues, you read a few more short sentences about the human price of China’s economic

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miracle. So far, in its subject matter and approach *Journey to the End of Coal* feels like a conventional documentary critique of exploitation justified by the promise of prosperity. But then, the white text addresses its audience directly, assigning the 'viewer' a role in what is to follow. 'As a freelance journalist you have decided to investigate on [sic] the living conditions of those who are making the "Chinese miracle" possible. You will start your investigation with a focus on the most dangerous coalmines in the world.' The journey you are about to take, the text says, is based on fact. Engaging with the documentary *Journey to the End of Coal* involves navigating a virtual space, evaluating information, attempting to second guess the 'actions' of officials and making decisions all the while imagining how things might have been different.

Journey to the End of Coal is part of a growing collection of documentaries made for 'broadcast' on the internet. Often called webdocs, they consciously position themselves as documentary re-mediated for the internet age. Like traditional documentary, even a cursory glance at the webdoc reveals a diversity of styles and approaches. Interactivity in some form, however, is a constant. Yet interactivity itself is complex; different technologies deployed in a range of ways position the user differently in relation the documentary text. A list of the things audiences might do with webdocs could include: reading, watching, commenting, sharing content, talking to others, filling in a quiz, playing, and clicking. This list is by no means definitive, but rather suggestive of the ways in which documentary reception might be altered by the interactive potential of the webdoc. Audiences have become users and, although this transition is hardly unique to documentary, its impacts are likely to be significant for documentary theory.

There are increasing numbers of webdocs and an emergent body of scholarship seeking to understand them. While interactivity has been a focus for some theoretical work it has most often been approached from the perspective of technology, focusing on what it is technically possible for users to *do* in relation to the webdoc. While technologies undoubtedly play a significant role, a focus on technology alone does not address the contribution of interactivity to the webdoc's meaning. What is the documentary significance of navigating a 360-degree space or sending in a comment? How does interactivity contribute to representation? Do discussion threads and chat opportunities impact on the documentary argument? In short, how do these interactive activities contribute to the documentary project?

This article seeks to contribute to our understanding of the webdoc by considering the rhetorical function of interactivity. While its goal is theoretical in that it seeks to contribute to the ongoing process of making sense of the webdoc as an emerging documentary form, it acknowledges the impossibility of totality in contemporary media theory (Jenkins, 1999). There are a number of perspectives from which interactivity might be considered, such as user experience or documentary practice, but our focus here will be on the use of interactivity in the context of documentary argument. It is often stated that a distinctive feature of documentaries is that they make claims, propose perspectives and evoke feelings in support of a particular view of the world (Nichols, 2010). If interactivity is a key tool in the webdoc-maker's tool kit how is it being used as a documentary technique?

Drawing on theoretical work on interactivity it is suggested that, for documentary, communicative potential and the user's ability to control and contribute to content are significant. Three dimensions of interactivity are then proposed: the form of interactivity, the purpose or motivation for interactivity and the context of interactivity. It is suggested that these three

dimensions constitute a framework for analysing the meaning of interactivity in the context of specific texts. Following from this it is suggested that, like film and television documentary, webdocs exhibit patterns of textual organization. At least three interactive structures can be identified: narrative, categorical and collaborative. Each can be further divided – indicating the diverse uses of interactive features. Finally, questions of research methodology are considered and a case made for textual analysis of the webdoc. Although necessarily provisional, this article seeks to demonstrate what might be achieved by this method.

What is a webdoc?

New media technologies and practices are extending the documentary project in a number of different directions. As new media technologies and new forms of communication emerge, contemporary documentary makers are engaging in a process of actively re-thinking the documentary project. They are imagining what documentary might become: non-linear, multi-media, interactive, hybrid, cross-platform, convergent, virtual, or something else as yet un-thought. Within this experimental space the webdoc has become an established mode of documentary production. The name webdocumentary (sometimes webdoc, interactive web documentary or web documentary) describes a body of documentary work, distributed via the internet that is both multi-media and interactive. The relatively widespread use of the name by broadcasters like the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) and France 24 (which offers an annual webdocumentary prize) suggests the emergence of a new form of documentary. There is also a webdocumentary blog and even a Wikipedia entry, complete with a list of examples, suggesting academic and general interest in the form.¹

The name webdoc stakes a claim to continuity with film and television documentary. It can be viewed as a statement of intent and may serve an indexical function, creating expectations for the user. But is the claim justified? Documentary continues to be a fuzzy and imprecise category of media production. While we may ‘know one when we see one’ specific texts have always had the ability to destabilize definitions. The fuzziness is if anything, worse in the digital domain. Questions have been raised, for instance, about whether docu-games share sufficient continuity with film and television documentary to warrant the epithet. While some point to a continuity of purpose (Raessens, 2009) or make claims for a specific gaming epistemology (Bogost, 2010) questions remain about the compatibility between documentary’s need for historical accuracy and gaming interactivity (Fullerton, n.d.). However such questions are addressed, it is clear that claiming to be a documentary is not of itself sufficient.

In the case of the webdoc, however, it is possible to point to a number of continuities that constitute a ‘family resemblance’ with traditional documentary. These continuities include: the institutions and contexts of production, textual conventions and continuities of purpose. Most often the institutions that produce and broadcast television and radio documentaries (often publicly funded broadcasters) produce webdocs. Independent production companies may supply both television and web documentary content to broadcasters (see for example Chocolate Liberation Front and Roar Films).² While the internet has brought changes to the documentary production ecology, including the emergence of web-only companies and spaces for independent production (Coffman, 2009), traditional players are looking to continue their role as creators and ‘broadcasters’ of documentary online.

As texts, webdocs draw on many of the representational conventions of film and television documentary. They make use of interviews and observational sequences, sound and images collected on location, and commentary either in the form of voiceover or text. Structurally there are similarities as well with webdocs employing narrative and categorical structures (to which we shall return). There are of course differences, most notably in the shift from the temporal organization of elements toward a spatio-temporal organization and the re-mediation (Bolter and Grusin, 2000) of a range of non-fiction media such as books, photographs, maps and so on.

In addition to the contexts of production and textual characteristics it is possible to point to continuity in terms of purpose. Corner (2002) identifies three 'traditional' functions of documentary: democratic civics (providing information/publicity to engage the audience as active citizens), journalistic enquiry and radical interrogation (questioning the status quo and providing alternative perspectives). Webdocs very often address classic documentary subjects, particularly environmental (*Waterlife*), social and political issues (*GDP*, *Gaza/Sderot*, *La Vie a Sac*, *The Big Issue*, *360 Degrees*), with an investigative/journalistic goal. The content and approach of webdocs can often be indistinguishable from television documentary. For all these reasons it is not improbable to think that audiences will conceptualize their experience of the webdoc on the basis of their familiarity with traditional documentary. It also suggests that the concepts and tools used in the study of film and television documentary are likely to provide insights into the webdoc.

What is interactivity?

Having declared interactivity a defining characteristic of the webdoc and suggesting that it has the potential to contribute to the meaning of the text it is necessary to clarify what is meant by the term. Doing so will require a critical examination of the substantial claims made on behalf of interactivity. Hudson (2008), for example, argues that the inherent polyvocality of the interactive documentary constitutes a radically different representational practice that has the potential to overcome the political and social inequalities that characterize traditional documentary. Interactivity is further presumed to signal a shift from passive to active audience engagement. Beattie (2008b: 43) suggests, for instance, that by interacting with each of the scenes in her documentary *The Wrong Crowd*, the user is able to 'understand more fully, more deeply, the layers of the truth of that moment'. She associates the act of navigation through the webdocumentary space with a distinct epistemology. While it is likely that interactivity will have implications both for documentary representation and audience engagement, interactivity as a concept comes with significant cultural baggage that must be critically unpacked.

What unites these enthusiastic claims is the assumption that interactivity is a singular phenomenon, something that is characteristic of computer-mediated documentary and which distinguishes it from its film and television cousins. But interactivity can have many meanings and so a closer consideration of its use in the webdoc is warranted. In terms of features a webdoc may involve the user in navigation through content, immersion in a virtual world or participation in a community. The user might be interacting with a website, with other users or with the documentary maker. Interactivity may differ in degree as well

as in kind – something that is suggested by criticisms that current interactive documentaries are at best minimally interactive (see Almeida and Alvelos, 2010). The theoretical challenge ahead is to refine our understanding of interactivity and to consider the kinds of frameworks that might foster critical engagement with its use in documentary.

Although not extensively applied in the documentary context, there are many theories and concepts of interactivity that inform this study. When interactivity is considered in relation to documentary it is most often understood in terms of the user's ability to exert control over content. At its most basic the webdocumentary differs from film and television documentary in that the user plays a role in the presentation of the documentary by choosing the order in which they access content. While interactivity opens up the possibility of multiple informational pathways it challenges the concept of narrative coherence that has been so central to film and television documentary. Whitelaw (2002) asks, for instance: 'If we explode and open the structure, how can we be sure the story is being conveyed?'

But is control over the order in which content is presented sufficient to call a webdoc interactive? Smuts (2009) argues that interactivity cannot be explained as control over information for the simple reason that this would include media forms that we do not conventionally think of as interactive. How, Smuts might ask, does a documentary on DVD with a menu of possible scene selections differ from a webdocumentary in which the user accesses material according to their interests? The answer, I suggest, is that what separates the webdoc from the documentary DVD is the way in which the spectator/user is positioned. The webdoc invites the user to play a role in the presentational order of the documentary. The documentary maker expects that the user will do this and attempts to structure the process of navigation. Beattie (2008) describes webdocumentary production as a process of pre-empting the audience's 'ordering of the real' (see further discussion below). But not only do webdoc makers expect users to engage with the interactive text in this way, users do too and this expectation frames their encounter with the text. The fact that a DVD makes scene selection a technical possibility does not in any way change the fact that the documentary text it contains positions the viewer as a spectator in the traditional sense. While technological affordances are an important consideration in discussions of interactivity, the contexts in which technologies are deployed are just as critical.

While user control over the presentation constitutes a significant difference from film and television documentary, the ability to alter or contribute content is generally thought to mark a more significant level of interactivity. Given that documentary is a form of public discourse, the creation of content marks a significant discursive shift, enabling users to 'write into' public memory (Burns, 2002). Richards (2006) argues that the ability of users to create content is central to interactivity but that user contribution hinges on the positioning of the user with respect to content. User production, he suggests, can only happen when the user is positioned in a proactive role. He proposes three forms of interactivity: *consumer* interactivity, in which content is fixed and user activity consists of interpreting, evaluating or acting in an alternative domain; *processor* interactivity, in which users have some ability to contribute, although the content and form of the contribution are fixed, for example sending an email; finally, *generator* interactivity, in which the user occupies a space in which they can author content and/or alter the environment, for example starting a new discussion thread.

Richards is interested in the relationship between the tools made available to users and the way in which they either facilitate or constrain content generation both by making contribution possible, and providing a motivation for user contributions. Richards' contextual approach provides an alternative to those that focus on interactivity as either property or experience. Applying this to documentary draws attention to the ways in which technology facilitates content production and motivates content creation. It also draws attention to the extent to which documentary makers prescribe specific forms of contribution. But given that our concern is to engage with questions about the meaning of interactivity in the webdoc, a focus on context also asks us to consider the way in which contributions are incorporated into the documentary text. Is user content conceived of as an addition to the documentary database or are users given scope to modify the structure of the documentary? To what extent are contributions foregrounded or, alternatively, situated in a separate space away from the 'real' documentary content? In other words, what is the relationship between user contributions and the voice of the webdoc?

Because documentary, like other 'discourses of sobriety', is a media form founded on the ideal of instrumental power (Nichols, 1991: 3) the link between documentary voice (Nichols, 1983) and interactivity is significant. This is particularly the case since users most often conceptualize interactivity in terms of its contribution to social influence. Drawing on research with ordinary users, Quiring (2009) shows that when users are asked to elaborate on what they understand by interactivity they overwhelmingly focus on its contribution to social relationships and influence. One respondent described discussion boards as a way of influencing others, for example, while another talked about chat rooms in terms of interpersonal relationships. Technology, according to Quiring, was relevant to users insofar as it facilitated their social and political goals. Given that webdocs deal with a range of social issues and historical subjects, and, like film and television documentaries represent a shared social world, the idea that interactivity might be evaluated in terms of users' social and political goals is pertinent. For webdoc users, therefore, a satisfactory interactive experience is likely to depend on the kinds of relationships that become possible and the extent to which they have a voice. Can the user connect with others or just the database? And, returning to the argument above, how are user contributions framed by the documentary text?

Three aspects of interactivity are relevant to the webdoc: control over content, the ability to contribute and the framing of user contributions and, finally, the ability to form relationships and present one's case. Further, I have argued that technology, while an important factor in discussions of interactivity, cannot in isolation help us to grasp the contribution that interactivity makes to documentary discourse. We must be sensitive to the webdoc text as a whole and the place of interactivity within it. Taking this as a starting point for the analysis of interactivity it is suggested that three dimensions be considered: form, function and context. These dimensions taken together do not define interactivity but rather reflect a growing awareness of its multidimensionality (McMillian, 2002). They also provide a framework for considering interactivity as a representational strategy central to the production and consumption of the webdoc.

A focus on the form of interactivity draws attention in the first instance to the different technical affordances incorporated into the documentary text. Formal analysis highlights the method of interaction, the extent to which user contributions are prescribed (in terms

of both form and content) and the direction of information flow through the text. The aim of formal analysis is to consider the relationships that the webdoc establishes between user(s), text and author, and the extent to which the user is positioned as navigator, commenter or creator. Formal analysis also considers constraints on users' control over information. To what extent, for instance, are particular narrative structures embedded in the webdoc? Is the order of presentation pre-determined to some extent? The SBS webdoc *Goa Hippy Tribe*, for example, allows users to 'unlock' content as they engage with the site. The effect of this is to provide a degree of temporal control over the order in which information can be accessed. While on one level this can be interpreted as a motivational device, it also constrains user choice. In terms of user contributions, to what extent are they integrated into the documentary text? Or, to put this another way, to what extent does interactivity facilitate the emergence of the kind of braided documentary voice (FitzSimons, 2009) that underpins the celebration of polyvocality?

Closely linked to the form of the interaction is its purpose: what has the user been asked to do? What motivations exist for their interaction and how does it add (or not) to the goal of the webdoc? Interactivity can serve a number of functions within the documentary text: finding information (either within or beyond the documentary), learning, furthering the narrative, personalizing the documentary, adding to the documentary content, play or searching 'playfully' for hotspots within an image-interface. Placing the webdoc in its social and political context, allows for a consideration of interactivity in terms of users' political and interpersonal goals. From the perspective of the documentary maker, interactivity can also be considered in terms of its potential to reach new audiences or to relate to the audience in distinct ways.

In documentary simulations, such as *Asylum: Exit Australia* (SBS), the user takes the role of an asylum seeker and interacts in order to make decisions that drive the outcome of the documentary. The user interacts with a model that replicates processes in the world – a mode of engagement Bogost (2010) has labelled procedural rhetoric. *Waterlife*, on the other hand, uses interaction for a range of purposes including entertainment. On a number of pages the user will find animated paperclips that move away from the mouse as though by magnetism. This interactive 'game' provides users with something entertaining to do while reading. *360 Degrees*, a webdoc about the US prison system, includes several dynamic data simulations. Here the user can take a quiz to find out whether they have ever committed a felony, or to discover which justice theory best fits their beliefs. An interactive map allows the user to find out which American states have the highest rates of disenfranchisement, particularly of African Americans. Here a constructivist epistemology is suggested with interactive data allowing the user to discover information for themselves.

Finally, it is important to consider the context of interaction. Context draws attention to the way in which interactive opportunities are presented to the user. How extensive are opportunities for interaction? Where are they located? To what extent do elements either within the frame or outside it encourage or discourage participation? Is the interface designed to be comprehensible or opaque? Where is the webdoc hosted and what impact might that have? How is the user positioned in the interaction? Are they addressed directly, left to work it out for themselves or, perhaps, positioned outside the text, a position that parallels film or television spectatorship?

Looking at individual webdocs from the perspectives of form, purpose and context highlights the diversity of interactive features and their contributions to meaning. The same feature, clicking on a link, for example, may be technically identical but have very different impacts when used in the context of different webdocs. *Highrise: Out My Window* consists of more than 90 minutes of material – 49 stories filmed in 13 cities. The interface consists of a global high-rise building in which every window takes you to a different city. The grey dilapidated exterior contrasts with the warm, colourful interiors (that illuminate on rollover) to support the documentary's thesis: that in spite of their ugly exteriors, high-rise buildings are spaces of creativity and community. As the user enters each of the flats, they navigate the 360-degree panorama in search of hidden 'hotspots', with certain images playing a navigational role (as image-instruments; see Manovich, 2001: 183) in addition to their representational role. The user controls the 'camera', directing its gaze, identifying with its point of view and controlling the visual perspective. The user has the option to contribute to the documentary text by uploading images taken from their own (high-rise) window. However the user gallery is separated from the rest of the documentary, thereby limiting the user's ability to challenge the documentary's perspective. Interactivity plays a rhetorical role in *Highrise: Out My Window*, with individual stories confirming the documentary's central thesis. It doesn't matter which of the stories the user chooses or the order of their choice. Wherever they look, however they control the mobile 'camera', the user receives the message that the high-rise is a place of creativity that needs to be reassessed.

Prison Valley (ARTE, 2010) uses interactivity both to advance the documentary's narrative (this will be considered in more detail below) and to support the development of a community of interest. *Prison Valley* is a webdocumentary about the prison industry in the American city of Cañon, Colorado. The documentary considers the economics of the prison industry and the implications for the town, the prisons, and for society in general. It explores the issue through various frames of dysfunction: the dysfunction of the prison system, the justice system and the economy. Structurally and stylistically the documentary references the road movie, and could be considered an example of a journey documentary (Bruzzi, 2006). The content consists of a dominant 'movie' that tells the story of the filmmakers' visit to Cañon. The user isn't assigned a role in the narrative; rather they follow the filmmakers' journey. Voiceover is extensive; its function is interpretive and erotetic (Plantinga, 1997), providing information and generating questions the webdoc then proceeds to answer.

Prison Valley incorporates several interactive features that support the development of communities of interest. The user is invited to 'react!' to the narrative at a number of points and directed to a relevant discussion forum. The documentary makers are active on the site, facilitating discussion. The forums offer the user an opportunity to contribute to the documentary text and it is here that the documentary shifts from monologue (the main narrative) to a responsive dialogue. An interesting discussion between the residents of Cañon City and the documentary makers centres on the way in which the city is depicted in the documentary. Several residents accuse the documentary of taking a narrow and negative view of the town, pushing an anti-prison agenda. Although the discussion forums are separated from, and therefore somewhat subordinate to the main narrative, frequent links to the forums provide a link between the two discursive spaces. The site also facilitates communication between users by providing a 'live chat' feature and, by linking the user to either a Facebook or Twitter account, a connection between the documentary and the user's broader social network is formed.

Interactivity and webdoc structure

Webdocs, like their film and television cousins, are stylistically diverse. It is possible, however, to identify patterns in the way texts are organized and in the contribution of interactivity webdoc structure. In film and television documentary structural patterns serve to support assertions about the world. The opening of the documentary 'frames' the issue, introducing the world of the documentary, setting up a problem to be investigated and engaging the viewer in a play of question and answer (Plantinga, 1997). It is interesting to note that some webdocs (*Prison Valley* for example) retain a very cinematic opening sequence to fulfil this function. The temporal ordering of elements in film and television documentary makes connections and invests events with dramatic meaning. While the structure of film and television documentary is determined prior to reception, in the case of the webdoc the user plays a role in the arrangement of the documentary's elements. In constructing the webdoc the documentary maker structures into the text specific opportunities for interaction that impact on the relationships between elements. Viewed in this way, interactivity is a key element of the webdoc's structure and, therefore, meaning.

The structural patterns to be found in webdocs parallel, to a large degree, those found in film and television documentary. Therefore, the categories developed below draw significantly on existing documentary theory, in particular work on documentary structure by Nichols (1981) and Plantinga (1997). In comparing the structures of the webdoc and traditional documentary, interactivity plays a role not unlike that of editing in the context of the linear text. In spite of the structural relationship with film and television documentary, however, the webdoc also allows for the possibility of a structure founded on user contributions. In these cases the webdoc might be described as having a collaborative structure.

The narrative webdoc

Narrative is a fundamental way in which we explain and evaluate events in the world. It gives shape to the events, emphasizing here, glossing there, while investing events with dramatic movement and emotional force (Plantinga, 1997). As has already been noted, interactivity is thought by some to be incompatible with the documentary maker's need to shape reality, precisely controlling the order and duration of events for rhetorical ends. Debra Beattie (2008) provides insight into the tension between narrative and interaction in her account of making the webdoc *The Wrong Crowd*. Beattie's documentary is a personal history that intersects with a history of police corruption in Queensland, Australia. In producing *The Wrong Crowd*, Beattie struggles to reconcile non-linearity and her desire to ensure that the webdoc is 'navigable in a way that support[s] the unfolding of a particular historical argument'. Beattie's solution is to look for ways of structuring the information to support what Renov (cited in Beattie, 2008) describes as practices of 'ordering the real' that are central to documentary reception. The personal story that forms the heart of *The Wrong Crowd* provides continuity through key 'memory-moments' that constitute the content of the documentary. The reference to historical dates and the chronological arrangement of links to content further structure the material to support an ordered reading that Beattie describes as a process of 'narrativizing'.

The narrative webdoc is structured so as to facilitate narrativization. In other words it is structured so as to privilege a mode of engagement that is similar to that of traditional

linear documentary narratives. In order to achieve this the webdoc will include a central narrating position (this might be the documentary maker, the user or another individual) and emphasize the causal connection between events. The user need not experience events in chronological order, but the way in which events are structured and the documentary framed makes the chronological structure and causal relationships between events evident. The mode may include observational style webdocs, simulations in which the user's journey provides narrative coherence, or webdocs that focus on the filmmaker's journey.

Rapporteur de Crise is a webdocumentary that tells a story about the impact of the global economic crisis in Europe by following one member of the European Parliament through sensitive negotiations. Pervenche Berès, leader of the Special Committee on the financial, economic and social crisis, must gain the agreement of different political factions to come up with a plan for Europe. *Rapporteur* references the observational documentary tradition, presenting overheard conversations between Berès and other members of the committee. Interactivity augments the central narrative, with users given the option to move away at specific points to hear interviews with key players. A 'tool box' provides the user with an interactive glossary that explains terms and concepts central to the narrative.

In *The Whale Hunt* it is the filmmaker's journey that provides narrative coherence. The webdoc consists of a series of 3214 photographs taken at 5-minute intervals over a period of 9 days. The full sequence of images is represented either as mosaics of thumbnails or in the form of a heartbeat-like graph along the bottom of the screen. While the interface provides the user with a number of ways to re-order and compare information (i.e. it allows for a non-chronological viewing), the subject matter – the filmmaker's journey and participation in the hunt – provides a chronological framing that narrativizes the user's encounter with the text.

In *Prison Valley* it is the documentary maker's journey that orders the various encounters with residents of Cañon City. The opening sequence plunges the user into a world of dysfunction, a problem situation centred on the US prison system. Looking through the front windscreen of a car, the user travels toward the town of Cañon City. Establishing shots of rundown buildings introduce the user to the world of the documentary while short interview excerpts and voiceover by the filmmaker introduce the documentary's thesis: 'We're in some God forsaken place in the middle of Colorado, Cañon City.' At the end of each video segment the user is given the option to either leave the 'movie' in order to get further information, or 'hit the road' that is, return to the movie. The video segments making up the principal narrative unfold chronologically and the voiceover makes frequent references to earlier encounters. The documentary stores information about the user's activity so on return the user picks up where they left off. Non-chronological navigation, while not foreclosed is made difficult. As the user engages with the content, the documentary maker's point of view and the ordering of various encounters into a narrative structure contributes to the text's meaning. As in a traditional documentary, opening and closing sequences frame the documentary, emphasizing the documentary maker's vision of Cañon City.

The categorical webdoc

While narrative structures have dominated film and television documentary, webdocs more readily employ alternative forms of textual organization, in particular a categorical

structure. A categorical structure is one in which a simultaneously (as opposed to chronologically as in narrative modes) existing collection of objects or elements gives the documentary coherence (Plantinga, 1997). At its simplest a categorical documentary may consist of a list of elements, but more often, the list is united in some way such as by theme, subject or location. In the categorical webdoc the temporal ordering of elements is less important than the comparisons and associations the user is invited to make between the documentary's elements. In some categorical webdocs (*Out My Window* and *GDP*) an establishing sequence frames the user's interaction with the collection of elements, but this is not always the case.

Categorical webdocs predominantly (although not exclusively) consist of a collection of micronarratives, short video sequences that in themselves exhibit a narrative structure. Overall, however, there is no narrative relationship between the sequences. Nichols' (1981: 210–16) notion of a mosaic structure usefully describes the relationship between part and whole in the categorical webdoc. Analysing the work of Frederick Wiseman, Nichols argues that it exhibits a mosaic rather than a narrative structure. Whereas the narrative documentary is edited such that sequences build to explain the relationship between the initial and final states, Wiseman's documentaries exhibit no such coherence. While individual sequences exhibit diegetic unity, there is no attempt to arrange sequences into a single narrative. For Nichols, Wiseman's mosaic structure serves an epistemological function since it 'assumes that social events have multiple causes and must be analyzed as a web of interconnecting influences or patterns'. In the case of the categorical webdoc a mosaic structure can serve a number of epistemological functions. Interacting with the various sequences the user is invited to make connections, discovering similarities, differences or ambiguity. While an acknowledgement of complexity is frequently an outcome, the categorical webdoc may also work to build an argument either by focusing on relationships of similarity or difference or by compounding different forms of evidence.

The documentary *Gaza/Sderot*, for example, consists of a collection of 80 short videos shot in the neighboring towns of Gaza (Palestine) and Sderot (Israel). The interface is a simple black screen divided by a white line, with one side of the line 'labeled' Gaza and the other Sderot. The interface serves as a metaphor for the geographical space, its proximity and arbitrary division. The videos can be accessed in four different ways. A user may look at a given day and compare the video shot in each of the towns. Alternatively, the user may pick a face to see a collection of videos featuring a single individual. At the end of each video, however, the user is prompted to make connections by viewing the corresponding video shot in the other town on the same day. It is also possible to select videos by theme and location but again the user is prompted to make comparisons by watching videos that share an association. The documentary paints a subtle picture of mutual suffering as both communities strive to exist in the midst of conflict. By inviting users to engage with sequences based on categorical associations such as location, key terms or individuals, the collection of sequences in *Gaza/Sderot* suggests complexity and interconnectedness.

Initially launched in 2008 *Big Stories, Small Towns* is an ongoing webdoc project that aims to present a diverse and inspiring portrait of country life.⁴ Countering much negative media coverage of life in Australian country towns, the documentary presents a number of positive stories from rural communities. The argument of the documentary, that small towns are places of vibrant community, is supported by the diverse stories that make up

the webdoc. Like *Gaza/Sderot* the webdoc is structured to promote connections between elements based on theme, location or character. The identification of themes and story-threads in the webdoc makes the associations between stories explicit. Themes such as love, work, family and dreams connect several distinct narratives while providing an interpretive frame.

In the webdoc *Waterlife* the argument emerges from the cumulative engagement with the documentary's content. Documentary maker Kevin McMahon writes in his director's statement that he hopes that the documentary will 'alert Americans and Canadians to the extreme threats facing the great body of water they share'.⁵ An introductory clip announces that the Lakes are changing and that 'something's not quite right with the water'. The documentary's interface consists of a collection of thumbnail images arranged in the shape of the Lakes. The documentary's argument builds as the user engages with each piece of content/evidence. The documentary's argument about the vulnerability of the Lake ecosystem is supported by the user's tendency to navigate quite randomly through the site (unlike most webdocs there is little to privilege one navigational path over another). The large number of different pathways through the information supports the claim that the causes and effects of environmental damage to the lakes are far reaching.

The collaborative webdoc

Unlike the relatively self-contained documentaries discussed so far, there are also a growing number of webdocs that foreground user contributions in various forms. *Mapping Main Street*, for example, is an attempt to collect images and stories from America's 10,466 main streets. The diversity of images and stories stands in contrast to the political evocation of 'Main Street' as a symbol of Middle America. *Eighteen Days in Egypt* is a documentary project that aims to bring together the photographs taken by people who were in Egypt during the 2010 revolution. The website proclaims 'You witnessed it, you recorded it, now contribute it to the 18DaysInEgypt project'. The team is also calling for people to contribute to the editing process. While each of these projects may ultimately become a narrative, categorical, webdoc, or even a film or television documentary, the community that forms around the project provides the structure of the project in the first instance. The meaning of the documentary for those who participate is bound up with the relationships that form through their contribution and may be less easily deduced from analysis of the documentary text alone. In studying collaborative documentary there is a need to look for traces of these relationships.

Goa Hippy Tribe (Facebook) (2010) is a collaborative webdoc created for 'broadcast' on the social network site Facebook. The documentary tells the story of a group of people who had been a part of the hippy community in Goa, India during the 1970s. While the project has now developed into a categorical webdocumentary, its initial phase, on Facebook, was highly collaborative. The *Goa Hippy Tribe (Facebook)* group began in December 2009 and by the end of the project in May 2011 had more than 20,000 followers. Thirteen video interviews by documentary maker Darius Devas formed the spine of the documentary but the 'audience' contributed much of the content. While the increase in collaborative content creation made possible by the internet has been well documented in a range of media industries (Banks, 2009; Bruns, 2008; Gillmor, 2006; Jenkins, 2006;

de Roeper and Luckman, 2009), documentary to date has afforded few if any spaces for audience contributions. Significantly, the ability to contribute allowed some users to present an alternative history of the hippy movement. One user in particular posted an article that challenged the dominant nostalgic view of Goa as a hippy paradise,³ suggesting that it might more realistically be understood as another form of colonialism.

In addition to contributing content, users interacted with other users and with the characters featured in the documentary. Interaction here extends the social networking practices associated with Facebook (messaging, commenting, chat), to foster the formation of a community among those who were most active in relation to the project. Bruns' (2008) notion of *produsage* helps to explain the way in which the community collaboratively created the documentary. Bruns argues (2008: 16) that since *produsage* is a collaborative process we must consider the production community, with its particular dynamics and identity, as central to content creation. The community is not oriented toward the completion of the media product but is rather engaged in an ongoing process of accumulation and interpretation.

One space in which the dynamics of the *Goa Hippy Tribe (Facebook)* community become visible is in the comments posted on the Facebook wall. At first glance these comments appear to be relatively devoid of content. A large proportion are simply supportive expressions such as: 'Simply AWESOME!!!' or 'Thanks for these insights:))'. However, the comments can be seen to serve a number of functions: they add extra detail (often based on personal experience), they are relationship forming and, as such, represent significant tokens in the construction and maintenance of the community. The collaborative webdoc raises a number of theoretical issues, particularly in relation to documentary voice and the role of the documentary community as the guarantor of the documentary's truth claims. These will no doubt continue to be important areas of study as the webdoc evolves.

Studying the webdoc

In addition to making possible new modes of representation the webdoc invites a reconsideration of the methods by which we seek to understand documentary. It is argued here that the webdoc extends the documentary project into a new media space. The methods and concepts that have been developed in order to understand audio-visual non-fiction are likely, therefore, to provide some insights into this emerging form of documentary. As a new media object, however, the webdoc challenges traditional methods of study. Textual analysis, a key method of documentary study since the 1970s (Corner, 2008) becomes problematic when, potentially at least, there are as many ways of engaging with the documentary text as there are users. My focus on context here, however, cautions against equating a technical possibility, in this case the possibility that users might navigate a site in radically distinct ways, with the assumption that this is in fact what happens. A webdoc is a database that is structured by an interface. The user's engagement with the database will be strongly influenced by the way in which information is structured and presented to the user via the interface. The organization of information, where an element is placed on a page and the metaphors used to frame the user's experience will all impact on the way the user moves through the documentary.

Manovich (2001) develops the concept of the cultural interface to explain the fact that computer interfaces, while potentially infinite in form, build on a small number of

culturally significant metaphors. The language of cinema grounds both the practice of documentary and the development of new media. I have argued here that the webdoc can and should be situated within the documentary tradition. It draws on many of the conventions and techniques of film and television documentary, and will benefit from many of the analytic and conceptual tools that exist for the study of documentary generally. The webdoc, particularly in its collaborative form, raises challenges for textual analysis. Nevertheless, the research presented here demonstrates that, given the significance of context and the role of the interface, textual analysis remains valuable.

The framework presented here is based on my own study of a number of webdocs. It therefore reflects my own engagement with the form. It is provisional, and designed to draw attention to the need to consider meaning when writing about interactivity. The framework does not currently take into account the ways in which the meaning of webdoc interactivity may trade on the familiarity of audiences with the internet as a source of information and a site of different media practices. To what extent, for instance, might the meaning of collaborative production refer back to users' experience of new media practices like photo sharing and blogging? Such questions suggest a need for more empirical engagement with webdoc audiences, a methodology that is likely to make a valuable contribution to understanding documentary modes of engagement more generally.

Notes

1. See: <http://webdocu.fr/web-documentaire/> and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_documentary respectively.
2. See: www.givemechocolate.me and www.roarfilm.com.au respectively.
3. See: <http://www.tcoletribalrugs.com/article67GOA.html>
4. See: www.bigstories.com.au
5. See: <http://waterlife.nfb.ca/>

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