POLICYFLIX

THE DOCUMENTARY AND PUBLIC POLICY

THE INTERACTIVE DOCUMENTARY

A TRANSFORMATIVE ART FORM

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From the earliest days of cinema, documentaries have provided a powerful way of engaging audiences with the world. In many ways they have been more effective at this than have dramatic feature films. While the fictional forms seized for themselves the wide enterprise of entertainment or art, the documentary maintained its grip on the imaginative encounter with the realities of our world. Even as documentaries were eclipsed by the glamour of the feature world, they remained stubbornly insistent on pursuing truth through a mode of seeing and artistic creation that no other art form provided.

Just as importantly, audiences wanted to see and hear those truths. The films had impact. They provided perspectives on the crucial issues of the day in ways that neither journalism nor academia could. Documentary films alerted audiences to environmental degradation, to health care crises, to issues of social injustice — the list is long and honourable — as much as providing an entrée into little-known worlds, whether on the other side of the globe or next door in an immigrant quarter. Often it was a documentary that first brought to wide public attention taboo subjects such as mental illness, the treatment of gays and lesbians and the appalling living conditions on Aboriginal reserves.

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Documentaries had impact because they adapted to the available means of production and distribution. Initially the films were shot on 35mm and projected in cinemas. Later the documentary migrated, very successfully, to television. Documentarians were avid adapters of new technologies, which periodically revitalized the classical documentary form. The introduction of lightweight 16mm cameras and synchronized sound in the late 1950s transformed the documentary film, giving birth to cinéma-vérité and the intimacy of "fly-on-the-wall" observation of reality (and thus, incidentally, godfathering today's reality television). The arrival of video a decade later opened the door to activist filmmaking, the progenitor of citizen journalism (think of the impact, from the Rodney King video in 1991 to the cellphone movies from Tahrir Square today).

The best creators always understood that filmmaking was a function of technology — how it was made and, crucially, how it was viewed and engaged with. Documentary filmmaking has always been at its most dynamic at the intersection of technological changes, which allows for significant new modes of creation, periods of intense and rapid social transformation, the emergence of artists who seize on new means of expression to respond to social change, a direct and ongoing connection with audience/public and the ability to create social meaning.

We are at such a moment now.

As with all media, the advent of the Internet and the digital revolution both challenged and disrupted traditional media making. However, the digital challenge to filmmaking, and particularly the documentary, is radically different from all the other technological shifts in its history. The advent of digital or interactive work is not simply another part of a linear development, an extension of filmmaking, such as cinéma-vérité or IMAX or stereoscopy; rather, it is the birth of an entirely new art form, the first such in over a century.

These are early days for the interactive documentary. Creators are experimenting and playing with new modes of documentary storytelling. They have been called a variety of things, such as interactive, transmedia, cross media and multi-platform: this diverse nomenclature is in itself an indication of the vitality of this nascent form driven by a new breed of creators.

Most traditional documentarians are uncomfortable with the demands of digital creation and tend to dismiss it as mere technology. The fact that their craft is anchored in technology (movie cameras, computerized animation stands, editing machines, projectors and so on) is opaque to them. This kind of resistance is common whenever a new art form threatens to displace an older one, at the same time as it threatens the financial bases for those traditional arts. If anything, resistance underscores the importance of the upstart art practice.

The interactive documentary (for simplicity's sake I will stick with that term) will not eliminate the classic filmic documentary. Photography did not kill art; cinema did not kill theatre; television did not kill cinema. But the new form will grow in strength, maturity and impact. In the evolution of the interactive documentary, we are at a place equivalent to where film was between the invention of the movie camera in the mid-19th century and the birth of cinema some 20 years later.

In that interval, the techniques that defined the artistic and narrative practices of the movies were developed: montage, tracking shots, double exposure, crosscutting and so on. Today, we watch a film and have an almost innate understanding of how the story is being told. The storytelling methods are an embedded part of our mental furniture. But a little over 100 years ago it was not so self-evident. Audiences had to learn that new language of narrative. The great pioneers of cinema — Dziga Vertov, Sergei Eisenstein, Georges Méliès, D.W. Griffith — led the way.

Today, we have the unusual situation of audiences who have moved well ahead of the artists and creators. The technology has allowed them to bypass the gatekeeping constraints imposed by movie houses or television. For the first time in history, mass audiences are able to set their own parameters for engagement with content. This can be profoundly disturbing for creators, who have always operated in environments that allowed them to control their work and its relation to audiences.

It also has profound implications for the future of the new documentary and the impact that this work will have. One can also see immediately the policy implications for governments that are accustomed to operating within the regulatory framework of closed broadcasting systems or distribution channels with high barriers to entry. Government's openness to audiences is limited to the narrow perspective of "consumer choice"; the dispersal of power is as unsettling to governments as it is to the traditional media creators. The shift in the nature of audience and its relation to the work of documentary will only grow in scale and importance.

"Audience" is not a homogenous concept. This is not a reference to diversity — that broad range of ethnicity, gender, race, age and class. Today we must confront a very different idea of audience. Audience, by definition, is an act of receiving — etymologically, through the ear. As an audience member, something is given to me to hear. It has become a catch-all term, arithmetically reflected in broadcast ratings or theatrical box office, which obscures the fact that in our traditional broadcast sense of the term, audience is a subset of something much more extensive.

The dichotomy of makers/distributors and receivers of content no longer obtains. Audiences are no longer receivers; they are role players. Our audiences may at any time be co-creators, citizens, activists, teachers, learners, collaborators, fans and so on. The audience as role player changes everything. We may capture some data about the interactive audience by page views and time spent on a particular website, but it is far from a complete portrait of what is actually happening with the audience. One only has to think of the ways in which that audience will use social media to engage with content to begin to see the amplitude of the difference.

Globally, the interactive or digital audience continues to grow exponentially. As of December 31, 2013, 39 percent of the global population was connected to the Internet. There is nowhere in the world that has not experienced massive growth in Internet connectivity: In Africa the growth rate was over 5,000 percent in the period 2000-14. In China, Yang Weidong, president of Tudou, the most popular video streaming site, told me the site boasts 70 million unique viewers a day. In Brazil, 87 percent of

connected users watch online video, meaning 75 million viewers a month. Canadians are among the most connected and most engaged Internet users in the world, spending an average of close to 35 hours a month on the Internet.

But that is only part of the story. The other part has to do with the intense engagement in all countries with social media. Social media, interactivity and online video in combination are the ingredients for a potent social force. Unlike the one-to-many distribution of broadcast and cinema, audiences today are connected in many different ways to many different people. It is one to one. Many to one. One to many. One to groups. Groups to one. The Pew Research Centre, a nonpartisan think tank based in Washington, DC, canvassed close to 2,000 experts on what they expect digital life to be like in 2025. Most of the experts agreed that we are moving to "a global, immersive and ambient computing environment." We are talking about global neural networks.

The implications for the future are enormous. It is clear that the ways in which we conceive, create, engage and use factual media will take on forms that we can hardly imagine, and that, in and of itself, will have major impact on all aspects of social organization.

Audiences are not only connecting and watching and interacting; they are learning. Consider apps. There are thousands of them available. We use them for all sorts of purposes. But there is one thing that all apps do, and we don't give it any conscious thought: they educate us. They teach us different modes of engagement with the devices that contain our lives. We are constantly learning how to read information and input information. Our relationship is undergoing a sea change in the Internet of things; wearable tech will add to a shifting relationship of audiences.

We will not be able to segregate the world of media, in its own bubble separate from our other ways of experiencing and living in the world, from devices that influence every aspect of our lives — financial, health, education, relationships. It will become more difficult to move from those experiences, which are complex, layered and interactive, to the more limited set of experiences which we call entertainment. This is about much more than media. It is a pronounced epistemological transformation of how we perceive and understand the world.

This is proving to be a challenge to traditional filmmakers, whose understanding of the new audience is limited to promoting their finished work to interest groups through social networks. The importance of understanding and relating to audiences tends to elicit an almost offended reaction: "I am making my film. I am not going to be dictated to by what an audience wants. After all, this is art, not paint by numbers."

To take this attitude is to misunderstand profoundly what understanding audience means in an interactive world, where as creator you make the audience a collaborator in your processes. This does not invalidate the filmmaker as creator or auteur. It enlarges the notion of auteur. The new auteurs will understand that the relationship to audience as co-creators and collaborators is part of their medium of creation.

The future of interactive docs is being driven by some key differentiators that will become increasingly important. These are:

IMMERSION. There is a totality of experience that is of a different order from that of the linear documentary. It is evident that one can become swept away by the power of the linear documentary. As a creative form it will continue to thrive and find its audiences; it has its own specific spheres of operation and impact. The interactive documentary is not a dislocation or replacement of the classical documentary; it is a new media form that is doing something different. The immersive quality of an interactive work is simply greater by virtue of the fact that the viewer/user can be placed within the heart of the project. The experience can be further heightened in all sorts of ways depending on the extent of interactivity, the technological apparatus that brings one into that space and so on. Immersion is important not so much in and of itself but for what it does. It shifts the mental map in ways that linearity cannot do.

I can watch a hundred films about driving, and I may have amassed a vast amount of theory about the nature of driving. I may even have developed, through well-constructed stories, emotional relationships to driving. But until I have my hands on the wheel, I will be missing that fundamental experience that changes everything. I noted above in the context of apps how audiences are always learning. This is another example of learning and is part of the ways in which our epistemological construct of the world is changing. Our knowing is always embedded within a particular conceptual construct in which we swim; they are the boundaries which define the ways we know things. The digital world is shifting the boundary markers.

BIG DATA. There is an enormous advantage here for the interactive documentary. It can integrate the accumulation

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of massive amounts of information and make narrative sense of it in real time. The French public broadcaster undertook an ambitious project to map the state of French youth. *Génération Quoi* (http://generation-quoi.france2.fr/) was an interactive documentary project that built in a 143-question survey filled in by some 230,000 French young people, the results of which kept changing the nature of the project and the portrait it presented of that generation. It changed the understanding of French youth in a way that a traditional documentary or an academic sociological study could never have done.

Another French project, *Générations 14* (http://generations-14.fr/), is relying on access to a database of 1.4 million files from the French ministry of defence to connect audiences to their own personal stories of the First World War through genealogical search. Lev Manovich's *SelfieCity* (http://selfiecity.net/) investigates the style of self-portraits in five cities across the world from a database of over 3,000 pictures.

PARTICIPATORY. The linear documentary is a closed world. At a certain point in time in the privacy of the edit room the filmmaker "locks picture." The film is fixed in its final form for once and for all. By contrast, the potential for active participation is inherent in the interactive work. It is by its very nature an open universe.

The essence of the interactive work is to remain open — the private edit room gives way to the public virtual space — and open-ended. The work continues to ebb, flow, mutate as long as audiences continue to interact with it. Participation may be minimal — for example, the ways in which I navigate through the work and thus determine the narrative sequence; or it may be extensive and determinative of the work. A project like *Insomnia* (http://insomnia.nfb.ca) depends entirely on the audience participating fully with the work.

Participatory does not necessarily mean access to high-tech. *Quipu* (http://www.quipu-project.com/) uses phone

recordings both to tell the stories and to engage with participants who have no access to digital technology. It illustrates the ways in which the aim of may documentaries, social transformation, can bring other and very effective tool sets to that work of positive social change. Once again, the participatory audience is a learning audience, reinforcing yet again the epistemological shift.

TIME. Cinema/television is about time; interactive is about space. Time in cinema/TV is fixed and has an inexorable forward-moving trajectory — from opening title to closing credits. The interactive work is about spatial movement, even as that spatial movement is virtual, while time remains malleable. It can be instant, but it can be infinite in the sense that a project need not necessarily be defined by a fixed time, whether 2 minutes or 40 minutes. The more interactive and participatory, the more organic it may become and the more open-ended. It can become truly a never-ending tale, the story one wants to keep adding to, hearing, watching it unfold. This kind of storytelling entails a shift as well in our modes of understanding story as both storytellers and story listeners.

GLOBAL. A linear documentary may set out deliberately to be international and shoot in many countries around the world. It can never match the interactive work for its ability to capture the global pulse in real time. *SelfieCity* starts from a global perspective, as does a project like *Global Lives* (http://globallives.org) or *Highrise: Out My Window* (http://outmywindow.nfb.ca). Interactive, by its nature, opens itself to anyone, anytime, anywhere. This will define the work and change it in ways that we cannot yet imagine.

> ## THERE ARE GREAT POSSIBILITIES FOR CREATION AND IMPACT, BUT THERE ARE ALSO IMPORTANT CONCERNS ABOUT PRIVACY AND SURVEILLANCE.

NAVIGATION. Navigation is to interactive what montage is to cinema. It is not a necessary technological evil. It is the fundamental structural principle and the defining aesthetic. It is also the determinant of the relationship with audience. Interactive adds complexity, but it does not liberate the public from the imaginative work of the creator. In a work like *Waterlife* (http://waterlife.nfb.ca), the point of view resides as much in the ways of constructing the experience of navigating the documentary as in engaging with the content of the work.

INFORMATION. The organization of information is a central problematic of the classic documentary, particularly in an era of an overabundance of shooting ratios, which can rise to 100 to 1 or greater (in other words, a filmmaker may shoot one hundred hours of footage to produce a one-hour documentary). Editing is a sculptural process where excess material is progressively pared away. Documentarians perennially bemoan the loss of precious material to the cutting room floor.

The advent of online led some to believe the solution had been found. Documentaries would be extended into the digital space by means of an information dump. All the unused material could be made available and audiences could trawl through it at will. There is a value in that, but it has the same relation to a formal interactive digital documentary as a collection of random alphabetical letters has to a work of literature. The interactive documentary may accommodate a great deal more material, but the organization of that material in a coherent artistic form remains fundamental, albeit very different from the cinematic documentary. In both, information is not simply information. It is one of the elements for the construction of emotionally engaging narrative.

The interactive work opens up the possibility of a multidimensional engagement with information. A brilliant example of this is *Le Grand Incendie* (http://le-grand-incendie.nouvelles-ecritures.francetv.fr/). The starting point is the shocking fact that in France every 15 days someone immolates himself or herself in a public place. A conventional documentary might tell the story of the victim and the family and crosscut to the official version to create tension and contrast. In *Le Grand Incendie*, Samuel Bollendorff uses a seemingly simple but very emotionally disturbing and effective technique where the two stories are represented on the screen by two graphic squiggly lines, almost like a cardiogram output, one on top of the other. By moving the cursor between the two you can alternate and almost overlap the story from inside the family and the official version that is trying to distance itself from responsibility.

Any interactive work will, by its very nature and by the confrontation of the creator with the artistic demands of navigation, develop strategies for a varied user relationship to the informational content of the work.

TECHNOLOGY. The technology we engage with is constantly evolving, and that will greatly affect the creative possibilities of the interactive documentary. The keyboard, the track pad and even the touch screen are relatively primitive interfaces. We are moving toward creating and interacting in more natural and human ways. Discussing the Internet of things in the

Pew Internet Project, J.P. Rangaswami, chief scientist for Salesforce.com, predicts that "people will engage with information using all of their senses: touch and feel, sight, sound, smell, and taste — using them in combination, more often than not. Wearable, connected devices will become embedded more and more in our bodies, more like implants, as in the [Google] Glass becoming more like contact lenses. As that happens, our ability to use nerve impulses to engage with information will expand dramatically. We will see today's connected devices become smaller and smaller and slowly merge into the part of the body from where the particular sense related to that device operates."

PUBLIC REMIT. As with the classic documentary, most interactive documentarians are committed heart and soul to positive social change. Although not specific to interactive, it takes on a distinct value because of interactive's collaborative and participatory nature. At the same time, classic documentarians are finding it harder to place hard-hitting social issue films in their usual sites of distribution. Traditional public institutions, such as public broadcasters, have for the most part for a complex set of reasons either recoiled from or been unable to articulate a vibrant new vision of what public service means.

The most exciting and innovative thinking about a regenerated and reinvigorated public sphere is coming from outside the mainstream in the world of interactive documentaries. The *Nanny Van* (http://www.nannyvan.org/) travels the United States physically and virtually to give help to an underclass that is often abused and exploited. *Génération Quoi* wants to change the way society connects with and thinks about its young. *Action Switchboard* (https://actionswitchboard.net/) is all about concrete actions to effect positive social change. *Gaza-Sderot* (http://gaza-sderot.arte.tv/) pioneered new ways of grappling with the complexities of the Middle East. Look at just about any interactive documentary and you will see that impulse for public transformation.

GAMING. Creators are experimenting with the convergence of game and interactive documentary worlds. It enlarges the experiential and immersive possibilities of the documentary. *Fort McMoney* (www.fortmcmoney.com), for example, combines documentary with gaming to involve the user/viewer in confronting the issues raised by mega-oil-sands development in Fort McMurray.

A great deal of work still needs to be done on the cognitive, emotive, psychological and physical forces at work in the interactive experience. We need to dig deep and see if there are correlations and differences across cultures and across audience segments such as education, age, social class, gender and so on. Those are the obvious ones but the less obvious ones will be more interesting and more revealing.

If there are great possibilities for creation and impact, there are also some important concerns. One in particular is the dark heart of the digital world: privacy and surveillance. There is currently a great disconnect between all the excitement of creating and experimenting with new forms on the one hand and, on the other, the intense commercial appropriation of private data by the likes of Google or Facebook and the greatly disturbing fact of massive surveillance by state security agencies everywhere.

We can't separate the world of massive spying and how it distorts the public sphere and private lives from the world of interactive creation, which has perhaps an almost naive trust in collaboration and participation. That trust, de facto, puts everything at risk of being scooped up into the maws of the so-called security agencies on the one hand and the great commercial concerns of an Amazon or Google on the other. There are no evident and easy solutions to this, but perhaps the very possibility of throwing the problem open to the world may lead to ingenious crowd-sourced avenues of repair and resistance.

Finally, even though it has been argued that the digital world does as much to divide by tribalizing as it does to connect, my feeling is that we are actually in a movement to "something else." In living with the technology in the ways we do and in the ways that it is evolving, I think there is inherently a very important shift in the ways that we know what it is to know — the epistemological shift.

It is probably the most profound mental turn in human history — more so than transition from the oral cultures of preliterate societies to the alphabetized ones; more than the Gutenbergian revolution, which over a number of centuries liberated knowledge from the hieratic order; more than the Copernican one, which displaced man from the centre of the universe. We are blundering through this transformation, doing it in fits and starts. Yet it may very well be leading us to some kind of inverse Jungianism. Not a collective unconscious, but a collective consciousness.

For that very reason the interactive work is becoming the artwork of our age. It is the one more than any other that will define the conscience of humanity through a seeing that is through the eyes of all. I think it is the art form we need as we drive forward relentlessly to grapple with the great issues that threaten us in the coming decades. ∎