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Creative Documentary Today: Challenges and Opportunities for Directors and Producers¹

Abstract: In today's creative documentary, a director often decides to simultaneously assume the role of producer. This new situation has its own advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, it gives the director/producer more freedom in story development and in leading a project. In addition, he or she is able to work more flexibly with the film budget and has a chance to change the direction of the project while following the storyline without fear that a producer will refuse such ideas. This position gives the director/producer room to work with smaller budgets and to claim the entire profit in the end. On the other hand, he or she must be prepared to work within a high-risk situation and assume complete responsibility.

The new digital economy has opened opportunities to identify the most innovative ways to integrate digital platforms into the phases of story development, direction, promotion, and distribution of documentaries, thus allowing filmmakers to identify their niche audiences, build new value with it and find the right ways for monetization and revenue increase.

Keywords: documentary; film director; producer; business; digital; economy; monetization

Introduction

The term 'documentary' was first coined in 1926 by Scottish documentary filmmaker John Grierson, who defined the format as a "creative treatment of actuality".² A decade later, in 1936, film theorist Paul Rotha offered a more in-depth and analogous definition.³ He said that documentary defines not subject or style, but approach. The documentary approach to cinema differs from that of narrative 'story' film, not in its disregard for craftsmanship, but in the purpose to which that craftsmanship is put.

During that time documentaries shared their development with political and economical environment in society. They were photo albums of society and its

¹ Author statement: This text is not a theoretical analysis, it is an auto poetic statement from my practical experience in documentary field.

² John Grierson, "The review of the South Seas film by *Moviegoer*," *New York Sun*, February 8, 1926.

³ Paul Rotha, *Documentary Film* (London: Faber and Faber, 1936).

conscience, but they were also developed in their authors' creative vision of their surroundings. One of the largest documentary festivals in the world, IDFA (International Documentary Filmfestival Amsterdam), defines creative documentary as an art form wherein the documentary maker is an artist, not a journalist. Where the journalist attempts with his or her reports to present reality as objectively as possible, the artist follows his or her own idea.

The advent of digital technologies has created marvelous opportunities for documentary filmmaking. Digital recording and archiving, the Internet, and increasingly instantaneous global communication are changing the way media can be created and viewed. The new digital economy is opening opportunities to identify the most innovative ways to integrate digital platforms into the phases of story development, direction, promotion, and distribution of documentaries. Secondly, producers are faced with new forms of writing and innovative means of financing, plus new models of distribution and marketing on digital platforms.

For filmmakers, the platforms have thrown into question the entire creative process that has existed until now. This widening of the documentary field challenges creators to think differently about their relationship to reality, to the work, and to the audience. The exploration of transmedia is only in its infancy; its creative potential and rich possibilities are attracting the growing interest of filmmakers.⁴

However, the documentary industry has yet to vigorously approach the search for innovation in business practices, to exploit opportunities that are offered by content digitization, interactive media, on-demand and multiplatform distribution models, the use of broadband, or re-engineering of the value chain. Innovation is the key to development of viable business models and practices for documentary producers.⁵

Creative documentary and storytelling in the new media economy

These are exciting times for documentary films and filmmakers. Changes in technology and the way media is produced and consumed are creating new opportunities, and documentary stories are finding new audiences both locally and globally. Not just documentary films, but documentary stories in general are more popular than ever.

The documentarist has a passion for what he finds in images and sounds – which always seem to him more meaningful than anything he can invent. Unlike the artist of fiction, he is dedicated to not inventing. It is in selecting and arranging his findings that he expresses himself.⁶

⁴ Documentary Network, "Study: Documentary and New Digital Platforms, an ecosystem in transition," 2011, www.obsdoc.ca, acc. December 10, 2017.

⁵ Saul J. Berman, Bill Battino, Louisa Shipnuck, and Andreas Neus, "The End of Advertising As We Know It," in *Television Goes Digital. The Economics of Information, Communication and Entertainment (The Impacts of Digital Technology in the 21st Century)*, ed. by D. Gerbarg (New York: Springer, 2007), 29–55.

⁶ Erik Barnouw, *Documentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).

Documentary storytelling does not refer specifically or exclusively to writing. Instead, it describes the conceptual process that begins at the moment an idea is raised and continues through production and postproduction.⁷

From my professional experience in the documentary field as a producer and director, a story may begin as an idea, hypothesis, or series of questions. It becomes more focused throughout the filmmaking process, until the finished film has a compelling beginning, an unexpected middle, and a satisfying end. Along the way, the better you understand your story, even as it's evolving, the more prepared you'll be to tell it creatively and well. Documentary storytelling involves a range of creative choices about a film's structure, point of view, balance, style, casting, and more. No matter what your specific role – producer, director, writer, editor, cinematographer, researcher, commissioning editor, or executive producer – decisions about storytelling will confront you throughout your career. Storytelling lies at the heart of the best documentaries: strong characters, compelling tension and a credible resolution.

Towards the end of the 20th century and, above all, at the beginning of the 21st century, the two genres, documentary and feature films, have taken different paths, overcoming their own trials, surviving in a changing environment and reaching a noteworthy degree of maturity. From this first contact, each genre adopted a series of properties and characteristics typical of the other. In some ways, a fusion begins from mutual attraction: the documentary genre contributes with its several modes of representing reality, and the digital media genre contributes with its new navigating and interacting modes.⁸

Digital technology is changing documentary filmmaking. With millions of people active on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, social media has become a new ally during the research and production of a film, and it can keep a project active online long after its launch.

It is unquestionable that the future of media gathering, production, and distribution, be it text, sound, still or motion imagery, is digital media as it offers incredible advantages. Already computer-based word processing is ingrained in our daily lives. The ability to convert any media item into a digital file offers media makers an incredible tool for the creation and distribution of their work.⁹

These technologies are often dubbed *New Media*. Are they really new media forms or are they just new tools for creating older media forms? Are all these technologies representing new opportunities or threats to creative documentary?

New tools very often beget new thinking, and serious re-evaluations of the existing media forms, both by intention and by accident. The discrete nature of digital media has a potentially profound effect on the very way we understand the structure of such art forms as cinema. Instead of a medium of temporal montage, which has

⁷ Karen Everett, "Into Three Acts. What documentary storytellers can learn from screenwriters," *Release Print Magazine. The Magazine of Film Arts Foundation* (March/April 2006): 37–47.

⁸ Amie Hardie, "Docspace: a Fresh Look at Documentary Audience and Screening," www.docspace.org.uk/audienceresearch.asp, retrieved January 2007, acc. December 10, 2017.

⁹ Gunthar Hartwig, *New Media Documentary*, 2011, blog.gunthar.com, acc. December 15, 2017.

dominated filmmaking since the days of Eisenstein, we are moving into an era where the composite is the fundamental visual construction.¹⁰

At the beginning of all creative products is their content and storytelling and during the whole documentary history idea, content and storytelling were first place in the documentary production.

Would the new media economy change their importance and put them at the lower lever in future?

Probably not, as it can only give them more opportunities to explore a wider range of creativity. Digital media could help the storytellers to establish closer relationships with the audience and hear feedback from them from the very beginning of the documentary project, involving them in the creative process of idea development as well. Today filmmakers are starting research for almost all topics using the Internet, social networks and other digital media, using them as professional and creative tools.

Storytelling, craft, and aesthetic vision are still essential to a well-made documentary, even when the intention of the director is political. Much innovation in documentary involves content, style, and form, themes that fall outside the scope of this paper.¹¹

A global approach to documentaries should involve a “flexible definition of documentary to suit the social, cultural, economic, and technological circumstance in which it now operates”.¹² Documentarians who experiment with these and who aspire to commercial success are, or should be, aware of the need for “artful entertainment”, a high-end market developing for the documentary genre.¹³

What are some of the similarities between web and film documentaries? For starters, the success of both is dependent upon a good story. Both focus on real world issues or stories that have social, political, cultural or environmental importance. And both are designed to provide information, insight and knowledge in an effort to increase awareness about a given subject.¹⁴

The newest trend is businesses using serious documentaries to help them form a more meaningful connection with their target audiences. Brands and companies are becoming the new commissioning editors, partnering with directors and producers and forging new business models for funding, distribution, outreach and participation.¹⁵

¹⁰ Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, (Chicago: The MIT Press, 2001), 155.

¹¹ Richard Kilborn and John Izod, *An Introduction to Television Documentary: Confronting Reality*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 14.

¹² David Hogarth, *Realer Than Reel; Global Directions in Documentary*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006), 14.

¹³ Pat Aufderheide, “The Changing Documentary Marketplace,” *Cineaste* (Summer 2005): 24–8.

¹⁴ “Documentary,” International Documentary Association’s publication, 2005.

¹⁵ *Marketing Week*, 2009, <http://marketingweek.co.uk>, acc. December 10, 2017.

Documentary value chain in new digital environment

Documentary film, as a product, is within the same economic category as movies, music, publishing, video games, and software. They are all experience goods with important commonalities: 1) The business models (and the value chain) for these products are transforming due to ongoing technological changes, as well as the dramatic changes in audiences lifestyle and consumption of entertainment; 2) They are in transition from physical to digital formats, and once digitized would have negligible marginal cost of production; 3) Some product information is bundled with the product itself and is revealed only upon consumption; and 4) They are subjected to a particularly disturbing trend of piracy due to increasing ease of duplication and availability of illegal copies.¹⁶

Nowadays, documentary promotion starts from the very beginning of a project. Filmmakers can target their audience and involve them into the project through different social media. Some filmmakers start with a promotion and then continue with fundraising, using their fans as a tool in gathering finance for film. In that way they also build future audience and prepare a fine starting position at the market before distribution. Targeting audiences and creating global connections with their fans, they create a base for production and for future distribution at the same time.

One of the newest platforms in new digital documentary environment, which enables promotion using digital media as well, are online pitching forums. The European Documentary Network (EDN) initiated online pitching like a new pitching format, based on an online video conference, where a limited number thematic documentary projects are pitched. The aim of the EDN Online Pitching Sessions is to create a forum where documentary projects with a specific focus can be introduced and discussed.¹⁷

A growing number of projects use social networks in the research phase to hook an audience. Without having to resort to the latest interactive applications, some producers launch blogs in which different members of the production crew describe their creative approach even before shooting starts. This permits the audience to experience the content in another way, and to explore its possibilities. The 'internauts' (a user of the Internet, especially a habitual or skilled one), follow and comment on the development and production phases, and according to viral marketing strategies, their comments form a pyramid attracting more and more people to the film's release. The new tools of the social networks are easy to access, but they require a lot of time and energy to have a real impact on the promotion of a documentary.¹⁸

¹⁶ Ramnath K. Chellappa, and Shivendu Shivendu, "Managing Piracy: Pricing and Sampling Strategies for Digital Experience Goods in Vertically Segmented Markets," *Information Systems Research* 16, 4 (2005): 400–17; Claudia Löbbecke, and Marcia Falkenberg, "A Framework for Assessing Market Entry Opportunities for Internet TV," *The International Journal on Media Management* 45, 2 (2002): 95–104; Ramya Neelamegham, and Dipak Jain, "Consumer Choice Process for Experience Goods: an Econometric Model And Analysis," *Journal of Marketing Research* 36, 3 (August 1999): 373–86.

¹⁷ European Documentary Network, Online Pitching Forum, 2010, <http://www.edn.dk/activities/edn-activity-texts/edn-online-pitching-session-art-documentaries/>, acc. January 10, 2018.

¹⁸ Documentary Network. "Study: Documentary and New Digital Platforms, an ecosystem in transition," 2011, www.obsdoc.ca, acc. December 10, 2017.

The new digital economy drives us to rethink the traditional structure of production. It pushes us to develop new partnerships and innovative ways of doing things. One of the newest opportunities, which has appeared in recent years, is crowd funding. This is another kind of public mobilization which is developing on websites dedicated to participatory financing, when internauts become involved financially in support of cherished projects.

In the first instance, it's a system of profit-sharing for the beneficiaries. The fundraising site functions according to the rules of co-production, which transform the internaut into an investor. The contributing internauts bet on the future revenue of the film, from which they will receive dividends. The director and the producer give up part of their rights to the internauts and to the co-production site.

In the second instance, platforms are emerging that facilitate donations from the public to the film director or producer. The filmmaker or production house retains all the rights. The platforms Kickstarter, IndieGoGo and Babeldoor have been constructed for this purpose. The basics of crowd-funding a film are pretty simple. Instead of asking a few people for a lot of money, you ask a lot of people for a little money, not unlike an old-fashioned charity drive. The modern version uses the Internet to connect with supporters on a global scale.¹⁹

In the new model media environment, documentary in production with different social networks does not have gatekeepers, exclusivity or territorial restrictions. Director and producer will have many chances to provide funds, using Internet and also they could provide multi small incomes through their or project's fans. In that case they wouldn't be independent, fan dependent.

Distribution in the Digital Age: there are no more gatekeepers

Once upon a time were big fat bosses with large cigars who gave all power in the movie distribution business and if you know them you had opportunity to show and sell your documentary. The new digital economy offers opportunity to find one's target audience or present one's documentary to the other commissioning editors avoiding old big bosses in film distribution.

Filmmakers used a variety of Internet marketing, promotion and distribution channels to get their film seen and to generate revenue. From the very early stages of the project they began blogging and video blogging on their own websites, which helped create a buzz about their films. Crucially and most productively they communicated directly with their fans, and encouraged them to get involved in promoting the film using 'crowdsourcing' techniques.

Digitization is changing distribution and the ways audiences find documentaries. Documentary film is available in a range of markets through festivals, television, and theatres, and now enjoys commercial distribution through DVD releases, or via

19 Cf. Juanjuan Zhang, "The Wisdom of Crowdfunding," *Communities and Banking* (Winter 2013): 30-1.

pay per view, video on demand, satellite, and d-cinema projections. Documentarians have long seen their major mass-media outlet in TV, and have usually languished in the public eye thereafter. For many years, documentarians have depended on the non-theatrical aftermarket, in which educators and librarians pay high, institutional prices for videos. Suddenly, film lovers are buying and renting documentaries, and they expect them to be packaged like feature-length fiction films.²⁰

Innovation does not imply abandoning these, but establishing new outlets and new business practices, to develop new solutions for each distribution channel and serve specific consumer markets.

Digital and interactive media, and on-demand and multiplatform communication technologies facilitate the re-engineering of the value chain.²¹

Generally, today the Internet offers filmmakers direct access to a worldwide audience through digital marketing and distribution, providing exciting opportunities for creative and financial self-sufficiency. The challenge is how to maximize the potential of digital distribution services like iTunes, Amazon Video on Demand, Hulu, SnagFilms, and at the same time bolster filmmakers' DVD, television and screening revenues

Digital movies can be delivered via broadband, video on-demand (VOD), or over the Internet, and digital film delivery may displace physical films, videos and DVDs, thus threatening the long-term survival of video rental stores and other middle layers in the value chain;²²

Drivers for such transformations in motion pictures include: a) broadband Internet; b) digital file compression; c) streaming media; and d) encryption. These technologies allow video files to be digitized, stored and transmitted via digital networks and broadband. Large-scale use of broadband opens the door for fundamental change in business practices, especially in distribution, as video-on-demand over the Internet becomes possible.²³

Perhaps the most important lesson is that digital, interactive, and on-demand, multiplatform solutions together with the right set of business practices to develop and exploit such solutions can offer an unprecedented latitude to independent, or 'indie', producers.²⁴

²⁰ Aufderheide, "The Changing Documentary," 26.

²¹ David A. Cook, and Wenli Wang, "Neutralizing the Piracy of Motion Pictures: Reengineering the Industry's Supply Chain," *Technology in Society* 26 (2004): 567-83; Andrew Currah, "Digital Effects In the Spatial Economy Of Film: Towards A Research Agenda," *Area* 35, 1 (2003): 64-73; James R. Irwin, "On Digital Media As A Potential Alternative Cinema Apparatus: A Marketplace Analysis," *Atlantic Journal of Communication* 12, 1 (2004): 4-18; Jon Silver, and Frank Alpert, "Digital Dawn: A Revolution in Movie Distribution?," *Business Horizons* (September-October 2003): 57-66; Kevin Zhu, "Internet-based Distribution of Digital Videos: The Economic Impacts of Digitization on the Motion Picture Industry," *Electronic Markets* 11, 4 (2001): 273-80.

²² Zhu, "Internet-based Distribution of Digital Videos"; Currah, "Digital Effects in the Spatial Economy of Film".

²³ Zhu, "Internet-based Distribution of Digital Videos"; Silver and Frank, "Digital Dawn: A Revolution in Movie Distribution?".

²⁴ Currah, "Digital Effects in the Spatial Economy of Film."

The advent of new media platforms, such as the Internet and mobile devices, calls for the planning and design of documentary content to comply with those new platforms and take into account the fact that the content can be implemented in more than one platform, i.e. cross platform.

Consequently, there are five main options: TV or cinema as the main and sole distribution platform; New-media as the main and sole distribution platform; Cross-platform: New-media as the main distribution platform, and TV, print, live events, etc. as promoting platforms; Cross-platform: TV as the main distribution platform, and new-media, print, live event, etc. as promoting platforms; Cross-platform: All platforms equally.²⁵

At the end of the day, new interactive technologies are making it easier than ever to not only distribute documentaries, but build communities around them. However, the new digital landscape begs a new set of questions for documentary distribution: With a seemingly endless variety of new platforms introduced every day, how a documentary producer or filmmaker can find the right vehicle to reach the ideal audience for his or her film? How can he or she navigate the choices for rights deals? What are some of the new partnerships forming between the public and commercial media worlds? And what are the revenue models that can sustain the future of this fragile ecosystem?

Documentary and media rights in new digital era

Before the beginning of every documentary project, a producer must be prepared for the entire copyright process, and take care in advance about idea development and be ready to prepare the right budget for it. The new digital economy offers many challenges in the field of media rights, starting from crowd funding through a variety of choices in digital distribution.

Copyright cost is estimated to amount to between 20 percent and 30 percent of the budget of many documentaries, and there is a tendency that documentaries on subjects like art or history are not being made due to the costs of archive footage or music.

Copyright law is a mechanism for regulation of production and dissemination of cultural products. In documentary storytelling, reuse of copyrighted material such as footage and music is of great importance. This requires filmmakers to obtain permission from rights holders, obtain a license or invoke fair use under copyright law.²⁶

Independent documentary filmmakers are particularly appropriate subjects because they typically develop projects with autonomy, generating new topics and approaches, and sell or lease them to broadcasters or cable casters to get them seen. They are responsible for performing rights clearance. Without a detailed record of

²⁵ David Hogarth, *Realer Than Reel. Global Directions in Documentary* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2006).

²⁶ Leif Ove Larsen and Torgeir Uberg Nærland, *Documentary in a Culture of Clearance* (Bergen: University of Bergen, 2010).

rights clearance, for example, they cannot get errors and omissions insurance, without which a broadcaster or cablecaster will not show the work.²⁷

The current regime of copyright was made for a world of analogue media. Applied in a digital environment, these rules are hindering cultural expressions and freedoms offered by new technology.²⁸ Copyright must be reformed, in order to make sense of the creative potential of digital technologies.²⁹

Rights are divisible and can be assigned or licensed according to the following criteria: territory (the place in which the assignment or license will apply); term (the duration of the license); and/or media (the types of media the assignment or license will apply to). In the documentary film and television industry, there is a strong emphasis on dividing the rights according to media.³⁰

Conclusion

Digital platforms offer opportunities for both the specifically-dedicated documentary content created for the web, and the production and distribution of linear documentary. For filmmakers, the platforms throw into question the entire creative process that has existed until now. This widening of the documentary field challenges creators to think differently about their relationship to reality, to the work, and to the audience. The exploration of transmedia is only in its infancy; its creative potential and rich possibilities are attracting the growing interest of directors.

New Media technologies and thinking present a rich field of opportunities to both rethink the nature of the documentary form, storytelling and present new ideas to the viewing public. Interactivity and audience expectations, new technologies and critical theory suggest a new process for the creation of this media form.³¹

The global digital media environment will probably create a different documentary value chain within the future media environment. It will start with promotion and marketing and continue with development, production, and distribution. Yet, one thing will certainly not change – a successful documentary will still need a good story, intriguing content and creative development and production.

Documentary creation on the new platforms should be able to develop with appropriate resources, without straining budgets allocated to linear documentaries produced for theatre and television release, which should continue to develop. It's essential to find new sources of money.³²

²⁷ Patricia Aufderheide, and Peter Jasz, "Untold Stories: Collaborative Research on Documentary Filmmakers' Free Speech and Fair Use," *Cinema Journal* Winter 46, 2 (2004): 133–39.

²⁸ Lawrence Lessig, *Free Culture: The Nature and Future of Creativity* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004).

²⁹ Lawrence Lessig, *Remix* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 253.

³⁰ Redlich Holding, *Introduction to Copyright and Related Issues for Documentary Film Makers*, Film Australia/Holding Lawyers, 2008.

³¹ Manovich, *The Language of New Media*.

³² A Documentary Network's Study, "Documentary and New Digital Platforms an Ecosystem in Transition," 2011, http://obsdoc.ca/wp-content/uploads/pdf/2011-02-03_Observ-Study.pdf, acc. December 10, 2017.

Online solutions with clear commercial viability are currently unavailable for documentary producers and more broadly for other producers of digital video products. Online distribution and d-cinema will be easily adapted to the documentary genre and adopted by producers and distributors, and new partnerships (networks) to distribute content to end consumers will include documentary productions and distributors. Learning about audiences for documentaries should be a priority.

The development of new technologies and digitalization will lower expenses of production and give authors an easier approach to the development of their films. This will also bring digitalization in cinemas and reduce the expenses of distribution, starting with the master copy that will no longer be on tape, and continuing with all other elements, which will, in its turn, directly increase profitability. In addition, director/producers will be able to sell directly to their fans or target audience. He or she will thus become fan dependant and will have to speak directly to and nourish their audience. As a consequence, documentary will be presented to the entire net of fans and target audience from the very beginning, from the development of the idea, thus testing its future rating, as well as the possibility for production and distribution.

Online distribution platforms and broadcaster portals serve as audience multipliers. They increase the influence of documentaries. New ways of managing rights need to be found which can boost the public profile of works, and can also be a real source of revenue for the creators and producers.

Documentary producers will certainly have to know more about the entire copyright process and take care in advance about idea development, and be ready to correctly budget for it. Even though the current regime of copyright is under pressure from the Internet as well as the anti-circumvention rules in current law, there is not yet a convincing alternative for viable cultural economy. What is at stake is not only the use of footage and music in documentary films, but the fundamental democratic ideals of freedom of expression and freedom to receive and impart information and ideas.³³

All these things will present big challenges for the creative documentary business, but will also give more opportunities to filmmakers to find their target audience and open new possibilities for storytelling and documentary development, production, marketing and distribution.

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³³ Natanel Neil, *Copyright's Paradox* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

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