Documentary's metamorphic form: Webdoc, interactive, transmedia, participatory and beyond

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ABSTRACT
This article examines the evolution of interactive, cross-platform and transmedia documentaries within the context of the earlier model of database narratives and the impact of Web 2.0 technologies. Specific documentary projects illustrate how the interactivity supported by online platforms has influenced the aesthetics of form and altered conventional models of production and distribution.

A visit to the International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) DocLab website in December 2011 attests to the vibrancy and variation of form found in interactive documentaries (i-docs) produced in the past decade. What is also clear in surveying the featured works is that there is no single template for production in terms of either the design of the interfaces and interactivity or the design of multi-platform distributed documentaries. Although this latter form is now more often designated transmedia, following the Producers Guild of America’s creation of the ‘Transmedia Producer Credit’ in April 2010, it is important to recognize that the term denotes a design strategy of distributing narrative content across platforms rather than

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a distinct and singular model of production. Importantly, in the context of American film and television, this evolving production model is also being driven by commercial concerns. What is evident in contemporary practice is that experimentation with new models of production, particularly cross-platform design, social media usage and new technologies are driving a degree of accelerated innovation in the form of i-docs that is remarkable. With the increasing popularity of Web 2.0 platforms, documentary makers are increasingly inviting content created by fans (crowdsourcing) and turning to audiences as communities that can participate in funding documentary projects (crowdfunding). The fluidity of this space of practice in the adoption of new platforms, screens and technologies is recognized in the description on the IDFA site, which extends the realm of digital storytelling into ‘other’ to be discovered realms: ‘Throughout the year, IDFA DocLab showcases interactive webdocs and other new forms of digital storytelling that expand the documentary genre beyond linear filmmaking’ (IDFA 2007).

It is this notion of ‘beyond linear filmmaking’ that marks the porousness of this emergent and changing field of practice and which presents a challenge in creating a stable taxonomy of forms.

Sandra Gaudenzi’s doctoral thesis maps current variants as hyper-text, conversational, participative and experiential while foregrounding the digital interactive documentary or i-doc as a relational object that requires the agency and interactivity of the audience (Gaudenzi 2009: 3). Here, she extends Bill Nichols’ parsing of documentary points of view that organize to the film-maker, the text and the viewer (Nichols 1991: 12), and his taxonomy of modes of representation (poetic, expository, observational, participatory, reflexive and performative) (Nichols 2001) to understand the logic in the shift to the viewer’s experience in interactive design. In terms of form, i-docs can then be analysed in terms of how they make meaning via the viewer/user/participant’s engagement with the specific project (Gaudenzi 2009). This focus of analysis can then be thought of in terms of the design of interactivity and user experience, which this article will address. As such, i-docs can be contrasted with web-based documentaries (webdocs) that use the Web as a broadcast platform for traditional linear documentaries, and which may or may not have interactive paratextual components. In 2012, two landmark examples of webdocs that combine traditional documentary form with cross-platform paratextual and participatory components are Caine’s Arcade (Mullick 2012) and Kony 2012 (Invisible Children 2012).

Both of these documentaries were launched online and achieved global viral success using social media campaigns and cross-platform extensions, leveraging the many-to-many (M2M) sharing capacity of social platforms to create global networked communities around traditional documentaries. In contrast, i-docs are often designed as databases of content fragments, often on the web, though not always, wherein unique interfaces structure the modes of interaction that allow audiences to play with documentary content. The story or stories are encountered as changeable non-linear experiences, the narrative or storyline is often designed as open, evolving and processual, sometimes including audience created content. In practice, however, documentary makers such as Kat Cizek of the NFB’s multi-year, multi-platform Highrise project use both analogue and digital forms, complicating further the definitional criteria associated with interactive digital documentaries, incorporating performance in real-time installations (Cizek 2010–2011).
Transmedia documentaries add a further nuance in that narrative content is designed as distributed across multiple platforms (digital and non-digital), often (but not always) designed with interactive components. Designing for participation has become an almost required component in the discussions of transmedia documentaries, particularly in the context of social concerns, as documentary makers seek to leverage social media platforms to invite audiences to contribute content and to connect with each other. The artistic and aesthetic calibre of digital i-docs, transmedia and participatory documentaries and their metamorphic quality in the blurring, hybridization of multimedia forms are now being recognized in international awards such as the IDFA DocLab, the MIPDOC 2010 WebDoc Trailblazer and the Sheffield Doc/Fest Innovation Award, which acknowledges ‘the project that exhibits originality in approach to form, storytelling and delivery’. The emphasis on innovation in form and the creative use of the affordances of digital and web platforms and a shift away from traditional linear form are evident in a sampling of the list of recent award winners: the NFB’s Highrise for the IDFA 2010 (Cizek 2010); ARTE’s Gaza/Sderot for the MIPDOC 2010 WebDoc Trailblazer (Brachet 2008); and the NFB’s Bear 71 for the Sheffield Doc/Fest Innovation Award 2012 (Mendes 2012). Having been a member of both the MIPDOC 2010 and the Sheffield Doc/Festival Innovation Award 2012 juries, a key point of discussion for both juries was the question of innovation in the digital space in adapting and using the affordances of web and digital platforms and technologies.

What this article examines is the evolution of a now distinct yet ever-changing cinematic form and practice that continues to be rooted in what John Grierson’s termed documentary’s ‘creative treatment of reality’. As two forms that deploy non-linear content design models, it may be useful to establish a distinction between interactive and transmedia documentaries, as numerous projects exist as hybrids. An i-doc can be web-based or created as a physical installation, but it is a discrete contained work encountered on a single platform, and in earlier examples tends to function as a closed database. A transmedia documentary distributes a narrative across more than one platform, it can be participatory or not, can invite audience-generated content or not, tends to be open and evolving, though not always. This article will consider how both forms can be understood within two contextual and interrelated frames. The first frame is defined by the structural principles underlying database narratives and a consideration of how the emergent phenomenon of i-docs should be understood as both an extension of and deviation from earlier conceptions of database narratives as randomized, algorithmic cinematic forms as theorized in the early 2000s. The second frame foregrounds the impact of ubiquitous computing and the development of Web 2.0 platforms, social media, mobile and tablet devices as multiple screens that have contributed to the uptake of participatory, collaborative and social strategies often underlying transmedia productions. The instantaneous connectivity of Web 2.0 platforms have amplified and extended the efficacy of what Bill Nichols termed the twentieth century’s non-fictional ‘discourses of sobriety’ and documentary’s underlying ideological and activist stance in relation to its audience (Nichols 1991: 3). Here i-docs continue established practices of documentary makers who have sought to activate audiences in response to social justice issues and crisis initiatives. Simultaneously and paradoxically, though, digital and Web 2.0 technologies are also blurring prior divisions between fiction and non-fiction, text and paratext, director and audience.
FIRST LINE OF ENQUIRY: EVOLUTION OF INTERACTIVE TO TRANSMEDIA DOCUMENTARIES

In the context of the first frame of database narratives, a key distinction of contemporary works is that i-docs are designed to be coherent and conceptually unified experiences. This is achieved by strategically organizing dynamic content within a clear thematic and/or polemical frame that guides the meaning of and engagement with the experience. Alternatively, i-docs can be organized as fragmented narratives focused on an individual though more often on a community or communities. These framing devices are one response to a tension articulated by Lev Manovich in his statement that ‘database and narrative are natural enemies’,¹ a postulate that critical engagement with the potential of database narratives has wrestled with over the past decade (Manovich 1999). Manovich’s own 2005 database cinema project, Soft Cinema: Navigating the Database, illustrates the lack of affect that results from the absence of strong narrative and/or paratextual frames. Soft Cinema was designed as a (re)combinatory work for DVD or screen that mixes audio and video clips in an algorhythmic sequence that ensures no single viewing is ever the same. Yet, the experience lacks meaningful complexity in adhering to a structural model articulated here: ‘As a cultural form, database represents the world as a list of items and it refuses to order this list. In contrast, a narrative creates a cause-and-effect trajectory of seemingly unordered items (events)’ (Manovich 1999). What is lost in this conception is the complexity of narrative structures that layer meaning through patterns, juxtapositions, associations and reversals that can telegraph meaning through the poetics of the text.

Antecedents can also be found in surrealist films, the complexity of poetry and traditional documentary. Bill Nichols includes the poetic mode in his Introduction to Documentary as an addition to his earlier taxonomy of four categories (Nichols 1991; Nichols 2001). Manovich’s reductionist view of narrative as a simplistically linear structure driven by cause and effect, i.e. action based, which the interactive work then ‘breaks’ in order to ‘choose your own adventure’, is also evident in Carolyn Handler Miller’s statement that ‘The viewers can be given the opportunity of choosing what material to see and in what order. They might also get to choose among several audio tracks’ (Miller 345; see also Aarseth 1994). When interactivity is reconceived as an engagement with a dynamic interface that is playful, exploratory and not based on expectations of utility, our relationship to the work fundamentally changes and we become interactants (O’Flynn 2011). In the interest of recognizing how radical the quality of a shift to experiential design for the audience is in an interactive medium, I will use two distinct terms, ‘user’ and ‘interactant’ in order to acknowledge the utilitarian and consumer orientation of the term, ‘user’, and highlight in contrast the agency and participation of the ‘interactant’ in playing with dynamic interfaces that then shape and frame the experience of a given work.

A review of critical thinking on interactive cinema and database narratives of the past decade reveals key breaks between past and present practice driven by specific technological innovations. Janet Murray in Hamlet on the Holodeck defined the four essential properties of digital media as: procedural (rule-based); participatory (interactive in that they are responsive to input); spatial (interactive works of necessity are designed to encourage exploration through a system of networked and/or linked content and/or through hyper-text or graphic environments); and encyclopaedic (interactivity necessitates an
exponentially increasing database of alternative possible content depending on the degree of choice) (Murray 1998: 71–83). Significantly, Murray’s concluding discussion looks to the more expressive potential of digital media in capturing human experience and its potential for pleasure, heralding the very important questions: why do we play with interactive content and what generates pleasure and satisfaction in interactive environments? Marsha Kinder revisits Manovich in ‘Designing a database cinema’ to argue that narrative and database ‘are two compatible structures whose combination is crucial to the creative expansion of new media, since all narratives are constructed by selecting items from databases (that usually remain hidden), and then combining these items to create a particular story’ (Kinder 2003: 348–349; see also O’Flynn 2005). She recognizes the importance of patterning and our cognitive engagement in digital narratives of controlled randomness in that these textual landscapes require ‘… a constant refiguring of our mental cartography with its supporting databases, search engines and representational conventions’ (Kinder 2003: 353). Interactive works add complexity to the break of immersion necessitated by interactivity, as pleasure can be generated as a result of experiential design in web interfaces. In contrast to utility-oriented interfaces that function as content delivery systems (think Netflix), the mechanics of interactivity can initiate exploration, discovery and pleasure in the unexpected and idiosyncratic design.

David Hudson’s essay ‘Undisclosed recipients: Database documentaries and the Internet’ makes a valuable contribution to the field of documentary studies in adapting Marsha Kinder’s theory of ‘database narratives’, as ‘dual process of selection and combination’ (Hudson 2008; Kinder 2002: 6), as a frame for investigating i-doc as a form. He argues ‘that database documentaries loosen assumptions about documentary from fixed modes (expository, observational, personal) and towards open modes (collaborative, reflexive, interactive)’ (Hudson 2008: 2). One consequence of this shift he identifies is ‘from object-based “push” media (celluloid, video, even visual display of a graphical user interface (GUI)) towards act-based “pull” media (user acts, hyperlinks, algorithms)’ (Hudson 2008: 2). As he traces through a number of examples, this process of selection and engagement in negotiating a database structure online can mimic the archival structure of the Internet itself (Hudson 2008: 6). Recent interactive storytelling platforms such as Mozilla’s Popcorn HTML5 have been designed to pull real-time content from the Web in relation to existing designed content, taking the idea of an Internet-based documentary to a logical next phase. Hudson also cites examples of Internet documentaries that combine the representational strategies of conventional documentary with what he terms ‘the less conventional mode’ of ‘dialoguing’ (Hudson 2008: 6), foreshadowing the participatory, community networking that is now characteristic of many 2011–2012 i-docs and transmedia documentaries. Rather than presenting documentaries as closed structures, this hybridization supports ‘multiple perspectives of particular situations, emphasizing movements towards collaborative, open-ended knowledge’ (Hudson 2008: 6). The impact of Web 2.0 platforms is evident in the expectation now in 2012 of participatory design in i-docs, inviting content generation, collaboration and sharing throughout 2011 and 2012. Attention to the user experience in individual projects is now a necessary design component, in contrast to the conventional trajectory of documentary film production, cinema release and broadcast mechanisms.
When considering (user) experience design within these earlier works, the conception of interactivity is based on a concept of a sliding scale of control, functioning as a zero/sum equation where the film-maker cedes in varying degrees authorial and/or editorial control to the user who has a limited degree of choice within a discrete and finite database of content. In these earlier models focused on user as editor, a recurrent promotional mantra was the allure of ‘now you can edit your own film’. A good example of this early form is Florian Thalhofer and Mahmoud Hamdy’s non-linear documentary (2003), Seven Sons, which was produced in Thalhofer’s Korsakow software, which works with a simpler interface that focuses attention on the question of editorial control rather than user experience (Thalhofer 2003). Gaudenzi usefully refers to these highly structural and controlled works as hypertext documentaries (Gaudenzi 2009b). Korsakow uses a rule-based system that preloads available clips based on predetermined algorithms that tag images, audio and video clips as linked or not linked to preceding clips. Thalhofer’s software allows film-makers and audiences to experiment in a highly controlled way with non-linear film and create an associational structure moving from element to element via an associational tagging system, allowing for a more detailed understanding of the database structure. Seven Sons does this with tags such as ‘Sand’, ‘Water’ and so forth. As a design tool, Korsakow is one answer to what Lev Manovich defined as the challenge for ‘new media’ when he stated that we ‘expect computer narratives to showcase new aesthetic possibilities which did not exist before digital computers. In short, we want them to be new media specific’ (Manovich 1999).

Yet, interactive online films (documentary or drama) designed in this form are more often reified experiences that rarely create an emotional resonance with the interactant and this is a consequence of two factors. The first is that the removal of a fixed editorial structure results in the absence of a sense of a narrowing horizon of choice leading to a dramatic climax and conclusion, in what Robert McKee termed the archetype structure (McKee 1997). The second is the often ‘flat’ or ‘static’ interface design that takes only minimal advantage of the affordances of web interfaces, where the focus of interaction is only on what content to view next. One can return to Murray’s flagging of the importance of pleasure as a significant aspect of engagement with digital media and increasingly more recent dynamic interfaces are designed to be pleasurable and exploratory in their own right. Notably, it is this aspect of experience design that often offsets and balances what can be challenging and/or distressing content.

Looking back over the past five years, the evolution in form resulting from technological shifts is clear. Winner of the Prix SCAM 2009 digital interactive artwork award, the French i-doc Journey to the End of Coal (Bollendorff, 2009) is designed as a ‘choose your own path’ experience within a highly constrained set of choices that do not impact on how the narrative unfolds, a binary choice structure that can work well in games, yet which adds little narrative enrichment to the beautiful cinematic content. Sandra Gaudenzi’s discussion of three modes of interactivity in i-docs: ‘semi-closed (when the user can browse but not change the content), semi-open (when the user can participate but not change the structure of the i-doc) or completely open (when the user and the i-doc constantly change and adapt to each other)’ is also useful here (Gaudenzi 2009a).
A key feature of the web documentaries discussed so far is that they are structured to tell a reasonably coherent ‘story’. The interactive website for Errol Morris’ Standard Operating Procedure (2008) fits here telling the story of military participants in the Abu Ghraib prison abuse, but through a spatial, dynamic presentation of the infamous photographs and an organizational structure that supports multiple modes of accessing the content (Morris 2008). The home page displayed a group of the infamous photos taken by the US military personnel and images taken from Morris’ interviews with the military personnel scattered around the film title. Rolling the cursor over individual photos triggered each photo to scale larger in turn and encouraged the interactant to click on a given photo, causing the images to reorient with that photo as the new central image. Smaller peripheral images are then organized with headings indicating: Personal Account, Commentary and Photos. A menu in the upper left opened tabs to reorganize the content as: The Events, The Profiles, The Prison and Director’s Q & A, corresponding to Aristotle’s fundamentals of the good drama defined as plot, character and setting. Clicking on The Events produces a horizontal chronological time line, whereas The Profiles reconfigures participant photos in a vertical line, organized hierarchically with the commanding officer Brigadier General Janis Karpinski at the top, followed by the descending order of officers to privates, with the contract interrogators at the bottom of the vertical stack. As such, the website design worked as an elegant and intuitive interface wherein the associational and causal links between reordered images was always clear or easily recuperated. Its dynamic interface and recombinatory structure positioned Standard Operating Procedure as a more complex experiential Web documentary that demonstrated how more immersive webdocs are when the interface design is aesthetically and thematically linked to the content.

Another i-doc that broke new ground in the thematic integration of content and interface design and that worked with a closed database narrative was the NFB’s i-doc Waterlife (2010), which also provides an excellent example of how the experience of a dynamic interface design can be expressive of, and integrated with, the content or subject matter in a highly pleasurable way. With this kind of dynamic interface, the user becomes the interactant, and is positioned in a more exploratory mode in relation to the content (McMahon 2009). NFB producer Loc Dao has described the process behind the production of the webdoc and how all elements within the interface design had to support a sense and experience of liquidity, fitting given that the subject of the documentary was North America’s Great Lakes (Dao 2010).

In all of these instances of integrated design, the experience of negotiating the database/website is as important as a design element as the choice of colour palette or conventions of cinematography or graphic style. Here too, the creators of i-docs, unlike film-makers, have to constantly innovate in form in the marrying of interface and narrative, and no individual work establishes a template for future i-docs. In the digital space, the replication of an existing structure or design is more than likely a failure to think through the idiosyncrasies of the core experience to be communicated in a given project. Manovich’s insight that ‘new’ media foregrounds the database of editorial possibilities always latent in film production is still a valid reflection on the underlying database structures of the i-doc form. Yet, the first marked evolution away from a cinema-rooted form arose because of a shift to experiential interface design.
SECOND LINE OF ENQUIRY: THE IMPACT OF WEB 2.0 TECHNOLOGIES AND PRACTICES

My second line of enquiry extends from this first phenomenon in tracing how i-docs have increasingly leveraged the phenomenon of Web 2.0 social media platforms and the affordances of the Internet to use extend documentary projects across multiple platforms, and to invite audiences to participate as collaborators. Here, i-docs extend a logic of engagement that traditional documentary makers have often designed for, which is the capacity of documentary to serve as a catalyst for public outcry and hopefully social activism. Combined with the networked capacities of Web 2.0 platforms, the development of multi- or cross-platform documentaries has led to the rapid coalescence of an array of strategies under the designation of transmedia documentary. As these practices are fluid and evolving, any snapshot given here will likely be repositioned as a past moment in the light of new technologies and platforms by the time of publication.

One source of mobilization and creative innovation stems from the recognition by content creators that the Internet can support an immediate dialogue and exchange with and between a global audience via Web 2.0 platforms. When webdoc, i-doc and transmedia creators establish clear narrative frameworks, participatory, i-docs position content producers and the communities they engender as deliberate catalysts for social activism. While this has been a goal of traditional social change documentaries with the foregrounding of directorial voices and expose practices in the works of Errol Morris, Michael Moore and Morgan Spurlock who call for reform in industry and/or government, the connectivity of the net is unprecedented. Where the films of Morris, Moore and Spurlock attest to Nichols’ claim that ‘documentaries always were forms of “re-presentation” of reality ... the filmmaker ... always a participant witness and active fabricator of meaning’ (Nichols 2005: 18), digital technologies and social platforms provide more immediate and widespread opportunities for multiple interventions, engagements with, and re-representations of experience through the M2M functionality of social media platforms. Stella Bruzzi has defined the documentary film-maker as one who invades real space wherein the documentary manifests as ‘a dialectical conjunction of a real space’ (Bruzzi 2000: 125). In contrast, Web 2.0 platforms empower audiences as networked communities who can intervene, critique and on occasion mobilize in response to the calls to action embedded in documentary’s re-presentation of real-world crises. Key to this change has been the shift from what can be defined as the one-way channel of communication in traditional documentary where films are of necessity linear in presentation, where the film is a discrete artefact viewed in cinema or on DVD. In contrast, Web 2.0 technologies and platforms support M2M conversations between audiences and content creators via multiple platforms including blogs, social media platforms and wikis, where this exchange can be immediate, archived and networked online. Debra Beattie’s essay, ‘Documentary expression online: “The Wrong Crowd,” a history documentary for an “electrate” audience’ examines the process and challenges of making an Internet documentary for Australia’s ABC Internet Portal in 2002 (Beattie 2008). As she notes, designing for the Web in 2002 was uncharted territory in terms of audience reception to non-linear database narratives. Yet, in a conclusion similar to that of Marsha Kinder, Beattie asserts that the experience of ‘ordering the real’ from fragmentary, polyphonic narratives was a familiar protocol, established by
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directors such as Errol Morris in *The Thin Blue Line* (Beattie 2008, 68). Of great significance is her observation that ‘even within the changed and fragmentary reception platform of the computer screen, audiences retain an impulse to narrativize non-linear content’ (Beattie 2008, 69). The documentary maker can design ‘to engage the empathy of the viewer. It is possible to present a well-researched database of verifiable documents embedded in cinematic images, which sustain in a fragmentary manner the essence of the documentary argument’ (Beattie 68).

Because of the Internet’s connectivity and global reach, i-docs are increasingly processual in that they can be designed as ongoing projects inviting the submission of participant-generated content (PGC). Where traditional documentaries were presented in the final edit as a static closed artefact, online documentaries can be open in form and practice, extending across multiple platforms, as expanding, interactive, porous and participatory databases. Within this fluid digital space, the hybridization of forms is now as rapid as the emergence of distinct forms. Transmedia documentaries that rely on curation and collaboration of PGC are distinct from those that design highly structured and authored content systems. Most importantly, these distinct forms require very different approaches to narrative design. Another hybrid form occurs with the blurring of fact and fiction, and increasingly ‘transmedia’ is used as the catch-all phrase for a disparate set of strategies mixed in varying degrees. As a design strategy, the concept of transmedia in 2012 now functions in two overlapping though not always integrated ways. Henry Jenkins formalized the term in his analysis of *The Matrix* (The Wachowskis, 1999) as a transmedia entertainment property that ‘unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole’ (Jenkins 2006: 95–96; Wachowski 1999). As Jenkins noted, transmedia properties depended on fan willingness to discover distributed content, which necessitated a high degree of engagement from a core audience (Jenkins 2006; see also Jenkins 2009).

Since then, the rapid uptake of social media and the clear evidence of fan enthusiasm for connecting, creating, remixing and sharing content online has been leveraged by artists and the entertainment and advertising industries in the promotion of participatory storytelling where fans as communities are invited to co-create content. This second model often overlaps with the first in what again is often a sliding scale between authorship and curation. Hybrid documentaries such as Jane McGonigal’s *World Without Oil* and *Urgent Evoke*, Lance Weiler’s *Pandemic* and Tony Pallotta’s *Collapsus* have used hypothetical frameworks projecting near-future scenarios to invite audiences to address and/or ‘solve’ crises and generate narratives in the process. The catalyst crises for these ARGs were, respectively, the global oil industry collapse; a global developed world food shortage in which African elders held the key for survival; a global virus that immobilized adults, leaving children to save the day; and a second peak oil crisis.1

In Angelica Das’ post ‘Transmedia for social documentary’ on the Tribeca Future of Film website, one of her examples presents another hybrid merging of fact and fiction (Das 2011). Jacqueline Olive’s documentary project on lynching in America, *Always in Season*, uses a *Second Life* simulacrum environment to engage participants in of a 1930s lynching (Olive 2010). This gamification of a compositing of historical events invites participants to respond in the game space to an intended lynching of an African American man, which the game curtails from its conclusion.
Crowdfunding has also become an important factor in media creation in the Web 2.0 sphere, changing the dynamics of curation and/or collaboration. One should note, however, that crowdfunding is a strategy used to fund any and all enterprises from iPhone cases to dental surgery to transmedia documentaries. What is significant in the context of how the digital sphere has impacted i-doc production is that media creators are now reaching out to audiences through crowdfunding initiatives, often at the beginning of the development of a production rather than targeting audiences with marketing campaigns six weeks or less prior to release. I would emphasize, though, that crowdfunding is a business development model that is content agnostic and in itself is in no way determinant of whether or not a project is transmedia. Vincent Mosco’s work on the myth of new media technologies as ‘bring[ing] about revolutionary changes in society’ flags ‘a genuine desire for community and democracy’. (2004: 19). Lina Srivastava’s TEDx Rome Talk on ‘Transmedia documentary and social change’ details a number of transmedia documentaries that use cross-platform and participatory strategies and that have been structured to provide catalysts for audience activism (Srivastava 2011). Her criteria of the necessary characteristics of the successful transmedia documentary integrates the two streams of authored and participatory strategies discussed here:

Each project has at its core the use of local voice, in direct partnership with the platform creator. So they are truly community-centered participation. Second, each uses its platform to move beyond awareness ... to connect participants to commit to a particular worldview, to advocacy or to action. Finally, each project uses a number of different platforms to cross boundaries and borders to foster transformation. (Srivastava 2011). The ease of uploading content to YouTube, Flickr and Facebook for supporters of a given project has also contributed to the global enthusiasm for participation evident in many i-doc projects.

This model of inviting an audience to contribute content within a specific constraint or frame is also identified as one of a number of categories Nora Barry defines in her essay ‘Telling stories on screens: A history of web cinema’ (Barry 2003; Barry n.d). Here, Barry provides a taxonomy of form and practice that had emerged with the impact of digital technologies and artists’ experimentation with creating content for new screens. A return to this not so distant critical overview and the questions posed by Barry in the conclusion of her essay is illuminating, as the categories she notes continue to anchor current trends in the development of interactive online content yet trace these trends to practices before the phenomenon of social media. In the typology she creates, we find a range of interactive practices supported by web platforms and digital technologies that still define the scope of what are grouped under the term interactive works today. Her ‘pass-along narratives’ are defined as ‘a filmmaker starts a story and places it online, and other filmmakers or viewers from around the world add to it’ (Barry 2003: 546) and align closely with what Sandra Gaudenzi terms ‘collab docs’.

A 2011 post by i-doc producer Mandy Rose identifies a similar phenomenon in collaborative documentary in what she terms the ‘Creative Crowd’ model (Rose 2011). Here, ‘multiple participants contribute fragments to a highly templated whole, analogous to the separate panels within a quilt’. Examples given are video artist Perry Bard’s Man with a Movie Camera: The Global Remix and Mad V’s The Message and the distinctive characteristics of these works are ‘energy and repetition’ (Bard 2007--; Mad V 2009). Bard’s
ongoing participatory remake of Dziga Vertov’s 1929 film *Man with a Movie Camera* invites a global audience to submit footage corresponding to the 1276 shots from the film’s 57 scenes in order to remake the film shot-for-shot. The online iteration of the film changes daily dependent on the number of images or clips of PGC as the site loads different content elements each day. As an ongoing project, the website changes daily in response to the ongoing submission of content from a potentially global audience is searchable and designed with simple utility oriented rather than experiential interfaces.

If awards are an indicator, there is wide agreement that the NFB’s multi-platform documentary project, *Highrise*, is one of the most innovative transmedia documentary projects currently ongoing. The focus of this project is the enquiry into the experience of life in high-rise towers, which Cizek and producer Gerry Flahive call the world’s vertical suburbs. This core concern is explored through multiple platforms including the two-authored i-docs, *The Thousandth Tower* and *Out My Window*, launched in 2010, the Flickr group that invites submissions of photos taken from anyone’s high-rise window (Cizek 2011c), feeding the curated *Highrise: Out My Window* Participate component on the NFB website (Cizek 2011b), an HTML5 interactive video that animates one tower’s residents revisioning of their high-rise (Cizek 2011a). Future extensions will include a game, possibly as an app, and future partnered research projects linking transnational sites.

It should be noted that the NFB producers are in a relatively privileged position in terms of funding as even with budget cuts, the NFB is a government supported institution. For documentary makers reliant on broadcast, distribution, arts grants or crowdsourced funding, the challenges of production and financing are further complicated in that there are no template business models for revenue generation for webdocs, i-docs or transmedia documentaries (the same applies to dramatic cross-platform content). The last significant shift that should be touched on in terms of what has changed with the evolution of the i-doc is in the complications to business models, as these new documentary forms have no reliable or standard business model. This rapidly evolving and disruptive aspect of media production is inseparable from the activist orientation of Web 2.0 documentary practices wherein one can argue that the participatory strategies of contemporary i-docs and transmedia documentaries are intentionally designed to empower audiences as active members of galvanized and sometimes activist communities. As such, participatory strategies would seem to contemporize Brecht’s challenge within the theatre space to transform passive audiences to active ‘spect-actors’ (Harris 2001). Clearly, content creators in 2012 (documentary and dramatic) are scrambling to leverage social media platforms to connect with audiences where they already are. If one tracks the rate of adoption of YouTube and Facebook as broadcast channels and community sites for contemporary content, it is evident that cross-platform distribution and social media outreach have been reactive strategies, intended to emulate the viral success of home-made, non-professional videos (think David at the Dentist). Today’s media landscape further complicates the efficacy of what Brecht proposed as the contradictory text designed to challenge the passivity of consumer-oriented audiences (Belsey 2002: 126). In 2012, the ‘artist’ and/or studio no longer control the text or the media landscape, which are more porous, unstable and changing than that of the twentieth century. Consider the difference of today’s media landscape to what Catherine Belsey observed in 1992 building on Brecht and Barthes’ theorizing of the ‘writerly’ text (Barthes 1970: 5):
‘In what I have called the interrogative text there is no simple hierarchy of voices such that the reader is offered privileged access to the work’s ‘truth’. Instead the reader constructs meaning out of the contradictory voices which the text provides’ (Belsey 2002: 129). Meaning today is no longer provided, controlled or conveyed solely by the ‘authored’ text as either Brecht or Barthes conceived. Instead, texts are disrupted, remixed, created and distributed by audiences who bypass earlier models of production and reception. Meaning is also generated in the interactions of audiences as networked communities, responding to online content and to each other, shifting the centre of gravity and IP control away from traditional old media content producers.

Ironically, although the participatory strategies of contemporary i-docs and transmedia documentaries arguably extend Brecht’s challenge to audiences to engage as ‘spect-actors’, by hopefully galvanizing core communities towards activism, those participatory strategies are also necessarily undertaken in the interest of promotion, marketing, distribution and box office and merchandising revenue. Brecht’s disruptive strategies have been incorporated into marketing campaigns as a means to engage consumers with a given brand, as the authors of ‘Customer participation in retail service: lessons from Brecht’ detail (Harris 2001). To be blunt, for the creators of webdocs, i-docs and transmedia documentaries, the goal of community-building is often directed simultaneously towards activism and revenue generation, as traditional business models often no longer apply. Both goals exist as intertwined, necessary components in what contributes to success. As such, the determination as to where power and agency ultimately reside, with the documentary maker, audiences and/or subjects of a given documentary project remains unstable.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, notions of interactivity have changed over the past decade in response to two key factors. One, a shift away from a binaristic ‘choose your own adventure’ orientation towards plot as an either/or structure and narrative causality to an exploration of experiential interface design. Here, i-docs of the last five years have demonstrated an increasing attention to interface and user experience design as dynamic structural elements expressive of a thematic core to the given narrative. Two, the impact of social media and the rise of participatory strategies of engagement have positioned audiences as collaborators and creators who can expect an immediacy of response and the opportunity for agency. And as the digital sphere provides opportunities for webdoc, i-doc and transmedia documentary film-makers that are unprecedented, the shift from film-maker to transmedia producer, curator and collaborator now demands a flexibility and willingness to experiment with the means of communication and a commitment to engage in communication. Further, traditional models of financing and revenue generation no longer apply, and the opportunity to create new business models for financing and revenue generation abound. Jon Reiss and Sheri Candler’s How to Sell Your Film Without Selling Your Soul provides a series of case studies of idiosyncratic transmedia business strategies tailored to specific documentary and dramatic projects (Reiss 2010). Within this constantly evolving mediascape, it is also clear that an affecting frame and/or invitation to collaborate is as powerful and effective as a well-told story. Interactivity can occur in multiple ways: in the interactivity of a well-designed interface, as a cycle of engagement between media creators and audiences who can become participants generating
content, or in communities supporting social change and production financing. At this juncture, documentation of the individual works (webdoc, i-doc, transmedia documentaries) and the processes of interaction and flows of PGC is vital, as digital works have no lasting material substance and there is no guarantee that a web-based work will be online for any length of time. My hope is that this critical reflection on the evolution of these rapidly metamorphing documentary forms, though necessarily incomplete, can contribute to our understanding of the historical context and future trajectories of the interactive, transmedial documentary.

REFERENCES


WEBOGRAPHY


SUGGESTED CITATION


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