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What is interactivity for? The social dimension of web-documentary participation

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Documentary has been so closely associated with the mediums of film and television that the emergence of new forms of documentary, made for computerized mediums such as the Internet, mobile phones and tablets appear fundamentally transformative. The potential for audiences to interact with documentary in various ways is at the heart of what makes these new modes of documentary distinctive; audiences are potentially able to engage in a range of practices from navigating virtual environments, to choosing video content from a database, taking part in ‘chat’ sessions and creating content. Engaging theoretically with these emerging audience practices raises questions about authorship and the social impact of documentary. In this paper, interactivity and participation are considered from a social perspective. It is suggested that there is a need to distinguish between user actions that impact on the documentary text and the ability of users to engage with others through documentary. The concept of documentary voice is interrogated to reveal two distinct dimensions: voice-as-authorship and voice-as-social participation. Drawing on documentary and digital media scholarship, this paper explores the social functions of documentary interactivity and participation with reference to a range of web-documentary examples.

1. Introduction

Documentary has been so closely associated with the mediums of film and television that the emergence of new forms of documentary, made for computerized mediums such as the Internet, mobile phones and tablets seem to demand theoretical revision. The ability of users to direct the sequence of content according to their individual interests or create content suggests a transformation of the relationship between documentary maker, text and audience. This paper will focus on interactivity and participation, key concepts that have emerged in interactive documentary scholarship. It aims to gain some theoretical purchase on these concepts in terms of the social impact of documentary. In doing so, it will consider not only how traditional relationships surrounding documentary are changed, but also connections between film, television and interactive documentary.

In focusing on the social functions of documentary interactivity and participation, I am concerned to explore what Nichols (1991) describes as documentary’s ‘sobriety’ in interactive documentary. Documentary representations are propositional, stating ‘[t]his is so, isn’t it?’ (Nichols 1991, 114); they address a shared reality and form part of our collective conversations (Chanan 2007, 16). This social orientation is shared by diverse modes of documentary, leading Corner (2002) to argue that documentary’s social functions have been as fundamental as its representational strategies and production contexts in defining the documentary tradition. As documentary is re-imagined in response to the representational potentials of emerging media technologies (and associated media cultures), to what extent is their continuity in terms of documentary’s social functions?

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Drawing on Corner’s (2002) analysis of the social functions of documentary and Renov’s (1993) discussion of its political/aesthetic functions, this paper will explore web-documentary interactivity and participation from a social perspective. Theoretically, the concept of voice will be interrogated in relation to interactivity and participation. Voice has often been invoked to capture the changing relationships surrounding documentary production and consumption, with interactivity assumed to result in ‘polyvocality’. Claims about audience voice will be interrogated with a distinction drawn between voice-as-authorship and voice-as-social-participation. The work of Carpentier (2011) provides a framework for thinking about the different ways in which audiences might engage in and through documentary, seeking to achieve their own social goals through participation. The media platform Cowbird will be explored as a form of interactive documentary. While it need not be regarded as such, doing so helps to demonstrate how the activity of documentary makers in ‘framing’ participation can build discursive communities around specific issues.

2. The social functions of documentary: tracing documentary change

In aiming ‘at the historical world directly’ (Nichols 1991, 111), documentaries have the potential to contribute to public discourse, its representations a form of political intervention (Waugh 2011). Documentary ‘speaks to the viewer as citizen, as a member of a social collective, as a putative participant in the social sphere’ (Chanan 2007, 16). Acknowledging the significance of its social dimension, Corner (2002) argues that the social functions of documentary have been as important as production practices and form in the evolution of documentary as a specific media category. He notes the significance of documentary in promoting dominant visions of citizenship, as journalistic inquiry and as a means of interrogating power by presenting alternative perspectives. Documentary has traditionally been tied to the ‘social’ so strongly that the emergence of a television ecology focused on ‘factual entertainment’ constitutes, for Corner, the emergence of a post-documentary culture.

Renov (1993, 12–19) similarly argues that documentary’s social functions are fundamental to making sense of the evolution of styles and movements within the documentary tradition. The aesthetic and political are necessarily linked in the production of documentary ‘as one might expect for such a capital-intensive (and frequently state-sponsored) cultural practice’. He identifies the drive to ‘record, reveal or preserve’, the fundamental mimetic drive that underpins documentary truth claims; the desire to persuade or promote, documentary’s rhetorical drive; to analyse and interrogate, documentary’s concern to interrogate the practice of representation; and finally, the aesthetic drive, a concern for the aesthetic dimension of representation.

Both Corner and Renov are seeking to understand what has been central to ‘documentary’ as it has changed over time, responding to new representational possibilities and changes in the economic contexts of production. This becomes a significant question given current experimentation with interactive forms of documentary such as the web-doc, i-doc, docu-game and mobi-doc. The nominal reference to documentary is significant, but what links these interactive forms to the tradition of documentary? Corner and Renov’s analyses suggest that we look for continuity at the level of social function, rather than in terms of textual conventions or production practices. Given the potential to connect people around issues of shared concern (Zimmerman 2008), a focus on social functions seems particularly valuable. To what extent might the
participatory cultures of digital media support documentary’s traditional social functions, making digital media a valuable niche for documentary culture?

3. Interactive documentary: interrogating interaction and participation

In focusing on television and film, Corner and Renov treat documentary as a textual product, analysing its representational strategies as evidence of the maker’s social agenda. Interactive documentary, in contrast, exists simultaneously as a product and as a process, inviting the audience to interact and participate in various ways. Gaudenzi (2011) describes interactive documentary as a relational entity that, unlike the film or television text, does not exist independently but rather relies on the collective agency of user, author and system. Making sense of the social functions of interactive documentary therefore requires critical reflection on the relationships established around documentary and the extent to which users have agency with respect to the issues addressed.

A key theoretical concept in documentary scholarship that is often referenced in discussions of interactivity is that of ‘voice’. Initially proposed by Nichols (1983), voice seeks to capture the ways in which documentaries present to their audience a particular perspective or argument. The combined result of mode, style, audience address and the selection and presentation of evidence, the concept of voice is an established metaphor for the complex processes of documentary authorship. In the film context, and to some degree also in the television context, the voice of the documentary reflected the point of view of the documentary maker. The documentary maker spoke about or sometimes for those s/he represented, raising political and ethical questions about the process of representation (Nichols 1991, 91; Ruby 1992; Winston 1995). The solution, for many practitioners and scholars, has been to rethink authorship through collaboration with documentary subjects (see for example Winston 2000, 162; Renov 2004).

The potential for participants and audiences to ‘speak for themselves’ has been at the heart of much of the enthusiasm surrounding interactive documentary. As a relational object, interactive documentary has the potential to realize a ‘braided’ voice (FitzSimons 2009) that reflects both the intentions of the documentary maker and the perspectives of users. Interactive documentary makers, such as Sharon Daniel (2012, 217) for example, describe the process of web-documentary authorship as one of ‘giving voice’, providing ‘the means, or tools that will induce others to speak for themselves, and the context in which they may be heard’. Authorship becomes a process of ‘framing’ audience actions, inviting particular forms of engagement and positioning the audience (now ‘user’?) in relation to the documentary content (Dovey and Rose 2013, 19). The ‘framing’ of interaction and participation therefore becomes critical to evaluating the social functions of interactive documentary.

Interaction and participation are becoming increasingly significant terms in interactive documentary scholarship, although their meaning is often taken for granted. Carpentier (2011; see also Jenkins and Carpentier 2013) provides a framework for thinking about audience practices grounded in political–democratic theory. He argues that analysis of media practices should take into account the power relationships surrounding media production and consumption. Participation, he argues, is a ‘floating signifier’ that is used to describe a range of practices that vary considerably in terms of political significance. This becomes problematic when radical notions of participation are invoked to explain routine forms of engagement, such as visiting a museum (Jenkins and Carpentier 2013, 7).

It is possible to see this kind of slippage in some descriptions of interactive documentary. Hudson (2008, 90), for example, describes the act of choosing content from
a documentary database as a process in which users participate in meaning-making, 
producing ‘polyvocal, unstable and contested meanings, rather than fixed ones’ and 
creating politicized online and offline environments. While choosing content from a 
documentary database transfers some aspects of the process of ‘authoring’ to the audience, 
claims about the destabilization of meaning and the creation of politicized environments 
require further investigation. What we find in much writing on interactive documentary is 
that voice, interactivity and participation have all to some extent become ‘floating 
signifiers’, obscuring different user actions and degrees of agency. Interrogating these 
terms is therefore a necessary step in the development of a critical framework for the study 
of interactive modes of documentary.

Within the interactive documentary literature, ‘interactivity’ has often been 
approached in terms of emerging technologies and what audiences are able to do in 
response to documentary content. Aston and Gaudenzi (2012, 126) understand 
interactivity as a specific kind of relationship between the user/participant and the 
documentary artefact, one in which the user/participant is positioned ‘within’ the 
documentary, playing an ‘active role in the negotiation of the “reality” being conveyed 
through the idoc’.

Central to Aston and Gaudenzi’s understanding of interactivity is the importance of 
physicality. They argue that: ‘This view of interactivity requires a physical action to take 
place between the user/participant and the digital artefact’ (a similar argument is made by 
Skartveit [2007]). Aston and Gaudenzi then go on to develop a taxonomy of interactive 
documentary modes grounded in Gaudenzi’s (2013) work on the logic of interaction. In 
each case, interactivity is interrogated in terms of the characteristics of the technologies 
involved and the way in which the user/participant influences documentary content. 
Inherent in this framework is a distinction between interpretation (mental) and interaction 
(physical) that discounts the physicality of traditional documentary spectatorship (see for 
example Gaines 1999; Sobchack 2004) while obscuring the interpretive elements of 
physical action. The relationship between interpretation and physical action is 
undoubtedly complex, pointing to the need for further research. It seems both too early 
and potentially problematic to focus on physicality as a distinguishing feature of 
interactivity.

Interactivity has also been approached from the perspective of authorship. Odorico 
(2011), for example, uses pragmatic theory to explore the relationships established by new 
modes of documentary. Navigating the web-documentary, users’ choices, externalized 
through various physical actions, create unique audio-visual sequences, thereby giving 
users a role in the representation of reality. Such a role is not limitless, however, since the 
options made available by the documentary maker and the rules governing user action 
serve to situate the user with respect to content. Odorico understands interaction as 
creating new forms of documentary authorship, while usefully drawing attention to the 
power relationships inherent in the way documentary makers ‘frame’ (to use Dovey and 
Rose’s terminology) interaction.

Most analyses of documentary interactivity, including those writers considered above, 
approach interaction in terms of the actions of the individual documentary user and the 
response of the documentary ‘system’. Thinking about documentary from a social 
perspective, however, draws attention to the relationship between user actions and 
documentary voice. Nash (2012a) analyses a number of web-documentaries in terms of the 
relationship between user actions and the documentary argument, suggesting that 
interactivity is a representational strategy that does not inherently empower the audience. 
In the case of narrative and categorical web-documentary, for example, user actions are
prescribed to reinforce an argument being made by the documentary maker. Documentary makers (Skartveit 2007, 138; Beattie 2008, 25–27, 45) have reflected on the importance of structuring interaction to ensure that the documentary gives a ‘true’ account of its subject matter. Ironically, in trying to ensure that users come away with a preferred reading of the interactive experience, documentary makers may provide fewer opportunities for audiences to challenge the documentary’s point of view.

In other cases that Nash refers to as ‘collaborative’, users are given greater scope to contribute by making content or participating in discussions with others around the documentary. While this work draws attention to the social dimension of user actions, there is still work to do in terms of theorizing the impact of emerging audience practices. Genuine collaboration requires that users have the opportunity to participate in the development of the argument. Carpentier (in Jenkins and Carpentier 2013, 8) argues for a distinction between interaction and participation on the basis of power relations in the decision-making processes surrounding media production. While interaction describes processes involving mutual action (the user interacts with a web-documentary by choosing content from a database, for example), he reserves the term participation for those practices involving decision-making in the creation and use of media. He divides participation into two categories: participation in media and participation through media. The former identifies the involvement of non-professionals in decision-making about the programme/platform (structural participation) and/or content production (content participation). The latter refers to opportunities for individuals to engage in social debate through documentary.

The value of this distinction for documentary scholars is its ability to draw attention to two different concepts of voice that are often confused. Participation in media draws attention to the ability of participants to contribute to the documentary text and so captures the relationship between participation and representation. In this case, participation impacts on the textual voice by providing the potential for user input that is either structural or content-focused. Critical reflection on participation in documentary would focus on the nature of participant contributions, the ‘framing’ of the invitation to participate and the relationships surrounding production. In contrast, participation through media draws attention to documentary’s social dimension. Here the focus shifts to consider the extent to which participants have the potential to express themselves in a discursive space, the ‘spreadability’ (Jenkins, Ford, and Green 2013) of documentary through various social networks and the ability of users to connect with others and have their social ‘voice’ acknowledged.

What we notice from this perspective is that there are in fact two concepts of voice relevant to interactive documentary study. Voice-as-authorship interrogates the ability of participants to share in decision-making surrounding documentary representation (participation in documentary), while voice-as-social participation considers the relationship between audience practices and social discourse, highlighting the ability of participants to connect and engage with others (participation through documentary). Critical analysis of web-documentary must involve a consideration of the relationship between these two forms of voice.

It is important to acknowledge that while emerging technologies may have the effect of mainstreaming participatory production practices, neither participation in nor through documentary is without precedent. Dovey and Rose (2013) provide several examples of content participation in documentary including Video Nation (BBC) and Wendy Clarke’s Love Tapes project that involve participants as contributors of content within a framework established by the documentary maker. Surveying a range of web-documentary
collaborations (including projects such as *Mapping Main Street*), Gaudenzi (2013, 212) notes the dominance of a similar model of collaboration in which users are invited to contribute content to a database established by the documentary maker. The result is what she describes as a documentary ‘mosaic’, a collection of individual contributions that effectively ‘add-up’ to an argument about the universality of experience.

Participation *through* documentary also has a significant history, evident in activist, committed and political film movements. Whiteman (2004) traces the ways in which social movements have used documentary – both through creation and distribution – as a way of entering into public debate. He considers several case studies in which individuals and activist groups have made and strategically distributed documentaries in order to address specific social issues. Nash (2010) similarly shows that documentary participants are often motivated by a sense that their participation will impact political debate. In the case of web-documentary, participation *through* media is potentially extended to audiences through activities such as creating, commenting on and sharing content.

4. The social functions of web-documentary

We have seen that the social functions of documentary are central to understanding its evolution as a media tradition. To what extent might these social functions help to make sense of documentary makers’ exploration of emerging technologies and platforms and their ‘framing’ of interaction and participation? In the case of web-documentary, does the participatory culture of the Internet provide a supportive environment for socially oriented documentary? In exploring the social functions of interactive documentary involving audience participation, it is important to take into consideration the social goals of documentary participants as well as those of the documentary maker. There is some empirical evidence (Quiring 2009) that, for users, a key dimension of the interactive experience is the extent to which they are able to achieve specific outcomes through media, particularly in terms of relationships and social influence. Drawing on both Corner (2002) and Renov (1993), three expanded social functions are proposed for web-documentary.

4.1. Record, reveal or preserve

In the film and television context, documentary’s mimetic drive is grounded in the ability of the camera to ‘fix’ and render some aspect of reality in the form of the visual image. In the case of the web-documentary, representation is potentially broadened to include new forms of (visual) evidence. Web-documentaries are databases, structured collections of items that can be accessed and organized in various ways (Manovich 2001, 194). In some cases the database is open in the sense that it can continue to accept content contributions, in others the database is closed, limiting audiences to practices such as search and selection. The documentary database, while still providing an interpretive framework within which documents are presented, facilitates a convergence between *document* and *documentary* through its archiving potential. With multiple ways in which to store and structure not only moving images but also artefacts, simulations, recollections and conversations, the database as archive expands documentary’s mimetic function.

The impulse to record and preserve gains impetus where the database is open to collecting and presenting material from contributors. The web-documentary project *18 Days in Egypt* (http://beta.18daysinegypt.com/), provides an example of a database used to collect and distribute large amounts of material collected in Egypt during the 2011...
Revolution. In this project, participation is deployed in the service of preservation, bringing together diverse media forms (video, photos, texts and tweets) to preserve a historic event. The project frames participation as a collective writing of Egypt’s history: ‘Add your story for future generations to see’ (http://beta.18daysinegypt.com/). The drive to record and preserve intersects in this instance with what Corner (2002, 259–260) calls documentary as alternative perspective. The speaking position in this case is not ‘official’ or journalistic, but rather that of individual experience. Here the ability of digital platforms to store and distribute content contributes to the project’s goals of capturing the granularity (Miles 2008) of the experience in the form of many stories told by Egyptians themselves.

4.2. Civic engagement

The project of democratic civics captures the documentary drive to address its audience as a member of a community, situating them as potential actors with respect to issues of shared concern. Historically, this has been most visible in the form of government-sponsored film-making in support of dominant notions of citizenship (Corner 2002), although the educational tone of this material was often a barrier to audience engagement (Winston 1995, 68). Might web-documentary, in its ability to tap into the interests and practices of participatory audiences, be better placed to engage audiences as active members of a community of concern? While this question has yet to be answered in any definitive sense, what is clear is that in the creation of web-documentary documentary makers are seeking to build communities of interest and foster conversation around issues.

*18 Days in Egypt*, which received funding through the Tribeca new media fund, highlights both the potential and challenges of civic engagement with web-documentary. Participants are explicitly positioned as citizens: ‘For the first time in history, citizens are recording an actual revolution in real time’ (http://beta.18daysinegypt.com/#/about). Project creator Jigar Mehta (cited in Nash, Hight, and Summerhayes, 2014) describes *18 Days* as a documentary grounded in community:

> We built a community on Twitter and Facebook before we launched the project and through that process we gathered a group of people, mainly Egyptian students who were very interested in what we were doing. We reached out to these people and provided a context for storytelling. So, for example, when something happened like the Port Said massacre, we would ask the group ‘what are the stories you want to share?’ or ‘there is a wall being put up in the middle of Cairo, what are your feelings about this?’ or ‘we’ve noticed a graffiti movement, what movements have you seen?’ In this way we could capture the detail, fill in the gaps. When we asked people very directly about their experience we found that they would fill in those gaps. On the other hand if we said something like ‘tell us a story’, which is a very open invitation, they didn’t really take it up.

Mehta’s comments highlight the growing significance of civic engagement as a way of thinking about interactive documentary production. The creation of community itself becomes an explicit part of the production process, feeding into a process of collaborative content creation. Nash (2012b) explores notions of community surrounding the Facebook documentary *Goa Hippy Tribe* (SBS, 2011). Through Facebook audience members with a shared interest in hippy culture connected with each other, the documentary maker and the interviewees. Significantly, many of the posts on Facebook had the social function of reinforcing relationships (the use of a shared ‘hippy language’, for example). Furthermore, the community played a central role in making and supporting truth claims about the hippy experience in Goa. What *Goa Hippy Tribe* and *18 Days in Egypt* are seeking to do is to address their audiences as citizens, members of a documentary community.
The web-documentary *Re-enchantment* (Sarah Gibson, 2011) explores the cultural significance of fairy tales by looking at the way they have been re-imagined by visual artists, writers and animators. It is a poetic web-documentary that seeks to engage its audience aesthetically. A key element of the project is an invitation to audiences to submit their own creative responses to fairy tales. The project of civic engagement is less overtly political, rather it is realized through aesthetic participation in the creation of documentary content. Here the formation of community is grounded in a shared interest in fairy tales, rather than a shared national identity. Reflecting on the experience of creating *Re-enchantment*, documentary maker Sarah Gibson (2012) noted the challenges of engaging audiences in content creation. The fact that the documentary contains work by professional artists left many audience members feeling intimidated and reluctant to contribute. In the case of *Re-enchantment*, like *18 Days*, the creation of community was an explicit part of the documentary-making process oriented towards the collaborative creation of content. In both cases, however, documentary makers discovered that in spite of new ways of connecting, motivating and empowering audiences, fostering civic participation remains a challenge.

4.3. Persuasion

Along with the desire to record, Renov considers the rhetorical and promotional drives to be fundamental to the documentary tradition. He cites (1993, 29) Grierson who viewed the screen as ‘a pulpit, the film a hammer to be used in shaping the destiny of nations’ in the service of his project of documentary civics. The breadth of the persuasive impulse is explored with reference to Nichols’ Aristotelian categorization of documentary proofs: ethical, emotional and demonstrative. While Renov’s concern is with the documentary maker’s rhetorical use of the form, interactive modes such as the web-documentary open up the possibility that audiences may seek to persuade through their engagement with documentary.

The web-documentary *Prison Valley* provides an example of one audience group making use of the interactive platform to challenge the argument presented by the documentary makers and present evidence in support of an alternative perspective. The web-documentary takes the form of a journalistic ‘road trip’ through Cañon City, Colorado, making an argument about the negative impacts of the prison industry. Residents, however, used the discussion forums, initiating 21 discussion threads (there were 57 at the time of writing) challenging the documentary makers’ argument. They took issue with the way in which the town was represented, the use of the name *Prison Valley* (which they argue is not used) and several factual inaccuracies (such as the location of the Riviera motel and the significance of the colour orange). Some residents challenge the authority of the documentary makers given their ‘outsider’ status: ‘Honestly, the only way you will ever be able to document the effects of living so close to so many prisons is to live here yourself and see it every day. 40 days isn’t enough to see what you completely missed’; ‘[w]hat I have seen so far is not true at all. You did not take the time to get to know many of us living here’; ‘... so called ‘film makers’ who only spent a blink of an eye in our community and served it up as full fledged truth’. In response, the documentary makers claim a journalistic and artistic authority, quipping: ‘what does that mean, only horses can talk about horse races? Come on, we don’t believe it. We believe in exchange, crossed views and discussions’. Analysis of the discussion threads provides an interesting example of one segment of the documentary audience seeking to express an alternative perspective to that presented by the documentary makers, using the discussion forums as a space in which to present a very different kind of argument.
These three social functions of documentary – recording and preserving, fostering civic involvement and persuasion – can be seen as documentary drives influencing the use and development of interactive platforms. As with film and television documentary, these drives do not exist in isolation, rather, they overlap in complex ways within the context of specific web-documentary projects. What this analysis suggests is that in spite of the significant differences between digital and traditional modes of documentary, there is value in looking at areas of continuity. Documentary may be difficult to define, arguably more so as modes proliferate, but there is ample evidence of the continued relevance of documentary as a category for both audiences and documentary makers.

5. **Cowbird:** participation and voice in interactive (documentary) storytelling

Launched in December 2011, *Cowbird* is a storytelling tool that supports social storytelling, by facilitating the production and sharing of digital stories. *Cowbird*’s tagline – To be a witness to life – and its goals intersect with the social functions of documentary:

> Our goal is to build a public library of human experience, so the knowledge and wisdom we accumulate as individuals may live on as part of the commons, available for this and future generations to look to for guidance. (cowbird.com/about)

The site’s creator, digital artist Johnathan Harris, has described *Cowbird* as a participatory journalism platform that goes behind the news story to reveal individual perspectives (https://vimeo.com/41353175). *Cowbird* stories are simple, largely consisting of a single image and associated text or audio. In many respects, the platform itself can be seen as a web-documentary, in that it consists of multimedia content that is web-distributed and interactive (Nash 2012a). Where it differs from web-documentaries such as *Welcome to Pine Point* and *Prison Valley* is that there is no unifying subject matter.

In terms of participation, *Cowbird* is clearly grounded in a commitment to participation through media, connecting audiences around shared issues. The *Cowbird* collaboration, ‘The Voices of Pine Ridge’, for example, incorporates hundreds of ‘unedited’ stories by residents of the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. Photographer Aaron Huey, who has worked on the Reservation for many years, wanted to find a way to involve Pine Ridge residents in documenting their community. He describes the *Cowbird* project as facilitating a new relationship with his subjects that ‘opens up a new kind of transparency and dialogue rarely seen in mainstream journalism today’ (http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2012/08/pine-ridge/community-project-intro). The relationship between documentary subject and audience is transformed. Rather than a documentary maker speaking about ‘them’ to a distant audience, the subjects address the audience directly, speaking in the first person about their personal experience (Nichols 2001, 14). In the story Winyan, for example, an image of a young Indian woman is accompanied by text written by her granddaughter. Memory, past and future come together in one woman’s exploration of her experience of sundancing.

On one level, the many thousands of *Cowbird* stories, lacking a unifying subject matter or style, could be seen as an example of the ‘sea of data’ described by Dovey and Rose (2012), ready to drown any talk of documentary. Considered as a platform, however, several features have the effect of rendering individual stories both visible and meaningful. There are some obvious social media elements to *Cowbird*: contributors create a personal profile that is visible to members of the community; they can ‘love’ individual stories, build their own ‘audience’ or become part of another contributor’s. It is possible to search for stories, adding parameters such as location and date, or ‘role’ (e.g. brother or wife).
‘Sagas’ and ‘collections’ provide a means of grouping stories according to different criteria. Collections are described as ‘little mix-tapes or magazines that you assemble by hand’, by adding stories and comments. ‘Citizens’ (paying members of the Cowbird community) can collect and present stories that can then be browsed by others. Interestingly, citizenship in the Cowbird world is tied to the right to curate. Some collections explore a single subject matter, e.g. ‘food’, ‘water’, while in other cases curation becomes a process of self-expression.

Sagas, on the other hand, bring together stories about significant events or experiences likely to be universal. Harris describes sagas as ‘things like the Japanese earthquake, the war in Iraq and the Occupy Wall Street movement – things that touch millions of lives and shape the human story’ (http://www.number27.org/cowbird.html). Initiated by Cowbird, sagas can be seen as a way of focusing the participatory drive around common experience (an early saga was ‘first love’ [http://cowbird.com/saga/first-loves]) or significant events. The process of ‘tagging’ stories with various keywords (done by the story’s creator) effectively links the story to those sagas identified as relevant by the creator.

The Occupy Wall Street movement provided the focus for Cowbird’s first saga (http://cowbird.com/saga/Occupy/); nearly 300 contributors created a collection of 871 stories. As a documentary about the Occupy Wall Street movement, the hundreds of stories in the Occupy saga reveal multiple perspectives, arguments and styles. They constitute a rich record of a range of experiences that accompanied the protest movement: the struggle of unemployment (I wish I could tell you), the experience of arrest (The most beautiful thing), moving out of home due to foreclosure (True Friend), the experience of a financial advisor (Tuesday morning) or the fact that life was just going on with the occupy movement in the background (Running uphill with Mitch). Some stories are overtly political and persuasive (My Political Agenda and Hail to the chief, both by the prolific ‘Fred’, author of more than 500 stories), while others are more tangentially related (Holdouts is the story of the destruction of a building in Shanghai) although their inclusion in the collection inevitably fosters interpretive connections. Some stories have had thousands of ‘reads’, and the ability to ‘share’ through Facebook and Twitter provides additional opportunity for participation through documentary as stories may become part of broader discussion of the movement.

Using the concepts of voice and participation in and through documentary, it is possible to map the social functions of Cowbird. The platform explicitly addresses its audience as citizens, members of a community with a shared interest in storytelling and/or specific social issues. Audiences participate in Cowbird through content creation, making and posting stories, and also in practices of ‘liking’, curating and sharing stories. Gaudenzi (2013, 191–193) notes that in the production of interactive documentary, there is most often a division between authorship of the interactive framework and authorship of content. Using Carpentier’s (2011) terminology, this could be expressed as a division between content participation in documentary (which Gaudenzi demonstrates is fairly widespread) and structural participation in documentary (which, she argues, is rare). Gaudenzi then considers the political implications of this, arguing that it allows documentary makers to retain discursive control in recruiting participants to validate their argument.

Thinking about Cowbird in terms of participation and voice, however, it is possible to question whether structural participation in documentary is essential for audience participation through documentary or voice-as-social participation. While the audience cannot participate in the Cowbird platform, the structural features of the site arguably facilitate spreadability and discoverability (by grouping related content as defined by keywords) rather than any specific argument. In this respect, Cowbird is dissimilar to
many web-documentaries (although, arguably similar to *18 Days in Egypt*). Although small-scale and therefore limited in terms of social impact, the ability to share content within a community of interest provides a valuable foundation for social action.

6. Conclusion and more questions

In this paper, I have suggested that interaction and participation in emerging modes of documentary, such as the web-doc, are shaped by documentary’s traditional social functions. Focusing on the social dimension of interaction and participation, I propose that the ways in which documentary makers position and seek to engage audiences reflect the documentary drive to record, foster civic participation and persuade. While analysis of the social functions of documentary in the film and television context must necessarily focus on the intentions of documentary makers and the institutions in which they work, in the case of interactive documentary there are opportunities for audiences to pursue their own goals where they can participate through documentary.

Critical study of interactive documentary is developing, with scholars working alongside documentary makers actively engaged in re-imagining the form. This paper seeks to make a contribution to this emerging field by critically exploring the concepts of participation and interaction. We have arguably been too hasty to interpret new audience activity in political terms – conflating notions of voice-as-authorship with those of social voice. Interrogating the different possible relationships between these two ‘voices’ in interactive documentary will allow for a more nuanced consideration of the political implications of interactive documentary representation. Documentary scholarship, with its focus on interrogating the ways in which truth claims are made and sustained in audio-visual texts, is well-placed to contribute to the study of the burgeoning field of persuasive audio-visual media.

While this paper suggests one way in which documentary scholars might think about interactivity and participation, it also attempts to articulate some of the questions with which we must wrestle. While we might imagine that audiences experience a sense of agency when they interact with documentary, to what extent is this the case and what are the impacts of this on documentary reception? Similarly, how are we to evaluate the relative importance of structural and content participation in documentary? While it makes sense given the importance of the interface/platform in most web-documentary to see the lack of structural participation as limiting audience agency, it is also the case as Jigar Mehta points out in relation to *18 Days* that participation requires structure. How might we more comprehensively work through the political implications of the presence/absence of structural participation in documentary?

Notes

1. Several discussion threads focus on these issues. In particular: inaccuracies, this is the most skewed, elitist piece of drivel I have ever watched; the real Canon City and Fremont residents reactions to *Prison Valley*. Available at: http://prisonvalley.arte.tv/en/forums/discussions/1/
2. Bsteg, 11 May 2010, Miscellaneous inaccuracies
3. Tinmarcco, 13 May 2010, Fremont Residents Reactions to *Prison Valley*
4. Novasil, 18 May 2010, Fremont Residents Reactions to *Prison Valley*
5. Defence Our Answers to the residents of Fremont County FAQ

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References
Dovey, J., and M. Rose. 2012. “We’re Happy and We Know It: Documentary, Data, Montage.” Studies in Documentary Film 6 (2): 159–173.

**Interactive documentary works**

*Re-enchantment:* [http://www.abc.net.au/tv/re-enchantment/](http://www.abc.net.au/tv/re-enchantment/)
*18 Days in Egypt:* [http://beta.18daysinegypt.com/](http://beta.18daysinegypt.com/)
*Goa Hippy Tribe:* [https://www.facebook.com/goahippymunity](https://www.facebook.com/goahippymunity)