INTRODUCTION TO THE SYMPOSIUM

Documentary Film: Towards a Research Agenda on Forms, Functions, and Impacts

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Recent films such as Fahrenheit 9/11, Supersize Me, An Inconvenient Truth, Food Inc., and Sicko have generated attention to how documentaries can shape debates over social issues and policy questions. Documentaries are no longer conventionally perceived as a passive experience intended solely for informal learning or entertainment. Instead, with ever increasing frequency, these films are considered part of a larger effort to spark debate, mold public opinion, shape policy, and build activist networks. In addition to these new forms and uses, more traditional public media such as Frontline, Bill Moyers, and POV continue to be influential outlets for public affairs journalism and commentary. Documentaries are also becoming an ever-more-valued commercial enterprise at for-profit cable television networks and a popular amateur genre on YouTube.

These quickly changing trends in documentary content, distribution, and reach generate a range of important questions for media scholars and communication researchers to examine. For this special symposium at Mass Communication and Society, we invited theoretically-driven and empirically-grounded manuscripts that investigate the forms, functions, and impacts of documentary film. We are happy to report that more than 20 manuscripts were submitted in response to the call for papers with 4 eventually accepted for publication. Submissions included works by scholars in communication, political science, and anthropology from the U.S., U.K., and Europe.

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In fitting with the focus of *Mass Communication and Society*, we looked specifically for research approaches beyond the most familiar one of textual analysis, which historically is grounded in cinema studies and literary studies. Documentary film, despite its growing influence and many impacts, has mostly been overlooked by social scientists studying the media and communication, and our hope is that this symposium might catalyze additional work. In the rest of this editors’ note, we propose central questions and themes that can constitute a research agenda on documentary film, highlighting the conclusions from contributors to this special symposium.

One key approach is that of cultural production, which can reveal the factors that determine the subjects portrayed in a film, the stylistic conventions used, and the public interpretation of a film. For example, what are the economic, social, and cultural contexts that influence the form, distribution, and reach of a documentary film? In addition, how do these factors shape different and emerging subgenres of documentary film and why? In her study published as part of this symposium, University of Leeds (U.K.) communication scholar Anna Zoellner uses participant observation and case study techniques to examine the selection process for documentary programs that run at major broadcast and cable networks in Great Britain and Germany. In order to successfully pitch a film to commissioning editors at a network, independent producers rely heavily on developing personal relationships, on their track record, and on appealing to the anticipated preferences of editors. This generally means that a film has to be a new angle on a familiar topic such as a well known historical figure or event. In addition, a film has to adhere to familiar narrative conventions. Typically, for example, films about contemporary subjects follow a case study format that profiles individuals and their personal stories. Not only do government codes demand a balanced portrayal of these topics, but the subjects have to be “camera friendly” in appearance and a “good talker” with added points for “extraordinariness.” This last criterion commonly leads to films profiling a celebrity or using one as a host. It also includes choosing individuals who can offer predictably extreme attitudes, behavior and lifestyles. As Zoellner concludes of the factors that shape the agenda and portrayal of subjects selected by independent film producers: “Working in television is usually associated with notions of creative and autonomous work although the activities carried out in television production are to a large extent non-creative, regulated and predetermined with little scope for individual artistic self-expression.”

While Zoellner examines the production pressures and factors that shape the focus and form of documentary film, Temple University anthropologist Naomi Schiller in her study considers how political and social context influence the perceived legitimacy of a documentary. Schiller considers the case
of *The Revolution Will Not be Televised*, a film that challenged major news media accounts of the 2002 Venezuelan coup d’état attempt against Hugo Chavez. In her research, Schiller traces *Revolution’s* release and subsequent reception in New York and Caracas, detailing the frame contest among activists, critics, and other political actors to define the film as either an important dissident perspective or a work of pro-Chavez propaganda. As she observes: “The meaning of a film is shaped not only by its composition but by who is responsible for its circulation, when and where the film is screened, and the contextual information provided to the audience.” Zoellner’s conclusion is as relevant to understanding the perception of *Revolution* as it is to more recent debates over major releases such as *An Inconvenient Truth* and *Sicko*.

Normative and ethical questions related to filmmaking also provide a rich subject for analysis, allowing us to understand how social actors perceive their own actions and choices and the motivations behind them. For example, how do different kinds of documentary filmmakers and producers identify their roles? Do they define themselves as journalists, artists, storytellers, historians, satirists, and/or entertainers? With each of these roles, what sort of ethical considerations and professional standards guide the production, content, and strategic use of a film? How do publics and stakeholders perceive the authority, intentions, or objectivity of these film producers? This is an arena in which scholars can contribute powerfully to public knowledge by drawing data directly from the source: the producers of a film.

For example, in a September 2009 study, *Honest Truths: Documentary Filmmakers on Ethical Challenges in Their Work* (www.centerforsocialmedia.org/ethics), Center for Social Media researchers Patricia Aufderheide, Peter Jaszi, and Mridu Chandra analyzed interviews with 45 documentary veteran filmmakers, on ethical challenges they faced in production. This study demonstrated the value of open-ended inquiry with practitioners and also the need for more extensive exploration of the topic. Documentary filmmakers identified themselves as creative artists for whom ethical behavior is at the core of their projects at the same time that their ethical choices are affected by unprecedented financial pressure to lower costs and increase productivity. They discussed three conflicting sets of responsibilities: to their subjects; their viewers; and their own artistic vision and production pressures.

Filmmakers resolved these conflicts on an ad hoc basis and argued routinely for situational, case-by-case ethical decisions. At the same time they shared unarticulated general principles and limitations. Unarticulated principles included, in relation to subjects, “Do no harm” and “Protect the vulnerable,” and in relation to viewers, “Honor the viewer’s trust”—each
principle conditioned by cold economic reality and their own perceptions of what they called a “higher truth.” The study demonstrated the need to develop more publicly shared norms and toward that end, to have a safe space for a more public and ongoing conversation about ethical problems in documentary filmmaking.

A third important element of a research agenda involves societal impact questions. For example, how does media theory help us understand and measure the social impact of a documentary’s release? For audiences, what influence can a film have on informal learning about a complex policy topic? How do noted qualities of a film such as narrative and perceived realism influence audiences? Moreover, what about the influence on publics beyond those who actually watch the film? Specifically, how can a film reframe an issue relative to wider public understanding, news coverage, and policy debate? From an evaluation standpoint, how can research in these areas inform the design, distribution, and marketing of a film? What kind of metrics can be defined and observed?

In their experiment with Ohio State University students, communication researchers Heather LaMarre and Kristen Landreville compare perceptions and learning among students who viewed either the fictional motion picture *Hotel Rwanda* or the PBS documentary *Triumph of Evil*. Students in the two experimental groups were compared in terms of their accurate identification of basic facts of the Rwandan genocide. Learning occurred among both groups of college students, though not surprisingly, knowledge gain was higher for the documentary viewing students. More importantly, LaMarre and Landreville find that students reported as much if not more emotional and narrative engagement with the documentary *Triumph of Evil* than they did with the fictional *Hotel Rwanda*. As they conclude: “Because the documentary group reported higher levels of affect, as well as increased issue concern and learning, it appears that sociopolitical documentaries can play a vital role in both informing and engaging the electorate. Such evidence also suggests that documentaries, as a form of political information, have the potential to strongly influence public opinion.”

Moving beyond direct impacts on audiences, University of South Carolina political scientist David Whiteman uses a case study approach to examine the influence of a film on the agenda and actions of activists, the media, and policymakers. He tracks the influence of *Yes, In My Backyard*, a documentary that critically evaluates the trend of rural communities using prisons as agents of economic development. As Whiteman describes, the film served as a catalyst for recruiting activists working against the citing of a prison in one rural community. The strengthened activist movement went on to raise the profile of the issue in the news media and among policymakers, pushing the topic higher on the political agenda while also framing
alternative policy options and bringing new voices into the decision-making process. As Whiteman concludes: “An issue-centered model of political impact calls attention to the kinds of impact documentary films have beyond their effects on mass audiences. With the increasing popularity of documentary film, and the wide audience for films like *An Inconvenient Truth* and *Super-Size Me*, the temptation might be to return to the notion that documentary films achieve their influence through mass education and perhaps even mass mobilization of the general public. However, for the vast majority of activist documentary films, much more of their impact can be revealed by attention to recruitment, education, mobilization, and framing within the relevant activist organizations and within the issue network of which they are a part.”

A final dimension of the research agenda is that of documentary’s interface with civil society and democracy questions. For example, how and when do documentaries function as vehicles to engage people not only as viewers but as members of affected publics and participants in the public sphere? In what ways can a film be used as a tool to sponsor or facilitate public deliberation? How do such efforts differ from advocacy or cause-related documentary efforts? As documentaries become a highly valued commercial genre and/or a new form of campaign strategy, does their perceived and/or actual role shift?

These are challenging questions that require thoughtful applications of political and communication theory to media practice, as proposed by scholars such as John Dewey, Jurgen Habermas, and Benjamin Barber. In order to begin such inquiry, it is important to address the too-frequently-slighted distinction between advocacy work and film campaigns designed to more broadly inform and create relevant “publics.” By this term we mean John Dewey’s concept of people who share a common problem (typically caused by private or government action) and who find solutions for it together. Advocacy films are typically designed to mobilize and agitate a like-minded and ideologically intense public to take a specific set of actions. In contrast, films designed to inform and provoke publics alert a wider public to a problem, potentially by reframing a problem so that it connects to a wider set of values or so that it can be addressed differently. These films are often deliberately designed to speak across existing lines of political difference and to go “beyond the choir.” They are open-ended in their expectations while still vested in shaping public conversation and action. They provide tools that make it easier for people to become active citizens, to engage with people who may not already agree with them, and to define with others what collective actions they want to take.

Films designed for public knowledge and action may feature very different strategies, forms, and approaches. Consider two documentary films on
the same general topic, *Trade Secrets* and *Blue Vinyl*. Bill Moyers’ 2001 *Trade Secrets* addresses, in the tradition of Edward R. Murrow, a general prime time public broadcasting viewing audience. The documentary exposes dangerous chemical industry practices that affect everyone’s daily life, made possible by a lack of regulation. The two historically dominant frames-of-reference for the chemical industry—the social progress emphasis of “better living through chemistry” and the event-driven focus on the Thalidomide scandal—were replaced by Moyers’ more systematic emphasis on public accountability and government oversight of the industry. His film was powerfully controversial, not least because the Chemical Society protested it. It was also rigorously researched and documented journalism, with the imprimatur of public television and Moyers’ own journalistic reputation. The documentary’s website was rich in additional information substantiating claims of the film. The website also offered recommendations as to how individuals can become personally involved in the issue by informing themselves, by reducing chemical use in the home, and by discussing the issue with friends and coworkers. The film’s goal was to inform an active (prime time public broadcasting) public, which beyond private action would presumably take this information into decisions such as support for particular legislation or candidates, although these types of actions were not guided by a film-related campaign.

A very different approach was used by Judith Helfand and Dan Gold in *Blue Vinyl*, a documentary about the dangers of polyvinyl chloride (PVC), a possible carcinogen that has been used in building materials, car interiors, children’s toys, and other vinyl products. The film was structured as a personal journey, with Helfand investigating the implications of her family’s choice to put vinyl siding on their Long Island suburban home. Helfand modeled herself as the average consumer, demonstrating the obstacles to discovering the implications and consequences of consumer choices. Her sometimes comical efforts to find answers to what should be simple questions and to find an alternative to vinyl siding reframed the issues from a narrow focus on consumer choice to a wider consideration of public health and public will. Helfand and Robert West, through their separate outreach organization Working Films, have supported a variety of constituencies inspired by the film to address PVC-related issues in their communities. For instance, Helfand and West have supported organizations that resist incinerators, which put dioxin into the air. They have also worked with businesses to limit use of vinyl packaging. The film encourages people to become active citizens and informed consumers. The action campaigns that have emerged have done so because through the film, individuals across communities have discovered that they shared common problems, problems for which the film helped provide them a common vocabulary to articulate their interests and concerns.
The ideal of providing media for public knowledge and action is often assumed in documentary production, but is rarely closely examined, either by filmmakers or scholars. Using the broad label “activism” as a conceptual substitute for this goal is inadequate, since cause-directed mobilization and strategic campaigns are a constant feature of political and economic life, employed by the most powerful and entrenched stakeholders. In short, scholars need to consider more deeply the important dimensions that distinguish a film that engages and empowers publics and the many different types of emerging political or interest group campaigns which might use video and film as a component. Developing theoretical clarity on how documentary film can ethically and effectively promote public life and civic culture will be critical, and related approaches discussed in this symposium will be useful. For example, understanding the ways in which cultural production modes inhibit or encourage documentary for public knowledge and action can inform not only production decisions but also policy decisions about support and funding for public media. Examining and closely mapping norms and practices can further provide clarity on goals and methods. Developing metrics for using film to enhance the quality of civic culture will be more difficult than for activist or entertainment media, where website visits and product sales provide rough comparisons. None of this will be easy, but these are challenges worthy of the next stage of interdisciplinary scholarship on documentary film, its forms, functions, and impacts.
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