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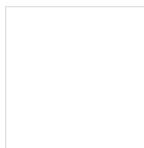
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PhD Thesis: Digital Technologies, Social Media and Emerging, Alternative Documentary Production Methodologies

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Digital Technologies, Social Media and Emerging, Alternative Documentary Production Methodologies

Original Doctoral Thesis
Final Re-Write Submission (02.06.15)
Written by Ms. Jodi Nelson

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and distribution routes that could potentially liberate a new generation of women filmmakers

to tell and share their own stories. The varied channels of online distribution have provided a growing audience for new films and content around feminist themes that can contribute to a larger economic sector for feminist filmmakers. Also important to note is the emergence of film festivals specifically catering to women's films, which became a signifier in the 1970s for growing feminist subject matter and that audiences were interested in these types of film. With digital technologies and social media platforms, these types of festivals have grown with audience demand (Lesage, 2013, p. 266). Additionally, Butler (2002, p. 3) adds that "film festivals and film journals began the work of recovering the history of women's creativity in cinema; women filmmakers began, in groups and singly, to produce avowedly feminist films". One example of a specifically feminist distribution company is *Women Make Movies*⁷. Additionally, a growing repository of feminist conferences and film festivals can be found on KT Press⁸.

In 1975, documentaries were the predominant form of feminist film and (Armatage, 1979, p. 49) these films presented images of ordinary women with whom an audience could recognise a shared experience. There would, however, still be differences within the emerging women's film movement. What would it be called? How would it be represented? What form(s) should it employ? Whatever the answers, Lesage (1978, p. 509) argues that women's personal explorations through film were made in order to combat patriarchy, therefore making the filmmaker and her subjects political. As Kellner writes,

The proliferation of documentary films of personal witnessing emerged in the 1960s and 1970s when members of the civil rights, women's, gay and lesbian and other social movements told their personal stories...and used film as a medium to probe social problems (2013, p. 62).

Women filmmakers attempted to structure their films and tell their stories through personal experiences and share them in a politicized way. These films are "woman-identified" (Lesage, 1978, pp. 507) and this principle has not changed much since the 1960s. What have changed are emerging technologies and access to digital tools. Through the use of social media platforms, which present opportunities for wider dissemination of these types of films, more women filmmakers are telling their stories. What is becoming evident is that the

⁷ Women Make Movies at: <http://www.wmm.com/>

⁸ KT Press at: <http://www.ktpress.co.uk/feminist-film-festivals.asp>

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application and accessibility of the internet and social media platforms have exponentially offered up the opportunities to women filmmakers to reach larger audiences with more immediacy and lesser barriers to entry and/or economic restrictions.

During the 1970s, feminist independent film-makers' initial aim was to "produce alternative media narratives often with a specific political purpose or expressive of family or personal histories, supported by an independent exhibition circuit, including student film societies, arts laboratories and other fringe venues" (Hum, 1997, p. 180). Often these marginal films subverted narrative conventions of mainstream cinema and thus distinguished themselves from a male-dominated cinema. Hollinger (2012, p. 233-34) adds that documentary also offered women an alternative to the mainstream. As with counter-cinema, feminist filmmaking can mix forms and styles whilst at the same time claiming a privileged relationship to 'truth'.

Changing media forms and new technologies have had a profound impact upon documentary's epistemological claims, as new approaches by both theorists and practitioners continually push its boundaries, redefining what documentary is within its new present constructs. For Bill Nichols, however, there remain "three central issues in the study of moving-image documentary – evidence, narrative and ethics" (2013, p. 33). I would also add 'witness' as a key debate, especially heightened in today's complex digital landscape. "Witness, or the act of watching, is complex when the material concerned, both visual and audio, reproduces other times and places as though they were in some way present". This becomes even more complex as digital media can be reframed, reshaped, shared virally and inserted into narrative threads as new ideas. John Ellis (2012, p. 124) continues that modern media place their viewers in the position of the witness (or 'voyeur' as the term was previously coined), as the person to whom testimony is directed. Though not the same as being on the scene or being an eyewitness, "the portrayal of the activity being watched, acts as a witness whose truthfulness should be assessed from the position of the viewer of the screen on which they appear".

Finally, Nichols adds that the concept of documentary storytelling must be a story about **the** world, rather than an imaginative fiction about **a** world; otherwise documentary as a genre cannot be sustained (2013, p. 33). Therefore, my research and practice explores new ideas and methodologies for how and why these central issues can and should remain relevant to

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the documentary practitioner, its audiences and the film industry even with the emergence of new technologies shaping new documentary forms.

Documentary Evolution

New interactive, participatory modes created with emerging technologies and online audiences are shifting narratives, audience reception and producing new ethical debates around ‘truth’ and ‘authenticity’ as lines are continually blurred. How can photographic evidence be authenticated? Where does the responsibility lie if not with the filmmaker? Rughani states, that “for documentary...ethics flow from principles such as accuracy or honest dealing (sic) with contributors” (2013, p. 98). He adds that defining this ‘documentary value’ can be found in how filmmakers choose to shoot, edit, frame, direct and embody ethical decisions in order to construct the film. It would follow then, that makers of documentaries in today’s modern digital age have a responsibility to uphold the value and integrity of their documentary practice.

The question of authorship in documentary practice, and especially that of women’s documentary films, has always been difficult to define” (Warren, 2008, p. 7). Cinéma Vérité⁹ and the Direct Cinema¹⁰ movement of the 60s both in their different ways posed challenges to traditional views of authorship. What then, is the meaning of authorship in today’s new participatory online space? Pettice (2011, p. 26-27) states that within new media the content of the work and the interface are separated, making it possible to create very different meanings with the same material. Interaction could therefore alter and reshape an original narrative, taking ‘authority’ away from the filmmaker. Structure notwithstanding, utilising an interactive narrative can be understood as providing multiple trajectories, and thus striving

⁹ Cinéma Vérité (*truthful cinema*) is a style of documentary filmmaking, invented by Jean Rouch, inspired by Dziga Vertov’s theory about Kino-Pravda (see Chapter 2) and influenced by Robert Flaherty’s films. It combines improvisation with the use of the camera to unveil truth or highlight subjects hidden behind crude reality and encouraged a presence of the filmmaker creating a transparency between the filmmaker and its subjects as the best way to reveal its ‘truth’.

¹⁰ Direct Cinema is a documentary genre that originated between 1958 and 1962 in North America, principally in the Canadian province of Quebec and the United States, and developed by Jean Rouch in France. Similar in many respects to the Cinéma Vérité genre, it was characterized initially by filmmakers' desire to directly capture reality and represent it truthfully, and to question the relationship of reality with cinema. It also was characterised by its minimalist approaches to filmmaking through its use of lightweight cameras, improved sound and lighting equipment, which was reflected in the social attitudes of filmmaking and how it represented it more truthfully in real life outside of a studio environment.

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for an ‘egalitarian authenticity’ even with overlapping narratives and themes. Yet I feel that authorship *is* possible – or at least *necessary* as an assumption the filmmaker must make, and a responsibility they must take - within new online modes.

Recently, and in light of emerging technologies, theorists of film authorship have begun to see the female auteur in particular as neither an individual creative genius, nor entirely the product of the film text, as the idea of the ‘death of the author’ assumes, but rather as a figure influencing the production and consumption of the text (Hollinger, 2012, p. 231). Perhaps, then, specific production methodologies rather than aesthetics or historical assumptions can be used to frame and redefine the feminist auteur. Within the context of women’s documentaries, for example, a set of filmmaking practices called first-person films, while not easily definable in terms of aesthetic forms, would perhaps also fall under the category of female auteur because of their individualistic modes of expression (Lebow, 2013, p. 258). For the filmmaker, documentary can be a medium for autobiography.

However, new strategies, intertwined with technological advances and the integration of participatory engagement, mean renewed debate around questions of authorship in documentary filmmaking. Dovey and Rose state that as documentary filmmakers take advantage of new practices, a new “poetics of collaboration and participation” begins to emerge (2013, p. 370). This incorporates the renewed importance of autobiographical documentaries, together with amateur film cultures with easy access to photographic technology, and is reinforced and broadened by the rise of interactive digital media typically centered on user-generated content.

John Grierson defined documentary film as the ‘creative treatment of actuality’ (Chapman, 2009, p. 9). Thus, as critics (Corner, 1996, p. 17) have pointed out, a tension between these two elements (‘actuality’ and its ‘creative treatment’) has been evident since the form’s beginning. New technologies intensify and render more complex, rather than fundamentally changing these longstanding debates around documentary’s relation to both ‘truth’ (‘actuality’) and narrative (its ‘creative treatment’). As new modes of practice enter documentary making, not only can this change the way filmmakers approach telling their stories about the world, but the audience reception and experience is also shifting through the means in which they are receiving documentary films through multiple devices on-demand. ‘Evidence’ - “something two or more people agree upon, something verifiable and concrete”

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(Nichols, 2013, p. 33) – becomes more difficult to establish in the face of digital technologies' capability of reproducing and manipulating images. Plantinga argues that in the face of this change, a fundamental bond between audience and filmmaker must be established which objectively secures 'a' truth factually rooted that aspires to exploration rather than propaganda (Rughani, 2013, p. 107). At its very core, this is a mode of transparency between filmmaker and audience.

A large burden of responsibility therefore, must fall on the shoulders of the documentarist. Rughani additionally, suggests that documentary ethics turn on at least two axes: (1) the documentarist's relationship to subjects in the film and (2) their relationship to the audience. The underlying key meaning in this case is 'responsibility' (100). When audiences view content with different devices such as computers, mobile phones or iPads – very different from a traditional viewing experience in a darkened theatre – the viewer has a varied and different mode of engagement. Because of this flexibility of devices and spatial experiences, as well as the alteration of images, Rughani further claims that questions of accountability and 'truth' become more urgent for the documentary as its forms become mobile, interactive and online (98). Yet such forms also potentially yield greater power for the documentary: the opportunity, as Petitto argues, to "amplify... the message towards the entire civil society, creating a deeper awareness of issues ..." (Petitto, 2011, p. 3).

New Technologies & Online Practice

Rethinking documentary in the virtual space brings about new challenges to the old debates around evidence, witness and ethics, as it is the product of a more democratic attitude towards practice, distribution and dissemination of its stories. For new participatory audiences are now also helping to create the very product they are witnessing. Therefore, creating media within the public sphere can bring about a wealth of new tools, wider contributions to media making and a more global awareness of its dissemination. But it is not without its controversies and challenges.

What once was a higher barrier to entry into the film business is now a more open and online accessibility where anyone can wield a cheap camera or mobile phone device, make a movie and share it on the internet. These newfound accessible practices could potentially disrupt an already complex system of communication practices. However, it could also supply it with a

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much-needed collective idea bank for tackling global issues and finding sustainable solutions. Within the scope of participatory practices, a first person filmmaker can experience greater freedom within the confines of this process and delivery.

Social media's prevalence continues to spur the need for the necessary skill sets and professional training needed for producing content in this new participatory way. New social media sites emerge daily, claiming new audience sectors in the effort to drive traffic, creating new content and sharing it virally amongst its growing audiences. The social communities that exist in the virtual space can move beyond traditional media experiences, creating new discourse amongst communities with potentially lower barriers to entry. Pavlik states, "perhaps the most profound social consequence of the world of online communications is the development of virtual communities" (1996, p. 296).

What powers can filmmakers invoke when considering all creative and ethical choices made as storytellers within this new online medium? Nyiro (2011, p. 2) states that "participation of the audience and interactivity is a continuously evolving phenomenon", which involves gathering content and attempting to create a synergistic thread while production processes are in a constant state of flux. How has this new frame shifted or impacted the way documentaries are created, seen and interpreted? What about the value quotient within this process as it is demystified through online audiences and media discourse?

Since the launch of YouTube and better penetrations of broadband, there has been a surge of new moving-image culture through emerging technologies such as digital cameras, flip phones and web cameras, which are cheap and easy-to-use. And with free online editing tools, some built into the very social media platform which will be used to distribute content, Nyiro adds that media making becomes extremely simple to perform (367). It is the collective strength of these numbers of online participants and social media platforms that contribute to the outputs of documentary narratives, which might otherwise be limited in scope by traditional means. It is here where a new dimension of filmmaking in non-linear and technological forms can engage audiences and present new methodologies for practice. The various ways in which the audience can interpret the film and its process depend upon many different factors, such as mobility modalities, spatial relationships, and environment experience (aurally and visually). It is at the meeting of participatory culture and

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... Yet how social media influences documentary production was not the focus of her research. And Jody Nelson explored in her PhD research how digital technology has been transforming the genre from a feminist perspective (Nelson, 2015). This study explores a knowledge gap neglected for too long and investigates how social media is transforming the value chain in documentary production. ...

... How would the design best connect to the paradigm and perspective taken? And could this research 6 An example of this form of inquiry is Jodi Nelson's PhD research at the University of Sussex concerning digital technology and alternative forms of documentary by engaging online audiences encouraged audiences to contribute to the development of her documentary narrative (Nelson, 2015). address problems of practice and, especially in the case of social media, the inherent rapid technological change? ...

Whose-documentary-is-it-anyway-2018? Encounters with the Global Digital Family and the rise of a participant-centric mode of documentary filmmaking.[Thesis](#) [Full-text available](#)

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This article aims to provide a contextual overview of the filmmaker–subject relationship in documentary filmmaking. This topic is addressed in those documentary films that require the involvement of the filmmaker in the participants' everyday lives over a prolonged period, thereby turning their relationship into a central feature of the documentary filmmaking. I argue that the filmmaker–subject ... [\[Show full abstract\]](#)

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Due to their clearly imaginary narratives and to the presence of animation itself, animated mockumentaries make the viewer aware of their fictionality from the start. Therefore, these animated works constitute the clearest example of mockumentary being not a genre, but rather a narrative style capable of transcending the boundaries of genres, media, and individual poetics. Through the analysis of ...

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Social Media as a Narrative Filmmaking Tool

January 2012

 Jodi Nelson-Tabor

This research is being conducted through a practice-led documentary film project, web platform, and published case study. I am primarily interested in how the new paradigm shifts in digital technology and the democratisation of the filmmaking process allow filmmakers to connect to an 'expert' global niche audience with more immediacy through the internet, engaging virtual communities, ...

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Manifest Documentary

September 2023 · JCMS Journal of Cinema and Media Studies

 Rijuta Mehta

This article argues that the symbolic and material power of Manifest Destiny inherent in the norms of documentary photography at Life magazine, particularly in preexisting shooting scripts. An analysis of visual re-takes and narrative fixity in the 1947 photo-essay on the Indian Partition, "The Great Migration," reveals how tropes of US settler colonialism were projected onto distressed refugees ... [\[Show full abstract\]](#)

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