Database Documentaries: New Documentary Practices in Emergent Narrative Spaces and the Classroom

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Abstract

The development of sophisticated portable media tools, social media applications and high-speed communication networks has arguably changed our understanding of the documentary form. Database documentaries offer filmmakers and audiences new ways to produce and/or experience a wide range of narrative forms.

Whereas once the documentary form may have been perceived as a self-contained linear medium, database documentaries employing sophisticated convergent media technologies may be understood as dynamic non-linear narratives that invite high levels of interaction and audience participation.

Media content, in the form of photos, videos and audio information, may now be viewed on a wide range of screens or pinned onto everyday locations using augmented reality applications, thus transforming places into information spaces and reconfiguring our experience of, and relationship with, the documentary form.

Projects such as Blast Theory *Rider Spoke* mesh location-based services with portable computing to construct a dynamic documentary experience, while Max Schleser's *24 Frames, 24 Hours* and Perry Bard's *Man with a Movie Camera: The Global Remake* exploit the potential of networked technologies. All create innovative modes of collaborative and participatory filmmaking which arguably remediate and reinvigorate the traditional documentary form.

Here I examine the potential and perceived opportunities presented by networked portable media devices and associated software to aid the creation of documentary forms that extend our perceptions of storytelling practices, thereby promoting audience engagement with documentary content in both virtual and real-world environments. This research also looks at the ways in which the practice of making database documentaries may be used within the tertiary classroom environment to enhance the teaching of digital literacy.

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Introduction

Over the past decade dramatic technological shifts have changed our relationship with media. Greater access to high-speed broadband, networked portable media devices (smartphones and tablets) and a plethora of online platforms, social media tools and mobile apps are providing filmmakers, creative practitioners and educators with innovative ways to construct a wide range of media narratives. No longer constrained by access, cost and the need for specialised knowledge and/or skills,

these emergent technologies arguably make it more possible for both amateurs and professionals to engage in digital storytelling practices.

Digital technologies are shaping our understanding of media and reconfiguring the ways we engage with media tools and digital artifacts, by presenting new ways to construct, distribute and experience stories. Wood (2007, 48) suggests that digital technologies not only organize what we see and how it is seen, but are also framing and expanding our understanding of narrative space.

According to Jenkins, 'we are entering an era where media will be everywhere, and we will use all kinds of media in relation to one another' (2001, 1) to construct narrative forms which exploit the parameters of digital media devices and communication networks. Networked media devices facilitate the micro-managing of our daily communications but they also present opportunities for the production, viewing and sharing of a diverse range of media content.

As suggested by Burdick et al.,

> the networked information economy, at its best, promises openness, sharing, and common platforms for information exchange. Access to the means of production in the information economy is dramatically opened up, rendering the bar for participation low enough for nearly everyone connected to the Internet. (2012, 79)

One need only walk down a street or ride public transport to witness individuals recording or watching content on mobile phones, uploading photos and videos to dedicated websites, and blogging or sharing their adventures via social media platforms and locative media applications. Data is distributed, consumed, re-mixed, re-distributed and consumed again in a cycle of production and consumption that requires access to media tools and communications networks, as well as varying degrees of digital literacy in order to participate. Here I suggest that digital literacy is not just confined to a working knowledge of networked digital media tools, associated software and social media applications, but it also includes an understanding of the media ecologies and social practices that shape (and which are in turn reshaped by the media itself) the ways we use digital media devices to construct narrative forms and navigate networked information spaces.

Digital Narratives and Emergent Documentary Forms

As networked media technologies continue to evolve, it is important to consider not only the ways in which such technological shifts may change our relationship with media, but also the ways in which these new digital media tools and associated networked platforms might be exploited for the production of new modes of storytelling and innovative types of narratives.

Over the past 20 years 'digital storytelling', a term often used to describe short auto-biographical narratives through the use of personal photographs, video and audio, has established itself as an important mode of storytelling. Digital storytelling projects often employ basic filmmaking strategies and use digital media editing applications (iMovie, Premiere Pro, Final Cut Pro etc.) to construct linear video and/or audio projects that may be used as a form of art therapy and/or for educational purposes. Digital storytelling may be understood as a form of 'vernacular creativity', a term coined by Burgess (2006, 6) to describe a meshing of consumer practices and knowledge of media production tropes with older popular traditions and communication practices such as family photography, scrapbooking and storytelling.

Burgess also notes that,

> Digital Storytelling as a 'movement' is explicitly designed to amplify the ordinary voice. It aims not only to remediate vernacular creativity, but to legitimate it as a relatively autonomous and worthwhile contribution to public culture. This marks it as an important departure from even the most empathetic 'social documentary' traditions. (2006, 6)

Digital storytelling often aims to empower individuals, not only through the recording and sharing of personal stories, but also through the process of gaining confidence and a sense of agency through the acquisition of digital media production skills and knowledge via the making of personalized digital narratives. Digital storytelling has arguably played an important role in the popularizing of consumer level digital media tools to aid the production of personal storytelling, but I suggest that although digital storytelling may borrow certain aspects of the documentary form, its emphasis on personal narratives and therapeutic practices, rather than documentary filmmaking, places digital storytelling outside the scope of this research.

The focus of this discussion is the remediation of documentary film practices in relation to the opportunities presented by networked media and portable media devices for exploiting the potential of new media technologies and media convergence in the production of radical and/or innovative media forms that extend or re-imagine the documentary film.

In his article '*The Art of Watching Databases: Introduction to the Video Vortex Reader*', Lovink states that 'we no longer simply watch TV and films, we watch databases' (2008, 9), a concept also explored by Manovich (2001) in his book *The Language of New Media*. I suggest that just as we have learnt to master the hypertext language of the internet, we will also develop a sophisticated understanding and knowledge of the database; not only to better access information and media content, but also to aid the production of innovative models of media entertainment and storytelling.

According to Ma (2013), a 2013 study found that over three-quarters of Australians use mobile devices to access the internet, and as we spend more of our lives navigating and negotiating online spaces and communication networks (mobile, social media, etc.) we become increasingly familiar with the interfaces and databases that shape our experiences of media content and understanding of new media technologies. It might be said that as we find new ways to communicate there becomes a need to refashion or remediate older forms of storytelling to fit within the parameters of a networked culture. In light of these changes I would like to draw particular focus to the documentary film and consider the ways in which developments in digital technologies and networked media devices may be exploited to aid the development and production of new modes of documentary practice.

Rather than proposing a debate regarding what documentary is, I believe it may be more productive in the context of this discussion, to create a dialogue around what a documentary can or might be. At present there is a great deal of discussion surrounding definitions and categories for this new breed of digital documentary, with some individuals adopting terms such as *interactive documentary, web docs, cross-platform documentary, participatory documentary and database documentary*. For example, the website *The Journey of Documentary* adopts the term interactive documentary and cites 14 subgenres, which include DocuGames, The iPad/Touch Documentary, The Linear Web Documentary, The Transmedia Documentary and The Crowd Sourced Documentary.

According to the *The Journey of Documentary*' website (Dionysus, 2014) interactive documentary forms are constantly evolving and adapting to technological shifts, and may sit across multiple platforms and take on many forms. But as media technologies continue to change, creative practitioners, filmmakers and media educators are challenged to develop an understanding of the planning and production requirements of these new documentary forms.

Using a definition put forward by Burdick et al. (2012, 54), I suggest that the term 'database documentary' may be a suitable term to describe emergent documentary forms which employ a combination of mobile, locative, social media and online applications in ways that remix, refashion and remediate linear models of documentary film.

According to Burdick et al., database documentaries are:

> modular and combinatoric, branching and hypertextual, often structured more like a multimedia prose piece than a film. Consisting of a series of tracks through an actual or virtual database, the documentary can be built out of a wide range of media types: not just film and video, but also sound, static image, text, animation, actual documents (or their digital equivalents), even live or dynamic feeds from the World Wide Web. Database documentaries are multi-linear. They are not watched, but rather performed by a reader/viewer who is provided with a series of guided paths; and, unlike the cinematic documentary, which is free-standing, database documentaries may be built on multiple, overlapping databases. (2012, 54),

The database documentary differs from the linear documentary film, not only in its non-linear narrative structure but also in its ability to exploit the parameters of emergent media tools and networked media technologies. Information may be captured on a mobile phone, shared via social media, housed on blogs or experienced through augmented reality software, thus creating a meshwork of story information that invites viewer interaction and/or participation.

In the following sections of this article I present an overview of some of the digital tools, software and strategies that are being used in the production of database documentary projects, with particular reference to relevant case studies and how these media production techniques and strategies might be used to aid the teaching of digital literacy within the university classroom.

Networked Media and New Visualities

We now live in a mediated space where many of our communications and experiences are captured and shared via a host of ubiquitous portable media devices and social media platforms. The database and interface invite new modes of interaction with digital media, both within screen spaces and physical spaces. Terms such as participatory, interactive, cross platform and transmedia appear almost interchangeable in a networked digital media space that has become defined by these qualities.

In a digital era that has seen the ongoing decline of traditional broadcast models and a continued migration towards user-generated content and online delivery, digital literacy and digital media production skills may provide real opportunities for individuals to have agency within this networked media-scape.

As Jenkins notes;

> As average people develop the ability to tell their stories, we're seeing different perspectives emerge. We're seeing different groups gain representation, we're seeing groups challenge the dominant media images that have been constructed for their lives. (2009)

With these new forms of digital literacy come new modes of visuality which instigate the remixing and reimagining of media aesthetics and narrative structures in favour of the creation of experimental and hybrid narrative forms. Such forms exploit the opportunities presented by portable digital media devices and social media platforms and thereby aid the production and sharing of user-generated content via telecommunications networks.

Manovich suggests that,

> The explosion of user-created media content on the web (2005-) has unleashed a new media universe. On a practical level, this universe was made possible by free web platforms and inexpensive software tools which enable people to share their media and easily access media produced by others. (2009, 319)

The shift towards a culture of remix may also be driving innovation in documentary practices. The remixing and meshing of multiple mediums and documentary forms play a key role in the creation of experimental and hybrid documentary forms which exploit the opportunities presented by digital media devices and social media platforms.

According to Castells,

> Interactive documentaries create a new logic for the representation of reality. The emphasis of this new logic lies in the relationship between the text and the user, when navigating and interacting, rather than how the author constructs a specific discourse on reality for traditional viewers. (2013)

Along with the repurposing of media tools and data assets and the remediation (see Bolter and Gruisin, 2000) of media technologies and cinematic tropes, these strategies arguably give rise to new modes of production, distribution and viewing of documentary narratives.

Re-imagining Documentary: Smartphones, Databases and Emergent Narrative Spaces

Documentary content may be experienced in online and physical spaces. New media technologies are not only changing our relationship with media, they are also reconfiguring our understanding of narrative space. Our streets may now be understood as places on which to pin a plethora of story information, which can be experienced via networked portable media devices such as smartphones, tablets and other portable computing devices.

Figure 1 Screen shot of Rider Spoke, Blast Theory (2007).

Augmented reality applications may be used to expand the viewer experience of documentary content, enabling an audience to interact with information in innovative ways. First shown in London in 2007, Blast Theory's *Rider Spoke* (Figure 1) project challenges notions of private and public space as it transforms, via the use of locative media software, the city into a meshwork of personal stories. As bicycle riders equipped with a portable handheld computer drift through city streets at night they are encouraged, via pre-recorded messages, to search out particular locations and leave audio messages that are then stored in a database for others participants to listen to later as they experience the city. This technology may be employed for site-specific documentary style narratives, further enhancing the connection between place and personal experience.

As ubiquitous portable computing devices, and in particular the camera-phone, proliferate our private and public spaces; it would appear that our relationship with information is also shifting to fit the parameters of a digital world. In the age of the database, where the act of capturing, sharing and archiving information has become synonymous with digital culture, the camera-phone has emerged as a key digital production tool we can use to navigate, capture, view and share the mediated traces of the world around us.

Smartphones, and in particular the Apple iPhone, offering high definition video capture, editing software and a host of filters, lens attachments and accessories, provide a relatively low cost option for the production of audio/visual content. The smartphone may now be best understood as camera, editing suite, distribution portal and micro-cinema, offering its users a one-stop-shop approach to filmmaking.

Figure 2 Screen shot of 24 Frames, 24 Hours, Max Schleser (2011).

Mobile phones with cameras are ideal for collaborative filmmaking practices, as seen in Schleser's (Figure 2) participatory 'mobile-mentary' (mobile documentary) *24 Frames, 24 Hours* (2011) that exploits the availability of portable media devices and online spaces to facilitate a global collaboration with community groups. Drawing upon Dziga Vertov's concept of 'kino pravda' (cinematic truth) (Sadoul 1974, 264), Schleser invites the use of the ubiquitous camera-phone as an enabler for innovative documentary filmmaking. As noted by Keep and Berry (2013, 166), Vertov's concept of the 'kino-glaz' (film-eye) may now be better understood as the 'mobi-glaz' (mobile eye), as filmmaking practices are adapted to fit the parameters of the mobile phone. As people move through urban spaces "the camera-phone lens may be better understood as a third-eye, a receptor to absorb and convert the images reflected off the city and its populace into parcels of data" that can be uploaded and integrated within an organised and searchable database structure. Schleser refers to his project as an online digital

canvas where ‘participants can paint a picture of their local environment and communicate with each other through the social media integration’ (2013, 207).

In the case of Schleser’s project, mobile filmmaking may be understood as a catalyst for the production of ethnographic videos that can be uploaded by the filmmakers to a dedicated website online for viewing. Merging local and global perspectives across time zones, *24 Frames, 24 Hours* may be understood as an example of a database-driven documentary using the idea of a 24 hour cycle to document an ‘around the clock’ view of everyday life in multiple cities.

Figure 3 Screen shot of Man with a Movie Camera: Global Remake, Perry Bard (2008).

Also exploring the potential of networked and convergent media tools, is video artist Perry Bard’s 2008 collaborative filmmaking project *Man with a Movie Camera: Global Remake* (Figure 3). This work remediates Russian filmmaker Dziga Vertov’s classic experimental documentary film *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) in the form of an online global pastiche that invites viewers to capture and upload video footage that corresponds to one of the 1276 shots from Vertov’s iconic film. In the spirit of the Vertov’s vision of exposing the materiality of the filmmaking process while providing an insight into life in a modernist city, Bard’s project invites a liquid aesthetic in the form of a constantly fluxing array of user-generated

digital video content, captured using a variety of portable media devices such as mini dv cameras, tablets and smartphones. The site-specific software on the website remixes uploaded media content in order to generate a new version of the film on a daily basis, thus producing a video that is arguably never complete, but rather open to creative interventions from a networked global audience that are viewers and/or participants in this unique documentary project.

Bard's project rejects the idea of the auteur in favour of a more democratic approach to the production of this documentary form. Like Scheleser's *24 Frames, 24 Hours*, Crowd-sourcing also enables Bard to gather content from across the globe, providing opportunities for individuals from diverse backgrounds to participate in the production of a multi-narrative participatory video project. Viewers are encouraged to select a shot or scene from Vertov's original film then use a digital imaging device to replicate that image in a way that captures their imagination or resonates with some aspect of their personal life. The resulting video footage is then simply uploaded to the website and collocated in a growing database of digital media content.

Bard's project does more than create a remake of a classic experimental documentary form, it provides a means to connect the past with present, analogue with digital, and engages both audience and participants in the search of a 'kino pravda' (cinematic truth) that has resonance and meaning in the digital age.

In his book *Questioning Technology Freeburg* (1999, vii) suggests that we are empowered by conceiving of the social and technology as being interconnected. Our everyday communications and experiences become increasingly mediated through a wide range of digital technologies. We use computing devices to micro-manage business and pleasure, capture and share images, and entertain ourselves. In the age of the database, we have arguably become the director, writer, technician and producer of our own stories. As we familiarize ourselves with new media technologies and learn ways to navigate networked spaces, we are also developing an understanding of the systems and tools that are required to have agency in these digital spaces. With these new media technologies comes the opportunity to forge new frontiers, to exploit the creative potential of emergent media technologies, and in doing so create innovative and/or hybrid documentary forms.

Database Documentary in the University Classroom

As we move further towards the idea of a networked global society, an understanding of networked and new media technologies should form an important part of the curriculum of a digital media program. As noted in the recent *Innovating Pedagogy Report*:

> Seamless learning (connecting learning experiences across locations, times, technologies or social settings) is emerging from research projects and moving towards mainstream adoption. Mobile technologies are enabling learning to continue across contexts, so a piece of work started in the classroom can be continued at home; and ideas that occur on the move can be shared with colleagues online, and then followed up in person. (Sharples et al. 2013, 17).

With the above factors in mind I have developed a second year tertiary level unit/subject, Digital Narratives, which aims to build knowledge, skills and awareness of the ways in which new media technologies and *convergence cultures* (see Jenkins 2008) are reconfiguring our understanding of media production, broadcast models and audiences. Students in this unit use a combination of online platforms, mobile media, and social media to produce and disseminate original digital content used for production of database documentaries.

The main focus in the Digital Narratives unit is on documentary projects that explore and/or examine the role of community in society. In the first week of one such class an informal survey found that only two of the 32 students watched documentary films on a regular basis, therefore the role of the Digital Narratives unit was to introduce students to documentary, as well as new modes of documentary storytelling while increasing their digital literacy knowledge and skills.

Digital Narratives students are asked to organise themselves into groups of three or four to construct a database documentary that explores the theme of community. Students are also required to keep a weekly production blog where they document ideas and challenges associated with the project, this process culminates in the production of a two or three minute video in which each group member reflects upon their personal experience and the learning outcomes.

In the classroom live crowd-sourcing applications are used to generate ideas which are later distributed to the students via social media. Rather than prescribe a set format for each production, students are asked to experiment with both the media tools and the narrative structure. Students are also encouraged to use their smartphones to capture video and photographic

content, while more conventional equipment (such as mini DV cameras, digital audio recording devices, lapel and/or shotgun microphones) were also made available.

As observed by Helen Keegan (2013), Senior Lecturer in Interactive Media and Social Technologies at Salford University, mobile filmmaking assists students in developing an open mindset and promotes an engagement with networks. Engagement in database documentaries encourages students to engage in performing for the internet rather than simply sitting in front of a computer.

Through their use of networked and portable media devices, some Digital Narratives students have found creative solutions to the organisation and capture of interviews with their subjects. One group invited the subjects of their documentary to interview themselves, recording it with smartphones and then to upload the files to Dropbox (dropbox.com) for later retrieval by the students; another group created live video or audio captures of interviewees on the other side of the globe using the Skype (skype.com) video call application. Another group (making a documentary on the organic food community in Melbourne) used the online social media platform Instructables (instructables.com) to host DIY video tutorials to help others to grow their own organic vegetables; another group, using a mash up of WordPress (wordpress.com) and Google maps, created an interactive mobile phone tour of Melbourne's street art.

As noted by Schleser (2011) 'in addition to enabling the access to film and video production, the digital media environment increasingly challenges the linearity of production, consumption and exhibition'. Unlike self-contained linear narrative forms, database documentaries defy the logic of a beginning, middle and end as an overriding structure. Instead, database documentaries invite multiple entry and exit points, combining a range of media assets (photo, video, audio, text, etc.) across a range of media platforms and screens to create unique ways to experience information.

Social media platforms can also play an important role in the promotion of online documentary projects. They are an integral part of outreach strategies, helping filmmakers to reach and engage audiences, as well as build community awareness of key issues and themes associated with a documentary project. As noted by Scott-Stevenson (2011), 'the incorporation of social media platforms into online documentary can enhance this engagement and understanding, an example of which may be the drip-feeding of clips from a documentary onto Facebook, leading viewers to return to a home website to watch more content'.

Social media platforms may also be used as repositories for documentary information in the form of written, photographic, video and audio material. These platforms can also enable easy sharing of media content where viewers assume the role of 'contributor' by uploading information they perceive to be relevant to the issues presented in a documentary project.

In a new media landscape it is important that educators develop new modes of teaching practices and pedagogies that acknowledge the global shifts in education. As Rorabaugh says,

> If students live in a culture that digitizes and educates them through a screen, they require an education that empowers them in that sphere, teaches them that language, and offers new opportunities of human connectivity. Digital tools offer the opportunity to refocus how power works in the classroom. (2012, 1)

The ongoing convergence and development of new media technologies presents educators with increased challenges, but also opportunities, to improve student engagement through innovative teaching practice. As we increasingly navigate a networked media landscape, it's important that both students and educators familiarize themselves with the tools and rhetoric of the new knowledge economy. To operate in this fluid technological space, it is vital that students and educators develop an understanding of *the language of new media* (see Manovich, 2001), and in particular, how these technologies may facilitate engaging and innovative learning and teaching practices within and outside the university classroom.

Conclusion

As digital media technologies continue to transform the production, distribution and viewing of media content, the documentary film might also be transformed to fit the parameters of digital media-scape and a networked society. As Nichols (2001, 101) states, "new modes signal less a better way to represent the historical world than a new dominant to organize a film, a new ideology to explain our relation to reality, and a new set of issues and desires to preoccupy the audience". This is not to say that documentary film should be considered obsolete, but rather that digital media and networked technologies simply offer filmmakers a chance to remediate the documentary film in ways that exploit these technologies, and by doing so, extend our understanding of documentary storytelling.

Database documentaries presents opportunities for filmmakers (amateurs and professionals) to engage in new modes of documentary practice while developing the digital media skills and literacy that are vital to having agency within a dynamic and constantly changing new media-scape. The development and production of database documentaries within a classroom environment can also be used to promote student engagement in documentary practices, contributing to the important task of teaching digital literacy. Through the making of database documentaries, students may also develop a sophisticated understanding of the ways in which networked media technologies shape our communications and media experiences. It is with this understanding and knowledge that students will be better placed to be effective media practitioners and communicators in a digital realm.

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Figures

Figure 1: Screen shot *Rider Spoke*. *Blast Theory* (2007). http://www.blasttheory.co.uk/projects/rider-spoke/

Figure 2: Screen shot *24 Frames, 24 Hours*. Max Schleser (2011).
http://www.24frames24hours.org.nz

Figure 3: Screen shot *Man with a Movie Camera: Global Remake*. Perry Bard (2008).
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