"Civic Realism": Documentary and the Unfinished Business of Citizenship

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Abstract

Documentary has played a vital role in promoting interests in social and political issues and active citizenship, at different historical moments. Or so it is claimed. Amid changes in media technologies and their uses including the pressures of popular television programming, and in broader political culture, some see the idea that documentary can engage public interest in questions of citizenship as now being in crisis. This paper argues that documentary can promote the capacity for social participation by the way in which filmmakers manage their relationships with the people they represent and find new ways of appealing to audiences. It illustrates this with reference to the 2008 documentary about the Australian Government's emergency intervention in Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, Intervention: Katherine, NT, which was made through community collaboration, for mainstream broadcast television. This program shows the ability of documentary to promote networks of relations through which filmmakers, participants and audiences can share interests in dealing with the unfinished business of citizenship.

Keywords

documentary, civics, realism, Northern Territory intervention

Introduction

This paper takes up the question, posed in the "Media and Citizenship" stream of the ANZCA09 conference, of how media communications can "contribute to the development of personal capacities to more effectively participate in societies characterized by increased cultural and technological complexity" (ANZCA, 2009). It discusses this question from the viewpoint of documentary. For some critics and scholars, documentary's role in fostering civic participation, in sustaining and extending ideas of citizenship, can no longer be assumed

as confidently as it has been at some other historical moments. I shall argue that, in our context of cultural and technological change, the conference-stream concern with developing personal capacities helps to understand this role, from a perspective that has not been considered extensively, or even explicitly, in work on documentary within the field of media, cultural and communication studies.

This perspective is based on an idea of what I call "civic realism" in documentary. The paper develops this idea by first amplifying critical concerns over documentary's ability to engage with contemporary publics, in its representations of social realities and issues. Then, with reference to the Australian situation and through an example, it responds to these concerns by arguing the ability of documentary to act as a medium for negotiating complex discursive and political positions, in networks of relations where filmmakers, participants and audiences share interests in articulating problems and possibilities of citizenship.

Reimagining documentary communities

The increasing "cultural and technological complexity" characterizing sites of social participation, to cite the conference-stream question again, is at the heart of recent debate on documentary. A clear statement of the issues arising for documentary is provided by Corner (1999). For the purpose of broader discussion, acknowledging that he is referring mainly to the British context, Corner (p. 2) identifies three "classic" documentary "projects" or "functions". These are the "project of democratic civics", which has provided "publicity for citizenship" under official sponsorship; "journalistic inquiry and exposition" associated with the television industry; and "radical interrogation and alternative perspective", which has developed through independent filmmaking and "attempts a criticism and a correction of other accounts in circulation".

Broadly, Corner contends that these three projects, and their forms of connection with audiences, have been affected by a fourth, which he calls "documentary as diversion" (p. 3). Television has increasingly blurred the boundaries between documentary and various popular, entertainment-based genres of factual television. (The changes in industry contexts and the development of hybrid documentary and factual forms are further outlined in Corner, 2002, and Corner & Rosenthal, 2005.) Corner writes that the "emphasis on market systems [and] market values", in national and international contexts, has generated an "expanded range of popular images of the real" (1999, p. 7) and a re-channeling of "documentary energies" into forms of "diversion" (p. 3). These are the elements of what he calls, for argument's sake, "post-documentary culture".

The use of the latter term indicates that the changes in question are not solely technological, in any narrow sense of the word. The shifts in genres and uses of technique, driven by the television industry and trade, relate also to changing tastes and cultural predispositions of viewers. In this regard, according to Corner (pp. 1, 5), the very ideas of the "social" and the "public", which documentary has counted on, are in "deepening crisis". Although he does not discuss previous periods in detail in this particular paper, a brief note on historical context may help to make the point here.

In relation to the documentary civics tradition, Corner (p. 2) refers to the role of John Grierson in Britain, a reference that evokes the British documentary movement with which the latter was strongly associated and which made popular education for citizenship its mission. The tenor of that movement is signaled elsewhere by Rabiger in his *Directing the Documentary* (1997, p. 19). So, for instance, Rabiger recalls Grierson's endorsement of Brecht's view that "art is not a mirror held up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it" and writes that the commitment being built was to an "idea of community and community strength" (p. 19), implicitly in a spirit of nation-building – as is evident more generally in Grierson's writings (Hardy, Ed. 1979). While projects of documentary civics, in diverse national contexts of official film production and public service broadcasting, have taken no canonic form, simply derivative from Grierson's ideas, this example illustrates a conventional assumption, to which Corner is referring, that documentary can engage meaningfully in a public sphere.

Such projects envision documentary as part of a cultural context in which viewers can be disposed to recognise that they share interests with other social actors who belong to wider audiences, as well as with the makers of the films or programs. In this regard, they have relied on, and sought to reinforce, practices of imagining "community in anonymity" that Benedict Anderson (1983, p. 36) sees as having been made possible initially by cultural and commercial media uses of print technology, as in the circulation and reception of newspapers. It is this historically available confidence in imagined community, however, that Corner says is now in question for civic, journalistic and other uses of documentary. He contends that documentary has relied on an "engagement with perceptions of social community" and "assumed and fostered rhetorics of belonging and involvement … that are now increasingly difficult to sustain" (p. 5). In effect, this is a concern that documentary ideas of shared cultural concerns with civics may now be anachronistic.

In seeking a basis on which documentary could renew models of media and civic communities, Corner suggests that it is to be found by interacting with "the new range of scheduled factuality and the tastes this has encouraged" (p. 6). This means being open to the value of popular, "infotainment" genres for finding "new lines of viewer interest". Corner speaks of the opportunity that documentary makers have to contribute to "the defence and development of democratic public life", which requires "goals of accuracy, clarity, fairness and trust" (p. 6), in creating new forms of documentation in this changing media culture (one that continues to shift with forms of digital convergence as foreshadowed in his paper). In other words, a merging of "civic" with other functions is possible, bringing documentary ambitions, research, and analysis to bear on "journalistic" practice and its potential audience appeals.

This problem of imagining a public for documentary is pursued by various other writers, most notably for present purposes by Winston (1995). In his critique of the Griersonian tradition, Winston (p. 67) sees civic-minded documentary as having failed to excite social "identification and involvement" (see also Winston, 2000, pp. 19-22, 40-42, for a less severe critical appraisal). He argues that, in epistemic terms, works in this tradition have "claimed the real" (Winston, 1995), purporting to reveal truths of actuality through the aesthetic process of representation, while disavowing their own ideological mediations. At the same time, in ethical terms, by constructing their ideals of progress, and their vision of social practices and problems, including those of disadvantaged groups, filmmakers have presumed to speak for others, who are thus denied agency in the process by which they are represented. As a result, this civic tradition is seen to have shored up dominant ideological outlooks while casting a range of social actors, albeit sympathetically, as victims of circumstances that the works fail to analyse and so help to perpetuate. These are the features of what Winston (pp. 40-47, 255) characterizes as a "victim tradition" that has cast a shadow over documentary practice long after its cinematic heyday. From this viewpoint, two forces – an aesthetic mode of orchestrating images and sounds, and an ethical and political displacement of social actors from the process of portraying their own historical experience – have combined to create a pattern of ideological closure in filmic representation, taking documentary on a "flight from social meaning" (p. 37), from which it still struggles to recover.

Although the possibilities of realism have been compromised by this ideological practice, Winston (pp. 253-55) argues, if documentary drops the pretence of objectivity, and acknowledges "the normal circumstances of image production" and its "inevitable mediations", it becomes free to engage more openly with a range of issues in ways "consonant with our everyday experience of reality". The questions of how documentary

represents social experiences and issues, and from whose point of view, need to be confronted. So, too, does the nature of the relationship between filmmakers and the participants or "subjects" portrayed – that is, the topic of ethics that has allegedly "been repressed in film studies and practice" (p. 241). Approached thus, documentary has the power to "amplify" issues that have significance in particular social or political contexts (p. 237; see also Nichols, 2001, pp. 141-142). In turn, "[a]ny consideration of the realist documentary must confront the reality of its reception" (p. 61): the measure of realism becomes what the audience makes of, in Bill Nichols' words cited by Winston (p. 253), "the documentary's representation of the evidence". In sum, by engaging more openly with participants, audiences and contexts, documentary can help to shape communities of interest in new ways.

Situating these concerns in relation to the underlying interest in developing capacities for social participation, the question arises at this point of what abilities and resources are required in this kind of cultural engagement. I now suggest some terms within which a response to this question can be outlined more explicitly than it has been to date in critical writing on documentary civics. Rather than defining these terms first in the form of general principles, I indicate them by taking a case study of documentary at work in an accessible context. This is consistent with the recognition by Winston (1995, pp.257-258) and Corner (1999, p. 1) that the problems and possible solutions that they discuss vary in nature across different national or regional contexts. In the next section, then, I take up the issues of what resources, relations and attributes enable documentary to facilitate participation in social issues, and reflect on the nature of that participation, with reference to an example drawn from the contemporary Australian context.

Documentary as medium of civic negotiation

The problems facing documentary in its attempts to engage with social issues have been discussed in the Australian context by numerous writers and filmmakers. For some, like Porter (1998), these attempts are thwarted and documentary undergoes a "dumbing down" as its forms and approaches are appropriated in the development of light-weight reality television formats. In response to a media sphere dominated by the demands of television programming and popular reception, the need is argued to support documentary practices that include depth of research and liaison with participants, and promote analysis of social realities, changes and tensions (Porter 1998; Thomas, 2002).

The conditions for such support relate to some distinctive features of contemporary Australian documentary production and distribution. In ways partly comparable to the British and some

other contexts, television has become the "main show in town" for documentary, since the late 1980s (FitzSimons, Laughren & Williamson, 2000). Indeed, government production funding for the expanding independent sector has mainly been conditional on commitments to distribute works through broadcast television (FitzSimons, 2002). In this situation, different functions of civic, journalistic and independent-alternative documentary have intersected with each other, as well as combining with hybrid infotainment genres. However, this has had no necessary general outcome (such as the "dumbing down" of documentary), because varied cultures of practice have persisted, intersecting and overlapping in the changing context, with sometimes unpredictable outcomes (Williamson, 2007).

Another distinctive feature of the Australian context is the relative strength of projects that Corner does not specifically mention in his paper on post-documentary culture, particularly those of anthropological and ethnographic documentary (Laughren, 2006). Taking the channeling of these streams into account, in a distribution environment still dominated by television, we can recognise that diverse documentary forms find support, to varying degrees, through government screen assistance bodies, and connect with interested communities, participants, distributors and potential audiences. Documentary's potential for social engagements, and the personal and culturally formed capacities that it draws on and fosters, can thus be looked at from the viewpoint of initiatives to use the medium's resources to negotiate diverse industry, funding, distribution and community networks.

This idea can be illustrated by the example of a recent Australian documentary that joins the wider debate and controversy over the Commonwealth's "Northern Territory Emergency Response" intervention into Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory, which began under the Howard Coalition Government in June 2007 and has continued, with some modifications and review, under the Rudd Labor Government. *Intervention: Katherine, NT* (2008) is a one-hour television documentary, written and directed by Julie Nimmo. It was developed and produced in association with the ABC, with principal production investment from Screen Australia and further assistance from the NSW Film and Television Office.

The general context for the documentary includes the volatile mix of criticism, mistrust, cynicism, qualified support and endorsement that the intervention precipitated in media and public debate. The intervention, it may be recalled, followed the release of the *Little Children are Sacred* report (Northern Territory Government, 2007) on the problem of the sexual abuse of Aboriginal children. For many, government has had a hidden agenda in the intervention, for instance to take control over land or normalize Aboriginal communities in neo-assimilationist terms, denying rights in a process with which at least some mainstream media

continue to be complicit. (See Langton, 2008-2009, for an account that acknowledges the force of the "hidden agenda" criticism but also argues its limits in dealing politically with the urgent problems raised.) Given this, the intervention can be seen as a circumstance in which the concerns about contemporary disenchantment with the possibilities of defending and developing "democratic public life", which Corner raises, play out in an intensified form.

The immediate setting of the documentary is one in which the filmmaker records the experience of the intervention among people in four Indigenous communities near Katherine, over a year (Tudball, 2008.) Making the film involved interaction with groups directly affected by the intervention, and gaining clearance from Mal Brough, the then Minister for Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs, to film the staff conducting the intervention (Smith, 2008). This varied basis for working with the different people who are represented informs the way in which the film addresses the political and cultural issues.

The issues articulated in the documentary include the tension between attempting to address problems of social citizenship (concerning health, safety, welfare, and improvement of living conditions), on the one hand, and, on the other, the suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act (RDA) that guarantees formal equality of citizenship. This relates to concerns about the "blanket" nature of intervention measures, such as income quarantining, which participants in the film see as undermining their own exercise of ethical and cultural capacities and citizenship in public and private (including family) life. To the extent that we might speak of a "story arc", welcomed on television, in the documentary's treatment of such concerns, it lies in the progression from a key pretext for the intervention, protection of children from sexual abuse, to the presentation of findings that such abuse in Indigenous communities is much rarer than had been assumed. However, along the way, various problems are tabled in the program, by the documentary methods of observational filming, and interaction with the Indigenous communities and a range of other social agents. The latter include representatives of the intervention, and regional health and administrative personnel, who have local knowledge and alternative views to those of the intervention teams about how to deliver and use services. The researched exposition, reflected in further soundtrack commentary and data, registers a range of arguments for and against the intervention, and on its likely success or failure.

The film thus portrays a range of different perspectives and interpretations, from community to territory and federal levels, indicating points of agreement or translation between them, and gaps between policy and implementation. These problems and differences are not resolved by the use of a dramatic narrative formula, or ironic distancing of the possibility of documenting

serious social problems (as in various postmodernist and avowedly anti-realist conceptions of progressive documentary). Rather, the film uses a range of documentary "functions" (to recall Corner's term) to hold in tension a number of different political and cultural positions in the field of the intervention. For instance, the long-term observation process, carried out collaboratively by the Indigenous filmmaker who is new to the remote communities (Smith, 2008), allows community members to share their perspectives and tell their own stories extensively, according to the principles and practices of ethnographic filmmaking (noted above as a significant dimension of Australian documentary practice). But this approach also depends on the willingness of people liaised with and represented "to participate for the needs of television" (Nimmo, cited in Smith, 2008). This willingness can be seen as both an expression of trust in the filmmaker's role and, for at least some of the participants, an interest in the documentary as an opportunity to voice a position publicly. But the needs of television also delimit the amount of observational and ethnographic material that can ultimately be included. Further, the television "end-use" includes the journalistic techniques of using short interviews or actuality footage for the visiting personnel, thus showing further perspectives, but altering to some extent the context in which the community voices are heard in the discussions with the visitors and in day-to-day situations that have been complicated by the intervention.

To generalise slightly, the flexible use of documentary functions and techniques here reflects a negotiation of relations between filmmaker and participants (particularly several Indigenous community members who are observed and who speak to or for the camera in multiple scenes), one that suggests the interplay of their interests. We can see in this the value, for documentary seeking to "amplify" social issues (as Winston puts it), of a filmmaking aesthetic and practice capable of engaging participants in representing their experience. The combination of various documentary functions enables the program to represent a number of problems in the intervention, in their complexity, for instance when local testimony and observation of experience jar with the stated aims of the intervention. The intervention regime of basic health checks is seen in this way to be superfluous because of the documented efficiency of already authorized local health care in the district. However, this judgment forms on the basis of a shared commitment to norms of health that need to be secured across the population. Keeping such norms of citizenship in view across the zones of dispute, the multiple (ethnographic, journalistic, etc) functions allow the issues to be treated in depth and breadth, in new encounters with evidence. For instance, various scenes show the difficulties caused by the intervention in the functioning Katherine communities, but these are held in tension with arguments that certain interventionist measures are necessary to deal with the extent of problems existing in other communities. This extended treatment allows viewers (or

participants) the possibility of responding from similar or different perspectives. In juxtaposing elements such as patient observation with character study and journalistic inquiry, the film shows the possibilities of "interaction" between documentary form and the television idioms to which Corner alludes, in a way that treats matters with greater rather than less intelligibility.

What supports various points for engagement here is that some weight is given to different categories of citizenship and differentiation of statuses and prerogatives within them. The political inequality resulting from the suspension of the RDA is recognized as uncomfortable, even if it is designed to assist Indigenous people, and the criticism is included that no equivalent constitutional measure applies across other problem areas of the population. However, the film does not treat this problem, or indeed the idea that government action was motivated ideologically and by calculation of electoral appeal, as delegitimizing concerns with "normalization" in the sense of achieving some equitable, positive ordinariness in matters of social citizenship, for example, in health, welfare and housing.

In this regard, in terms of its capacity for social engagement, documentary works as a means of relay, extending knowledge and experience, from sites represented, to other individuals and groups. This is reflected in the way the film has been taken up in education, as a means of studying the civic and political issues of the intervention (Tudball, 2008), and in journalistic debate in other media. The response of the journalist, Paul Toohey (2008), indicates how the film helps to progress debate on aspects of the intervention. Toohey writes that the film is not necessarily "balanced", but it does not "have to be". While it "leans against the intervention", the generation of evidence and findings allows further interpretation, while operating in frameworks of social communication where negotiation and adjustment of views are possible. Although the film shows the statistical case that there is not "rampant child-sex abuse" and suggests that "the language of the intervention … underwent a subtle change to talk about poverty", Toohey contends that the focus changed, rather, to the problem of "child neglect", which is the responsibility of "both parents and government" and a "real reason why the intervention needs to continue". Nonetheless, Toohey notes, the film shows areas where the intervention and related measures need closer engagement with Indigenous people in the Northern Territory – a position argued on several fronts in the film itself, including by health and administrative staff. Despite, or even through, such disagreement, then, the film advances debate by its organisation of the perspectives, voices and arguments that it assembles.

An achievement of the documentary is thus to offer insights into issues requiring further consideration (rather than being neatly resolved in the program), while working with a

television format that allows a familiar range of both reasoned and empathetic appeals in characterization and narrative tensions. The documentary provides the means to attain what Goot & Rowse (2007, p. 171) describe as an open and sophisticated understanding that, not only are there "contesting political and cultural groups each with their own way of seeing the world", but that persons may be "divided in their own minds when they find that more than one framing of a complex matter makes sense to them". The example of *Intervention* suggests that, in uses of documentary, holding different perspectives in tension with one another need not be thought of as trying to find some ideal balance, or as deferring the need to make decisions on complex issues. Rather, this activity can be seen as an effort to stimulate, through cultural and media relays, interest not only in the controversial issues and the divisions between sides, but in preserving the "common ground shared by conflicting parties" in the civic interchanges and processes by which decisions can be encouraged or reached (Minson, 1993, p. 175). It is in this sense that documentary can promote civic encounter and negotiation.

Conclusion

Through the example of a program made in the current situation, I have outlined an approach for considering how documentary can engage with social issues in changing media and cultural contexts. This approach is offered in response to the concerns about the possibility of documentary making significant connections with publics in a so-called "post-documentary" culture. We can understand the potential for social engagement through documentary by considering a range of linked factors including the relation of filmmaker and participants; the inventive use of documentary resources in the context of that relation; and the negotiations of form and content to realize the work for wide distribution including (but not limited to) television, in ways that appeal to audiences.

The example of *Intervention: Katherine, NT* indicates how new kinds of interaction can occur between independent filmmaking, production assistance bodies and mainstream television, resulting in accessible treatments of events, and how documentary functions can be used in mobile ways to bring into dialogue different perspectives on problems and how to deal with them. Through the example considered here, we have seen how documentary practices such as long-term collaboration and research, adapted to create work for television and potentially other outlets, offer methods for capturing different experiences and positions in ways that support a civic mode of negotiating controversial issues, based on a realistic interest in the cultural and institutional conditions under which they can be worked on. This discussion of a documentary "intervention in the intervention" can, of course, only be indicative, but it

illustrates the capacities that documentary can enhance for media participation, and social engagement, in the unfinished business of citizenship.

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