Reframing the Impact on Documentary From Social Media and Streaming Through Media Theories Informed by Platformization

SEAN MAHER◆
Queensland University of Technology, Australia

The analysis of documentary filmmaking is approached through emerging critical media theories responding to the intersections between Web-based platforms and factual programming. Despite series-based documentary becoming a mainstay on streaming services and inchoate forms of factual content proliferating across social media, scarce attention is paid to the context and role of Web-based platforms and their impact on documentary as a social movement media. Reframing critical media theory to account for the upheavals affecting documentary means taking fuller account of "platformization" and reexamining film history epistemologies of documentary premised on professional producers and spectatorship. As the era of globally networked communication continues to reconfigure iterations of certain social, political, and economic apparatuses, the analysis examines emerging approaches and speculative media theories to documentary as a key legacy media object. As the forerunner to a form of media that targeted social change, documentary warrants efforts to expand epistemological perspectives on its development and continued negotiation of social media in the age of Web-based communications.

Keywords: documentary, social media, platformization

Traditional media analyses addressing documentary is still often premised on feature film formats and separations between production and distribution despite online affordances rapidly dissolving such distinctions. As emerging forms of factual content proliferate across social media and streaming platforms, they are redefining documentary against modes of user-generated content (UGC) as well as changing industrial and economic models transforming from Web-based technologies and the key online infrastructures supplied by platforms. By taking stock of how documentary is being transformed in the context of "platformization" the aim is to assess how documentary production is responding to new processes of global online mediation.

Until recently, documentary producers have used social media platforms as a means of extending forms of activism or for marketing and promotion purposes that can support distribution. But as underlying infrastructure, platforms continue to reorganize social, cultural, and economic relations, and there is a concomitant take-up of documentary among social media players who have moved into producing original content for their user base. Documentary and factual content is shifting in this sense

Sean Maher: s.maher@qut.edu.au
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as its relationship to various platforms becomes employed in the service of a platform's "stickiness" (Yen, 2016), the condition that describes how users are encouraged to remain engaged with specific platforms. For example, social media partnerships between organizations like the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) and Snapchat as well as documentary initiatives by LinkedIn and Instagram have been trialed as the means for expanding the respective social media platform's offerings to their users. For documentary producers these collaborations offer the possibility of increasing the audience reach for factual programming. As well as redefining forms of documentary-based storytelling, the impact of platforms on documentary filmmaking is also to reorganize its financing, distribution, and consumption models. As news and journalism content has moved from analog to digital modes of consumption, the implications from these shifts have been well documented by social movement studies and early Internet research developed in communications studies. In terms of documentary, however, these upheavals remain secondary against film studies considerations with a tradition of analysis focused on television and feature film formats that situates documentary in a somewhat linear relationship to cinema and broadcasting in its epistemological history.

As the expansive user base of social media and streaming platforms replaces the traditional conception of spectator-orientated audiences, documentary is undergoing transformations in line with other media content and formats against the inextricable rise of amateur content creators. Traditional documentary has always posed its own set of challenges, from its definition to its relationship to fictional narrative modes and content. These perennial questions and issues are only exacerbated as documentary is circulated alongside user-generated and other inchoate forms of content that continues to proliferate online. Recent documentary collaborations on social media platforms have highlighted how distinctions between branded content, documentary, news, and other factual content blur in the age of UGC and the participatory online culture of network society. At the more pernicious end of the spectrum, the disrupted mediascape of participatory culture has given rise to challenges issuing from fake news, deep fakes, shallow fakes, and most recently, artificial intelligence. The combined effect of these developments has given rise to notions of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation, phenomena that threatens verification systems and that UNESCO has identified as seeding societal destabilization (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). It is against these ongoing tumults unleashed by the digital age that documentary filmmakers are navigating new forms and new modes of engagement.

Changes in documentary in the contemporary media ecology offer a unique perspective on Web-based platforms and the extent to which they can accommodate aspects of documentary's social change remit or whether these vital aspects will be constrained by the inherent limitations imposed by the architecture of network society's global computational infrastructure. Traditionally approached and conceived in terms of disruption and disintermediation, platformization continues to reorganize global media according to user and computational logics that is for all intents and purposes determined by the private tech sector. Amid the prodigious expansion of factual content across streaming services and social media platforms, this discussion combines transformative and constructivist methods in a transdisciplinary approach to contemporary media understandings. By focusing on how platforms are impacting documentary, a corresponding research methodology is derived from the spheres of media activity operating under network logics and their internalities.

Platformization

The Web-based digital environment surrounding contemporary documentary production, distribution, and exhibition continues to displace the traditional broadcast and theatrical contexts where documentary traditionally circulated and was consumed. Until recently, the function of social media platforms has served as the promotional needs of stand-alone documentaries produced in a mostly traditional manner that has resulted in feature-length films. More recently, however, there are examples where documentary has been produced on and by social media platforms, giving rise to new formal expressions of social documentary. Examples like Sara Mak and Nicola Hazell's (2018) docuseries, *SheStarts*, saw the social media platform LinkedIn turn to documentary programming as the means for extending their brand and platform centered on corporate networking. By collaborating with professional documentarians on *SheStarts* (Mak & Hazell, 2018), LinkedIn's expanded on its UGC that is the mainstay of its offerings (Logue, 2018).

As well as motivated to expand what a social media platform can offer to its users, documentary represents a somewhat trusted artifact from legacy media. Documentary represents the potential for independent perspectives to deepen the engagement of a social media platform's users that can also extend to notions like DIY (do-it-yourself) activism. According to Rose (2014),

> today, we can see not just DIY as amateur-made, participatory content within documentary, but the broader development of what we might call a DIY culture that is emerging where documentary meets the affordances of the social, semantic, and open web. (p. 202)

Online affordances would seem to extend the social remit of documentary by enabling forms of DIY and participatory culture that comprise essential aspects of contemporary citizenship that continues to redefine and reimagine the public sphere.

While documentary form and content is responding to shortened modes aligned with social media platforms, streaming services like Netflix, Amazon, and HBO Max have embraced long-form documentary content for their own programming purposes. As platforms that provide video-on-demand content, they too have impacted the formal elements of documentary through preferences for docuseries over other formats like documentary features. Documentary form continues to respond to streaming platforms in the tradition that saw it adapting to changes in cinema exhibition and broadcast television throughout the twentieth century.

The embrace of documentary programming by Netflix often sees docuseries showcased under the banner of Netflix Originals that ensures privileged positioning on the streamer's landing pages by generating the auto-play of trailers, teasers, and promotional content for its subscribers. Meanwhile, other global streaming services like HBO Max, Amazon, Disney+, and Paramount+, have all either hosted, commissioned, or produced documentaries either as stand-alone feature films or adapted factual content into multi-episode series (Bosselman, Shanfeld, & Ferme, 2021). Multi-episode series comprising single or multiple seasons satisfy the binge-viewing behaviors indelibly associated with streaming services. Netflix

currently has 1,025 docuseries available to U.S. subscribers ("What's on Netflix," 2024) and this proliferating format is a notable impact from streaming services as they adapt factual programming into a form that corresponds to the consumption habits of their subscribers. The influence and impact from streamers has also been attributed to the rise of the true crime genre in documentary and reflects how streaming services are able to respond to the algorithmic data harvested from the programming choices and behaviors of their subscribers (Maher & Cake, 2023).

Streaming services from Netflix to Amazon platforms cater to high-end, professionally produced screen content that most resembles the former analog contexts of legacy media, while social media platforms situate documentary alongside user-generated and amateur content. Given how influential the Web-based media context has become to all screen content, the following section outlines some key concepts drawn from digital media commentators and scholarship to outline some key characteristics of online media practices that have become synonymous with platform logics. These logics underpin contemporary media practices and include the hardware from which we access the cyber and online world to the social and cultural practices that has blurred distinctions between producers and consumers and given rise to notions of prosumers in the wake of the prodigious expansion of UGC.

The media and communications ecology characterized by ubiquitous digital devices and the affordances of Web-based media operate in a constant state of emergence. As new devices and new technologies continue to update and persistently shift social and cultural behaviors, the architectonics beneath the contemporary mediascape appears to unfold in a state of perpetual flux. As new platforms with their modes of engagement emerge, correlating forms of new behaviors develop. Beneath Web-based dynamics, however, some fundamental principles can be derived from platforms that inform how interactions are conducted online. For van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2018), platformization "refers to the way in which entire societal sectors are transforming as a result of the mutual shaping of online connectors and complementers" (van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 19). For van Dijck and colleagues (2018), when platforms serve as connectors and complementers, they form part of the infrastructural functions of platform providers that are more relational than fixed. Additional insight is provided by Hutchison (2023) who emphasizes the role of programmability in platform logics that "describes the process by which content becomes popular across social media platforms: it is the manipulation of content that is distributed across social media platforms that promotes our interpersonal communicative activities" (p. 124). Content and technology converge in platform logics seemingly in response to user behaviors and choices, while at the same time, algorithms also drive what content is distributed and what choices are presented to users. The key dynamic operating between users and platform technologies then is one based on continual exchange that operates like a calculus, forever adjusting to relatively sized inputs from both platform affordances and the choices of users.

Platforms and the dynamics surrounding platform logics are necessarily in a constant state of flux in network society. What persists amid endless cycles of emergence and convergence is the ongoing collapse of former distinct spheres of communication once divided along public and private, as well as professional and amateur. As the key writers on social media like Jenkins (2008) and Flichy (2007) have identified, a defining aspect of the Web-based media environment has been the rise of the amateur. The distributive impact of UGC continues to reshape social, cultural, and public domains with concomitant effects on the everyday and institutional dimensions shaping the 21st century. As foretold by Castells (2004), network

society is "a society whose social structure is made up of networks powered by micro-electronics-based information and communications technologies" (p. 3). Almost two decades on, the contemporary behaviors of network society are exercised through the operations of global computational systems that manifest as countless virtual interactions and cyber/social relations. The essential everydayness of these communications that comprise forms of "digital speech" (Karpf, 2016) has become the mundane communications of Web-based platforms.

The impact from network society through digital speech has been interpreted as responsible for "a shift from the notion of participatory democracy to that of a cooperative democracy, built 'from below' by a public that speaks without asking anybody" (Ferreira, 2017, p. 23). Contemporary notions of a speaking public and the phenomenon of "digital speech," however, is dependent on the continual exchange operating through digital platforms and their computational architecture. Publicly interfacing platforms that have become synonymous with social media are the instantly recognizable brands of Facebook, X (formerly Twitter), Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, TikTok, and Reddit, among others. Alongside these that cater primarily to UGC, there are also the more variegated platforms of Amazon, Apple, Alphabet-Google, eBay, LinkedIn, and Netflix. A glance at any smartphone will reveal a multitude of such services that may be situated as apps but nevertheless function in computational terms as interfaced platforms. Operating at the consumer level, these highly visible platforms are situated atop the megastructure submerged beneath the global information system that provides the infrastructure for our technologically laden lives and its digital, virtual, and cyber dimensions (Bratton, 2016, p. xviii). A dimension that no documentarian or media-content creator on any scale, whether on a corporate or individual level, can afford to ignore, let alone avoid.

We now understand at the consumer level that Web-based platforms arose in response to the excess of online content competing for the scarcity of time that is now understood as the attention economy. In the 1990s, the entire Internet fundamentally functioned as a platform, and with arrival of the World Wide Web, it could operate as a global open access system. With the advent of Web 2.0, interactive platforms became synonymous with social media and behaviors that continue to transform contemporary domains of polity, community, and citizenship.

Documentary has long been engaged across the domains of the public sphere and occupied a somewhat unique and privileged space within the cross currents of sociopolitical and cultural constructs of the everyday. As documentary intersects with users of social media, there is significant potential for Web-based social media platforms to augment documentary's social change remit (Borum Chattoo & Jenkins, 2019). Primarily, the relationship between social media and documentary filmmaking has been comprised of documentary films and filmmakers employing social media as a means of low-cost marketing to supplement traditional and other established methods of advertising and promotion. In recent years, however, documentary producers have experimented by partnering with social media platforms to produce exclusive and original content through collaborations with Instagram, Snapchat, and LinkedIn.

The embrace of documentary by all manner of platforms and providers poses significant challenges on the form and content of documentary as well as its financing and distribution elements. But perhaps most significantly, the integration of documentary into the platform logics of Web-based media problematizes aspects of documentary's core undertaking, that of its social change remit and its status as

a venerable form of independent media and screen content. As shifts in the ecology of documentary and its relationship to digital media platforms move from disruption to increased integration, activist sites like Online Optimism embrace social media as the means by which social action is harnessed and enacted. "In the future, the revolution will be not televised, but rather tweeted, Instagrammed, and live-streamed. Social media can be scary, but it is also a powerful tool" (Khiry, 2020). Web-based documentaries, meanwhile, have been argued by many to form an inevitable corollary to this potential offered by social media. Innovations presented by online affordances like interactivity has previously been explored by Nash (2014), Gerbaudo (2012, 2019), and Funke, Robe, and Wolfson (2012), while others like Miles (2014) argue for the merits of affect in digital documentary that can be expanded amid the online logics of Web-based media. For Miles (2014), an affective ecology is central in the reconfigured milieu of documentary as a result of network logics and "this expression of an affective ecology allows documentary to look towards the particular material logics of digital networks as enabling, and allows understanding to reach out of the work to address the world" (p. 81). Interactive documentaries initially provided some insights as to how documentarians could engage the digital affordances of the online world, but the ever-deepening structure and reach posed by digital networks presents possibilities and challenges that extend far beyond this single formal response.

As documentary developed over the course of the twentieth century, it adapted to the age of mass communications by evolving its modes and formats primarily in response to broadcast media as well as theatrical cinema. The development of documentary has seen it firmly situated in the dominant history of mainstream cinema, albeit with some overlaps with alternative and underground filmmaking that challenged the hegemony of industrial filmmaking practices. It is those dominant forms of mainstreams media, their ownership as well as their history, that continue to be impacted by the upheavals from network society. Writing on network society in 2006, Benkler (2006) highlighted, "The twentieth-century industrial producers of information, culture, and communications—like Hollywood, the recording industry, and some of the telecommunications giants—stand to lose much" (p. 381). As the repercussions on legacy media players and forms from online and Web-based media continue to play out, Cunningham and Craig (2019) argue, "The emerging shape of screen industries in the twenty-first century shows established players, norms, principles, and practices ceding significant power and influence to powerful digital streaming and social networking platforms" (p. 4). Amid this kind of crossfire, documentary as a genre of factual filmmaking persists and is arguably thriving in popularity as it manages to span amateur-based UGC and their platforms as well as the more traditional, high-end content platforms of streaming services.

Adapting to digital media platforms has recast documentary alongside the amateur screen content that is now possible to be produced on all manner of screens and technologies associated with contemporary ubiquitous devices. Circulating and ostensibly competing against UGC in the attention economy has seen "documentary's long traditions of participant /independent media production, archival exploration, and social discourse/action all find correlates in interactive environments that seek to enable user-generated content, tagging, and social networking" (Fallon, 2019, p. 6). Operating alongside—and in some instances, in tandem with—amateur online content, reconnects documentary to inclusive histories of what are described in terms of "vernacular media" that describe nonprofessional cinema practices. Consideration of documentary in terms of vernacular media histories assists recasting the epistemology of nonfiction filmmaking and unshackle it from the somewhat linear relationship it has played in the dominant histories supplied by fiction filmmaking.

As recently as 2017, in the third edition of *Introduction to Documentary*, leading documentary scholar Bill Nichols (2017) only briefly noted in its Introduction how

> the emergence of . . . new digital forms typically represents something akin to a process of cross-pollination with the documentary tradition. Related media trade conventions and borrow techniques from one another. Websites such as YouTube and Facebook, like photography before them, will soon deserve a history and theory of their own. (p. xiii)

By 2020, Salazkina and Fibla-Gutiérrez (2020) were arguing the need for something considerably more radical than what Nichols (2017) had envisioned just three years earlier to update our perspective on documentary in the new media relations. For Salazkina and Fibla-Gutiérrez (2020), nothing less than a paradigm shift was required to account for the impact from user-generated to offer "a reconsideration of film and media history of the twentieth century that places amateur production at its conceptual center" (p. 2). By framing their focus on amateur cinematic practice in terms of the longer traditions surrounding "vernacular media," film history can reclaim the practices surrounding amateur cinema that were truly global. For Salazkina and Fibla-Gutiérrez (2020), a focus on vernacular media and amateur cinema "reveals unexpected junctures that resonate powerfully with our present moment in global media culture, making amateur media production look less like quaint self-indulgence and more like a harbinger of things to come" (p. 2).

Documentaries commissioned by social media platforms like Instagram, Snapchat, and LinkedIn have required content that can be formally integrated into their respective platforms with their highly specific format requirements. As commissioned documentaries targeting the users of these social media platforms, these examples demonstrated how the end product had to be aligned to users' expectations of their respective platforms, similar in style and format to the short-form video content that characterized their existing UGC.

For documentarian Nicholaas Veul (2018), the platform specifics of Instagram provided the formal basis for his film *#followme* that premiered on November 21, 2018, on Instagram TV (IGTV). Produced in in phone-friendly portrait, its formal elements derived from the Instagram platform and app, and when it was broadcast the following day over terrestrial networks, no changes were made to its format. Veul's (2018) *#followme* makes full use of the picture-in-picture graphical GIFs, text overlay, and animations characteristic of the user-generated videos on Instagram. Presenting a relatively harsh critique of Instagram and the cultural dynamics it promotes around its influencer economy and business model, Instagram nevertheless adopted a benign attitude to *#followme*. The film circulated on the platform seemingly without interference. Given the scale of content awash on Instagram compared with Veul's single short program and its critique, this is not too surprising. Irrespective of whether it testifies to a benign attitude or one of indifference, Veul's (2018) *#followme* testifies to how a filmmaker can maintain the valued documentary perspective of an outsider, someone who is able to critique the very platform that is hosting and funding them (Hussain, 2019).

The Snapchat collaboration with PBS, PVO series resulted in two productions: Chanelle Aponte Pearson and Terence Nance's (2016) *The Way It Should Be*, a story of love and friendship as lived and told by queer women of color, and Lizzie Jacobs's (2016) *We'll Still Be Here*, centered on a residential community

through a group of dominoes players against the backdrop of neighborhood change. The platform exclusivity meant both productions had to accommodate several Snapchat-specific affordances. This commences with the duration of each work with no episodes exceeding six minutes in length. It also included interactive, multidirectional swipe elements that enabled navigation through platform-native functions to access the short factual segments by swiping left, right, up, and down.

The formal dimensions of social media platforms are not necessarily the features that stand out to most users as they access its UGC. Indeed, these platform-specific affordances have been developed with its modes of UGC firmly in mind and with software designers going to great lengths to make usage as intuitive as possible. However, for stand-alone documentary to appeal to the users of a social media platform, it has to align with its mundane functionalities. This translates into innovations in documentary form having to correlate to the online behaviors, habits, preferences, and user-interactivity of the respective platforms. Taken together, digital affordances like these have the potential to transform notions of spectators and audiences into more actively engaged social agents enhancing what Renov (1993) labels documentary's "social change orientation" (p. 28). But many like Canella (2017) believe that online modes of activism do not necessarily replace traditional ones and are seen as functioning as more complementary to, in-real-life (IRL) activism. "While social movement organizations (SMOs) are creatively incorporating digital and online activism into campaigns for social justice, these practices are inherently social that complement 'traditional' forms of organizing like public demonstrations, community meetings and newsletters" (Canella, 2017, p. 26). Meanwhile, collapsing previous distinctions between audiences, users, and stakeholders has potential to increase the social capital mobilizing the social functions that Corner (2002) has argued traditionally unites documentary's many forms and underscored its development.

The changing form of documentary is not just being driven by the requirements imposed by Web-based platforms but also by technical developments that continually reshapes filmmaking as a technological medium. As Canella (2017) argues,

> traditional conceptions of documentary film as a 90-minute feature can be somewhat limiting in our contemporary context. Interactive documentaries, 360° video and virtual reality are emerging technologies that are reshaping the documentary genre and the ways in which activist shoot and distribute messages of social justice. (p. 18)

Short interactive films under 10 minutes like Gabo Arora and Barry Pousman's (2015) *Clouds Over Sidra* and the exhibition and series sponsored by Doctors Without Borders, *Forced From Home* (Pracht, 2016), that consist of 10 short films all under nine minutes, have both used 360-degree video as an immersive technology to create documentaries that recount life in refugee camps from Greece to South Sudan. Full functionality of the interactive components is readily available through commonly available browsers, and they are all freely accessible through being hosted on YouTube. Each leverages an expansive platform like YouTube for its immersive potential to package social change content and raise public awareness of the plight of refugees.

Although the issue-driven documentaries discussed above had to rely on the production of short-form documentary, the opposite is true for streaming platforms where even 90-minute feature-length documentaries

are deemed not long enough. When it comes to video-on-demand streaming platforms, one of the most notable changes has been commissioning practices that have preferred multi-episode seasons over single programs and feature-length films. For documentary producers, this has meant adapting content into docuseries. Taking its cue from the success delivered by long-form drama, streaming platforms are routinely commissioning and producing long-form docuseries that can also be structured over multi-episode seasons. True crime docuseries have proven particularly amenable to this prolonged format. As season-length programming, docuseries can recount prolonged narratives that, in the case of Netflix's breakout hit *Making a Murderer* (Demos & Ricciardi, 2015–2018), spans 20 episodes over two seasons. Season one comprised 10 episodes that were simultaneously released in 2015. Recounting the story of Steven Avery and his legal battles with Manitowic County over accusations of his false imprisonment, the series garnered a plethora of documentary awards ranging from a 2016 Prime Time Emmy Award for outstanding nonfiction series, 2017 Producers Guild Award for best TV series nonfiction (Aiello, 2017), and an International Documentary Association Award for best limited series (Kilday, 2016). The success of the series led to a second season but with the focus on Avery's nephew, Brendan Dassey, and his legal battles with Manitowic County.

For streaming platforms like Netflix, Amazon, and HBO Max, series programming both promotes and caters to binge-viewing whereby an entire multi-episode season can be consumed in a single sitting. Binge-viewing continues the consumption habits that began with the release of videos and DVD box sets. But rather than appearing after the series had been gradually broadcast, the "Netflix Effect" on binge-viewing reflects how complete seasons of shows are made available to subscribers on a single release date. As Dowling (2019) states, "With the entrance of documentary content into binge watching culture, conversation about TV shows is no longer restricted to fictional content" (p. 78). The viewing behaviors of subscribers of streaming services have inevitably influenced the format of documentaries with the emergence of multi-episodic and multiseasonal work similar to drama narrative content.

The distribution of series on streamers is in stark contrast to the traditional broadcast method where a precise scheduling regime would dedicate specific timeslots for weekly episodes. Spaced out across an extended period like this, scheduling meant an entire season was available to be consumed only over a period of months. In contrast, streaming platforms cater for a level of user-demand and user-control that has displaced the broadcast model and its scheduling system built on sequestered prime time slots and pilot seasons. Despite the innovations arising from the streaming of television, maintaining viewership is one constant they have in common with the former broadcasting era. The need for return viewing that translates into continued monthly subscriptions may have replaced an advertising-based ratings system, but it is vital that programming on streaming services consistently draws audiences back to the platform. Series-based programming has become instrumental in achieving this goal. Hence, the traditional format of a series organized according to an episodic structure with origins in the broadcast television era still appears to be enduring.

Underpinning the multi-episode and multi-season basis of fictional and nonfiction series on streaming platforms is the innovation of long-form narrative with its newfound conventions shaping the storytelling of both docuseries and drama series. Rather than discreet episodes with narratives that are neatly tied up at the conclusion of a single episode, long-form narrative has developed character-driven stories and plots that are sustained across prolonged and overarching storylines that can span an entire season or multiple seasons. According to Broe (2019),

serial TV itself has challenged the old commercial constraints of having to tell a story in one episode so that the series can be syndicated as a stand-alone entity. Instead, serial producers have spun a complex story that relies for its impact on consistent and more active viewing. (p. 4)

Missing one episode of a long-from drama or docuseries is not an option for audiences in the face of storylines and narratives that are intricately constructed with each episode, fulfilling important storytelling functions like links in a chain that provide unique and unmissable details. De Fino (2014) describes the kind of television shows based on the conventions of long-form narrative as, "'Quality' series [and] especially dramas . . . typically demand a commitment to their detailed and constantly evolving stories, from week to week, season to season" (p. 11). Long-form narrative arose in response to the expectations and behaviors of subscribers to streaming services, and it continues to redefine serial television formats irrespective of whether they are drama- or factual-based documentaries.

Platform Participatory Logics

Streaming and social media platforms expound on the value and levels customization they provide to their users and subscribers. Tailoring and adapting the conventions of series to the new video-on-demand consumption behaviors is testimony to how streaming platforms have reconfigured content from the broadcast era. But catering to the needs, wants, and desires of their subscribers inevitably comes at a price. As has been well established, Web-based media is premised on the vast harvesting of personal data through every download and with "each mouse click and cursor movement user data are generated, stored, automatically analyzed, and processed . . . [providing] detailed information about interests, preferences and tastes" (van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 9). In conjunction with highly detailed usage profiles, the harvesting of this data leads to similar online content being funneled to users. Whether it results in highly targeted advertising, recommendations for similar shows or tags that generate viewing suggestions, the almighty algorithms behind these processes generates bespoke information feeds able to ensconce users in filter bubbles. As virtual echo chambers that are derived from the self-selected content by the users themselves, the narrowing of funneled content gets further concentrated by the compounding logics of a platform's programmable architecture that connects its many users, a carryover from online cultures that has been extrapolated into citizenship and privacy issues and the undermining of democracy (Hindman, 2018).

Against the onslaught of data harvesting that has been heralded as the end of privacy (Jackson, 2021) and algorithmic determinations of content delivery to users, Lovink argues platforms have transcended any form of mere service provision. Instead, platforms have become what he argues are "subject"-defining systems. For Lovink (2019), embedded in the banalities of routine registration protocols, "The profile is the a-priori, a component that the profiling and targeted advertising cannot operate without. It is through the gateway of the profile that we become its subject" (p. 27). As subject-defining systems that determine vital aspects of our online behaviors, platforms necessarily regulate, both by formal and informal means, how we interact and function within virtual worlds. Imposing their logics in seemingly mundane ways, platforms test the veracity of claims made for digital speech with concomitant effects on its potential for activism, social protest, and social change. Design protocols underpinning digital speech form part of the essentializing conditions for shaping contemporary citizenship, and by extension, impact

documentary's social remit and its potential for revitalizing the public sphere. In essence, platform logics have to be carefully negotiated by documentary if it is to continue as form of content that can marshal social change in the new context of digital sociality.

If the Internet gave rise to new forms of sociality, then the online participatory culture expounded by Jenkins (2008) is what initially defined it. Content-sharing practices based on cocreation modes generated new forms of community no longer bound by space and time. While the proliferation in content created by users was one of the key virtues of the online world, it also proved to be one of its central challenges. Boundless amounts of content spread across countless Web pages soon made it increasingly impossible for users to navigate the multitude of online offerings. In response, emerging technology companies, the original start-ups, began to seize this online abundance as a new business opportunity.

The behaviors of participatory culture like sharing, posting, commenting, and rating began to form the basis of new commercial applications that would combine with adaptations in online advertising to deliver profits. While Internet service providers began developing interactive features in an attempt to bring online communities together by enhancing the user experience, smaller independent sites that were not service providers began to develop platform-like architectures that could host multiple Web pages. The Web hosting service Tripod, founded in 1994, was one of the first such providers and specifically targeted online communities among college students a decade before the formation of Facebook.

The challenge of combining user-friendly access with the means of navigating online content led to the development of what we now routinely use and understand as platforms. Developing into complex amalgams of technology, corporate brands, services, and tools, platforms grew into large-scale commercial enterprises that have gone on to underpin digital sociality and online culture. Platforms are driven to constantly extend their reach into the lives of their users to provide an all-encompassing ecosystem. For social media platforms, this is a strategy that offsets risks of being an intermediary that does not produce content. Instead, they have catalyzed distribution into new forms of business that can provide "free" services, content, and hosting functions in exchange for the harvesting of personal data. Conventions like personal registrations in exchange for usernames and login credentials begin the process of collecting personal details for the steady harvesting of data that are sold to advertisers.

Just a decade ago, social media platforms could be simply defined by Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content" (p. 60). It is only recently that we have seen how social media has become synonymous with a platform. According to Gillespie (2018),

> platforms are sociotechnical assemblages and complex institutions; they're not even all commercial, and the commercial ones are commercial in different ways . . . that a) host, organize, and circulate users' shared content or social interactions for them, b) without having produced or commissioned (the bulk of) that content, c) built on an infrastructure, beneath that circulation of information, for processing data for customer service, advertising, and profit. (p. 18)

While platforms have evolved into some of the most recognizable tech brands, they are also central to the organizational infrastructure that continues to redefine contemporary sociality. A stable of born digital consumer services now sits atop this infrastructure under the iconic brand names of Amazon, Facebook, Google, Twitter, and Instagram, while beneath is network society's material and immaterial infrastructure, an assortment of VPNs, cloud services, server farms, fiber optic cabling, and satellite transmissions conjoined in an endless procession of data processing.

Situated on top of the infrastructure, platforms now occupy key sites that function as the interface where software and hardware come together and where users and providers meet. As such, social media and streaming platforms are instrumental sites in what Benjamin Bratton (2016) has described as the planetary computing infrastructure operating by principles he identifies in terms of the Stack:

> I propose that we view the various types of planetary-scale computation (e.g., smart grids, cloud computing, mobile and urban-scale software, universal addressing systems, ubiquitous computing, and robotics, and so on) not as isolated, unrelated types of computation but as forming a larger, coherent whole. They form an accidental megastructure called The Stack that is not only a kind of planetary-scale computing system; it is also a new architecture for how we divide up the world into sovereign spaces. (p. xviii).

The full implications of Bratton's (2016) Stack are too expansive to go into detail for the purposes of this article, but conceptualization of the Stack helps to foreground the significance of platforms and their function as key proprietary sites that occupy swaths of sovereign spaces across network society like virtual archipelagos. The specific concept of sovereignty is key when it comes to interpreting the relentless drive of social media and streaming platforms to maintain their positions by collecting and harvesting the data of their users and subscribers. As van Dijck and colleagues (2018) argue,

> ultimately, the fate of a platform is determined by the collective behaviour of users. If users decide to move to other platforms or pursue content and services offline, a platform can very well fail, unable to produce the necessary network effects and economies of scale. (p. 47)

For the obvious monetary purposes surrounding advertising revenue, platforms must be vigilant when it comes to the choices and behaviors of their users and/or subscribers to service their populations by expanding the repertoire of their offerings. For social media platforms, it centers around UGC, while for streaming services, it is a constant supply of premium, and ideally, exclusively produced professional screen content.

The hyper commercial agenda of social media and streaming platforms may not seem that far removed from the environment in which documentary circulated during the broadcast era. With its drive for profits sought through high ratings achieved by entertainment programming, it was mostly at odds with documentary's social change orientation. Analog-era broadcast agendas posed substantive conflicts and challenges for the social change remit of documentary programming that routinely saw it sidelined on mainstream media. Nevertheless, documentary programming must now contend with the internal dynamics

of social media platforms that produce an unremitting drive for engagement in the attention economy. Quantified and measured at unparalleled levels, attention is what becomes monetized as the outcome of online user behaviors and the dynamics of continual exchange that occurs between users and platforms.

From the perspective of a documentary producer, collaboration with a social media platform promises direct access to their subscribers and therefore large audiences, particularly those comprising younger demographics. Such a feat will be increasingly impossible if documentary remains divorced from social media platforms and streaming services. Fifteen years ago, Vladica and Davis (2009) observed:

> In a marketplace transformed by the digital lifestyle of audiences, and with such vast choices of entertainment experiences available, documentary filmmakers need to innovate by creatively changing one or more dimensions of the business system to produce new value for viewers. Innovation, or the creation of substantial new value for the customer, becomes the key to future growth or even survival. (p. 298)

A decade and a half on from this assertion, documentarians are managing to maintain the cultural currency of their nonfiction content by shifting from feature formats to episodic series of season-based content that directly appeals to subscribers of streaming platforms. At the other end of the duration scale, however, filmmakers like Nicholaas Veul, Sara Mak, Nicola Hazell, Chanelle Aponte Pearson, Terence Nance, and Lizzie Jacobs have found ways of adapting documentary storytelling that remains committed to social change and accommodate the formal requirements expected by social media platforms to ensure users can connect to their commissioned content in the same manner they are used to consuming the respective platforms' UGC.

Finding audiences on social media platforms has also seen documentarians adapt to various cocreation models that always seemed aligned to the ideals of documentary filmmaking. By having the potential to lead to a deepening of social engagement, the coming together of social media and documentary posed the potential to create

> an environment in which audiences can search, watch, and share information they find valuable, and they also can provide support and feedback, which can prove invaluable during the creative process. These meaningful relationships potentially bridge the divide between filmmakers and audiences, creating rich environments where new forms of creativity are unfolding. (Nelson, 2015, p. 18)

As a specific iteration of early Web 2.0 affordances, it appeared inevitable that documentary and social media platforms would collaborate in mutually beneficial partnerships. In addition to opportunities and affordances, however, it seems the volatility that the tech sector is notorious for could also be a key driver for platforms to collaborate with documentarians. The transformed nature of online interactions since the introduction of Web 2.0 has seen social media platforms continually rise and fall, with the most recent example being the corporate turmoil that surrounds Twitter becoming "X." As complex amalgams of technology, services, and tools, platform architecture underpins the new sociality of online culture, something that is increasingly in the hands of corporate players and private interests adept at avoiding legislative oversight and public good governance.

As the production, distribution, and exhibition of documentary content converges through social media platforms, the risk is that it is effectively catalyzed into promoting the respective corporate platforms and their commercial sponsors and collapsing documentary along the lines of branded content or lifestyle programming. Belying the freedom associated with the kind of online interactions and behaviors prized by forms of social activism that can overlap with the ideals of documentary are the growing manipulations hastened by social media enterprises for revenue raising. While the extent to which user-behavior is manipulated or controlled by software applications remains contentious, as outlined in van Dijck's (2013) *The Culture of Connectivity*, forms of digital sociality constructed through various platforms are argued to occur in complex webs that "code social activities into a computational architecture" (p. 29). A key issue then becomes the extent to which information infrastructure like algorithms and metadata "shapes the performance of social acts instead of merely facilitating them" (van Dijck, 2013, p. 29). While the virtual world attempts to mimic the diversity and plurality of behaviors in the real world, critiques like those from van Dijck (2013) remind us that to be computationally constrained to the fleeting expression of "sharing" and "liking" also extends to users being confined to specific content awash in never-ending communication feeds. End-users may be given the impression of control and freedom to express their interest in ideas and seem enabled to support issues with unprecedented alacrity. As our coded choices and interactions are at the mercy of the almighty algorithm, then it is not just ways in which individual content is accessed or distributed that is at stake. Rather, it is how social media interactions become extrapolated by data-harvesting analytics into the much larger structures shaping network society.

By occupying ever-growing swathes of time and attention, social media platforms necessarily encroach more and more into all aspects of the everyday lives of their users. Platformization translates into organizational infrastructure that not only continues to redefine sociality but, in the case of Facebook, has ambitions to shape reality itself. As Mark Zuckerberg proclaimed in November 2021 when Facebook's parent company was rebranded as Meta, a metaverse, aided by VR, 3D, and holographic technologies acquired when Facebook purchased Occulus, will be "an embodied Internet where you're in the experience, not just looking at it" (BBC, 2021, para. 2). Seeking to extend itself beyond that of a platform featuring a series of applications, Facebook appears to be aiming to become a virtual dimension unto itself where users get to navigate and communicate across what Zuckerberg describes as "different layers of reality" (Chayka, 2021, para. 1).

Conclusion

Amid the upheavals unleashed by digital and Web-based media and the steady rise of platformization, documentary continues to be repositioned as a staple of online media. Navigating the intersectional site of social media, streaming services, and platform logics, whether or not documentary will forge new possibilities through formal and other efforts to keep pace with the altered social relations of the virtual age remains to be seen. What is clear is that the challenges facing documentary in the online environment are manifold. Driven by platform infrastructures and constraints imposed by corporate tech giants that spans algorithmic uncertainties to surreptitious and blatant censorship issues, maintaining appeal to users requires strategies and approaches that are far removed from those that engaged the spectatorship practices of the analog era.

Social media and streaming platforms may offer the means for traversing digital pathways to new audiences and expanded means of production financing but it also entails reconfiguring some of the fundamentals associated with social activism and attendant reworkings of documentary form. For documentary filmmakers and providers motivated by its potential for social change, the drive to incorporate documentary into the matrices facilitating social media–based interactions seems inescapable in the burgeoning attention economy. Ongoing scholarship addressing how documentary has unfolded within a broader history of media practices will be key to shedding light on how contemporary modes of user and amateur content represent certain continuities as well as disruptions. Recasting considerations of the trajectory of documentary in the context of vernacular media histories may not just rewrite epistemological understandings but also help envision the path forward amid the convergences and upheavals brought by Web-based media, online cultures, and network society.

Social media and streaming platforms not only provide opportunities for documentary filmmakers through access to new sources of funding but are vital to expanding audience reach and connecting to the new forms of digital sociality. Whether the competing demands on contemporary documentary will see it support its traditional remit for social change will be one of the key indicators of its continued social currency. In a fruitful alliance with social media platforms, documentary's social change remit may also just pose the potential to contribute, rather than hinder, its commercial viability.

Documentary filmmakers have shown they can adapt to the specific modes of short form expected and required by social media platforms dictated by the amateur forms that characterize UGC. Simultaneously, documentary is expanding into long-form narrative modes consisting of multi-episodic and multiseason docuseries in response to the preferred, binge-worthy modes of streaming services and their attendant platforms. Pulled in two such varying directions, these expressive forms and modes of documentary remind us of the continuities nonfiction filmmaking and screen content has with alternative cinema histories. Therefore, charting the epistemologies of nonfiction content produced in the age of online media may not begin from as segregated a position as suggested by initial notions from communications theory like digital disruption. Rather, it may speak to a reconnection with nonfiction screen traditions that may have been long overshadowed by dominant cinema histories but always contiguous. Reclaimed in the contemporary media context dominated by platforms and their logics, such epistemologies can help reformulate where documentary came from and offer insight into how it may navigate the future.

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