Introduction: Audience research into documentary and related media

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This themed section addresses documentary, which emerged as a distinctive genre in the 1930s. Despite a long established and rich literature on documentary cinema and television, there is still comparatively little research which addresses issues in the reception of such media. Many of the assumptions underlying early documentary literature assume an audience model predicated on mass media, which imagined an audience that corresponded with a notion of the 'public', with links to the national democratic sphere and an understanding of audiences as citizens engaging with public knowledge. This audience model has deeply informed the development of documentary theory as a field. Documentary as a film genre was championed by practitioners and early theorists interested in celebrating its distinction from popular-based entertainment and have continued to focus on exemplars of a film canon and favour auteurist-centred textual analysis. The need for audience research has long been recognised by key theorists within the field of documentary studies (Corner, 2002; Renov, 2004), however there are few detailed studies of documentary film viewers (Austin, 2007; Hardie, 2008; Harindranath, 2009; Rutten and Verstappen, 2015). Existing audience work in documentary has tended to involve specific audiences and/or small case studies (Corner, Richardson and Fenton, 1990; Roscoe, 1999) or to rely simply on more anecdotal evidence.

The label of 'documentary media' now encompasses not only celebrated exemplars in cinematic and televisual forms but more recently includes forms ranging across other media and depending on who is defining the nature of documentary culture, includes everything from photography, drama-documentary, documentary animation (documation), hybrid televisual formats, online and interactive forms including augmented and virtual reality, and even documentary comics. In audio-visual media, a variety of hybrid forms which blur distinctions between fact and fiction include those characterised by more entertainment-driven, personalised and autobiographical material (Dovey, 2000; Bruzzi,

2000, Roscoe and Hight, 2001; Corner, 2002; Murray and Ouellette, 2004; Harindranath, 2009; Ellis, 2012; Harindranath, 2014).

Documentary proper has tended, especially within film theory, to draw from an assumed distinctive relationship which audiences have with mediations of reality. However, the complexity of forms which draw their rhetorical and affective power from documentary aesthetics and the assumptions they appear to engender is proliferating. As documentary as a genre has expanded and fractured into multiple forms, this has made more problematic the specific social and political role it was assumed to have by early theorists and practitioners (Nash, Hight and Summerhayes, 2014). A core dilemma for theorists in this area is that as the field of documentary media has become more 'democratic' in terms of its openness to multiple voices, its use toward a variety of agendas, its break from elitist frames, it has also meant that these media inevitably no longer collectively serve a broader imperative to foster and support meaningful social and political exchange of the type essential to the maintenance of national communities. The crucial question driving our themed issue is: How do differently situated audiences 'make sense' of this spectrum of documentary media? As the field of documentary media broadens across technologies with different affordances and means of engagement, the nature of the framing of such content within a given medium becomes an increasingly complicating factor. Such questions becoming an increasingly vital task for audiences as *citizens*, in an age recently characterised as 'post-truth', where factual accuracy appears to be secondary to emotional resonance and appeal.

Documentary radio, film and television has been widely seen as having particular appeals to, and meanings for, audiences that are bound up in various ways with the promise of 'truth' and its audio-visual representation. Of course, how and why audiences watch or 'engage with' documentary and what they take away from that experience remains relatively understudied. But in the current climate questions about documentary audiences have become particularly urgent. As Harindranath argues in his piece, 'truth is up for grabs like never before'. In a post-truth world is it reasonable to assume that audiences turn to documentary out of epistephilia or anything remotely like it? And if audiences do not see documentary as veridical, what are the implications for its social and political project?

Not only is truth up for grabs, but as many of the contributors to this edition show, the complex and contested category of documentary is itself undergoing particular transformation in the present moment. Weidle focuses attention on the rapidly expanding field of virtual reality documentary which, she suggests, we might understand less as text and more as 'situation'. In relation to the audience experience of documentary media technologies like virtual and augmented reality raise a number of important questions. As Weidle notes, foremost among these is the affective and performative nature of these media; the truth of the camera is not obviously of a piece with the truth of VR. In terms of understanding the 'audience' experience we need to take into account interactivity in the form of a physical performance, or enactment, that produces an affective response – a 'flinch' – that, like the simulacrum, is both true and illusory.

The documentary audience and its potential to be motivated to engage in various forms of political action has become a significant concern for those involved in the 'impact' market. While impact has become something of a buzz word to be evidenced by a few well-chosen tweets, Kouchakji highlights the need to approach questions of political impact with a view to understanding the political and cultural contexts in which documentary is encountered as well as the practicalities of the way in which documentaries are screened. Taking Joshua Oppenheimer's trilogy on the Indonesian genocide (*The Act of Killing*, *The Look of Silen*ce and the lesser known *The Globalisation Tapes*) Kouchakji asks not only how a non-expert, non-Indonesian audience might interpret these films but whether that interpretation might be shaped by the order in which they are seen. Her conclusions point to the importance of more nuanced audience research in this increasingly important part of the documentary field.

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