Veridicality and the truth claims of the documentary in the post-truth era: Rethinking audiences' 'horizon of expectations'

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Abstract:
This essay examines the current role of documentary, at a time when the status of non-fiction genres as providers of evidence and truth has been made precarious by charges of 'fake news'. Given that audience response to and interpretations of documentaries are premised on the genre's claims to veridicality and truthfulness, this essay explores the question of whether such developments require us to rethink the perceived social function of the documentary, and what the repercussions are for public discourse and democracy. More specifically, the essay argues that both the broader socio-cultural context of the so-called 'post-truth' era as well as the affordances of digital technologies and platforms have affected the practice of 'audiencing', which, in turn, demands a reassessment of the genre's contribution to formation of public opinion and to democratic citizenship.

Key words: veridicality, 'audiencing', truth claims, 'horizon of expectations', public sphere, citizenship.

The recent furore about Facebook and Cambridge Analytica is the latest manifestation of the abiding concern with which media scholars have continued to examine the connections – both persisting and shifting – between various aspects of media and politics, particularly in democratic societies. That these connections include both the persistent and the shifting – and increasingly, contradictory and paradoxical – is revealed by the continuing relevance of frameworks and approaches such as political economy, concepts such as ideology, which retain their analytical significance and continue to be used, alongside new concepts such as affect and surveillance, to engage and keep up with rapid technological developments and their socio-political and cultural consequences.

Likewise, processes and techniques that mediate historical reality have come under increasing scrutiny of a kind that exceeds earlier concerns regarding framing and hegemonic intent to tackle the issue of reality itself. As a consequence, and combining with the awareness of the increasingly factional reporting of news, the status of alleged non-fictional representations and media content and their relation to historical reality have been questioned. Alongside the intensification of affective politics (Papacharissi, 2015), and in many ways contributing to it, are two, relatively recent, developments, one socio-political, and the other technological. Firstly, the increasingly loud dismissals of critical reporting as 'fake news' has both undermined non-fiction's claims to truth and also contributed to a culture war and the reinforcement of political bubbles that can be seen to have influenced the increasing petrification of political positions. Secondly, developments in media technologies have enabled the emergence of production practices that both facilitate alleged eye-witness accounts and promoted new modes of interaction and consequently new forms of audience engagement with digital texts. Such developments raise questions that require a revisiting of documentary audiences and practices of reception.

Among the issues raised are: what is the current status of the documentary and other factual media, when even the venerable news has lost its stature as the purveyor of objectivity and truth? How have the position, function, and impact of documentary changed following the widespread use of digital technologies and the subsequent democratisation of production? In what ways has the utilisation of diverse platforms and of interactivity affected the reception of documentary and factual content? And how have these impacted on the perceived role of the documentary in democratic societies, in particular, the public sphere? These and other such issues become relevant in the consideration of documentary audiences, whose responses to and interpretation of documentary and factual content are, to a large extent, dependent on their acceptance or rejection of the genre's claim to veridicality. This essay considers the role of documentary in the current era in which the validity and veracity of mainstream news seems to have been irrevocably damaged, and the consequent destabilisation of the status of documentary and nonfictional representation as purveyors of truth. Do these developments demand a reconsideration of conceptions of audiences' interpretive practices, the 'horizon of expectations' which characterise their encounter with the text? How does this impact on the documentary's social and political functions? And finally, through a brief account of the Gadamer-Habermas debate the essay underlines its pertinence to discussions of documentary, public discourse, and deliberative democracy and the need for a revaluation of the genre and its public role.

Documentary in the era of 'fake news'

The claims to truth on which the status of factual media as different from its fictional counterpart rests is itself called into question in the current 'post-truth' age, when the term 'fake news' has become part of the vocabulary, from the Presidential to the commonplace. Most significant here, for our current purposes, is the potential loss of credibility of the news genre – and, by extension, other factual content – as a result of its use as sites for

deliberately false content. 'Truth' is up for grabs like never before, especially in shaping public opinion, and increasingly seems dependent more on appeals to emotion than on the presentation of facts and rational argument. A recent headline in *The Guardian* reveals both the seriousness of this development and the importance of the distinction between 'false' and 'real' news, which forms the basis of not only the authenticity and veridicality of news sources and content, but also the very reputation of news organisations such as *The New York Times* and the BBC: 'The BBC is to assemble a team to fact check and debunk deliberately misleading and false stories masquerading as real news.'[1] More damagingly, generating fake news stories formed part of the election campaign strategy in the US elections in 2016, so much so that the Clinton campaign chair John Podesta decried fake news as 'undermining our democracy'.[2] News sites such as *The Intercept* have reported on the 'extraordinary phenomenon of fake news spread by Facebook and other social media during the 2016 presidential campaign',[3] and more recently, a new study by the Oxford Internet Institute has found widespread use of social media for propaganda in various states, including Russia, Brazil, China, Germany, and Canada: 'They found "the lies, the junk, the misinformation" of traditional propaganda is widespread online and is "supported by Facebook and Twitter algorithms".'[4]

With social media content and even news emerging as battlegrounds of propaganda and 'alternative facts', and as sites for opposing claims to veracity on topics ranging from climate change to sexuality to national security, it is important to consider how these developments have affected the audiences' perception of authenticity, truthfulness, and objectivity of allegedly factual content of the documentary? As is well known, the status of documentary rests on it being qualitatively different from its fictional counterparts in its efforts to reflect the 'real', and its legitimacy arises from its truth claims. Representatively equivalent to the essay, a piece of reportage, or a travelogue, it implicitly directs the audience to accept its claims. As Corner and Richardson (1986) pointed out, 'Documentaries have regularly sought to present audiences with accounts in which the viewed is to be taken as effectively indistinguishable from the real.' (p.141) Consequently, the authority of documentary derives from this transparency – while expository devices make it recognizable as documentary, its credibility depends on its successful mimesis. And yet, documentary is also, unavoidably, a narrative, and this reveals the ambivalence that is intrinsic to the genre: its invocation of authenticity and the credibility of its claims coexist with the inevitability of its narrativity. Fictive elements, conventions from more overtly narrative genres, challenge the documentary's position as nonfiction. While Silverstone (1983) is correct in his estimation that 'documentary claims a conformity with reality; the label documentary is itself a guarantee of authority and truth' (p.146), the recognition that documentary straddles two domains – in its ontological claims it privileges 'truth' even as its aesthetic is strongly narrative in character – is an important consideration particularly in the context of audience responses.

Renov (2004), for whom the disentanglement between fictional and non-fictional forms of representation happens outside the level of the text, argues that 'it is the different

historical status of the referent that distinguishes documentary from its fictional counterpart, not the formal relations among signified, signifier and referent.' (p.2) If fiction derives its logic from its internal consistencies of plot, character, and narrative, documentary's status is dependent on veridicality, the authenticity and accuracy of its representation of the historical world. It reaches outside itself in its claim to truthful representation. 'Believability', therefore, is a crucial aspect of audience responses to documentary and, importantly, in non-fictional forms of representation, believability rests not so much on realist aesthetics and consistencies in plot and character, as in 'the historical nature of its referent'. Documentary's claims to 'truth' draws on audience awareness of and familiarity with the world to which it refers, and it follows that its credibility lies in its approximation to historical reality, and its force derives from its association with the world it represents. Plantinga (2005), who prefers to conceive of documentary as 'asserted veridical representation' (AVR), is surely right in his argument that, while audiences may not have 'a philosophically precise idea of what constitutes AVR [asserted veridical representation] for the concept … to play a central role in thinking about the typical or usual documentary, [p]eople *do* expect of the documentary that it is intended to offer a reliable record, account of, argument about, or analysis of some element of the actual world, that is, they expect an assertedly veridical representation.' (p.112; emphasis in the original) However, technological and political developments over the last few years impel us to reflect on the source of such expectations, whether they are driven by a faith in the truth claims of the genre or by desire to have one's beliefs confirmed by purported 'documentary' representations or images. In other words, on what does the connection between assertions and veridicality rest? Indeed, as current academic discussions on the nature of 'truth' reveal, what is the status of 'veridicality' at a time when the concept of truth itself is being undermined?

'Post-truth' representations and their appeals to emotions and beliefs, rather than on evidence and analysis, in the shaping of public opinion calls into question the documentary's perceived contribution to the public sphere, in particular the determination of what counts as socially and politically significant. Chanan (2007), for instance, argues that '[d]ocumentary is ready to take up the political challenge because *politics is in its genes*, though not always expressed. But the documentary camera is always pointing directly at the social and the anthropological, spaces where the lifeworld is dominated, controlled and shaped by power and authority, sometimes visible, mostly invisible but often palpable. This also means that *documentary addresses itself to the spectator quite differently from fiction*. … [It] speaks the viewer as citizen, as a member of the social collective, *as putative participant in the public sphere.*' (p.16; emphasis added) Chanan's celebration of the documentary's responsibilities attest to his conviction that the genre, whose modality of address is determined by both its textual strategies and its anthropological content, contributes to the shaping of citizenship in liberal democracies. Intrinsic in this is a largely unstated but implied sense of a contract between the documentary and its audience, which rests on the former's claim to reveal the outside world, whereby its sequence of images,

what occurred in front of the camera and the historical event are congruent with one another. This assumes a particular 'positioning' of the viewer by the genre that is engendered by an assumed correlation between image and reality, which, in turn, contributes to its elevation in the hierarchy of truth. However, as we have seen, in an age when the nature of truth itself is uncertain, the 'horizon of expectations' that the viewer brings to the documentary is unlikely to bear out the contract.

The unstable, precarious distinction between truth and fiction is further destabilised in the digital realm, both by the instability of what constitutes 'truth' in the age of fake news, and also by developments in technology and in online production practices that claim to bear witness to historical events as they unfold. Not only has meaning, status, and validity of what constitutes 'documentary' become unstable following developments in technology and in production practices as well as those that have led to and followed the issue of 'fake news', the category of documentary audiences too, has shifted. The Bristol Watershed's website on 'Pervasive Media Studio', captures some of the developments in documentary production practice and their consequences for conceptions of audiences and audiencing: 'Documentaries share real stories about the world around us, so what happens when audiences become co-creators of these stories, contributing content and influencing how they unfold? The theme of Interactive Documentary brings together projects exploring how documentary practice and digital technologies can enable new and astonishing forms of storytelling, where audiences can become co-authors.'[5] In addition, audiences as co-creators of documentary content raises a different question regarding authenticity and validity: as Chouliaraki (2010) has pointed out, with the deployment of images from citizen-witnesses in 'post-television news' a shift has occurred in the rhetorical force of non-fiction, with the weight and immediacy of purported first-person experience given similar importance as verification of sources. Also pertinent here is the concern expressed by Anden-Papadopulous (2013) with regard to the importance for audiences of 'proper distance', or 'the symbolic management of distance provided by professional news practices. Allied to this is her question of 'how the nature of 'media witnessing'

> … is being transformed through the employment of user-generated footage. As opposed to the enduring journalistic norms of objectivity and impartiality, video shot by involved citizens summons an immediate and embodied experience from 'inside' the event that is believed to impose a particular moral and political obligation on news publics (342).

Audiencing in the era of 'fake news'
If the principal attribute of nonfiction in its purported claim to be different from fictional representations has become increasingly unreliable, audience expectations of news and documentary has also changed accordingly. Adapting from Bennett's examination of digital media, youth, and civic culture (2008), Marchi, in her study of how young persons keep up to date with current events, makes a distinction between two models of citizenship in the

United States, and by extension in other democratic societies: the first, 'the Dutiful Citizen', correlates with 'older Americans' who feel 'an obligation to closely follow the daily news participate in government-centered activities,'; the second kind of citizenship, 'corresponding with youth', is 'the Actualizing Citizen, who has a diminished sense of government obligation, a mistrust of mainstream news media and politicians.' (pp.246-47). Two of the most significant findings in Marchi's study were first, that her young respondents (adolescents) learned about current affairs and events from social media, blogs, and YouTube, and secondly, that '[m]ainstream news media's "objectivity" was *not* something the teens found useful. More importantly, what attracted them to social media and blogs was their search for 'a more balanced understanding of news.' (p.256) This clearly undermines the celebrated value of objectivity in news and its connection to the notion of 'balance' that news organisations are expected to strive for.

Marchi explains this apparent paradox thus: 'In contrast to the disinterested observations about the political world typical of "boring" professional news, the ironic and passionate remarks of blogs and humorous or acerbic current event shows "put things in context," offered "different opinions," and were "not afraid to tell it like it is."… As Kara, 16, put it, "The regular news gives you one side or another side, but you don't really know which one is good or bad".' (p.256) What could be described meta news content in blogs, which responded to, commented on and took different interpretive positions on mainstream news, was considered by these young persons as more reliable than conventional news content. Marchi's conclusions raise profound questions about not only changing audiencing practices and understandings, but also, more fundamentally, with regard to nonfiction content, including documentary, public knowledge, citizenship and the public sphere.

Arguing that 'the term *documentary* is always much safer when used as an adjective rather than a noun… To ask "is this a documentary project?" is more useful than to ask "is this film a documentary?"' (p.258), Corner (2002) seeks to review the notion of documentary by taking into account the range of documentary production practices and revisiting the functions of the genre, as for him, the *social functions* of the genre are as important as its textual attributes. Specifically, he identifies three key functions and adds a fourth: documentary as 'providing publicity and propaganda for dominant versions of citizenship', as reportage, and as 'radical interrogation and alternative perspective' (p.259), and 'documentary as diversion' that manifests an 'intensive cross-fertilization with other formats.' (p.260) Taken together, these reveal Corner's conceptualisation of the significance of the documentary – and of nonfiction in general – in democracies. The idea of examining media and democracy from the perspective of citizenship echoes what Dahlgren (2004) refers to as a 'culturalist' approach to communication, which highlights the links between media meanings, social agency, and citizenship. Crucial in this mix is the audience, as citizens and as publics. Seeking to transcend the 'audiences' and 'publics' binary, Livingstone (2005) points to the 'context-dependent, yet under-determined, plural and hybrid identities, understandings, practices that must and do shape people's engagement with others, in

private and public'. (p.32) Central to such discussions is the idea of public participation, of the relationship between the media – in this context, documentary and nonfiction – civil society and citizenship, and of media audiences and the public sphere.

As mentioned earlier, Chanan (2007) has argued that, while fiction appeals 'directly to the spectator's emotional and sentimental life, their *private* subjectivity', documentary 'speaks to the viewer as citizen … *The public sphere is its home ground*. … [T]he documentary mobilises the viewer as a social subject, situated in history.' Significantly, 'what the documentary can do is call public attention to its subjects and concerns sometimes just by bringing them to light … the return of documentary is therefore *a healthy sign of a return to reality*.' (p.16; emphasis added) Nash (2014), in her analysis of the social dimension of interactive web-documentaries, explores the issue of authorship and how this impacts on the social role of the genre, emphasising its potential to contribute to public discussions. The unique characteristics of interactive documentary, for Nash, demands 'critical reflection on the relationships established around documentary and the extent to which users have agency with respect to the issues addressed.' (p.385) This is a valid point. Alongside agency however, and relating to multiple forms and practices of documentary, is the audience/users' assessment of the validity claims of the documentary.

Chanan's and Nash's arguments raise several issues that are pertinent here. Chanan conceives of the documentary's role in a democracy as both contributing to the constitution of the public sphere and as enabling every citizen to become a participatory member of the public sphere. Intrinsic in this position is the implication that part of the documentary genre's *raison d'etre* is to raise issues relevant to a populace or a community and to make available the appropriate and necessary information on those issues, and by doing so facilitate the emergence of publics and interest groups. It thus plays a *public* role, addressing the viewer as a *citizen*, thereby engendering opinion formation, discussion, and public participation – in other words, cultural citizenship. This, consequently, leads to Chanan's claim that 'the public sphere is its home ground'. Following Nichols (1981), one of the fundamental aspects of the interaction between the documentary text and the viewer is the 'desire to know' on the part of the latter, and the text's 'tacit proposal' to gratify that desire, which, in turn, has two features: firstly, it requires 'to be fulfilled in terms of the real conditions of existence, the pro-filmic event or "real world" apart from the mediation of the system of textual codes.' (p.206) The 'veridicality' of the cinematic, especially the televisual image, from which the documentary derives its truth claims, makes it suitable for such a task. The second feature of this desire is the mode of direct address, which 'explicitly invokes the viewer as subject. Its appeal to reason presumes a center for its own discourse, the locus of He-Who-Knows, which reciprocally calls the viewer into being as a comparable center or locus, distinguished by the lack of the knowledge that is promised him or her.' (p.206) It is possible to link Nichols's conception of the documentary's didactic role to Chanan's argument of how the genre draws public attention to issues merely by raising them.

One basic question, however, remains: that of the audience, more specifically, what is entailed in the audience's acceptance of the text as documentary or non-fiction and the consequent evocation of belief as a modality of engaging with the text? In a later book, Nichols (1991) argues that the viewer's response to non-fiction depends upon the recognition of textual cues and documentary conventions commonly associated with realism, which facilitates the collapse of the distance between the sign and referent, contributing to the 'literalism' of the discourse of documentary. As Nichols argues, the documentary text 'presents a metonymic representation of the world as we know it … rather than a metaphoric rendering.' (1991: 28). Crucially, this recognition of textual cues, the subsequent understanding of the text as relating directly with the outside world, and the procedural skills involved in the viewer's engagement with and interpretation of the documentary is a learned experience that rests on a recipe of knowledge deriving from previous experiences with such texts. This, in turn, poses a few more questions: what are its implications for interactive web-docs, crowd-sourced documentary and impact documentary? Do the relations between the sequence of images and their historical referent stay the same through the blurring of the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction in terms of textual cues, and at a time when the status of the historical referent itself is questionable and the increasing manipulability of digital images? Is the audience's engagement with documentary influenced by cultural capital of the kind that exceeds media literacy?

Nash's (2014) concerns are important here: the affordances offered by digital platforms have fundamentally transformed both the genre as well as the practice of audiencing. Interactivity is a key development in this: 'audiences are potentially able to engage in a range of practices from navigating virtual environments, to choosing video content from a database, taking part in "chat" sessions, and creating content. Engaging theoretically with these emerging audience practices raises questions about authorship and the social impact of documentary.' (p.383) Nash is surely right in emphasising the need to explore two aspects of the 'documentary voice …: voice as authorship and voice as social participation' (p.383), in particular, since this underlines the perceived function of documentary as enabling practices of citizenship. Interactive web-docs can be seen, in some ways, as facilitating rational discussions online on topics of collective significance.

And yet, even in the case of interactive documentary practice, the issue of truth claims persists, as user agency includes the opportunity to reject the propositions and arguments presented in the text. Among the influences on audience agency, and contributing to the frameworks and attitudes they bring to their encounter with the text are socio-cultural factors. In other words, audiences do not function in a socio-cultural vacuum, they engage with the media as social subjects, which, in turn, shapes the form of that engagement and their patterns of consumption. However, what constitutes socio-cultural difference and how it impacts on interpretive practice seem to be uncertain. In an extension of the Liebes and Katz study of ethnically diverse audiences of *Dallas* (1990) Hill, et al (2017), in their analyses of responses of audiences from Sweden, Denmark, Japan and Colombia to

the documentaries, *The Act of Killing* (2012) and *The Look of Silence* (2014), raise the important issue of performance documentaries and affective relationships between the text and the audience. While the conclusions that they draw from their qualitative research map on to differences between audiences from the different nations, Harindranath (2009) develops an analytical frame that combines the categories of 'transparency' and 'mediation' from Corner and Richardson (1986) with those of 'referential' and 'critical' from Liebes and Katz (1990) to analyse interview data on British and Indian audiences' responses to documentaries, with the 'transparent' frame alluding to profilmic events being read as 'authentic' and the 'mediation' frame acknowledging the constructedness of the text and thereby resisting the rhetorical advances of the documentary text, while the 'referential' links audience responses to events in their own lives, and the 'critical' adopts a syntactic, semantic or pragmatic criticism of the content. The most significant finding from this study was that, while most respondents in Britain and India interpreted the documentaries in similar ways, the one group that emerged as markedly different in their deployment of interpretive strategies was that of the Indians without higher education. In other words, university education, as a form of cultural capital, was a key factor in the way this group of respondents deployed transparent-referential frames.

Regardless of this uncertainty of how and what kinds of socio-cultural factors impinge on audiences' engagement with documentaries however, what is important in the present context is that social and cultural differences matter. In addition to studies such as Hill et al and Harindranath, Marchi's conclusions on adolescents' suspicion of mainstream news and their preference of social media and other sources to learn about current events not only belies the widespread belief about the detachment of youth from politics, but also exemplifies the complex social and cultural context that her respondents inhabited. Audience involvement in and the consequent democratization of documentary production have undermined documentary's claim to veridicality. In addition, the broader political and socio-cultural context has contributed to the adoption of impassioned and more petrified positions on issues such as global refugees and climate change, amplified by emotions and beliefs rather than on evidence and argument. The terrain of audience engagement with factual content, therefore, seems to have shifted more recently, along with the perceived social and cultural role of such content in functioning democracies.

What are the implications of such developments for the social functions of the documentaries mentioned earlier? Can documentaries still be considered as unproblematically contributing to raising public awareness of socially and politically relevant issues and thereby enabling public discussions of them? And, if the social and political purpose of documentary, news, and other forms of nonfiction itself has been undermined by the increasing precarity of these genres' connections with historical reality, thereby undermining their role as educators of a democratic populace, do we then have to reconsider the idea of the public sphere? Jodi Dean (2001) argued that Habermas's conception of the public sphere was inadequate to deal with 'the complexities of the information age.' (p.246) Her preference is to replace the public sphere concept with a

'more complex model of civil society' (p.247), on the basis that, unlike the former's normative prescriptions of 'equality, inclusivity, publicity, rationality, and authenticity …, the notion of civil society embeds interaction in the media, associations, institutions, and practices that configure contemporary politics.' (p.247) However, our concern is not so much about the normative aspects of the public sphere notion as the audiences' interpretation of and responses to documentaries as nonfiction, which involves the fundamental aspect of accepting or rejecting their veridicality.

The pertinence of the Gadamer-Habermas debate

Gadamer's notion of 'prejudice' is pertinent here. His hermeneutics was a decisive break from earlier attempts, in nineteenth and early twentieth century hermeneutics, to fashion an interpretive method in order to uncover *the* meaning of a text. Gadamer's radical reappraisal of the hermeneutic project rejected the possibility or even the desirability of locating a single 'proper' meaning in a text, and emphasised instead the inevitable boundedness of a subject's understanding that restricts any attempt to transcend his/her historical horizon. For him, no amount of methodological rigour could possibly overcome the inescapable historicity of understanding. Rather than a negative phenomenon, however, Gadamer argues that this boundedness makes understanding and interpretation possible. He refers to this enabling condition as 'prejudice' or 'prejudgement', which 'constitute our being', our 'horizon', and he conceives 'prejudice' in a positive light:

> It can be shown that the concept of prejudice did not originally have the meaning we have attached to it. Prejudices are not necessarily unjustified or erroneous, so that they inevitably distort the truth. In fact, the historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are biases of our openness to the world. They are simply the conditions whereby we experience something – whereby what we encounter says something to us' (1976, p.9).

Prejudices and prejudgements are as inevitable as they are indispensable to understanding. Intrinsic in Gadamer's notion of 'prejudice' is the idea that the understanding of an event or experience goes beyond its immediate constituents, the perspectival aspects of which require a projection of meaning that takes account of this phenomenon and anticipates the meaning of the whole. In other words, one understands a given part of something in terms of a projected whole. This projection of meaning, in turn, is grounded in a network, or a 'horizon' of expectations and assumptions. For Gadamer, this phenomenon is both universal and a fundamental aspect of being human that permeates all our experiences. In terms of interpretation, understanding is a 'fusion of horizons', those of the interpreter and the text. The part-whole aspect of textual understanding involves the projection or anticipation of the meaning of the whole, and the revision of this projection in terms of the actual

interpretation of the parts. The initial projection of meaning is therefore not fixed and final, but flexible and ever-changing. While all understanding is a projection of a horizon of anticipation, the prejudgements that underlie these projections themselves undergo changes as a result of the act of interpretation. Thus, the process of interpretation is dialogic.

In some ways, studies of media reception, in their engagement with differences in audiences' interpretive practices, highlight such 'prejudices' without actually referring to them as such or to Gadamer. In other words, most such studies set out to demonstrate not just the existence of diverse practices, but also how these differ, and some go further, attempting to link these differences to sociological variables. However, although the idea of prejudgements and 'fusion of horizons' underline the socio-cultural context in which interpretive practices occur, Gadamer's insistence on the universality and the inevitability of this situatedness appears to challenge conventional notions of the public sphere and its relation to civil society and democratic participation. If audiences are conceived as participating citizens in a democracy, and documentary and nonfiction as arenas of public discourse that both set the agenda on what issues are of public interest and also address them, then participatory or deliberative democracy involves social and political inclusion that enables and encourages participation.

If, as Gadamer contends, the practice of understanding is inescapably constrained by historicity and prejudice, is deliberation and agreement made impossible? This forms one of the core themes in the debate between Gadamer and Habermas (Bleicher, 1980, Mendelson, 1979, Pusey, 1987). For Habermas, the application of reason and reflective self-consciousness makes the delinking of 'prejudices' possible, as 'reflection can grasp the genesis of its own standpoint.' For Habermas, 'it does not follow from the inevitability of prejudgements that there are legitimate prejudices. For a prejudgement whose historical genesis has been grasped can no longer function simply *as* a prejudice. A reflected prestructure cannot hold sway over a subject in the same way as an unreflected one' (Mendelson, 1979, p.59). Gadamer's hermeneutics, with its conception of understanding as ineluctably circumscribed by the enabling yet nevertheless restrictive 'prejudices' that constitute a subject's 'horizon' can be seen, from the Habermasian perspective, as potentially deterministic and therefore inimical to the kind of dialogue, deliberation and compromise that is the goal of participatory democracy.

As Kogler (1999) reminds us, Habermas, in partial agreement with Gadamer's conception of interpretation as a dialogue, extends and alters it in two ways in order to develop his insights as a methodology: firstly, by giving it 'a decidedly *methodological* turn, inasmuch as he conceives the results of philosophical hermeneutics as a contribution toward clarifying the validity claims raised in the interpretive sciences', and secondly, by replacing 'the linguistic ontology in Gadamer's account … by developing a *formal-pragmatic theory of meaning* in connection to language-analytic philosophy.' (p.149-150; emphasis in the original) Most significantly, for Habermas, interpretation involves determining the *internal* validity claims of an utterance or social interaction. 'To understand a symbolic

expression', he argues, 'means to know under what conditions its validity claims would have to be accepted' (1984: 135). Understanding a speech act entails determining what makes it acceptable, which requires making a rational judgement. Implied in Habermas's prescription regarding the determination of internal validity claims is one of his main disagreements with Gadamer's insistence on 'tradition' and 'pre-judgement' or prejudice.

Our current political conjuncture raises several questions around the role of documentary and nonfiction that touch on diverse aspects of the Gadamer-Habermas debate. If, as Corner, Chanan, and Nash, among others have argued, documentary's social functions include contributing to public knowledge and discourse, thus enabling discussions on issues of public and collective significance, how do we assess its role in the context of recent events in the US, the UK, and elsewhere? If the veridicality of documentary, its very foundational claim to truth has come under threat in an era in which the boundary between the news and fiction, truth and 'fake', has become blurred, can documentary still perform its social functions? And what does the ongoing, impassioned debates on social media, increasingly strident postings, and the political divides that seem to have petrified further, disclose about audience 'prejudices' and 'horizons' in the Gadamerian sense? It seems to me that these questions underline the necessity for a reassessment of the documentary genre, its status as nonfiction, and its contribution to democratic citizenship in the age of social media and digital cultural production and consumption.

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