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# Experimenting with Distribution Models for the PhD Documentary

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## Abstract

This paper examines the experimental process for a filmmaker who takes a traditional feature-length PhD documentary film and explores new distribution options for it, including Video On Demand (VOD), video capabilities on Social Networking Sites, and various models of Interactive Documentary. In other words, how does a filmmaker release a documentary, made for academic purposes, via contemporary networked platforms?

Using a practice-led methodology, this project highlights the tension academic filmmakers often experience between creating filmic works for the academy and for the industry. The paper reflects on the process of experimenting with a series of networked platforms, as well as the feature-length, chronological edit versus the user-navigated interactive edit. As well as examining case studies of a number of short and feature-length films, I will unpack the process of finding the right distribution method for my own PhD film, *Detour off the Superhighway* (Kelly 2013).

I discuss the features of my own film, including a project made up of many small clips; the interplay between genres having an impact on the edit of a project; the situation documentary and its malleability as an interactive project; and the question of narrative arcs and their consistent effectiveness in various platforms. I point to debates over budgets and marketing tactics for the distribution of academic documentaries.

Although the paper's focus is on the distribution of my own film, it is representative of the issues experienced by creators of PhD films and advances discourse in this field. As such, I explore questions in relation to interactive documentary production and how the VOD option for filmmakers might alter how we go about our creative processes.

## Introduction

*'... I have always believed that a film is not a film unless it reaches an audience... I would have to say the primary audience I am aiming at would be my academic peers in screen production. Hopefully others would find the work of interest but I would conceive of these productions as specialist works for that narrow audience' (Berkeley 2012, 10).*

In this paper, I utilise a reflective practice approach (Schön 1983) to analyse the process of developing a distribution strategy for a feature-length documentary made as an academic film. Progressing from traditional outlets, such as film festivals, and moving towards online options (of varying levels of interactivity), I draw on feedback from both academic and professional fields, as well as on contextual analysis and case studies of a number of thesis films as well as my own. I also explore the tension between creating work for the academy and for the industry that is often experienced by academic filmmakers.

This paper highlights the impact of various online distribution models on the creation of content by filmmakers in the academy, including the process of experimenting with distribution methods, such as film festivals, interactive documentary, and the prospect of using Vimeo on Demand (VOD), for my own PhD film.

## Background

My PhD project, completed in 2013, comprised a creative element, the feature-length documentary film, *Detour off the Superhighway*, and an exegesis. The study, like many practice-led PhD projects, aimed to demonstrate a relationship between Bennett and Woollacott's (2002) methods of textual analysis (highlighting an intra-textual focus and strengthening this discourse through extra-textual influences). I also blended theory and practice through practice-led research (Haseman 2007; Bennett and Woollacott 2002 and Stewart 2001). The exegesis followed what Hamilton and Jaaniste refer to as a 'connective model' approach, in order to 'overtly connect the creative practice and its processes with its broader theoretical and practical contexts' (Hamilton and Jaaniste 2010, 39). They are vehement that this model is not simply a coupling of theory and practice, but rather a delicate meld in which the reflection of the creative practice element is highly contextualised among the theories and practices within the field.

Once I had completed the 'examination cut' of my creative element I was aware of its weaknesses as a film. The colour correction could have used more extensive work; a lack of coverage in some sequences meant that it wasn't as visually dynamic as I had hoped; and, being the result of an auto-ethnographically-documented experiment, some sequences ran for longer than they would in a more commercial film. Nevertheless, the examiners recognised the film as the 'experimental aspect' of the thesis.

The project questioned the widespread preference for contemporary filmmaking technologies in an experiment documenting the utilisation of technology from eight traditional technological signposts over a period of eighty days. Using camera technology as the main point of enquiry, the experiment began with the prevalence of digital video in 2004 and ended prior to the early stages of photography in 1822. This auto-ethnographic experiment informed the production of the PhD film that explores the experience of using these technologies, as both a practitioner and a consumer, and identifies the advantages of using one over another. The film gives prominence to the consequences of 'going offline' in the digital era, highlighting the implications of modern technology in the field of media and communication today. It is appropriate to extend the experimentation process associated with this project beyond the successful completion of my doctoral candidature and into the distribution phase.

Since graduating I have often asked what I should do with this strange, personal, yet quite theory-heavy, feature-length film. Berkeley points to Maras, who ‘has proposed a genre known as the ‘thesis-film’ (Berkeley 2012, 7) which he describes as ‘film works that explicitly try to undertake a conceptual practice’, with conceptual practice understood as ‘acts and interventions in theory of the kind that crossover between the academy and the broader culture’ (Berkeley 2004, 85)’. In the case of *Detour off the Superhighway*, I would not have made the film as it is without the practice-led research that went into its production. Indeed, there were several sections of the film that referenced particular case studies or terminology that I referred to in my literature review. As a result, the film takes on an almost exegetical function. As well as functioning as a situation documentary, the film uses a number of production methods and styles, including satire, animation and remix and I believe this gives it wider appeal than solely within the academy. For this reason, I have re-approached post-production, with a view to offering it via a wider release, using online distribution methods. These methods not only speak to the film’s themes around contemporary media, but also offer the work a post-doctorate life.

With a traditional film school background, a key goal I had for my doctoral project was to produce a feature film. Given the constraints associated with producing a film as a personal project (part of a PhD), the film had an extremely low budget and no crew, and onscreen production values were quite low. The narrative was driven by the experiment that is portrayed within it, as well as the genuine friends and family associated with its production. Two questions that arise here are whether low production values are an acceptable trade-off in such scenarios; and what distribution methods are available for academic films.

Key theorists and practitioners include Leo Berkeley (2012), Maria De Rosa and Marilyn Burgess (2014), Seth Keen (2014), Susan Kerrigan (2011), Steven Maras (2004), Adrian Miles (2014), Matt Soar (2014), and Alison Wotherspoon (2011).

One successful distribution method for documentary academic films that has been identified by researchers such as Ruari Elkington and Sean Maher (2015) is through education, with particular reference to the ‘established area of study guides produced in association with the Australian Teachers of Media (ATOM) and the emerging area of philanthropic funding coordinated by the Documentary Australia Foundation (DAF)’ (Elkington and Maher 2015, 77). Alison Wotherspoon has also highlighted the potential for thesis films to operate in the education sector, pointing to the difficulty faced by many educators to find well-researched and well-produced programs for use in classrooms (Wotherspoon 2011, 7).

Given my undergraduate film school background, rather than look at the education sector my first attempts at a wider release for the film entailed entering it in film festivals; unfortunately to little avail. Berkeley writes that ‘[f]estival directors do not usually judge success in a screen work on the basis of its quality as academic research’ (Berkeley 2012, 11).

Susan Kerrigan reflects comprehensively on the process of engaging with various fields in relation to her own thesis film practice. Her documentary project focused on the history of Fort Scratchley in Newcastle, NSW which potentially made it of interest not only to documentarists but also those interested in Fort Scratchley field. In her exegesis, Kerrigan includes reflections on the film being turned down by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, writing:

*‘After it being so well received by those who have seen it [at numerous discrete test screenings], it would appear that the rules of the field are extremely rigid and inflexible. The content, though presented in an entertaining way, obviously isn’t considered to be broad enough for a mass audience (Kerrigan, Journal: 22 May 2007) (Kerrigan 2011, 126).*

Kerrigan writes of the disappointment she felt with this rejection; a feeling to which I relate. Despite making an academic film, I also aimed to present my film's content in an entertaining way. Kerrigan goes on to question whether very low-budget films might be unattractive to broadcasters. Despite my own film's lack of polish, I would ask the same question of film festivals.

Is a thesis film successful if the candidate's project passes examination, or is further collegial endorsement or some financial benefit required? Kerrigan writes that:

*'Submitting the documentary to these forums was something that I chose to pursue because I wanted feedback on my work that provided validation of my creative abilities beyond the Fort Scratchley field. The need for social validation can be seen as part of my industry practitioner habitus, where it is customary and logical for a documentary to be tested out and critiqued via industry networks' (Kerrigan 2011, 142).*

Likewise, this is something I would hope for with *Detour off the Superhighway*. It was my directorial feature debut and I would like it to reach an audience beyond the academy. I would cite Kerrigan's 'need for social validation' (Kerrigan 2011, 142) as part of my reasoning.

On the question of financial gain, the film was made with a very little budget, so it would not require much to make a profit.

As the creative element of my PhD project, the film was a success in that it helped me acquire my doctoral qualifications. I also view the experience of having made the film as one that has helped me gain employment within academia as well as a number of opportunities within the media industry. Beyond the academy, however, I wish to achieve some further validation through wider distribution.

## Steps towards achieving wider distribution

Given the lack of polish in the examination edit, I decided to re-approach the film's post-production stage, while also investigating possible distribution methods. I showed the film to some industry-active academic colleagues who had achieved some success with the distribution of their own thesis films. One told me that the film's structure needed to be clearer. In my exegesis, I had pointed to Spurlock's *Super Size Me* (2004) as a case study of a 'situation documentary' that contains elements of an auto-ethnographic approach and utilises a clear structure for a 30-day experiment. In the 'examination cut' of my film, the various segments had been demarcated by the year in which I was technologically 'living', a method that seemed to create confusion over when the experiment would end. With my colleague's feedback in mind, combined with the closer examination of Spurlock's film, I now intend to re-approach the communication of the structure, which will include a countdown of sorts, to make it clearer exactly at which point of the experiment the segment takes place.

Another colleague suggested I move the experiment to earlier, in the introduction, rather than my more academic approach of leaving it until the end of this first segment or act. The 'examination cut' begins with an overview of the modern approach to technology, followed by my own background (personally and professionally) as an early adopter of contemporary equipment. This approach is more embedded in the practice of presenting the beginnings of an argument; offering some background before setting out the main contentions and methods put into practice by the researcher. Berkeley (2012) points to some of the tropes that set the thesis film apart from more commercial outputs, many of which are highlighted by Steven Maras:

*'Traditional notions of complication and conflict can indeed be useful in thinking through the performative structure of the piece. But here, structure is not linked to rising jeopardy, or the structuring of incidents, alone. Structure is instead linked to, and works across, the formulation of the thesis and the performative aspects' (Maras 2004, 92-93).*

By reconfiguring the introduction, my film would present as a work driven by narrative rather than theory.

Since the completion of my doctoral project, not only have my research activities developed into new areas, there have also been new developments in the field. I have more recently been researching mobile video practices and interactive documentary, among other contemporary filmic practices. I have researched participatory films, including RiP!: A Remix Manifesto (2008), directed by Brett Gaylor, and Kyle Ruddick's One Day On Earth (2012). Such projects are driven by contributions of work by others, as instances of participatory culture (Jenkins 2006). I have also examined interactive documentary practices, including Goa Hippy Tribe (2011) and Seven Digital Deadly Sins (2014), which were both driven by non-linear structures, with the former utilising Facebook interactions very effectively. The success of such projects is often dependent on the use of social media platforms and their capacity for the creation of user-generated and user-created content (Hinton and Hjorth 2013).

Seth Keen (2014) points to his interactive work, The Bogota Project, 'produced in an industry research and development partnership between RMIT University and World Vision Australia' (Keen 2014, 194). Keen says his project's primary purpose was to provide sponsors with information and that using a non-linear or granular approach fuelled this purpose, because different 'users would have different interests that they would individually want to examine in more detail' (2014, 199).

I wanted to experiment with the online documentary form in a practical way. I had used the database film creation platform Korsakow (see Soar 2014) in the past. My 2013 work, North, took a non-linear form, using 'these platforms to examine my experience of Melbourne. In doing so, the documentary highlights the potential for mobile formats to explore various contexts...' (Kelly 2014). With this thesis film, however, I also wanted to test a linear narrative using online documentary methods.

To publicise behind-the-scenes occurrences to do with the project and my doctoral research I had created a Wordpress site which I reconfigured to structure a number of pages by segment within the original film (i.e. individual webpages for the 2004, 1976, 1967 segments, and so on). This approach to categorising the film into pages for the interactive version was taken directly from the narrative of the examination cut. I posted a segment from the film, with accompanying reflective text and a prompt for discussion, taking note of the other interactive projects I had examined.

I posted these new webpages to the project's Facebook page, I then also shared these posts on my personal Facebook wall and Twitter profile, as a technique that aimed for interactive engagement with networked audiences through connection, emotional bonding, and satisfaction (Brodie et al. 2011).

Being a linear narrative, the Detour off the Superhighway was not conducive to the more granular approach inherent in many interactive structures. Miles writes:

*'[a] medium is regarded as highly granular if it is made up of small parts that are self-contained to the extent that they make sense by themselves as is. Each part is a unit (Bogost 2012) that by itself provides closure (McAdams 1995)' (Miles 2014, 74).*

Pointing to the Kuleshov effect, a mental phenomenon by which an audience derives more meaning from the interaction of two sequential shots than from a single shot, Mile says that cinema is extremely granular—while the shots are more meaningful together, they still make sense individually. It is perhaps the traditionalist in me that gives preference to works that make use of the juxtaposition inherent in typical video editing practices. Indeed, in my own experiments with platforms like Korsakow, I have found the juxtaposition between clips—and the designer’s authorship surrounding this juxtaposition—to be the most appealing aspect.

This, combined with the already-linear structure of the experiment, is why I opted for a linear approach to the design of the interactive version of *Detour off the Superhighway*. This approach meant that each page subsequent to the ‘Introductory’ pages would likely make little sense on its own. The user would need to go back to the beginning to acquire context for the narrative. One might argue that increased granularity could improve the interactive version, but I believe it is the linear narrative, complete with the singular narrative arc, main characters, and challenges, that make the film what it is. Soar says these narrative elements, and the need to edit their significance into a linear work, are often of less concern to non-linear storytellers (Soar 2014, 167).

## Releasing the film online

I started the process of releasing *Detour off the Superhighway* as an interactive documentary in December 2014 (12 months after my PhD graduation), with a view to release one segment every week or so until the project was completely online. Much work was required to re-edit short segments quickly and put them online, let alone tend to the needs of a social media-driven project. This process became even more difficult when I gained a full-time lecturing contract. Berkeley (2012) points to the time commitments required for film production, financing, development, and release, and the incompatibility of these activities with ‘requirements of being a full-time academic’ (2012, 3). As a result, the interactive documentary fell by the wayside, but not before I noticed a steep decline in online engagement with the project. Generally as each segment was released, it would receive fewer views than the last. The introduction segment, for instance, was split into three parts: Part One received 23 views in its first week, Part Two received 27 views in its first week, and Part Three received only seven views. Perhaps, given the linear nature of the segments (and the parts within them), it was possible that some Facebook connections were unaware of the full context of the film and this influenced their reducing engagement.

## Linear documentary online

The structural problem, which had plagued the theatrical viability of the ‘examination cut’ of *Detour off the Superhighway*, was again present in this new beast that was the linear ‘interactive cut’. It seemed as though the short individual videos were less like self-contained clips that presented my life in each technological era of the experiment and more like segments from a larger film to be viewed without the rest of the film for context. The fact that my original situation documentary was a sum of its parts was now clear.

A colleague commented that if presented as a single clip the impact of the film’s climax would be lost if a viewer was to only watch that clip without the context of the experiment or the rest of the film. The interactive trial, while informative, was a failed one. Gaudenzi claims that ‘a linear documentary that has been shot with digital technology, and that is distributed on the Web, is a digital documentary but not an interactive one’ (Keen 2014, 28). It was clear that my film best functioned when shown as

a linear narrative. I decided that another approach would be to present *Detour off the Superhighway* as a feature-length film; similar in form to the original 'examination cut', but without the academic structure or theory-driven focus.

I began to investigate the film's distribution as a linear online documentary for a niche audience, what Berkeley (2012) would refer to as a 'specialist work for [a] narrow audience'.

The response I had received from industry peers, academics, friends, and family, is that, given the technology-driven subject of the film, it would have great appeal to viewers who are active online. Anecdotally, I have found some viewers who are not avid internet and/or social media users find the experiment a little tedious and uninspiring, whereas those who are 'digital natives' find the concept quite exciting, often recounting their own fraught relationships to technology. I believe that an online distribution method would be very effective in capturing that digital-savvy audience and build an online community which could potentially be expanded to future projects.

Furthermore, the PhD project itself was concerned with the development of technology and its effect on the production and distribution of video, and the exegesis took quite a progressive view on digital practices in this field. I cited practices such as 'collaborative content production' and crowdfunding as methods that transform the way that media projects are produced and consumed (Joutsen et al. 2008). De Rosa and Burgess (2014) highlight the increasing popularity of networked modes (including Netflix, iTunes, Apple TV, VOD, and Google Play) over more traditional ones (film festivals or cinema release) for documentary films. They also point to the success of feature-length documentaries over short form films on these contemporary platforms.

I see the future direction for *Detour off the Superhighway* as its release online via a streaming platform, such as VOD. This will mean completing a new edit of the film, taking into account the issues to do with the film's structure, as well as addressing colour correction and polishing the sound design. The result will essentially be that the film becomes less of a 'thesis film', as defined by Maras, and more of a 'situation documentary'; a film with an honesty and handmade aesthetic in an approach that Felperin describes as one that makes 'the package so persuasive' (Felperin 2004, 69).

For my documentary *Detour off the Superhighway*, the solution to the question of what one should do with a strange, personal (yet quite theory-heavy) feature-length film could very well be to edit it as a narrative-driven piece and to try to reach a niche audience that finds the research area embedded in the film interesting. This is what I intend to explore next, partly through my own practice and partly through engaging further with the work of my academic filmmaking colleagues, with the hope of producing new research outcomes of use to those producing academic documentaries.

To conclude, in regard to getting my thesis film into the public arena, there has been considerable trial and error in my postdoctoral career thus far. It has been a messy, experimental process, yet it has shed much light on the options for academic filmmakers.

Having quickly and impatiently dived into some fraught endeavours—such as the creation of an interactive documentary—I have made a number of mistakes, but I have also learned a lot along the way. Most notably, perhaps, is that there is a wide community of thesis filmmakers who struggle with what to do with their creative works. These filmmakers are often torn between satisfying the time-consuming requirements of their academic careers and achieving some amount of recognition from their industry peers. I believe that contemporary online distribution methods offer these filmmakers, who are often working with very low budgets, a viable way to reach an audience beyond the academy, even if that audience, as Berkeley discusses, is a narrow one.

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