Curating the Digital Documentary

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Society of American Archivists Conference
Library Science
UNC Chapel Hill School of Information &
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The film is no longer a "film." A movie now usually comes to a theater not on reels but on a matte. Instead of lacing a print through rollers and sprockets, the operator inserts the drive into a server that "ingests" the digital version. Along with a digital version of the movie, along with alternative soundtracks in various languages and all manner of copy-guarding encryption, the drive houses a hard drive the size of a big paperback. The drive is no longer a "film." A movie now usually comes to a theater not on reels but on a matte. Instead of lacing a print through rollers and sprockets, the operator inserts the drive into a server that "ingests" the digital version, along with all manner of copy-guarding encryption. (Bordwell, 2013)
Why study documentary?

Important for historical and cultural documentation

Often produced independent of major studio support = limited funding

Have been identified as part of an at-risk genre for preservation by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) report, The Digital Dilemma

Documentaries and film archives intersect in many ways

No small potatoes: Between 1995 and 2019, over 2,200 documentary films were produced, grossing more than $2.2 billion.
What is a digital documentary?

Digital documentaries use digital production, editing, and distribution/marketing. They use both linear and emergent forms: nonlinear, interactive, and participatory ("i-docs" and webdocs). Formats and lengths are all over the map, from minute-long shorts to features. Lives on a wide range of platforms, from Vimeo to Facebook and Netflix. Faster, cheaper, and easier to produce than film, but fragile in terms of preservation. From creative platforms like MIT's Open Documentary Lab, creative platforms like MIT's Open Documentary Lab.
Research Questions

1) What patterns emerge from a comparison of documentary filmmakers' digital production and distribution workflows?

2) Which digital tools and platforms are most commonly mentioned by documentarians? What is the information infrastructure (hardware and software) used for production, distribution, and consumption of digital documentaries? What is the information infrastructure of digital documentaries? What are the digital tools and platforms most commonly mentioned by documentarians?

3) What types of contextual information accrue to digital documentaries as they progress through their digital lifecycles? What additional contextual information is produced as part of the marketing and distribution of a digital documentary?
Semi-structured interviews with 12 filmmakers who have recently screened a documentary at a film festival

Methods

Assessment of existing metadata and contextual information for documentary films produced by interviewees

Image: Agnes Varda, The Gleaners and I

Recently screened a documentary at a film festival

12 Filmmakers who have semi-structured interviews with
Interview topics

Digital workflows

- Production to distribution
- Software and platforms used
- Festival presence
- Affordances and challenges of digital tools
- Tech problems and challenges
- File structure, organization, and backups
- Distribution platforms (i.e., the “Netflix effect”)
- Nature of filmmaking

Impacts of digital

Information management & archiving

- Festival presence
- Software and platforms used
- Production to distribution
- Advancements and challenges of digital tools
- Tech problems and challenges

Digital workflows

Interview topics

Image: Werner Herzog, Lo and Behold
Participants

- Doc filmmakers who have screened a film at a doc-focused festival in the last 3 years
- 12 completed interviews
Filmmaking production & distribution is 100% digital; only one respondent reported using film. Digital distribution and production is cheaper, faster, more accessible. Digital allows docs to reach new audiences.

Initial themes:
- Filmmaking production & distribution is 100% digital; only one respondent reported using film.
DIGITAL WORKFLOWS
We were a two person crew on location. It was the two of us. Um, one of us would shoot, one of us would do sound. Both of us basically wear the hats of directors, producers and a photographer, sound recorders.

For us we felt it was important to have a camera that did higher resolution, higher than 1080. The Standard HD a 1920 by 1080 is standard HD. We felt that, because technology is always changing fast and we didn't know how long the film was going to take to shoot, where things would be by the time we finished it. It's very grueling and that would have been easier if we had been shooting at a lower resolution that took up less space and had fewer gigabytes that we needed to back up.

So that's another important part of like the process during production is it's important that each card you make two copies for safety before you erase and reformat it. And you can imagine during the 14 hour shoot days staying late into the night backing everything up. It's very grueling and that would have been easier if we had been shooting at a lower resolution that took up less space and had fewer gigabytes that we needed to back up.

Difficult to keep up with technology and with the size of video files. One person, many hats. Many challenges related to technology.
DATA MANAGEMENT
We are among the most obsessively conscientious and organized filmmakers you can find when it comes to technical data and preventing problems because a lot of problems will happen because people's files aren't organized well or you know, they have, they know, preventing problems because a lot of problems will happen because when it comes to like technical data and like

THEMES

behavior driven by software conventions
quirky file naming
well-organized files
importance of
IMPACTS OF DIGITAL
I think that it's a little bit challenging and scary because it's like, you know, do you need to be affiliated with Netflix from the beginning of your project, in order to get distribution and you know, that obviously would affect the subject matters being covered.

Filmmakers still want to make films that have an impact — not just thinking about digital tech.

So I think people are still really attached to that being a part of their, mostly best experienced as a group and with the collective energy. And really appreciate the cinema and the sound, without the distractions of looking at your phone every 30 seconds. Watching films be seen in movie theaters on big screens and like in a dark room, that digital distribution, filmmakers really value, on an emotional level, like having their films be seen as a theatrical release that even though they're moving in the theaters.

I think that that people still really aspire to like having a 90-minute film that think that their film’s life.

Filmmakers on Netflix: Impacts on Documentary Filmmakers

THEMES

Impacts of Netflix on Filmmakers

just thinking about digital tech and not just thinking an impact - not just thinking about digital tech and not
Comparative analysis

Most filmmakers are "self-taught" in terms of information management, archives/backup processes, and keeping up with new digital production technology.

Workflows are highly variable and are driven by the needs of the project and preferences of the filmmaker.

Filmmakers care about preservation but are often uncertain about best practices.
The Netflix Effect: Platforms like Netflix are having huge impacts on documentary distribution, although most filmmakers have said they don’t like the idea of changing their workflows to suit Netflix.

Film comes first; technology is employed in the service of storytelling.

Comparative analysis
1) on filmmaker-owned drives,
2) film festival submission platforms, or
3) websites and social media channels.

Metadata and original files/media exist.
Documentation for digital docs can live just about anywhere.
Sources of contextual information for docs

Vimeo and YouTube sites
- Film trailer, clips
- # of views
- Filmmaker's bios
- Screening info
- Trailers
- Awards & press
- Synopses

Social site
- Social mentions
- Sharing stats
- Social media links

Filmmaker files
- Email records from production phase
- Trailers and preview cuts
- Rough cuts
- Notes and final cut timings
- Log files
- File names and directories

Film Festival & Filmmaker websites
- Distribution info
- Social media links
- Social mentions
- Trailers
- Awards & press
- Synopses

Filmmaker's other films (context)
- # of films
- # of trailer clips
- Vimeo trailer clips

Social media sites
- Analytics and search data
- Social mentions
- Vimeo and Youtube sites
Next steps

- Understand how film archivists approach web and interactive video
- Explore preservation strategies and models that could support independent videographers
- Identify emerging initiatives for preserving independent films
There's no hope that these production materials can be preserved -- it's too complicated. Emails documenting the process are too complex to save...

Filmmaker/interviewee, January 2019

Paper trails are easy. Digital trails are difficult. Paper records are easier.
Thank you!

Questions and feedback:
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Thank you!