Social network documentary and its aesthetic metamorphosis: Reflections from a practice-led research

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Abstract

This article employs a practice-led methodology to offer a creative examination of the digital trends, online practices, and shifting aesthetics of political documentary as it migrates in the interstices of social media. At the centre of this research is the production and circulation of Facebook-native microdocumentaries, labelled under the rubric of compact cinematics and radical videos. As a networked platform, Facebook affords opportunities for media experimentation and allows filmmakers to innovate political and sociable contents. I argue that documentaries circulated on Facebook, par- ticularly those with social change outreach, need to undergo an aesthetic adjustment to respond to ongoing ruptures in traditional storytelling and to address the shifting consumption modes of audiences online.

Introduction

This research is based on my creative practice using Facebook as an alternative platform for documentary storytelling and audience engagement. It examines how political documentary might exploit the affordances of social media in engaging with new media audiences. It is inevitable that newer forms of doing and making media will emerge and co-exist with traditional media practices as technology allows novel forms of storytelling. Independent documentary makers, among many creative practitioners, given their scarce resources, are historically more receptive to alternative distribution platforms. Despite criticisms that label Facebook as pseudo-public sphere and recent scandals that expose its negative impact on democracy, social media still has the capacity to extend storytelling, engage a politicised audience, and funnel political discourse, thus reshaping the practices and aesthetics of post-modernist documentaries.

In this essay, I focus my analysis on how political documentary remakes itself in the form of sociable but activist 'small media' (Chanan, 2012). It invites a rethinking of what exactly the current state of documentary making is in this age of media experimentation and hybridisation (Nash, Hight & Summerhayes, 2014). As a site of audience reception, Facebook also offers

practitioner-researchers an opportunity to scrutinise multiple layers of data - from aesthetics to sociability to algorithm. The scope of this article and emphasis on Facebook contributes to ongoing discourses that interrogate the practices of documentary and visual communication on social media. Adami and Jewitt (2016: 265) effectively describe these digital trends and online practices as "new configurations of typified communicative forms that fulfil specific and diversified social functions".

Daniel Meadows (2003) has argued previously that the value of practice-led research is measurable in two ways: its capacity to fill the knowledge gap and its impact on professional and work routines. As a mode of enquiry, practice-led research, sometimes called practice-based research, practice-as-research, creative research, and research-led practice, can offer unique research results capable of expanding an already existing knowledge (Smith and Roger, 2009; Batty and Kerrigan, 2018). It can likewise 'reveal an imaginative insight that challenges what we know' (Sullivan, 2009: 43). I situate my Facebook practices alongside these already existing notions that underline the contribution of creative practice research in understanding the old and new ways of doing, making, and consuming media.

Documentary and the social media landscape

Facebook production is a continuation of older experiments on digital video as documentary format. In the industry, a commonly cited case study is Darius Devas's use of Facebook group and Facebook page as alternative broadcasting platforms for his documentary *Goa Hippy Tribe* (2011). The documentary represents the story of Western hippies who reunited at the beach in Goa, India, some 30 years after their first encounter. Both the page and the group were used to circulate a series of Facebook documentaries, photos, and timeline posts - all of them native to social media. Kate Nash (2012: 30) analysed *Goa Hippy Tribe* as a social network documentary and argued that Facebook afforded the audience both creative and communal engagements with content.

> While the history of documentary is one of constant change associated with technological, aesthetic and social shifts, the production of documentary content for social networks like Facebook (which might be called social network documentary) transforms the documentary text, the mode of audience engagement and the relationship between documentary-maker and audience in ways that invite theoretical revision.

Nash's theorisation of Facebook documentary has been one of the early attempts to highlight the changes in documentary distribution made possible by the audience's involvement with Facebook.[1] *Goa Hippy Tribe* had no real political intent but was produced by a new breed of documentary makers who efficiently and actively use Facebook as a platform to increase audience engagement. Those filmmakers with political outreach typically publish short-length agitational videos that either expand the story, highlight a standpoint or echo a particular call to action.

Being relatively a young platform, Facebook users are afforded the means to experiment on postmodernist approaches in video production. For example, the surge of vertical instead of horizontal videos, although initially questioned, is today greatly accepted in the online community. This online is labelled in popular culture as 'vertical video syndrome' and is traceable to early cinema, for instance, the 'old movietone newsreels and square format photographs like Polaroids' (Ryan, 2018: 253). Cossar (2009: 3) describes the process of negotiating the screen resolution and size of films based on delivery platform as "aesthetic metamorphosis". They form a hybrid media practice that exists in the intersection between compact cinematics and radical videos. Hesselberth and Poulaki (2017: 2) use the term 'compact cinematics' to signify the study of "compact, compressed and miniature (audio) visual artefacts, forms, and practices that circulate in our everyday multimedia environment, across technologies, genres and discipline". Historically, the advent of social network-native videos is a continuation of the ongoing variations in the way we consume videos, stretching from the arrival of television in the 1920s and 1930s to the popularity of born-digital videos in recent years (Creeber, 2013).

Obrero as social network documentary

My independently produced documentary titled *Obrero* ('worker') serves as a unit of my textual and production analysis. *Obrero*'s Facebook page was purposefully utilised as a site of digital activism using a range of new media practices from journalistic documentaries to user-generated content, and can be considered a trans-journalistic social network documentary.[2] The Facebook page accompanies two other media platforms, each reaching its respective target audience: a regular documentary premiered in a film festival and an interactive documentary (i-doc) in the form of a website. Although *Obrero* varies across platforms, each variant can stand on its own. As an integrated whole, *Obrero* aims to represent the story of Filipino rebuild workers migrating to New Zealand after the Canterbury earthquake in 2011. Due to the magnitude of destruction, limited workforce and the urgent need to reconstruct, New Zealand relaxed its immigration policies and allowed for the entry of construction workers from overseas. In the beginning, New Zealand turned to its traditional source countries such as Great Britain and Ireland to recruit the much-needed labour force. Beginning 2013, however, a surge of workers from the Philippines started arriving in the city, a majority of them were former contract workers in the Middle East.

The political core of *Obrero*'s investigation is the issue of unethical migrant worker recruitment system as well as the well-being of the workers themselves distanced as they are from their families and community. Through my documentary and field work, I have revealed the phases of transnational recruitment from the Philippines to New Zealand that are vulnerable to corruption. I created the Facebook page in November 2017 when brand pages were already a mature platform for storytelling and audience engagement. In *Obrero*'s timeline, I posted multiple forms of media such as photos/albums, web links, videos, information graphic, status updates, and user-generated content.

Obrero wears multiple hats or fits in different categories of Facebook pages: as a film, as a cause, and as a community.[3] The hybrid identity of my project provided more opportunities for me as a documentary maker to engage with various publics online as I can access documentary fans, migrant worker advocates and a community of Filipino workers and their social networks. In other words, by targeting multiple publics (and understanding both their online and offline sociality), I was able to increase *Obrero*'s political outreach by spanning different interest groups. However, unlike the face-to-face interaction in film festivals, I communicate to my audience in a highly commercial environment where messages tend to be algorithmically friendly when accompanied by any of the following: photo/video, feeling/activity, movie showtimes, poll, check in, tag product, and watch party. These suggested modes of interaction are often atypical to documentary's sober treatment of social issue.

My role in the documentary is simply as 'reporter' and 'advocate' assuming an invisible presence as filmmaker, commenting as page administrator rather than as an author. Because I deliberately used the page for storytelling and activism rather than a promotional platform, the mood and feel of the page are similar to the ones created for campaigns and advocacy works of not-for-profit organisations. The reason is because Facebook page offers a one-size-fits-all template for communication. The distribution of multimedia content follows the prevailing logic and style of marketing, advertising, and fan base building, the dominant functions of brand page as sub-platform.

Publishing microdocumentaries on Facebook

Obrero is effectively a series of microdocumentaries and political posts on a timeline. Each post reports on a single issue or offers up an element of the bigger narrative. I label the reformatted videos as 'microdocumentaries' to signify their succinctness (between two to three minutes long) and to emphasise its lineage to documentary as media.[4] They are similar to 'mobisodes' or "short episodes of a popular television show that are specifically intended for mobile device viewing" (Safko, 2012: 465). These microdocumentaries do not necessarily repeat the film component. Instead, I collected video materials and interviews intended for Facebook audience. For a period of fourteen months, I have posted nine native videos on Facebook, seven of which are microdocumentaries. The other two include the trailer of *Obrero*'s film festival variant and a 25-seconder cover video. The cover video is essentially a teaser, which plays automatically on mute. It captures the essence of the page, and intertitled in Filipino language.

My microdocumentaries are at the centre of my digital activism on Facebook and has many precedents in video history. For example, activists have long used portable video equipment to record sites of protest and social struggles (Pillay, 2005) through video activism and grassroots organising. Often described in the literature as "participatory video, radical video, and alternative video", among other labels (Askanius, 2014: 453), the practice has provided voice to disadvantaged groups away from the discourses projected by the mainstream press. Although my microdocumentaries belong to the bigger family of radical video culture (see Presence, 2015) and have a semblance to citizen's journalism, I assert there is still a clear distinction between the sub-

genres. Vérité footage of protests shot on the streets tends to be uploaded on YouTube or Facebook in a relatively raw fashion, while a short narrative or argument in my microdocumentary must be creatively treated through a combination of testimonials, intertexts and supporting footage associating itself more closely with professional media-making practices.

Figure 1. Screenshot of Obrero's microdocumentary

Each microdocumentary contributes to the audience's understanding of the social problems *Obrero* engages with. The topics are presented somewhat like news packages aired over television or uploaded to web channels but have a strong take-away political message and are intended to educate and drive social change. For instance, my microdocumentary about New Zealand's migrant worker recruitment system exposed the plight of Filipino workers arriving in the country without jobs. Although it educated the audiences about the complexity of multi-layered recruitment system of workers, it also called for proactive government intervention and highlighted the need to establish a Filipino Labor Office in New Zealand. The strategic refashioning of documentary as Facebook video and the activist lens I used to report the problem illustrate Chanan's (2012) notion of how 'small media' can effectively highlight an alternative social reality, one that is neglected by mainstream mass media in the sending country or overlooked by journalists in the receiving country.

As a site of reception, Facebook offers a number of structural affordances to makers and users. First, there is the persistence or the automatic recording and archiving of online expressions and engagements; second, a replicability or the duplication of content through sharing and reposting; third, scalability or the ability of content to be visible in a networked platform, and finally, searchability or the capacity of content to appear in online searches (Boyd, 2010: 47-48). Of all these affordances, replicability is the most compelling reason why I chose to remediate *Obrero* as Facebook-native documentary. Replicability is closely linked to Green and Jenkins' (2011: 111) model of spreadability, defined as an alternative means to highlight the active agency of media users in 'shaping what messages spread, the routes they take, and the communities they reach'. In fact, there is a lesson to learn here from the entertainment media's 'engagement-based model': users must be treated as active agents in today's media ecology and it must be recognised that their online and offline activities generate distinct market value (Green and Jenkins, 2011), or in the case of my documentary, political engagement. When done properly, documentaries on Facebook could generate audiences that interact and co-create the media experience. For instance, digital conversations arise as the content is shared and circulated online. Affected Filipino workers, for instance, displayed disappointment about the inaction of government actors to mitigate the illegal charging of placement fees. What struck me most as a filmmaker was the way Filipino workers used these microsites as venues not only to highlight their voices but also to reveal their personal experiences of labour migration. Audiences of traditional media are given very limited means to talk back and influence the social agenda. My Facebook publics by contrast are no longer under my tutelage as the filmmaker. They are active agents of social change themselves, able to comment, share and submit user-generated content. I argue that apart from reaching audiences across national boundaries, Facebook facilitates public dialogue which is valuable for filmmakers seeking validity, legitimacy and timeliness of their political message.

Shifting video aesthetics

All microdocumentaries contained in this article are mobile-formatted. They are created to work with smartphones and through mobile apps, ubiquitous in today's contemporary media landscape.[5] The decision to focus on mobile app users is a creative response to studies that show audiences spend seven times as much time on apps as they do on mobile web browsers (Kemp, 2018). I concur that smartphones offer a flexible screen, which makes them ideal for any type of screen orientation and resolution. While vertical videos disrupt our traditional viewing norms, they must be embraced for its innovation and pleasure that they bring to mobile viewers (Ryan, 2018).

Microdocumentaries easily fit in today's 'attention economy' suiting the dynamic and fast-paced mobile 'news feed'. On Facebook, I replicated the aesthetics most often attached to native video. They exist at the interstices between old and new forms of creating media: (1) the aspect ratio is repurposed for mobile phone's vertical consumption, (2) titles are descriptive, (3-4) texts are captioned and intertitled so that the video remains intelligible when mute, and (5-6) the narrative and video length are both bit-sized for speed viewing[6] (see Table 1).

I argue that, despite the items' short lengths, this approach is the most effective way to achieve the rhetorical purpose of documentary. In addition, I chose to de-emphasise the cinematic sophistication of my Facebook microdocumentaries given *Obrero*'s political and journalistic nature which caters to logic and argument rather than the notion of the 'cinematic'. Thus, *Obrero*'s microdocumentaries are hybrid in nature, amplifying television current affairs' journalistic mode of storytelling on the one hand, and social media's succinctness, sociability and spreadability on the other. The video's spreadable format and digestible content, coupled with its use of Filipino's local language with intertitles, can politicise even non committed audiences on Facebook.

Table 1. Remediation: Technical specifications of Facebook microdocumentaries

FACEBOOK STYLE	REMEDIATION	RATIONALE	MEDIA ORIGIN
Square/vertical size	Aspect ratio	Suitable for mobile phone's vertical consumption	Television's 4:3 aspect ratio and cinema's standard 16:9 but vertical rather than horizontal; letterboxing
Descriptive heading	Titling	Evokes message	Movie titling; Newspaper and broadcast headlines
Captioned and intertitled	Text	Enhances viewing engagement	Intertitles common in early documentary and film; photo captions in newspapers
Intelligible without sound	Audio	Suits autoplay in-feed videos	Cinema's silent era
Quick message	Narrative Structure	Grabs audience attention	Newspaper's inverted pyramid news; standfirsts or nutgraph in feature
Bit-sized story	Length	Appropriate for speed viewing	Advertising's compact message delivery

A majority of these modifications in content and story structure of social network videos are a direct response to the changes in online advertising and Facebook interface. For example, after the launch of the 'silent autoplay in-feed videos' on Facebook in 2013, the value of the aural has diminished in social video and today supplanted by the subtitles and intertexts. This shift could be theorised as new media audiences' 'silent era'. This changing mode of spectatorship, I argue, means documentary makers must master continuity editing in post-production, a process wherein shots are assembled to maintain 'logical viewing orientation, action, and temporal relationships' (Bordwell and Thompson, 1997: 477–478). It sounds paradoxical that this 'silent' mode of consumption, pushed forward by social media's speedy, hypermediated and attention-seeking

ecology, is a step backward to the silent era, away from the documentary cinema's preoccupation with synchronised sound in the 1960s which was evident especially at the peak of direct cinema and cinema verite movement. Bolter and Grusin, 1999: 45) refer to this phenomenon as remediation, in which "digital media remediate their predecessors".

Obrero's narrative and aesthetic metamorphosis on Facebook relates to the prevailing discourse on interactive documentaries or i-docs. The word *interactive* connotes a metaphor for both technology and narrative presentation (Gaudenzi, 2013). A more straightforward definition states that an i-doc is "any documentary that uses interactivity as a core part of its delivery mechanism" (Galloway et al., 2007: 1). Social media as a delivery platform is dependent on user participation. Without audiences interacting, commenting, producing, sharing, and liking content, social media will be lifeless. In fact, "the very word 'social' associated with media implies that platforms are user centered and that they facilitate communal activities, just as the term participatory emphasizes human collaboration (Van Dijck, 2013: 11). *Obrero* also capitalises on audience interaction to advance its social agenda. Although largely beneficial, interactivity also poses a problem among new media documentary makers. Contemporary audiences today are floating in a cluttered media environment and bottomless newsfeed on Facebook, which means the availability of choices in interactive platforms may not necessarily translate to increased audience retention. The need to change *Obrero*'s aesthetic and narrative to suit Facebook, therefore, is a result of multiple factors, from audience fragmentation to the common tendency to casually 'graze' on social media rather than focus fully.

Conclusion

Media historian John Ellis (2012: 2-3) once noted that the documentary audience has changed and that the 'easy access to digital photography and video technologies has brought a new sense of familiarity with the basics of filming and being filmed'. The focus of this essay on Facebook as a site of documentary and digital activism also reflects the popular dictum 'the medium is the message' (McLuhan, 1964). Looking closely, the engagement strategies that I adapted in creating my microdocumentaries as a variant of radical online videos are not dissimilar to those undertaken by early avant-garde filmmakers (Askanius, 2014). Dziga Vertov also experimented on short-length agitational video pieces exhibited via travelling cinema in Soviet Union. Despite the short life span of this mobile cinema, I argue that its influence on the political rhetoric of video activism is still evident even today. I position my Facebook practices as a continuation of this creative refashioning of media production and engagement in this age social networking.

The production of a social network documentary is one that involves the remaking of a conventional film. As exemplified in this article, *Obrero* as a post-modern documentary mutates from analogue forms of communication into media formats that are both sociable and spreadable online. I conclude that creative practitioners must take into account the medium specificity and aesthetic attributes of Facebook in order to successfully navigate the platform. Facebook, however,

remains a double-edged sword. Radical filmmakers take advantage of the corporation's mechanism to politicise a transnational audience and yet forced to conform to the same algorithmic logic in order to survive in a saturated digital environment.

Notes

[1] Goa Hippy tribe is also available in multiple formats. Apart from Facebook page (fb.com/goahippytribe), the interactive documentary variant was also launched in 2011 (sbs.com.au/goahippytribe/#/get-your-passport-ready).

[2] See video section of fb.com/ObreroDocumentary

[3] Facebook page owners are given an opportunity to select from more than a thousand categories and subcategories that suit the desired objective or nature of their pages. As of January 2019, there are 1,505 existing categories and sub categories of Facebook pages. The main categories include: businesses, community organisation, interest, media, non-business places, other, and public figure. How pages are categorised affect the visibility of pages on web searches and searches within Facebook.

[4] The term 'microdocumentary' was also used in Aspen movie map (1978-1979) to refer to 'brief interviews' conducted with building occupants in Aspen, Colorado (see Brand, 1987). In 1993, Davenport, Evans, and Halliday also used the term 'micromovies' in discussing their Digital Micromovie Orchestrator (DMO) invention, a digital technology capable of creating small pieces of narrative structures.

[5] Facebook started embracing the mobile platform (m.facebook.com) in 2007, when the company turned three years old. The following year, the downloadable Facebook mobile application was made available to the public using The App store and Google Play (formerly called Android Market).

[6] Speed viewing has also been theorised through the lens of narrative films. Alexander (2017: 109) argues that the practice of speed watching can be 'understood not only as a means to master time, but also as a way of 'hacking' the cinematic narrative' and extending the logic of Hollywood's continuity editing.

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