

Obrero (“worker”): Practising and theorising political
documentary across transmedia platforms

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Abstract

This thesis is a creative and critical exploration of how transmedia storytelling meshes with political documentary's nature of representing social realities and goals to educate and promote social change. I explore this notion through *Obrero* ("worker"), my independently produced transmedia and transjournalistic documentary project that explores the conditions and context of the Filipino rebuild workers who migrated to Christchurch, New Zealand after the earthquake in 2011. While the project should appeal to New Zealanders, it is specifically targeted at an audience from the Philippines. *Obrero* began as a film festival documentary that co-exists with strategically refashioned Web 2.0 variants, a social network documentary and an interactive documentary (i-doc).

Using data derived from the production and circulation of *Obrero*, I interrogate how the documentary's variants engage with differing audiences and assess the extent to which this engagement might be effective. This thesis argues that contemporary documentary needs to re-negotiate established film aesthetics and practices to adapt in the current period of shifting technologies and fragmented audiences. Documentary's migration to new media platforms also creates a demand for filmmakers to work with a *transmedia state of mind*—that is, the capacity to practise the old canons of documentary making while comfortably adjusting to new media production praxis, ethics, and aesthetics. Then *Obrero* itself, as the creative component of this thesis, becomes an instance of research through creative practice. It does so in two respects: adding new knowledge about the context, politics, and experiences of the Filipino workers in New Zealand; and offering up a broader model for documentary engagement, which I analyse for its efficacy in the digital age.

Note on publications and creative practice components

Peer-reviewed journal articles

The following articles are modified versions of the discussions I wrote in Chapter 3 (Obrero as political documentary), Chapter 5 (Transmedia documentary variants), and Chapter 6 (Findings and Conclusion):

Zafra, N. (2021). Social network documentary and its aesthetic metamorphosis: Reflections from a practice-led research. *Visual Communication*. [DOI](#)

Zafra, N. (2020). The nexus of political documentary and alternative journalism: Addressing the social world. *Pacific Journalism Review: Te Koako*, 26(2),162-178. [DOI](#)

Zafra, N. (2020). Do-it-yourself interactive documentary (i-doc): A post-textual analysis. *Media Practice and Education*. [DOI](#)

Media Contribution

Zafra, N. (2019, July). The new documentary film and its role in democracy. *Rappler*. [URL](#)

Creative components

The creative components of this thesis have appeared in the following festival venues and have been recognised by the following organisations:

Zafra, N. (2018). *Obrero* [Documentary]. New Zealand; Philippines: Independent

-Official Selection, 13th Documentary Edge Film Festival, New Zealand

-Invited, DocEdge Docs4 Schools Programme, Auckland, New Zealand

-Invited, Cinematografo International Film Festival, San Francisco, California, USA

Zafra, N. (2018). *Obrero* [i-doc]. New Zealand; Philippines: Independent

-Winner, Multimedia category, ILO Global Media Competition on Labour Migration, International Labour Organization, Geneva, Switzerland [URL](#)

-Best website, Interactive media category, Migration Advocacy and Media Awards Commission on Filipinos Overseas, Manila, Philippines [URL](#)

-Invited, Loturak Festival [Festival of new documentary and digital narrative genres] Basque Country, Spain [URL](#)

Conference presentations

Zafra, N. (2019, June). *Obrero* ('worker'): Radical documentary production and distribution in the Global South. Transnational Radical Film Cultures Conference: An International Conference on Film, Aesthetics and Politics, University of Nottingham, UK.

Zafra, N. (2018, July). *Political doco turns social: Facebook as a site of transmedia documentary practice*. Australia New Zealand Communication Association ANZCA Conference, University of Auckland, NZ.

Preface and acknowledgements

Creative practice sits at the heart of this thesis. It functions both as a methodology and as a site of media experimentation. As a practitioner, creating a transmedia documentary allows me to fulfil and experience several media routines—from being camera operator to publisher and from being director to projectionist—which is reminiscent of the past when 16mm was the dominant film technology for production and exhibition. As a researcher, treating documentary as a site of research creates an opportunity to reflect on either the narratives of the rebuild workers in Christchurch or the findings I generated out of my transmedia practice.

Disasters like the Christchurch earthquake disrupt the status quo. And it is in the interstices of these ruptures that narratives unfold. When I started working on this thesis in early 2017, I realised that the timing to do research was perfect. I was living in the right place at the right moment. New Zealand had opened its borders for foreign workers as there was a public demand to fast-track the reconstruction. The Philippines, with its reputation as an exporter of labour, had quickly become a major workforce source. We saw at the time that this moment strengthened the bilateral relations between the two nations. Since this time, different media outlets have consistently reported the plight of migrant workers—from housing issues and contract substitution to racism at work. But some stories remained untold. At that point, the journalist and activist in me strongly identified the need to represent our own, the Filipino workers.

Despite being a lone filmmaker with few resources, I ventured into my documentary fieldwork. I travelled back and forth to Christchurch from Auckland several times between September and November that year. The period of my filming was the peak of reconstruction in the damaged city. Filipino workers smiled and warmly greeted me with *kabayan* whenever I bumped into them on the main streets and major construction sites. The term *kabayan* is used to address or greet a fellow Filipino or a person from the same hometown. I felt at home. Because we spoke the same language and shared the same status as temporary migrants in New Zealand, I developed a genuine interest in documenting their stories not only as a filmmaker, but also as a Filipino.

Experimenting with media platforms and recreating the documentary for a multiplatform audience fuelled my imagination and engaged me creatively. Initially, the task felt overwhelming. I transcribed long interviews, wrote and revised several scripts, and spent

many long nights editing videos and designing a website. But as Paulo Coelho once said, “When you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you to achieve it” (Coelho, 1993, p. 22). I was lucky to be surrounded with the right people who believed in my capacity to complete both the thesis and its creative component.

The enormous amount of time and effort to build a thesis with creative practice means a long list of people worthy of heartfelt thanks. I am especially grateful to my primary supervisor, Professor Annie Goldson, for her unwavering support and guidance throughout my PhD at the University of Auckland. I value her contribution to the overall shape of this project. The depth of Annie’s knowledge in documentary making and experience in doing creative practice as research contributed to the academic thoroughness and creative rigour of this thesis. I would also like to thank my co-supervisor, Associate Professor Neal Curtis. Exchanging ideas with Neal enriched the theoretical component of this thesis. I appreciate all his valuable suggestions as well as his critical insights in the design of my i-doc.

I owe special mention to the Filipino rebuild workers in Christchurch who participated in my documentary project. Thank you to Mike Quina and Jerry Angeles for sharing their time, commitment, and trust during the filming of *Obrero*. I would also like to thank the members of the Association of Filipino Tradesmen in New Zealand and all the Filipino workers and community leaders who supported me in this project in one way or another. I dedicate the documentary project to all of you and all overseas Filipino workers in New Zealand and worldwide.

I would like to thank the committee behind the University of Auckland Doctoral Scholarship that supported my research and entire PhD. I would not have been able to complete this thesis and creative components without their funding and assistance. Many thanks as well to everyone with whom I have bantered ideas during my candidature: to my PhD cohort and colleagues at the Department of Media and Communication and to my Filipino PhD friends at UoA and AUT. All of you helped me to maintain my overall sanity during my extremely busy days. Thank you for your overwhelming moral support and for engaging with me in intellectual conversations that sharpened my thesis arguments.

Finally, I would like to share my achievements with my entire family in the Philippines, my constant source of support and motivation. This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my parents who passed me their strong drive for education.

How to read this thesis: A guide for readers outside academia

- 1
Chapter



INTRODUCTION

The intro explains the scope of the thesis and its creative component. If you have limited time, check out the overview of *Obrero* as transmedia documentary. Afterwards, jump to “Findings and conclusion” to see how transmedia is applied in this project.
- 2
Chapter



METHODOLOGY

Think of methodology as a construction blueprint. It captures the entirety of a project and summarises how the study was executed. Scan the pages and check out the section “Transmedia methods and procedures”. I share a lot of insights as a researcher and practitioner so they might be useful for you in some ways.
- 3
Chapter



OBRERO AS
POLITICAL
DOCUMENTARY

This section is meant for anyone interested in documentary filmmaking. Some parts contain a historical exposition of the sub-genre and a discussion on social issue documentary, which provide you with concise summaries. And if you only like the production component, start with the section on production analysis.
- 4
Chapter



SOCIAL MEDIA,
INTERACTIVITY,
& DOCUMENTARY

You may skip this part if you are only interested in practical documentary ideas and have limited time to read. But this chapter is a fountain of information on Web 2.0 and it will appeal to you as an internet user yourself. Check out the section “Documentary and Web 2.0”. I’m sure you will take away something new.
- 5
Chapter



TRANSMEDIA
DOCUMENTARY
VARIANTS

Head straight to this chapter if you are into new media storytelling. I discuss here both Facebook and web documentaries and the process of repurposing documentary stories across platforms. Check out the data analytics of *Obrero* for some practical insights about audience measurement and digital metrics. Your next project might need this strategy too.
- 6
Chapter



FINDINGS AND
CONCLUSION

This chapter is for you if you want to read the thesis in a nutshell. Those who have interest in the Christchurch rebuild and the Filipino workforce might find the section on “*Obrero* as research” particularly relevant. If you are in a hurry but keen to read the thesis again, go straight to “Final words” for some quick ideas.

Where to access the documentary elements of this thesis

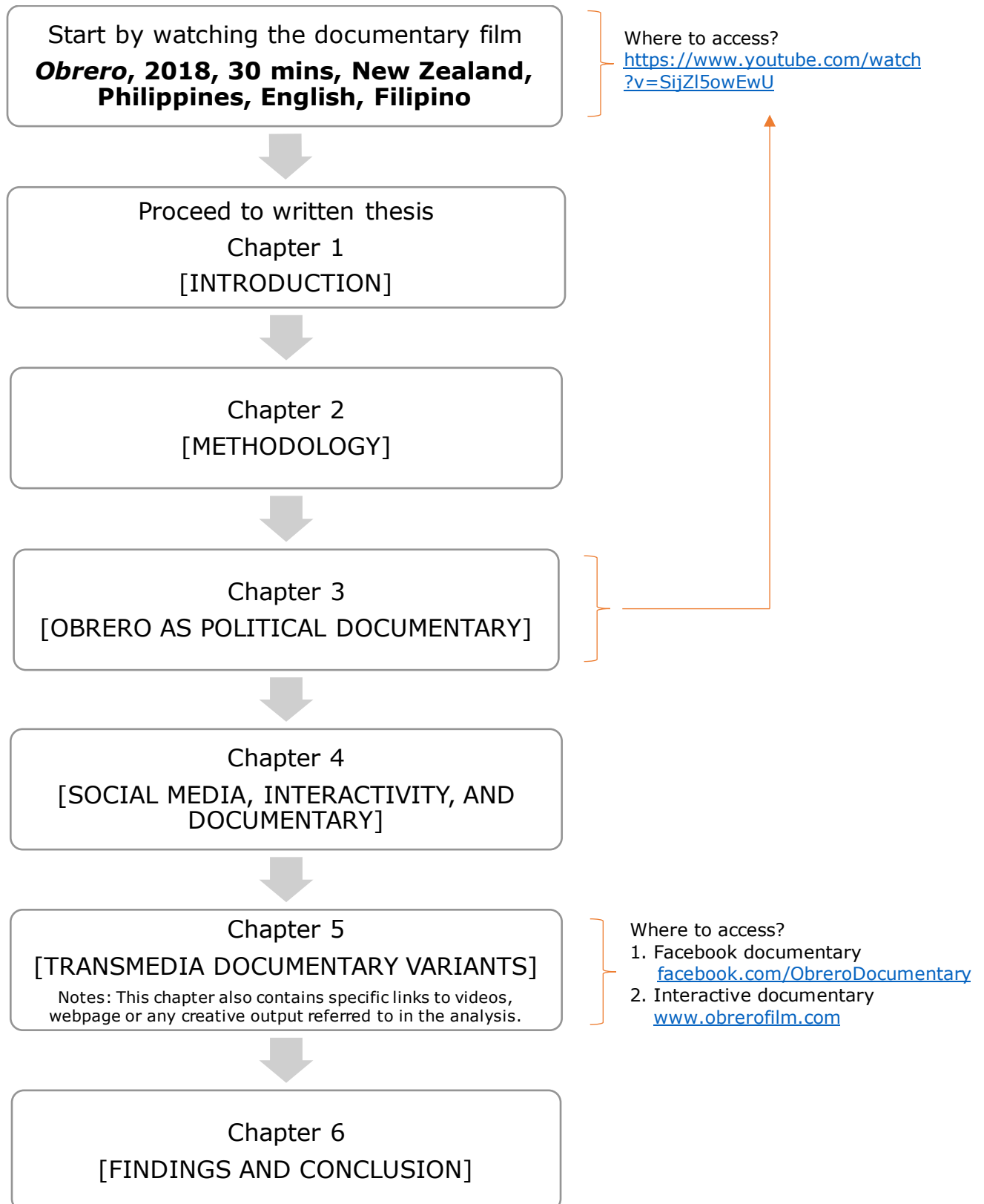


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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The documentary tradition, despite its long-standing roots, is historically under-represented in film theory and criticism and also marginalised by cinema's commercial imperative (Chanan, 2007; Metz, 1974). Thanks to the digital era and the greater politicisation of many societies and communities post-9/11, the documentary has seen a surge of interest in terms of experimental techniques in production and distribution outside conventional cinema. As a result, academic theorising of the genre has sharpened, turning away from a postmodern preoccupation with documentary's relationship to "reality" towards a new engagement with politics and technological change. While newer media technologies and accessible distribution platforms afford the emergence of innovative experiments in documentary making, questions about the genre still arise. How does the complexity of digital media ecology alter the "character of the representation" (Chanan, 2007, p. 22), change the ground rules of documentary making, and modify the presentation of transnational political issues in the contemporary context?

To explore these questions, I undertook documentary practice as research (Wayne, 2008) by producing a series of political documentaries about Filipino labour migration in post-disaster Christchurch. The Canterbury earthquake in 2011 is the only post-globalisation event which has seen an influx of foreign rebuild workers into New Zealand. Thus, Christchurch became a distinct case study in New Zealand's labour migration history, one that intersects with an increasingly complex debate taking place in the country over immigration (Spoonley, 2006). More importantly, the tangible and increasing impact of globalisation and neoliberalism worldwide points to the greater need to study labour migration as a social phenomenon in settler societies like New Zealand (Menz & Caviedes, 2010).

How can political documentary provide a multi-layered analysis of a particular global issue, for example, that of labour migration? How can the various modes, styles, or variants

of documentaries engage with differing audiences through the use of multiple platforms, and can we assess how effective this engagement is? In other words, although this thesis sheds light on the conditions and context of rebuild workers in Christchurch, it also analyses how a social topic, more broadly, is handled by the emergent practice of cross-media production and distribution, also called *transmedia*. The decision to blend labour migration (as a social topic), political documentary (as a medium), and transmedia (as a distribution strategy) lends itself to an original scholarly enquiry that encompasses not only the agency of the social actors being represented but also the strategic decisions made by political documentary makers to engage with their audience. This audience can be diverse—audiences for migration documentaries, for example, may come from both source and receiving countries. In other words, the work needs to assume a more sophisticated approach to audience engagement and storytelling, given the disparity of the target audience’s interest, stake in and position on, the subject matter.

1.1. Creative practice component: *Obrero*



Figure 1. Creative component: *Obrero*'s transmedia model

Obrero (worker) is a transmedia documentary that tells the story of Filipino construction workers migrating to Christchurch after the earthquake in 2011 (see Figure 1). The project began as a film festival documentary that co-exists with strategically repurposed Web 2.0 variants, a Facebook native documentary and an interactive documentary (i-doc). As well as using multiple channels, the project employs a transjournalistic mode of representation, expanding the reportage of worker issues through different documentary variants. The addition of new styles of documentary creates an option for audiences to navigate the narrative in an interactive manner, selecting multimedia elements at will—photos, animation, graphics and native videos. Social media, in particular, provides a platform for the audience to discuss publicly the issues raised by migration.

Obrero, although focused on the Filipino migrants, is deeply connected to a larger global labour migration trend. Recent statistics show that roughly 258 million people have migrated and reside outside their country of origin (United Nations, 2017). The focus on the Philippines' experience is even more important given the nation's reputation as a "pioneer" in the "global enterprise" of labour (Rodriguez, 2010, p. xii). Therefore, while this thesis explores the experience of a relatively small number of migrants working in New Zealand, its findings are applicable elsewhere, as economic issues, migration policies and the social impact of migration transcend geographical boundaries (Ratha et al., 2011). This exploration, then, could contribute to a greater public understanding of disaster and migration and may even influence the crafting of public policies. *Obrero* as an instance of research also provides answers to socio-political questions: What is the politics of labour migration in the Philippines? What is the truth behind the accounts of unethical recruitment practice in the construction industry? And is this practice ongoing?

1.1.1. Documentary synopsis

After the devastating earthquake that struck Christchurch in 2011, the city sought construction workers from overseas. Around 3,000 Filipinos were granted essential skills visas to work on the rebuild. But workers often remained without an income for up to a year as they were paying off the large recruitment fees. *Obrero* (worker) paints a portrait of a recovering city and speaks to the struggles and dreams of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) who migrated for the rebuild.

1.1.2. Canterbury earthquake and the Filipino workers

The 6.3 magnitude earthquake that hit the Canterbury region in 2011 is arguably one of New Zealand's worst natural disasters in recent history. The fault that triggered the shake was located within six kilometres of the city centre, which gave it extreme intensity (GNS Science, n.d.). The death toll reached 185 with another 6,659 people severely injured. The damage to public and private infrastructure was also staggering. The cordon surrounding the business district immediately following the disaster was extended to 92 hectares, which revealed the scale of devastation in the city (Statistics NZ, 2012). Government data showed that almost half of the central business district was destroyed by the earthquake, causing damage to 150,000 homes (Parker & Steenkamp, 2012).

More than a year after the disaster, the Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority launched the city's official recovery plan, which detailed the anchor projects of the rebuild (Statistics NZ, 2012). This stage not only marked the official transition of the city from an emergency to a rebuilding phase, but also signalled the peak of the labour migration inflow as triggered by the construction demand. It was estimated that the entire rebuild efforts would cost a vast sum of money, amounting to \$40 billion—most of this funded by the New Zealand Government (English, 2014). Private insurance companies also paid out \$2.7 billion on residential and commercial claims following the earthquake in 2011 (Insurance Council of New Zealand, 2017).

The extent of the construction activities required to rebuild Christchurch meant that manpower had to be outsourced from overseas to sustain and achieve the rebuild efforts. It was estimated that 35,000 labourers were needed, with half of that number to be recruited from other countries (Stringer, 2016). The Filipino workforce ended up as one of the biggest foreign worker groups in Canterbury's construction industry, outstripping British and Irish immigrants.¹ Filipinos were eager to work in Christchurch. Leighs Construction, one of the first companies to hire Filipino workers, reported that 400 workers applied in Manila for the 20 jobs it advertised (Montgomerie, 2013).

¹ Although New Zealand is geographically close to the Asia-Pacific region, its immigration policies have historically favoured migrants from source countries such as Britain and Ireland (Simon-Kumar, 2015). The assisted migration scheme in the first quarter of 20th century, for instance, preferred European migrants and contributed to the perception of "white New Zealand policy" (OECD, 2014).

The New Zealand Government introduced three sets of initiatives to fast track the movement of foreign rebuild workers: the Canterbury Skill Shortage List (CSSL); the Canterbury Skills and Employment Hub (also called “Skills Hub”); and the extension of work rights for English language students in Canterbury. The CSSL was a process to identify the occupations needed for the rebuild, while the Skills Hub was aimed at filling lesser-skilled jobs that are excluded from the shortage list but still important to the rebuild. A majority of Filipinos entered the New Zealand workforce through the CSSL. The first step in the recruitment process entailed matching a New Zealand citizen and a potential employer, but if local workers were not available, the jobs would then be offered to labourers from overseas (OECD, 2014).

Local journalists have reported the presence of Filipinos in Christchurch in numerous platforms and have covered such issues as exploitation, debt bondage, housing problems, and exorbitant recruitment fees (McClure & Meier, 2015; Morrah, 2016). However, the backstory of Filipino migration to New Zealand has rarely been told. This country has become a new destination for Filipinos; America, the Middle East and some parts of Asia have been typically favoured by those looking for overseas work opportunities (Martin et al., 2006). This research, then, fills a gap by providing a more comprehensive context in which to understand this recent wave of Filipino labour migration to New Zealand.

1.1.3. Filipino labour migration: Brief context

Migration is a common feature within democracies and is undertaken by most capitalist states, resulting in a transnational shift that “reshapes societies and politics” worldwide (Castles et al., 2014, p. 13). For citizens of developing countries, the decision to migrate is related overwhelmingly to the search for “economic betterment, social mobility, cross-cultural learning and reduction of oppression and racial prejudice” (Gibson, 1983, p. 31). In the Philippines, labour migration is a complex political affair. The notions of migrant and migration are both “socially produced” and “politically constructed and contested” (Tyner, 2004, p. 140). This is evident through the establishment of the so-called “state migratory apparatus” in the Philippines, which transformed labour migration into a highly politicised state activity (Tyner, 2004, p. 27). The Presidential decree No. 442, also referred to as the New Labor Code of the Philippines, introduced strategic provisions for labour migration and systematised the recruitment policies of the government. Three agencies were subsequently created: the Bureau of Employment Services; the National Seaman’s Board;

and the Overseas Employment Development Board (CIIR, 1987). The latter was specifically mandated “to promote the overseas employment of Filipino workers through a comprehensive market promotion and development program” (“New Labor Code,” 1974). Twelve years later, the functions of the three government bodies were merged into a single government unit—the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) (CIIR, 1987)—charged with overseeing and regulating labour migration policies in the country. Because of the increasing labour demand in subsequent years, POEA’s mandate focused more on licensing private recruitment entities and facilitating employment contracts, including government-to-government arrangements. Other functions such as migrant welfare and protection were assumed by another body, the Welfare Fund (now the Overseas Workers Welfare Administration (OWWA)). Rodriguez (2010) used the term “labor brokerage” to encapsulate the “institutional and discursive practices through which the Philippine state mobilises its citizens and sends them abroad to work for employers throughout the world” (p. x). It could be argued, therefore, that the presence of these state apparatuses reflects the relatively strong position of the Philippine government to institutionalise the export of labour (Tyner, 2004).

An optimistic view of migration often emphasises the economic returns of sending a proportion of the labour force to the developed world; the Philippines is seen as a model in this respect. The country has arguably mastered the strategic exportation of labourers to developed states, with over two million contract workers in roughly 140 countries, a huge increase compared to the 35,000 workers when overseas deployment was first institutionalised by law in the 1970s (McKay, 2015; POEA, n.d.). Often called “overseas Filipino workers” (OFW) and sometimes referred to as “sacrificial lambs”, they are portrayed not only as priced “commodities” but also as “heroes” of the nation (Alcid, 2003; Tan, 2006). Migrant workers are widely acknowledged in Philippine society because of their contribution to the economy, and this recognition creates an even stronger drive to continue sending workers to capital-rich countries (OECD/Scalabrini Migration Center, 2017; Tyner, 2004). In the year 2016 alone, overseas Filipinos remitted almost US\$27 billion back to the Philippines, which is enough to decrease the poverty incidence in the country (Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas, 2016). A report by the United Nations stated that foreign remittance serves as social equaliser in the Philippines as it not only allows families to send their children to school, among other basic needs, but it also increases the purchasing power of the families of overseas Filipinos (De Vries, 2011). Because of this, OFW remittance has been

perceived as an effective poverty-reduction mechanism of the government as they mitigate, although in short-term fashion, the country's economic instability (Tigno, 2015; Rodriguez, 2010).

While the “OFW as hero” is the most prevalent dictum of the government and the general public, recent questions have been raised as to the benefits of this economic mindset (Tigno, 2015). These have focused on not only the social consequences of Filipino parents' sustained separation from their families but also the weak protection and benefits provided by the government to OFWs if they become distressed or face difficulties (Arguillas & Williams, 2010; S. E. Harper & Martin, 2013; OECD/Scalabrini Migration Center, 2017). While it is true that labour migration initially was used by the Philippine government as a temporary measure to curb unemployment and foreign debts, the country's labour export orientation has become institutionalised and remains prevalent (Rodriguez, 2010).

A number of studies have been published in recent years tracing the movement of Filipinos to many parts of the world (e.g., Polanco, 2017; Rodriguez, 2010; Sills & Chowthi, 2008), but the recent migration of Filipinos to New Zealand has been minimally documented and researched. A few significant articles published recently by New Zealand authors have looked at the migration patterns of Filipinos in New Zealand (Friesen, 2017), the exploitation of migrants in New Zealand including Filipino workers (Stringer, 2016), and a critical examination of New Zealand's labour migration policies, for instance, the temporary status of migrant workers in New Zealand (Collins, 2016, 2019).

The social phenomenon of foreign rebuild workers in New Zealand—their conditions and contexts—are political in nature, driven by agencies and actors that shape policies both in sending and receiving countries. These labour migration issues, I propose, can be explored and investigated in political documentary. The complexity of labour migration as a topic also lends itself to the utilisation of transmedia strategies—spreading out socio-relevant media content in avenues that reach a transnational audience. Transmedia has the capacity to expose, represent, and contextualise a social phenomenon. And to fully maximise the strengths of documentary across platforms, filmmakers must break away from the traditional structure and order of documentary making in favour of a more converged mode of production and distribution.

1.2. Research questions

This thesis follows the research question framework proposed by Milech and Schilo (2004), which asserts that “creative production *is* research” and that posing research questions could articulate a debate and, therefore, fill a particular knowledge gap within the particular discipline (p. 7). The research question approach also allows me as practitioner-researcher to sketch out the relationship between the documentary and the written thesis.

RQ 1: How do different variants of the documentary—film festival, social media and interactive—represent a socio-political issue?

This question is centred on the practice of *Obrero* as a transmedia political documentary. In particular, I ask how a festival film performs differently than its Web 2.0 counterparts. This question allows me to critically examine and theorise the efficacy of web-based and mobile variants of *Obrero* by commenting on the strategies, style, and structures of its storytelling and distribution. Given the challenges posed by audience fragmentation and shifting technologies today, I ask how documentary’s reportage of social issues varies across transmedia platforms.

RQ 2: Can a transmedia approach offer a broader model for political documentary engagement in the contemporary digital age?

Obrero as a form of creative research is concerned with the efficacy of transmedia as a model for developing greater audience engagement in the digital age. Although political documentary has become more popular with mainstream audiences in recent years, the transmedia practice of low-budget and independent filmmaking could well engage more fully with those audiences committed to a social cause. For this question, I consider how transmedia allows the articulation of more grassroots voices as afforded by the internet’s interactive features. Hence, *Obrero*’s cross-media approach may offer a new mode of (and direction for) political communication and transnational audience engagement.

RQ 3: What new information does *Obrero*, as practice-based research, tell audiences about Filipino labour migration in post-disaster New Zealand?

This research question focuses on analysing the topic of *Obrero* documentary—labour migration. Using data derived from the ethnographic fieldwork and the documentary production itself, I explore the politics of the movement of workers from the

Philippines to New Zealand. In the analysis, I ask further: How is New Zealand depicted as a destination for Filipino migrant workers? What is the nature of worker recruitment? and What issues do workers have to negotiate to obtain employment? As this thesis is integrated with a corpus of creative work, answers to these questions appear in both the documentary and the written component.

1.3. Documentary as radical and alternative media

Political documentary is often aligned with radical film culture and, as such, can be considered in terms of its two branches—politics and aesthetics.² The first branch captures the inherent potential of documentaries to echo a radical or political point of view, contesting those in power. This is a unique characteristic that separates documentary from newsreels and other forms of actualities (Nichols, 2001). This notion of radical filmmaking “coupled to social purpose lend distinction to documentary as an art form capable of envisioning a transformed world” (Nichols, 2001, p. 608) or, in the words of Thomas Waugh (2011), a “radical socio-political transformation” (p. 6). Radicalism is also the rationale behind the concept of *Third Cinema*, defined not in terms of geographical location where the film is produced but the ideology that motivates the filmmaker to oppose class oppression, thus representing the plight of the masses (Gabriel, 1982) and espousing an “unequivocal commitment to a position or cause” (Wayne, 2001, p. 13). Barsam (1973) argued that documentary is a special form of rhetorical expression and is a “film with a message” (p. 4). It can also become a tool to manage public opinion (Renov, 2004). Documentary makers working as independents—those producing work outside the mainstream or dominant studio-based system on typically low-budget and community-supported projects—are often “viewed as aligned to left-wing politics, partly due to practical links between documentary activism, demands for access and alternative media outlets” (Geiger, 2011a, p. 189).

The second branch of radical film culture, on the other hand, deals with aesthetics and addresses the wider culture of experimental avant-gardism. To adhere to avant-garde film practice is said not only to oppose the dominant format, but also recreate traditional modes of film production, distribution, and consumption. When radical film culture meshes with new

² This was also the theme of Radical Film Network’s Conference in June 2019, where I presented some preliminary findings of this thesis. The conference suggested two definitions of radicalism: a commitment to the traditions of the Left and an experimentation with film aesthetics.

media technologies, a new form of documentary evolves beyond the traditional notion of political representation. As a result, the radical documentary today has extended its audience reach through the use of aesthetic strategies of exhibition and digital platforms and softwares (Hamblin & Watson, 2019).

Scholars also have mapped out the features of documentary in terms of alternative media and as alternative journalism. John Downing (2001) explored alternative media's links to radicalism and defined it as "generally small-scale and in many different forms, that express(es) an alternative vision to hegemonic policies, priorities, and perspectives" (p. v). Alternative media is valuable for its capacity to "create new spaces or alternative voices that provide the focus both for specific community interests as well for the contrary and the subversive" (Silverstone, 1999, p. 103). Common typologies of alternative media include the following: it is positioned in opposition to the mainstream; it involves more participation by community members in its production; it has status as civil society media; and it functions as rhizomatic media that links activist groups and movements (Bailey et al., 2008). This notion of being in opposition to dominant media structures appears consistently in succeeding research (e.g., Atton & Hamilton, 2008; Couldry & Curran, 2003; Forde, 2011). Recent scholarship also has explored a wave of contemporary documentary makers operating outside the influence of the mainstream linked to an environment of protest cultures where they can engage in creativity, experimentation, and innovation in film practice (Mutibwa, 2019).

The related literature on alternative journalism typically has addressed instances of amateur style reporting, citizen journalism, user-generated content, community journalism as well as studies on alternative news audiences (Akinfemisoye, 2014; Atton, 2009a; Barnes, 2014; Downing, 2003; Forde, 2015; Harcup, 2016). Similar to advocacy journalism (Janowitz, 1975; Thomas, 2018), alternative journalists (e.g., documentary makers) emphasise the perspective of ordinary people and provide insights from non-traditional sources rather than deploying an objective lens and a hierarchy of sources as in professionalised journalism (Atton, 2009); that is, their work functions as a "self-perceived corrective" to the mainstream media (Holt, Figenschou, & Frischlich, 2019, p. 862). These journalists represent the political by intending: "to give a voice to the voiceless, to fill the gaps left by the mainstream, to empower ordinary people to participate in democracy, and in many instances, to educate people with information they cannot access elsewhere" (Forde, 2011, p. 45). As the media has shifted towards tabloidisation, some have argued that

documentary makers are assuming journalism's watchdog role, probing political issues (Goldson, 2015); documentary making, as filmmaker Laura Poitras pointed out, can be seen as "journalism plus" (Das, 2015).

Historically, moving pictures began meshing with journalism when newsreels attained a popular status as a genre at the beginning of the 20th century. Defined as "a single film reel of topical news items" (McKernan, 2008, p. 1), the term *newsreel* could be applied to any motion picture footage of news and current events shown in cinemas as part of a programme. Scholars have situated newsreels at the intersecting point between the "idea of news and that of documentary" (Corner, 2018, p. vi). From their inception, newsreels were treated as secondary to feature films, but proved useful for the publicity purposes and prestige of the production companies (Chambers et al., 2018). But not all newsreels were commercially distributed. Scant representation of social issues in mainstream media through newsreels pushed some filmmakers to set up their own distribution networks to screen alternative newsreels projecting proletarian subjects (Pizzichini, 2003). By the 1960s, newsreel collectives revived an "alternative form of reportage" by showcasing alternative videos that highlighted news angles not covered by the mainstream press (Nichols, 1973, p. 7). Although it may appear nostalgic to look at newsreels as predecessors of journalistic videos that proliferate on social media, the point is to spotlight how the spread of *verité* footage of protests and other forms of video activism online symbolise how newer technologies today intersect with older forms of filmic representation (Levin, 2017).

1.4. Contextualising transmedia theory

Marsha Kinder was one of the first scholars to use the term *transmedia*; she connected it to intertextuality to highlight how pieces of related texts can appear across media platforms. Using the lens of children's programming, she referred to transmedia as the capacity of audience members to "recognize, distinguish, and combine different popular genres and their respective iconography that cut across movies, television, comic books, commercials, video games, and toys" (Kinder, 1991, p. 47). Because many succeeding scholars have applied transmedia to the study of fictional characters and narratives, the term has become almost synonymous with practices of commercial entertainment media designed to reach broader audiences, expand narratives, and commodify content across platforms (Jenkins, 2003). Transmedia has been associated with "a system of producing narrative variation on sameness" (Freeman, 2017, p. 9), a form of distributed narratives (Walker, 2004) and a media

phenomenon where “distinct-authors, same-media, and texts... produce new fictional worlds that do not adhere to the logic of the proto-text” (Dena, 2009, p. 315). A few notable case studies of successful transmedia strategies in this regard include *The Matrix Trilogy* (1999), *Star Wars* (1977), and *The Walking Dead* (2003). Here, characters and story worlds were successfully extended from a single movie or film trilogy to a number of delivery channels including online games (Jenkins, 2010). Jenkins (2011) later extended the application of the term to other logics such as “transmedia branding, transmedia performance, transmedia ritual, transmedia play, transmedia activism, and transmedia spectacle” (n. p.). He argued that “such a multi-layered approach to storytelling will enable a more complex, more sophisticated, more rewarding mode of narrative to emerge within the constraints of commercial entertainment” (Jenkins, 2003a, par 11).

While it is easy to say that new technologies fuelled the resurgence of transmedia theory and practice, narrative expansion across different platforms existed prior to the digital era. Popular comics, for instance, were adapted for film and television (Kinder, 1991). Religious narratives travelled across many different media forms including text, film, paintings, and manga. Stories of popular characters such as King Arthur, Robin Hood, Tarzan, and Superman appeared in print, the theatre, on film, and in broadcast media (Evans, 2011; Freeman, 2017). Compared with these earlier instances of transmedia, contemporary examples typically deploy multi-platform storytelling as a marketing or campaign strategy.

Outside commercial entertainment, transmedia has been applied in numerous contexts and has continued to traverse many aspects of media and communication practices. An emerging body of literature on transmedia has applied the concept to case studies in journalism and planned events (Moloney, 2020; Rampazzo Gambarato, 2016; Rampazzo Gambarato & Tárca, 2017), anthropology (Walley, 2015), social change movements or “transactivism” (Srivastava, 2011), radio production (Edmond, 2015) diplomatic campaigns (Pamment, 2016), and other forms of nonfiction media such as historical projects (Kerrigan & Velikovsky, 2014). Gordon and Lim (2016) co-edited a special journal issue titled “Cultural industries and transmedia in a time of convergence”. The issue expanded the application of transmedia to politics and activism. Of particular relevance here is Soriano's (2016) analysis of transmedia activism among marginalised ethnic groups in the Philippines. Her qualitative interviews revealed that the civic agenda of minority groups are appropriated to multiple spaces of articulation, which gives transmedia mobilisation its strategic

advantage. And yet the same distribution approach is also subject to challenge; for instance, it is difficult to strike a balance between communicating to the broader public while maintaining a communicative relationship with the grassroots communities that transmedia represents.

Zimmermann and De Michiel (2018) explored open space new media documentary, which, although a somewhat vague and overarching term, has links to the principles of transmedia. In a series of research articles, they defined open space as a theoretical construct to describe how new media documentaries today can “cross borders, bridge difference, and interact across disciplines and communities of interest (p. vii).” Open space, however, is an overarching term and can be applied to any form of community-oriented, alternative documentary projects or any hybrid types, as they mutate from one platform to another. Its working principles highlight distinct practices oppositional to the dominant paradigm of film festivals and broadcasting circuits. The open space framework also favours community and collective authoring of documentary projects and eschews the traditional film auteur. For Zimmermann and De Michiel, the complex ecology of documentary making today paves the way for projects that reject the linearity of film production, challenge rigidity of the dominant funding model, and demystify the divide between the filmmaker, audience, and subject. They wrote:

Significant changes in documentary ecologies require transitioning from a text-centered criticality or documentary-industry orientation toward a more diverse ecology including algorithm-based work, citizen journalism, critical cartography, database and interactive documentary, locative media, live performance, social media, YouTube, and augmented and virtual reality (p. x).

Documentary’s indexical relationship with the historical world also makes transmedia an example of an effective mode of distribution to communities, a continuation in fact of Dziga Vertov’s agit-prop and agit-train traditions (Heftberger, 2015; Karmen, 2006). An example of a documentary project that experimented with working across media is the climate change documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006) and its sequel *Truth to Power* (2017), which are accompanied by Al Gore’s travelling talks, books and website. Television documentaries, too, have quickly adapted to this trend. For instance, PBS series Frontline produced the documentary *Ebola Outbreak* in 2014; although it stood alone as a story, the producers chose to complement it with a virtual reality project and a series of short web videos. A few media organisations such as French-German television company ARTE and

the National Film Board of Canada stand out as leading the so-called new media documentary, but there is no production bible that dictates a specific new media approach to documentary making (Wiehl, 2014). In other words, the field is open—and it is an excellent period for experimentation since every industry player can, at this time of flux, design and define his or her own practice.

1.5. Overview of thesis structure

This thesis deploys a practice-led and practice-based methodology to test the efficacy of different variants of documentary in reaching its political, educational, and journalistic objectives. I divided the thesis into six chapters:

- Chapter 1, herein, sketched out the foundation of this research—a triad comprising the thesis topic, creative practice and transmedia methodology. I explained the creative practice component of this thesis by reviewing the literature related to labour migration (as topic of the documentary), transmedia (as distribution strategy), and political documentary and/or alternative media (as medium of storytelling).
- Chapter 2 explains the methodology of the thesis. *Obrero*, as the creative practice component, is described as a site to develop insights as well as conceptualise and theorise about transmedia documentary (practice-led research) and, as a result of research, the movement of Filipino workers to Christchurch (practice-based research). This chapter describes the quasi-experimental features of *Obrero* and expounds on the reflexive and post-textual analytical framework adopted throughout the thesis.
- Chapter 3 examines *Obrero* as political documentary and is divided into two main parts. The first offers a historical exposition of political documentary, citing its social-realist antecedents in the British Documentary Film Movement, and those of Joris Ivens and Dziga Vertov. The second part theorises *Obrero* as a festival film and pays close attention to its narrative structure, distribution circuits, and political impact. I emphasise here the reflexive commentaries and textual analysis as director, producer, editor, and researcher of the project. The chapter ends by examining *Obrero* through the lens of transnational documentary.

- Chapter 4 builds up the theoretical component of this thesis by explicating the platform and concept often attached to Web 2.0 documentaries: social media and interactivity. The main objective of this chapter is to situate *Obrero*'s second and third variants into their larger theoretical contexts. It traces the shifting theories of communication—from mass communication to the notion of the *masspersonal* in the internet age. The latter part of the chapter examines how documentary meshes with new media, underlining the concepts of participation and interactivity as presenting both an opportunity and a dilemma for contemporary documentaries.
- Chapter 5 provides a descriptive analysis of *Obrero*'s social network and i-doc variants, informed by the historical exposition and theoretical framework developed in the preceding chapters. The first part focuses on the aesthetic metamorphosis of Facebook-native documentary and the challenges encountered during its circulation. The second part deals with the features, structures, and overarching nature of *Obrero* i-doc and considers how interactivity can be both beneficial and detrimental to political documentary. The reach, engagement, and impact of Web 2.0 variants are then analysed using data derived from Facebook Insights and Google Analytics.
- Chapter 6 summarises the findings of this study by answering the research questions I posed at the beginning of this thesis. I explain the remaking of *Obrero* as transmedia and transjournalistic endeavour and its implications for the existing models of strategic impact documentary. Drawing on the results of fieldwork and treating documentary as critical and creative research, I summarise what *Obrero* tells audiences about the politics of Filipino labour migration in the context of post-disaster Christchurch. I conclude by expounding on the notion of a “transmedia state of mind” and its overarching implications for documentary storytelling and audience engagement in the digital age.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

2.1 Introduction

Using both academic theory and creative practice as research, this thesis explores labour migration, political documentary, and the efficacy of working across media (also called transmedia). The corpus of creative *Obrero* documentaries submitted alongside the written component of this thesis serves as a case study to examine how digital platforms represent a socio-political topic and how they might do this differently from a regular documentary. The very coexistence of linear and non-linear documentaries in today's media landscape serves as the backbone for critical analysis in this research. In other words, I treat the creative practice as a site of research and knowledge production. Documentary's audio-visual format can depict the findings and the outcome of ethnographic fieldwork, something that appeals largely to audiences outside academia. But fieldwork also fuels another layer of data collection, the mechanics of transmedia production itself. Some principles of action research do reverberate in this methodology chapter. Like action research, this study rejects the central tendencies of positivism, accommodates the generation of knowledge through reflexive methods, and invites other researchers to evaluate and judge the validity of the research in other contexts (Meyer, 2000).

In the following sections, I sketch out the methodological approaches I observe in this thesis. I begin by pointing out the experimental feature of the project and how it nonetheless remains deeply embedded in the documentary tradition. Second, I provide a rationale for approaching *Obrero* as a form of practice-based and practice-led research. And lastly, I explain the nature of reflexivity as analytical framework and how it fits within the broader context and assumptions of creative practice as research.

2.2. Transmedia experimentation

The importance of experimentation in film practice is as old as documentary itself. Ever since documentary attained a certain level of stability as a genre, filmmakers have consistently experimented on the opportunities brought about by new storytelling devices—from sound to narrative (Barsam, 1973). Alberto Cavalcanti, who replaced John Grierson as head of the GPO Film Unit in 1937, also asserted the value of experimentation in documentary storytelling (Monegal, 1955).³ During his time at GPO, Cavalcanti preoccupied himself with experimentation, for example, the “aesthetic possibilities of sound and music” (p. 346). He wrote a total of 14 documentary principles dedicated to young producers, the last of which pertains to the experimental direction of the British Documentary Film Movement.

Don't lose the opportunity to experiment; the prestige of the documentary film has been acquired solely by experimentation. Without experimentation, the documentary loses its value; without experimentation, the documentary ceases to exist (Monegal, 1955, p. 355.)

Obrero contains quasi-experimental features. Unlike a true experimentation in the context of pure science, the methodology I use here is a form of *mimesis experimentation*—a concept initially coined by Lapointe (2015). The concept is less interested in testing dependent against independent variables than doing and making media to realise, for example, the efficacy of documentary making across platforms. As an experiment, *Obrero* offers three layers of postmodern approaches to data collection: an exploration of new media documentary’s efficacy in handling a political topic; the ability of transmedia to offer up a new model of audience engagement in this digital age; and documentary’s remediation from one platform to another. Remediation, in particular, reverberates in *Obrero*’s experimental approach. Bolter and Grusin, 1999) wrote:

We call the representation of one medium in another remediation, and we will argue that remediation is a defining characteristic of the new digital media. What might seem at first to be an esoteric practice is so widespread that we can identify a spectrum of different ways in which digital media remediate their predecessors, a spectrum depending on the degree of perceived competition or rivalry between the new media and the old (p. 45).

Undoubtedly, experimentation as a research method remains the strong point of the natural sciences when advancing knowledge of their disciplines. With the exception of

³ *GPO Film Unit* was a subdivision of the UK General Post Office.

psychology, experiments in the social sciences remain limited. John Gerring (2007) argued that “because experimental work is impossible in most research settings, the experimental ideal is of little consequence for practising anthropologists, economists, political scientists, and sociologists” (pp. 11–12). But its value in the arts and humanities should not be disregarded. Media experimentation can advance knowledge in a field and fulfil a unique pedagogical objective. In media studies, this emerging methodology of making and doing as research is often situated as part of production studies, “academic investigations that explore processes of production and creative practice (Goldson, 2020, p. 235).

Throughout this project, I experimented with *Obrero* as a transmedia and transjournalistic project that exploits the potential of three media platforms, each reaching its respective target audience: regular documentary; an interactive documentary (i-doc); and a Facebook page. *Transjournalism* first appeared in the professional lexicon when the late *Restrepo* (2010) director Tim Hetherington called himself a “transjournalist” in relation to his use of multiple platforms to distribute his photography and film works. Hetherington’s notion of transjournalism describes the practice of “working across media and distribution platforms to reach as broad an audience as possible” (*Tim Hetherington*, n.d.). Journalists, however, have been producing multi-platform stories for years, even before the arrival of the World Wide Web. For example, the notion of the converged newsroom suggests stories could start on the radio, continue on television, and expand to newspapers (Deuze, 2004). Multi-platform documentaries made by media conglomerates (e.g., National Geographic and Al Jazeera) also span from television to magazine and the web. What makes transjournalism unique today, however, is that a single and independent producer can self-distribute his or her work over a variety of channels.

Experimental methodology also opens an opportunity to understand and theorise audience engagement. Modern software not only measures the size and behavior of online audiences but also provides advanced features that capture the overall performance of a particular content. Working across media on various platforms granted me access to digital metrics enabled by corporate tech giants that dominate the internet business. In this project, I monitored the performance of the project using data provided by Facebook Audience Insights and Google Analytics. Digital audience measurement adds a layer of knowledge beyond the scope of traditional ethnographic and qualitative research. Although online metrics do not necessarily provide an accurate snapshot, this quantitative aspect supplements my interpretive

research and textual analysis. For instance, numerical computation of audience reach allowed me to assess specific instances of success and failure of the project. This access to quantitative audience data distinguishes *Obrero* from other lens-based research projects that rely solely on textual analysis as their methodology.

2.3. Creative practice as research

Chilton and Leavy's (2014) partial lexicon of terms for arts-based research includes 27 different names and labels for creative practice scholarly research—from a/r/tography to transformative inquiry through art. As an emerging and increasingly popular methodology in the arts and social sciences, arts-based research denotes multiple layers of data collection or modes of enquiry: “research for creative projects, research about creative projects and research through creative projects” (Gibson, 2018, p. vii). Harper (2011) used the term *action-based creative practice* to denote the action-oriented principles behind treating creative work as research (p. 12).

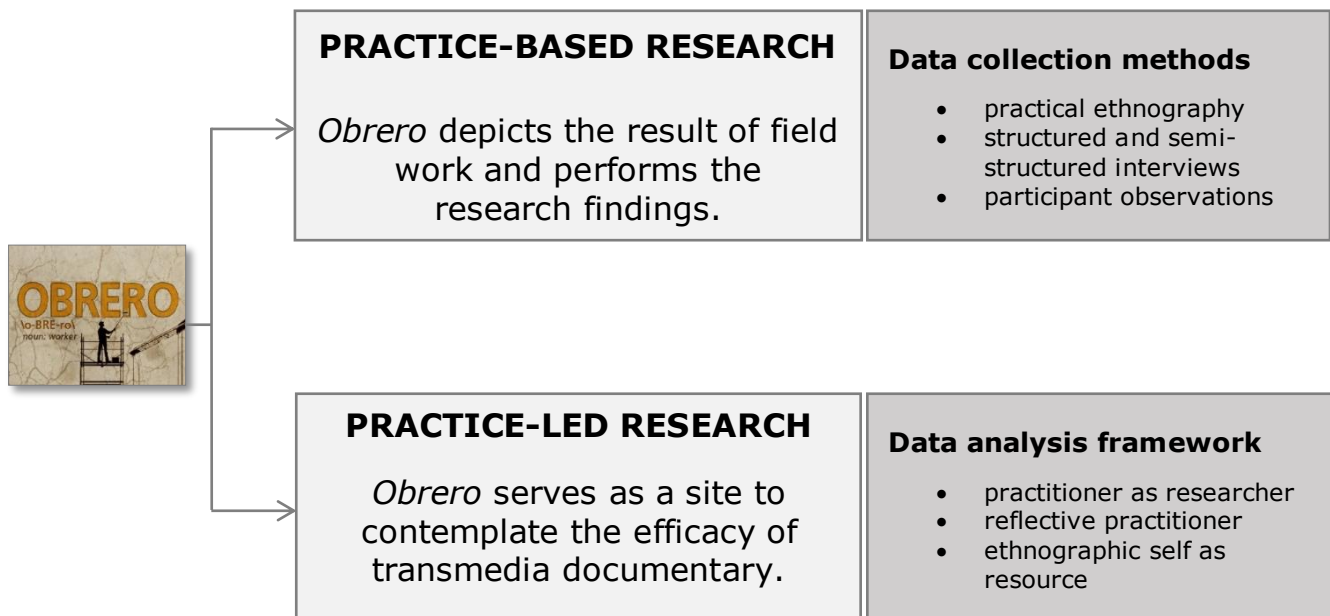


Figure 2. *Obrero* as both practice-based and practice-led research

Creative works can take two forms in practice-related study. In *practice-based research*, a creative work is used as an “original investigation undertaken in order to gain

new knowledge partly by means of practice and the outcomes of that practice” (Candy, 2006, p. 1). This strand of research positions creative practice as a conveyor of new knowledge. It is in the creative output that originality claims may be found. In *practice-led research*, practitioners use their creative outputs to “advance knowledge about practice, or advance knowledge within practice” (Candy, 2006, p. 1). A researcher need not include a creative output alongside scholarly text, but the practice aspect is integral to the analysis. Practice-based and practice-led research often intersect and emphasise the capacity of practice to produce original knowledge (Candy, 2011).

In film production, it is common to use film either as “a site for systematically gathering reflections on the process of doing/making” or a “result of research and therefore performs the research findings” (Batty & Kerrigan, 2018, p. 7). Both these approaches are adopted in this thesis. *Obrero* serves as a site where insights, conceptualisation, and theorisation of transmedia documentary practice can be generated which by itself is a ‘mode of research’ (Wayne, 2008). At the same time, the practice provides a creative channel to depict the result of the fieldwork (see Figure 2). As a practitioner-researcher, my production process also involves a critical reading of related literature. This can influence how the work is produced, including how the documentary expresses the academic discourses related to the topic under study. This methodological approach locates its epistemological roots under the banner of the poststructuralist and postmodernist movements. Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000) note:

Postmodernist and poststructuralist researchers draw attention to the problems surrounding the way theories are constructed, their assumptions, their rhetorical strategies and the claims to authority. Instead of an integrated theoretical frame of reference which guides an analysis towards unequivocal, logical results and interpretations, the idea is to strive for multiplicity, variation, the demonstration of inconsistencies and fragmentations, and the possibility of multiple interpretations (p. 152).

Image-based research as a methodology for knowledge creation has a long historical tradition. Early films were often anthropological explorations of foreign cultures (e.g., *Moana* in 1926 and *Nanook of the North* in 1922), although a number of films used structured reconstructions rather than actualities and were “illustrative rather than analytical” (Marks, 1995, p. 341). However, today, text-based data such as field notes through observation and interviews remain the dominant forms of ethnographic data collection with audiovisual

means of data gathering (such as films) still languishing as a technique in ethnographic tradition (Pink, 2007). This tendency has been fueled predominantly by the hegemony of the positivist tradition, which marginalises visual forms of research, for instance, video documentary (Prosser, 1998). Scholars such as Collier and Collier (1986) argued further that the manipulation through video editing makes ethnographic videos invalid material for empirical analysis. Pink (2007) advanced three criticisms of this argument: that it is difficult to video-record the subjects undisturbed; that raw footage is also subjective; and that ethnographic data does not necessarily connote observable information. She argued, moreover, that “this has meant exploring reflexive uses of video in ethnography, using video not simply to record data, but as a medium through which ethnographic knowledge is created” (p. 96). Refereed journal publications such as the *Journal of Visual Ethnography* and *Screenworks* publish research in the form of film as a primary medium of scholarly presentation. This initiative in academia articulates creative practice as research and recognises the capacity of the film medium to overcome the limitations of text in the collection, analysis, and dissemination of research data (Crofts & Nevill, 2018; Vannini, 2015).

2.3.1. Documentary as creative and critical research

In recent years, the use of visual mediums, such as documentary, as a methodology has seen greater acceptance in the academic community (e.g., Buckingham, 2009; Rollwagen, 2014; Shrum & Scott, 2017). As Mike Wayne (2008) argued, documentary’s hybrid format mixing social science and art and entertainment, including the political nature of its representation, contributes to its status as a critical and creative form of research. He added that documentary practitioners often stand at the “confluence of contradictory philosophical streams”, exploiting the value-laden interpretive paradigm on the one hand and positivism’s objective presentation on the other (p. 83). For instance, the Griersonian tradition was fixated on the objective reality imposed by voice-of-god narration and yet evidently subjective in its engagement and interpretation of the historical world (Wayne, 2008). Rather than looking at these dichotomies as a weakness, I assert that they remain, to this day, the greatest strength of documentary as research—reasoning is strengthened by relying on the quantitative paradigm and yet context-dependent when proving a point. To triangulate and mix differing methods of research ultimately benefits political documentary’s goal to “shape debates over social issues

and policy questions” (Nisbet & Aufderheide, 2009). These qualities, I argue, are unique features that separate documentary from other forms of visual research.

Obrero is the result of the fieldwork on and investigation into the conditions and experiences of Filipinos in Christchurch. Fieldwork was conducted in multiple locations—Christchurch, Auckland (for expert interviews) and Manila, the Philippines. The documentary explores the exploitative nature of state and non-state actors involved in the labour migration phenomenon, specifically in relation to the Christchurch rebuild activities. The data was gathered using observational cinema as practical ethnography, combining the qualitative research tools of participant observation and interviews. The latter involved a mix of informal (off-camera) and formal (on-camera) and unstructured and semi-structured styles. I also used archival footage and intertitles, which were treated using computer graphics. The documentary was made in cooperation with the members of the Association of Filipino Tradesmen in New Zealand (AFTNZ) and community leaders who worked closely with rebuild workers.

At *Obrero*'s political ethnographic core is the experience and conditions of Filipino workers in Christchurch. The personal and collective accounts of these workers form the documentary narrative and, thereby, shed light on the labour migration phenomenon in the Philippines (as a sending country) and in New Zealand (as a receiving country). Drawing heavily on Hammersley and Atkinson's (1995) articulation of the politics of ethnographic research, *Obrero* can be likened to a critical form of political ethnographic documentary, capable of bringing about social change. I concur with other scholars who have argued that using ethnographic methodology provides the researcher with a comprehensive assemblage of political information (Auyero & Joseph, 2007; Geertz, 1973; Ortner, 2006). In this instance, the struggles of workers in the Christchurch rebuild relates to the Marxists' definition of politics as “a reflection of a wider struggle between social classes in society” (Lowndes et al., 2018, p. 7). Marxist critiques remain relevant today given the continuing hierarchy and exploitation within a neoliberal system (Kiely, 2018).

2.3.2. Transmedia methods and procedures

Transmedia storytelling is concerned with the act of “integrating multiple texts to create a narrative so large that it cannot be contained within a single medium” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 95). Transmedia engagement, on the other hand, is concerned with generating audience

responses through watching, consuming, or interacting with documentary content. *Obrero* as a documentary project (see Table 1), with its contextual richness and human elements, lends itself to transmedia treatment/methodology.

Table 1. Transmedia matrix: *Obrero*'s distribution methodology

TYPE OF MEDIA	DISTRIBUTION PLATFORM	DESCRIPTION	OBJECTIVE
Documentary film	Film (<i>festival and community screening</i>)	-Combination of reflexive and observational styles of filmmaking	-to humanise labour migration story by profiling the Filipino workforce in Christchurch and highlighting their narratives as migrant workers
Social network documentary	Facebook (<i>@ObreroDocumentary</i>)	-Facebook page comprising several pieces of social media-tailored contents -spreadable pieces of information derived from field work and research	-to provide a participatory platform for discussion about Filipino labour migration in New Zealand -to engage the audience through activism and public discourse
Interactive documentary	Web (<i>www.obrerofilm.com</i>)	-Hypertext i-doc comprised of multimedia narrative such as videos, photos, and other interactive contents	-to educate the audience about Filipino migration to New Zealand -to raise awareness about immigration and recruitment policies -to reduce cases of exploitation against migrant workers -to inform policymakers and government actors

The festival film co-exists with recreated and expanded Web 2.0 variants that draw on and repurpose elements of the film. The first variant appears within the social network site Facebook. The company is one of the most popular social networking sites in the world. It boasts a total of 1.56 billion daily active users, according to its latest statistics (Facebook,

2019a).⁴ In the Philippines, consumption is also at a record high: users spend 4 hours and 12 minutes each day on social media sites, most commonly on Facebook (Kemp, 2019). Facebook is also the most popular social media platform in the country with 75 million active accounts (Kemp, 2019). It is possible to say that in many developing countries, including the Philippines, Facebook *is* the internet. Importantly, its special features are particularly suitable for innovative transmedia experiments: the attractive platform allows for 360-degree photos, user-generated content and videos native to social media. The second variant, the i-doc, is openly distributed online through a website. The i-doc serves as an ideal platform for content that invites user-engagement (e.g., a migration timeline or interactive graphics that contextualise the topic). Whereas the Facebook page is aimed at Filipino migrant workers and other diasporic communities, the i-doc is targeted towards a more international and diverse audience.

Obrero's production and circulation drew inspiration from the seven principles of transmedia as introduced by Jenkins: (1) *spreadability/drillability* or the expansion of a storyworld which encourages audiences to dig deeper into the narrative; (2) *continuity/multiplicity* or the coherence in storytelling and presence of multiple universes; (3) *immersion /extractability* or the audience's ability to deeply engage in a specific storyworld and extract experiences that relate to their everyday life; (4) *world building* or the creation of a narrative within a bigger storyworld where elements such as characters and plot intersect; (5) *seriality* or producing a series of instalments or sequels that audiences can follow through; (6) *subjectivity*, which allows audiences to trace a backstory that appeals to their imagination; and (7) *performance* or the contribution of audiences in expanding the narrative (see Jenkins, 2009a, 2009b). Although these principles reverberate in the project, I chose to distance *Obrero* from the notion of "world building" or the concept of "story universe" as both are best reserved for fictional entertainment.⁵ Instead, I addressed an already existing historical world. In addition, while this set of transmedia principles works best and is a tested model for entertainment media, I argue that *Obrero* could highlight its

⁴ As a whole, Facebook estimates that more than 2.1 billion people every day now use their "family" of platforms. These services include Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp and Messenger (see Facebook, 2019).

⁵ Contemporary fiction transmedia is inclined to construct a storyworld and build a character across platforms but do not necessarily expand the narrative. This research paradigm puts emphasis on "worldness" rather than "narrative structures" (Sánchez-Mesa et al., 2016).

political core and increase its social impact by remaining with transmedia's established conceptual patterns.

The purpose of *Obrero's* transmedia methodology is two-fold. First, it permits the generation of new knowledge by practising media and narrative expansions (Scolari, Bertetti, & Freeman, 2014). A story exhibited in a film festival is expanded to Facebook and interactive platforms. Second, the transmedia methodology permits the study of documentary audience engagement in this digital age (Evans, 2011; Winston, Vanstone, & Chi, 2017, p. 198). I argue that in the context of non-fiction and documentaries, both the media expansion and audience engagement strategies can be considered as conjoint initiatives of the transmedia documentary maker. This notion of transmedia as both storytelling and engagement reverberates throughout this research.

2.4. Reflexive data analysis

Obrero as a transmedia project is analysed as a reflexive case study and offered as a site of contemplation on the efficacy of documentary variants across platforms. The overarching data analysis approach is based on the notions of “reflective practitioner” (Schön, 1983), “practitioner as researcher” (Jarvis, 1999), and “ethnographic self as resource” (Collins, 2010). All three analytical approaches hold that theory can be generated through reflective analysis of the author's creative practice. They relate closely to the concept of reflexivity as a method of analysis deployed by various academic disciplines, for instance social work (D'Cruz et al., 2007), journalism (Nash, 2013; Niblock, 2012), and counselling and psychotherapy (Etherington, 2004). According to Schön (1983), “When someone reflects in action, he becomes a researcher in the practice context. He is not dependent on the categories of established theory and technique, but constructs a new theory of the unique case” (p. 15). The terms “reflectivity”, “critical reflection”, and “reflexivity” are often used interchangeably in academic literature (D'Cruz et al., 2007). But the researcher's unique position is commonly tagged as the defining element that informs the process and outcome of the investigation (Berger, 2015; Etherington, 2004).

Practitioners theorising about their own practice can offer a thick description of their experience by combining their experiential knowledge with theory (Jarvis, 1999). In qualitative research, the importance of “thick” instead of “thin” description is often emphasised. Thick description, however, is not merely concerned with presenting a huge

amount of information. Schwandt (2001) wrote: "... to thickly describe social action is actually to begin to interpret it by recording the circumstances, meanings, intentions, strategies, motivations, and so on that characterize a particular episode" (p. 255). Early documentary theories were often thick descriptions written by filmmaker-scholars. John Grierson and Paul Rotha of the British Documentary Film Movement and Dziga Vertov of the Soviet avant-garde not only created memorable films of their era but also pioneered the academic theorising of the genre. This reflexive analysis of film as media practice has continued in academia by treating lens-based documentary as research (e.g. Cole, 2015; Munro & Bilbrough, 2018; Thomas, 2017).

Anthony Giddens (1990) highlighted the importance of reflecting on practice in his book *The Consequences of Modernity*. In his introductory chapter, he argued for the value of reflexivity in the knowledge society: "what is characteristic of modernity is not an embracing of the new for its own sake, but the presumption of wholesale reflexivity - which of course includes reflection upon the nature of reflection itself" (Giddens, 1990, p. 39). To be reflexive literally means "to turn back", as in to reflect back on one's own practice (Siegle, as cited in Mcmorland, Carroll, Copas, & Pringle, 2003), and is also similar to the reflexive approach in autoethnography (see Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010), which means bringing the self into the process of research and analysis. In the social sciences, the reflexive turn argues for the role of the researcher as part of the subject or world in question, and includes two characteristics: "careful interpretation and reflection" (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000, p. 5). *Obrero's* reflexivity lies in its ability to critically reflect on the making of a documentary project. But such reflection is also subject to scrutiny; for instance, reflexive researchers may generate findings unique to a single case study, thus they are restricted to producing knowledge in a deductive manner (Jarvis, 1999). However, this limitation is today overridden by the growing acceptance of creative practice as research among universities (see Goldson, 2020).

The type of reflexivity I employed in this thesis is distinct from autoethnography. To be self-reflexive in this thesis means distancing the self from the creative work to allow for a deep textual analysis. Thus, I focused on the practice rather than on myself and on the practitioner-researcher rather than on an autoethnographer, although the demarcation can be blurred. Self-reflexive analysis in this case closely resembles the essence of grounded theory "beginning not with a hypothesis but with a research situation" (McGhee et al., 2007, p. 335).

To analyse the metamorphosis of *Obrero* across platforms, I conducted a series of post-textual analyses of the film, social media, and website variants. The notion of post-textual was proposed initially by Skains (2018) to denote how practitioner-researchers distance themselves from the creative practice when analysing the text. Post-textual analysis allowed me to “identify patterns in the creative process and narrative artefacts that may not have been apparent while the activity was underway” (p. 88). This approach is similar in principle to how television production crews conduct post-mortem meetings at the conclusion of an episode. Post-mortem, however, remains a pragmatic activity and is meant to evaluate several aspects of production with the purpose of improving the product rather than conducting an analysis of efficacy and meaning. It also offers an opportunity for production crew to reflect on their own practice and to give feedback both as producers and members of the audience.

In summary, integrating documentary practice as research in this thesis involved two interrelated processes. I performed myself as documentary maker first, aware of the restrictions, context, and other practical considerations of my practice and yet cognisant of the theoretical underpinnings of documentary as filmic text. I then wore the researcher hat after completing the practice role, which allowed me to balance the pragmatic and theoretical findings connected to this study.

CHAPTER 3

***OBRERO* AS POLITICAL DOCUMENTARY**

This chapter focuses on the film component of *Obrero*'s transmedia documentary project. It outlines the historical trajectory of political documentary as a means of situating the project in its larger conceptual and theoretical context. *Obrero*'s film practice is analysed through a combination of production commentary, post-textual analysis, and theorising of the form, content, and impact as well as outlining the film's distribution. Throughout this chapter, I refer to *Obrero* as a standalone film output and occasionally as part of the transmedia project.

3.1. Historical background of political documentary

Erik Barnouw (1974), in his seminal text titled *Documentary: A History of the Non-Fiction Film*, presented a comprehensive variety of roles assumed by non-fiction authors, labelling them "Explorers", "Reporters", "Catalysts" and "Guerrillas" amongst other such titles. The authorial principle behind being Catalysts and Guerrillas speaks to a precise political rationale associated with the strand of documentary practice that positions the filmmaker as an activist, documenting social realities. Such an approach has been described as a "progressive mode of film practice characterised by aesthetic innovation and social purpose" (Chapman, 2015, p. 18) with a "public importance beyond itself" (Grierson, 1939, p. 7). As Michael Chanan (2007) argued, there has been a resurgence of politically engaged documentary which addresses the audience as citizens and as participants rather than as individuals. Identified variously as "political documentary" (Chanan, 2007), "social documentary" (Burton, 1990), "advocacy documentary" (Aufderheide, 2007), and "committed documentary" (Waugh, 1984, 2011), such works have roots traceable to the British social realism movement (Lay, 2002) of the interwar period. Chanan argued that politics are in the "genes" of documentary making (2007, p. 16). However, to be political does not always mean advancing a specific cause or pushing a social agenda; rather, it can refer to the politicising of audiences by casting a spotlight on matters of civic importance

while staying true to the documentary's realist intention (Chanan, 2007). In addition, "to be political" can also mean subjecting a filmed experience to interpretation by diverse audiences—the general public, governments, non-government institutions, and community groups as well as non-committed audiences (Kahana, 2008).

Films carrying radical message are political because either they depict topics related to politics and state affairs or contain certain ideological or propagandistic messages—the two purposes can at times intersect. The radical message is what is lacking in a fiction film or non-fiction works such as travelogues, educational films, and newsreels. There is now a broad subfield of film studies that investigates the relationship between cinema and political representation, either critiquing the impact of political films (e.g., Chattoo & Das, 2014; Nichols, 2016; Whiteman, 2004; Christensen, 2009; Gaines, 1999), analysing political cinema as a practice and genre (e.g., Getino, 2011; Mestman, 2011; Traverso & Wilson, 2013), or undertaking a theoretical reading of political documentaries as media texts (e.g., Bernstein, 1994; Goldson, 2014; Smaill, 2014)

3.1.1. Influence of the British Documentary Film Movement

The beginning of the documentary tradition saw an emphasis on the "artistic representation" of mysterious subjects living in faraway communities, often theorised under the rubric of the naturalist romantic tradition (see Rotha, 1936). Robert Flaherty's films such as *Nanook of the North* (1922), *Moana: A Romance of the Golden Age* (1926), and *Man of Aran* (1934), mostly expeditions into exotic remote destinations in the Pacific Islands and the Arctic, stand out in this regard.⁶ The birth of the British documentary film movement in the 1930s, headed by filmmaker and producer John Grierson, led to a more progressive approach to the representation of social issues. Although the depiction and artistic representation of reality through filmic events was unarguably popular in the 1920s, Grierson saw a different potential for film—a communication medium deemed influential in educating the audience and delivering socially relevant messages. While producing for UK Government bodies such as the Empire Marketing Board (EMB) Film Unit and the General Post Office (GPO) Film Unit, Grierson emphasised social realities in familiar urban spaces rather than the

⁶ Historically, the term 'documentary' was first used in the English-speaking world in 1926 by Grierson in his review of Robert Flaherty's *Moana*, an ethnographic film that documented the lives of villagers in Samoa. Grierson, however, was not referring to documentary as the format that Flaherty used to represent his subjects but a description of the film having documentary value (MacDonald, 2014).

romanticising of characters living in faraway places.⁷ He treated documentary as a new and vital art form able to record real life, distanced from commercial studio production's romantic affair with fiction (Grierson, 1933).

Despite its idealism, the Griersonian documentary film movement of this time was still characterised by a propagandistic objective because it was predominantly government-sponsored. A number of memorable films were produced, however, including: the *Drifters* (1929), directed and edited by Grierson about Britain's North Sea herring fishery; *Housing Problems* (1935), directed by Edgar Anstey and Arthur Elton exploring the conditions of people living in British slums; and *Night Mail* (1936), directed and produced by Harry Watt and Basil Wright about the nightly postal train travelling from London to Glasgow. These films were largely experimental, expanding the aesthetic potential of film as a medium. *Drifters*, for instance, did not appear ostensibly radical but, as Barnouw (1993) stated, the “fact that British workingmen - virtually ignored by British cinema except as comedy material - were the heroes, gave the film a revolutionary impact” (p. 88).

Many of the films produced by the British Documentary Film Movement were intended to highlight the voice of the working class. But they have also been the subject of critique. Grierson was heavily influenced by the principles of philosophical idealism, which assumed that “societies ought to be cohesive and unified through a social bond held together by the corporate body of the state” (Krstić, 2016, p. 77). This ideology explains why, despite highlighting social struggles, these films projected the notion that “problems can be saved by combined good will and social action” (Ellis & McLane, 2005, p. 74). As a result, films made by the documentary movement portrayed a “romantic view of their working-class subjects; they failed to see the worker as an active, self-determining agent of change” (Winston, as cited in Nichols, 2017, p. 159). Grierson's fixation with the idealist philosophy led the British Documentary Film Movement into decline (Aitken, 1990). Stuart Legg, for instance, Grierson's colleague at the GPO, was vocal about the implications of Grierson's unrealistic utopian model in an interview published in 1975. He argued that balancing the desire of the filmmaker with the demands of the government was delicate, to the point of “absolute agony”:

⁷ A few sponsored films, however, remained focused on exploring colonised cultures in the East. The most highly cited is *Song of Ceylon* (1934), produced for the Ceylon Tea Propaganda Board. Basil Wright and John Taylor toured Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) to document the culture and industry of rural villages of Ceylonese.

Now, it is possible, I think, to accuse the documentary movement of, in principal at least, being prepared to sell itself to the wishes of the government, of the major industries, the Establishment, the capitalists, whatever you like. And a great deal of philosophical effort, and in fact argument with sponsors, was devoted to pointing out that you cannot exact a total control. You can only exact control to the point where minds meet (Sussex, 1975, p. 81).

At this juncture, some documentary filmmakers, rejecting government influence over their work under Grierson, established independent production outfits (e.g., Strand and Realist units), financed by the industry rather than by government agencies. This mode of industrial sponsorship offered greater freedom for documentary filmmakers, especially those committed to a political cause (Sussex, 1975); although they did remain susceptible to pressures, this time from commercial interests.

In the United States, a similar government sponsorship model had been in place; for example, it was behind Pare Lorentz's social documentaries such as *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (1936) and *The River* (1937). Like Grierson, Lorentz saw documentary as an alternative to the dominance of commercially-run Hollywood films and called cinema the still-born art (Musser, 1997). Lorentz failed, however, to match Grierson's reputation as a "legendary figure in Anglo-American film-making circles", his influence fading after leaving the film industry in the 1940s (Musser, 1997, p. 325).

3.1.2. The critical turn: Political films and Marxism

Britain saw the birth of social documentary, at least in the English-speaking world, but variants of political filmmaking arose elsewhere. Most of the classic documentary films in the first quarter of 20th century were driven by a radical Marxist turn that challenged the social democratic philosophy espoused by John Grierson. In this subsection, I briefly present the historical context of radical filmmaking and argue that films with radical and political content, the subject of this thesis, were influenced less by Grierson and more by Dziga Vertov's modernist avant-garde tradition and Joris Iven's political films that portrayed the struggles of the working class. The topics these films explored were largely connected to classical Marxist theories, emphasising compelling footage of protests and strikes that illustrated working-class resistance to an entrenched class system.

The Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov (born David Abelevich Kaufman) has been long recognised for his innovative experiments for the newsreel *Film Weekly* or *Kinonedelia* (1918-1919). He sent camera crew to cover the struggles, crises, disasters, and victories of

those affected by the civil war and famine (Barnouw, 1993), shortly thereafter distributing this footage through agit-trains, agit-boats, and other informal community channels. Vertov was on board the first agit-train in 1918 and was later appointed as manager of all agit-train film and photo divisions (Karmen, 2006, p. 61; Heftberger, 2015). Largely sponsored by the Soviet regime, travelling filmmakers on board agit-trains produced a combination of multiple media formats available in the era—from newspapers to cinema. Short films, called *agitki*, were particularly popular with uneducated peasants and workers in rural communities. Vertov was foremost an advocate of this style of film distribution practice, not only using film to represent class struggles but also to educate and propagate the cause of communism. The films produced by Vertov in the following years established a unique film language and a vision of social reality that could be understood by a universal audience (Petric, 1982).

As a pioneer of the Soviet avant-garde movement, Vertov produced films that had a flair for the unconventional and radical, deviating from the norm of the commercially viable and bourgeois film counterparts. As a result, critics accused his *Kinoks* film movement of being formalist and inaccessible to a mass audience. Apart from his experimental approach, his films were also laden with radical purpose. For instance, his first sound film *Enthusiasm: Symphony of the Don Basin* (1931), showing how the miners and metalworkers of the Donbass struggled to fulfil their part in the government’s Five Year Plan, was accused of being boring, thus failing to engage with its intended audience (Kenez, 1992).⁸

Unlike Grierson, who had an essentially harmonious relationship with the British Government that sponsored his films, Vertov faced a lot of trials during his filmmaking career; he was often in conflict with funding and film regulatory bodies under Joseph Stalin’s rule.⁹ The first five-year plan saw the suppression of the avant-garde movement and declared Vertov’s cinematic experiments as inappropriate. Vertov’s shooting style of “life caught unawares” effectively chronicled the people’s suffering and was branded antitraditional,

⁸ After Vladimir Lenin’s death in 1924, Joseph Stalin took over as a dictator of Soviet Union. He immediately replaced Lenin’s New Economic Policy (NEP) with his five-year plans aimed at transforming Soviet Union as an industrial superpower. NEP allowed private and public enterprises to co-exist while the five-year plan surrendered all economic controls to a central government. Soviet Union’s abrupt transition from agriculture to industrial system disrupted the flow of food supply causing famine from 1932 to 1933.

⁹ Vertov’s idea of revolutionary cinema was likewise in conflict with Vladimir Lenin’s formula of balancing the newsreel propaganda and commercial entertainment - better known as the “Leninist Proportion”. For Vertov, the policies proposed by Lenin impeded the growth of the cinema of fact (Petric, 2012).

extremist, and eccentric (Petric, 1982, p. 7). As a result, Vertov's successive film projects were rejected by the Ministry of Cinematography (Petrić, 2012, p. ix). His internationally acclaimed *Three Songs about Lenin* (1934) also received negative reviews in the Soviet Union, prompting distributors to halt the film's exhibition. Later it was revealed that Stalin disliked the film for deliberately disregarding his role in the October Revolution. In his diary, Vertov noted his disappointment:

It is terrible, therefore, even to imagine that some petty tyrant official, governed by his personal taste or for some other reasons, has the power to remove the film from the screen and thus spit in the face of the entire Soviet people (in Petric, 1982, p.11).

Despite Vertov's direct opposition to Stalinism, his filmic experiments consistently exposed socio-political realities of his time, although they were often more implicit than explicit in his cinematic montage style. For Vertov, capturing real people (instead of actors) stated "this is our cinema too" (Feldman, 1998, p. 50). His legendary film *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929) has been extraordinarily influential and is understood as the harbinger of contemporary political documentaries (Lebow, 2013, p. 259). Although interpreted as a film about the making of a film, the *Man with a Movie Camera* captured the chaos in society: "The camera is present at the great battle between two worlds: that of the capitalists, profiteers, factory bosses, and landlords and that of workers, peasants, and colonial slaves" (Vertov, cited in Roberts, 1999, p. 89).

Newspapers and journals abroad praised Vertov's unorthodox film style, but the party bureaucracy again vehemently attacked the film for being "confused, formalistic, aimless, and self-satisfied trickery" (Petrić, 2012, pp. 64–65). This negative publicity restricted the film's wider release. Although it took until the 1970s for Vertov's works, both his films and his manifestos, to reach the West (primarily through Annette Michaelson and the efforts of French film historian George Sadoul), they struck a deep chord given the politicised culture of that decade. Jean-Luc Godard (during his militant phase) and Jean-Pierre Gorin, for example, eschewed using traditional film credits, instead dubbing themselves the Dziga Vertov Group. Despite Vertov's contribution and lasting impact in political film practice and theory, however, the Vertovian tradition was never widely known about, especially in the English-speaking world (Mckay, 2005).

The films of Dutch filmmaker Joris Ivens have connected with audiences through their moving portrayal of the suffering and struggles of the working class. His most highly

cited work in academic literature has been *Misère au Borinage* (co-directed with Belgian filmmaker Henri Storck, 1933). Sponsored by a cinema club in Brussels and one unknown funder, the film documents the strike of Borin miners in Belgium and is considered as one of the early examples of the use of reconstruction in documentary making. During its production, Ivens asked the miners to dramatise a solidarity procession with one worker carrying a portrait of Karl Marx and to re-enact a scene wherein policemen were harassing the miners. These recreated scenes, blending with the narrative, were not acknowledged as re-enactments. Ivens defended their inclusion saying that his “reconstruction was absorbed by the reality” (cited in Hogenkamp, 2013, p. 175). G. Roy Levin interviewed Storck in 1971 and the latter clarified the film’s treatment:

There were no actors in *Le Borinage*. They were all real miners and all the situations were real as in a news report, as in a cinema verite, except that one scene was reconstructed, the scene with the police, because it was impossible to get the police to act in the film... We reconstituted the scene with workers dressed like policemen, and that’s the reason this scene isn’t completely successful (Levin, 1971, p. 160).

For many, *Misère au Borinage* is a perfect example of a committed documentary—highlighting the plight of the traditional proletariat who are “increasingly swallowed by information industries, demoralised, and marginalised” (Waugh, 2011, p. 280). By being committed, filmmakers like Ivens refused to conform to bourgeois aesthetics:

Instead of meeting the criteria of durability, abstraction, ambiguity, individualism, uniqueness, formal complexity, deconstructed or redistributed signifiers, novelty and so on, all in a packagable format, political documentaries provide us with disposability, ephemerality, topicality, directness, immediacy, instrumentality, didacticism, collective or anonymous authorship, unconventional formats, non-availability, and ultimately non-evaluability (Waugh, 1984, p. xxii).

The influence of the Marxist tradition in documentary also reached the United States in the early 1930s. For instance, the Workers Film and Photo League, both a body of filmmakers and a film movement, was instrumental in delivering socially relevant films during the Great Depression. Apart from the Soviet films and the works of Joris Ivens, film history has focused on Western examples of radical forms of documentary-making in the first quarter of the 20th century. Chanan (2007) suggested that this unbalanced purview can be attributed to the limited distribution capacity in the early days as well to the view that local documentary topics are unsuited to international exhibition. This does not suggest, however, that a political documentary tradition did not exist outside Europe and North America. For example, there were over 200 companies producing documentary in Japan before the 1939

Film Law (Chanan, 2007).¹⁰ Japanese filmmaker Kamei Fumio, who studied in the Soviet Union, directed a political documentary titled *Shanghai* (1937), showing the devastation caused by the war and questioning its consequences. He also made *Fighting Soldiers* (1939), which portrayed soldiers as exhausted and traumatised rather than as the brave, patriotic heroes projected by the Japanese government. In the Philippines, Jose Nepomuceno and his brother Jesus started producing newsreels for American film studios such as Pathé News and Paramount Pictures as early as 1917, when they established their independent production house Malayan Movies.¹¹ They also produced documentary films on Filipino local industries primarily as public relations material for the government (Quirino, 1983).

Post-World War II, the tradition of representing social issues and worker struggles in film continued to flourish. In the 1960s, radical films produced under the banner of Third Cinema emerged and in recent decades through video activism and grassroots organising. The advancement in video technologies largely influenced the ability of citizens to capture their own struggles and disseminate their films widely. As amateur video equipment (e.g., portable 8mm formats and later on DV and MiniDV formats) became much more accessible and portable, activist-videographers took to the streets to protest worker exploitation, human rights abuses, and environmental degradation—treating video and recorded testimonies as evidence of social struggles (Pillay, 2005). Sometimes referred to as video advocacy, this form of activism gave voice to disadvantaged groups through the strategic use of video to achieve heightened visibility and social impact.¹² The practice in turn provided a stimulus for alternative media representation away from the discourses projected by the mainstream press (Chanan, 2007).

The different variants of documentary practice I reviewed in this section point out to the long tradition of filmmaking as a tool for social critique. Departing from Flaherty's romantic affair with exotic subjects, the depiction of reality became less concerned with exploration and travelogue and more with the representation of human experience in urban spaces. Although both Soviet and British documentary movements produced films with a

¹⁰ The Film Law regulated the film industry in Japan and ensured that films served the aims of the state.

¹¹ For a comprehensive account of Filipino film history, see del Mundo (1998) and Deocampo (2003).

¹² Other terms used in the literature include “participatory video, radical video, alternative video, community video, development video, guerrilla video, underground video, advocacy video, DIY video, subversive video, labor video journalism and video for social change” (Askanius, 2014, p. 453).

social purpose, their views on institutional support differed from each other. Vertov believed in the radical potentialities of the modernist avant-garde, while Grierson remained attached to his democratic philosophy and retained his confidence in the viability of government-supported films as a way of achieving social order (Nichols, 2016). As documentary became more distinct as a form of radical media practice, it also blossomed into an established film genre, deep-rooted in its social purpose and capable not only of depicting and mirroring social realities but desirous of transforming them. Increasingly, online and offline forms of engagement are being used in documentary practice as will become evident in the next chapter's discussion of the thesis project.

3.2. Discussion and analysis

3.2.1. The rationale behind *Obrero*

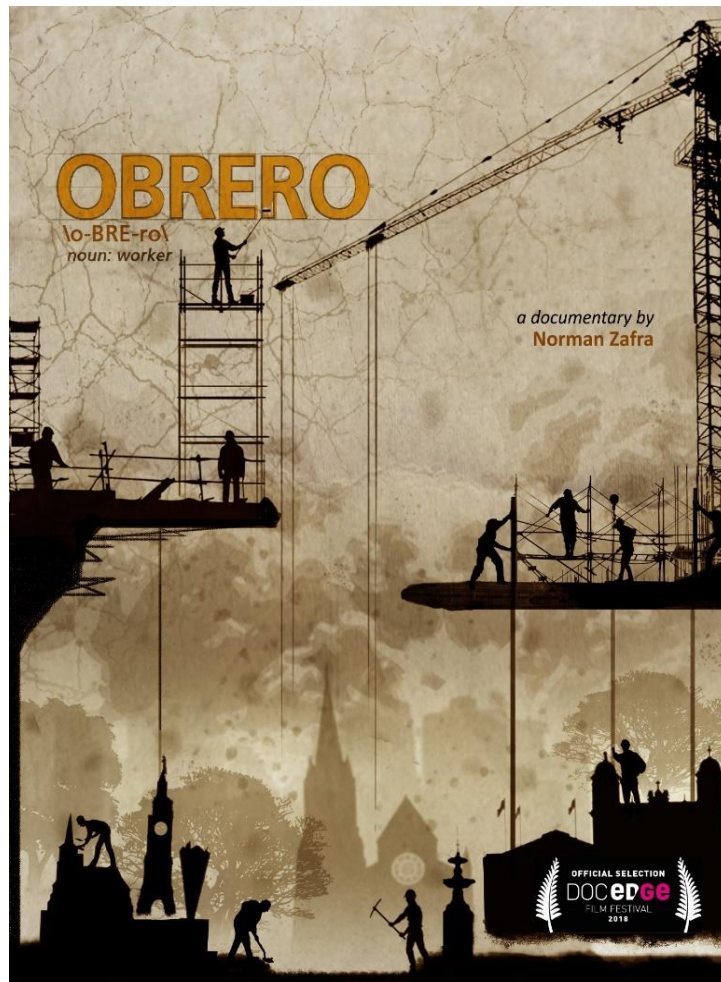


Figure 3. *Obrero's* film poster

The three *Obrero* platforms are treated equally in this project, which implies that no one platform is necessarily superior to another as a documentary format. Any of the three variants can act as a potential entry point to the documentary project. However, it is logical to begin any theorisation with the most recognisable format of documentary, the regular film. The *Obrero* documentary is a 30-minute film that follows the story of Filipino workers in Christchurch who migrated there to assist with the earthquake rebuild (see Figure 3). The title *Obrero* is a Spanish term which literally means worker or labour.¹³ Instead of using a more neutral sounding Filipino word *manggagawa* (the direct translation of the word “worker”), I chose the title *Obrero* because its meaning relates back to the history of colonisation and labour struggle in the Philippines. The word *obrero* also appeared in many of the Philippines’ accounts of working-class struggle post-Spanish independence, for instance, the formation of radical groups such as the Federación *Obrero* de Filipinas and the Federación *Obrero* de la Industria de Filipinas (Crippen, 1946). The connotation of resistance attached to this word could also be the reason why labour groups and activists in the Philippines use it when representing the struggles of the working class. However, even if we discount the activist attitude attached to the title, the term *obrero* introduces the Philippine language to a New Zealand audience.

As a political film, *Obrero* exemplifies a combined logic of Third Cinema and its variant, “militant cinema”. Third Cinema refers to a body of film practice that enacts a “cultural decolonisation” for the Third World, challenging both the domination of commercially-run film industries or First Cinema and the authorship and art of Second Cinema (Mestman, 2011, p. 29). Sometimes called the Imperfect Cinema (García-Espinosa, 1979) or Revolutionary Cinema (Sanjinés, 1986), Third Cinema engages with social analysis, political action and transformation, in order to resist and challenge cultural imperialism. Therefore, it can be considered a “cinema of strategic or tactical objectives” (Getino, 2011, p.44). Militant cinema, on the other hand, is a variant of Third Cinema that aspires to turn a film event into a site where political discourses can flourish (Mestman, 2011, p. 29). Chanan calls this radical style of practice “a militant film of opposition” citing *The Hour of the Furnaces* (1968) as an early example of cinema that was created “in the interstices of the

¹³ Of the 30,000 root words in Tagalog/Filipino language, 4,000 are loanwords from Spanish (Panganiban, 1961).

system and against the system... independent in production, militant in politics, and experimental in language” (Stam, cited in Chanan, 2007, p. 10).¹⁴

Although *Obrero* does not tackle colonial resistance often typified by the Third Cinema movement, the subject matter (a critique of neoliberalism and global labour migration) and the independent position of the filmmaker could make the film a suitable entrant of Third Cinema—one that not only analyses a political topic from the perspective of a developing country but also provokes political discussion. As Gaines (1999) argued, documentary can effectively bridge the physical world and the screen; hence, it can potentially move the audience to intervene.

At *Obrero*'s political core is its exploration of the movement of Filipino workers to New Zealand following the 6.3 magnitude earthquake that struck Christchurch in 2011. The peak of the migration was between 2014 to 2016, and it was during this period that cases of worker exploitation were first reported in the media. A particular focus of reportage was on the excessive amounts of placement fees charged by recruitment agencies in the Philippines. This exposure triggered the renewal of a memorandum of agreement between the governments of New Zealand and the Philippines which calls for a strict implementation of the no-placement fee policy and prevention of illegal recruitment, among other regulations.¹⁵ A migrant recruitment document published by Immigration New Zealand also states that service fees will be charged to employers to cover recruitment and immigration costs. Only minimal costs such as medical examinations and trades testing are shouldered by the Filipino workers (see Immigration New Zealand, 2018). But fieldwork data shows acts of worker exploitation have continued unabated. As the documentary outlines, workers moving to New Zealand can spend an entire year simply trying to repay their debts. Although focused on this one aspect of exploitation, the project shows there is little monitoring or regulation of private recruitment entities. Both the exploitative practice and the lack of investigation point to neoliberal policies at play in both the sending and receiving countries.

The film also depicts the social consequences of the unethical recruitment system, particularly the overcharging and even illegal charging of fees. The representation of this

¹⁴ *The Hour of the Furnaces* was the reference film that Octavio Getino and Fernando Solanas used in their seminal text 'Third Cinema Manifesto'.

¹⁵ The labour cooperation agreement titled *Arrangement on the principles and controls on the recruitment and protection of Filipino workers in New Zealand* was signed in September 2015.

social dilemma is guided by the principles of Marxism and its general interest in addressing the mass audience. Its ideological framework, suitable for the study of worker struggles, “raises questions about the relationships at every level of the social order” (Wayne, 2005, p. 31) from capitalists and government regulatory bodies to the workers’ movement in Christchurch.

3.2.2. Production analysis

Being able to freely immerse myself in the community of workers in Christchurch in making the film, I collected almost one terabyte of high definition and 4K resolution video files and photos. The production took place over a period of 15 to 20 days between September to December 2017 (including the B-roll footage that I shot and interviews that I conducted in the Philippines). The film’s production reflects a “guerrilla” type of filmmaking, with one person assuming all the roles thus lowering the film’s cost. Given *Obrero* carries out a sensitive investigation, its low budget offers a strategic advantage. It increased my opportunity to transform “technical limitations into new expressive possibilities” (Birri, cited in Wayne, 2016, p. 21). For instance, I was able to produce professional and high-quality content using a consumer-sized camera and bypass several access restrictions often encountered by large film and television crews. Given the production did not rely on funding bodies, there was also no need to recover production costs nor was the film subject to any kind of censorship.

Obrero capitalises on the power of direct cinema to “penetrate the private” (Winston, 1995, p. 205), to weave the narrative through diegetic or natural sound, and to “convey the sense of unmediated and unfettered access to the world (Nichols, 1991, p. 43).¹⁶ The use of a mobile and handheld camera to document the activities of workers also serves as an example of vérité production: “one camera person with hand-held camera and portable recorder treats the equipment like eyes and ears scanning, focusing on small details, turning and following” (Klinge & Klinge, 1983, pp. 202–203). This strategy reflects the principle Dziga Vertov espoused in his avant-garde cinema—capturing “life caught unawares”. He used the notion of *kino-eye* to denote the power of the camera to supersede what the eyes can see. His theorisation deserves a long quotation:

¹⁶ See Bill Nichol’s seminal book *Representing Reality* (1991). Chapter two deals with four models of organisational patterns of representation: expository, observational, interactive and reflexive.

Now and forever, I free myself from human immobility, I am in constant motion, I draw near, then away from objects, I crawl under, I climb on to them. I move apace with the muzzle of a galloping horse, I plunge full speed into a crowd, I outstrip running soldiers, I fall on my back, I ascend with an aeroplane, I plunge and soar together with plunging and soaring bodies. Now I, a camera, fling myself along their resultant, manoeuvring in the chaos of movement, recording movement, starting with movement composed of the complex combinations (Vertov, in Michelson, 1984, p. 17).

Similarly, the *vérité* style of production provides a “you were there” feel and authenticity, although this can come with occasional shakiness and a less than crisp soundtrack. *Obrero* does depart, though, from the formalist approach of *vérité* in its use of short takes instead of long handheld shots and its tendency to compose *mise-en-scène* rather than following the actions as a whole. In Bill Nichols’ term, *cinéma vérité*, the French version of observational cinema, is categorised as a participatory mode of representation.

The influence of *cinéma vérité*’s tradition of reflexive filmmaking is also felt. It allows the audience to naturally feel the presence of the filmmaker while watching the film. For instance, as the filmmaker I interacted with my documentary subjects during interviews and exchanged spontaneous banter with them during the process of filming—this reflexive gesture moves the film beyond the limits of formalist observational cinema style.¹⁷ *Obrero* draws on this mode, as conversations supplement a more static story of the exploitation of migrant workers in Christchurch. The interaction in the film is spontaneous, which distinguishes the film from other forms of actualities, such as news reporting that explores similar subject matter. In this sense, the subjects are given an agency and authorship within the film which exceeds a “humanitarian gaze” (Tascón, 2015). They are allowed to tell their own stories using their interview soundbites rather than through expository mode’s “Voice of God” narration. The filmmaker-subject interactions inserted throughout the film also inform the audience about the identity of the filmmaker and how this identity then influences the outcome of production (Ruby, 1977). The style of the film production was influenced by many variables. Like the workers I interviewed, I am Filipino; thus, as fellow migrants in New Zealand, we share a language and the same basic perception of reality. My position as an immigrant filmmaker together with my political persuasion, therefore, shape my filmmaking. Revealing reflexive practices in the film highlights the triad of producer, process, and product as argued by Ruby (1977). He wrote:

¹⁷ According to Erik Barnouw (1974, p. 255), direct cinema artists aspire invisibility just like an involved bystander while *cinéma vérité* artists are avowed participant and provocateur.

To be reflexive is to structure a product in such a way that the audience assumes that the producer, the process of making, and the product are a coherent whole. Not only is an audience made aware of these relationships but they are made to realize the necessity of that knowledge (p. 4).

Obrero is both a humanistic story of labour migration and an activist film, and, in producing it, I wore different hats—as journalist, as activist, and as a solo film author. I have written in detail elsewhere (Zafra, 2018) that being solo or practising “backpack film production” has advantages and disadvantages. For instance, while the practice produces high stress levels for the filmmaker, it permits the gathering of personal anecdotes from subjects who feel less intimidated by light-weight camera equipment.¹⁸ In the film, the portrayal of the workers’ plight mirrors the significant level of engagement and intimacy reached in my interactions with the rebuild workers.

3.2.2.1. *Structures and narratives*

Obrero straddles the boundaries of classical narrative documentary and journalism. In particular, the film locates causal agency as a particular narrative arc (Wayne, 1997, p. 152). Unlike classical narratives wherein the individual character (protagonist) drives the plot and storytelling, *Obrero*’s approach is to use a cause and effect structure that is more embedded in the historical context of the Filipino workers. For instance, before the earthquake footage is revealed, the film shows brief intertitles over a kino-eye inspired moving point of view (POV) shot of an airport baggage carousel:

10 million Filipinos work overseas sending \$2 billion home each month. The workers were mostly based in the Middle East and Asia not New Zealand... until a deadly disaster struck. [opening sequence, *Obrero*]

The film commences its exposition with a compelling cause and effect structure—the earthquake in Christchurch serves as a triggering event. The linearity of film as a medium lends itself to causality as an effective storytelling strategy. It can capture and hold audience attention and effectively convey a story with a compelling visual hook. The argument of the film is simple: a devastating earthquake triggered a wholesale reconstruction in New Zealand.

¹⁸ Backpack filmmaking is also seen advantageous in other parts of the world especially where funding restricts the production of documentary. A study in South Africa, for instance, argues that lone filmmaking fits not only the “problematic social and economic legacy of the (post) apartheid regime” but also the presentation of filmmaker’s personal take on a subject matter (see Maasdorp, 2015).

Workers were needed and those from the Philippines were the largest migrant worker group. The conditions they experienced led them to protest against overcharging of placement fees. Both the sending and receiving Governments intervened—but the exploitation continued.

The film's structure then follows Bill Nichols' (1991) notion of *informing logic*. He argued that the goal of the filmmaker is to make sense of an argument and work within the context of its historical reality (p. 18). *Obrero*'s narrative structure borrows significant storytelling strategies from classical fiction. In fact, like fiction, I was able to control the narrative structure, the discursive order of events, character development, positioning of climax, emphasis on conflict, drama, and human emotions. This liberty allowed me to project a rhetorical stance and a unique storytelling voice, an immigrant filmmaker himself immersed in a community of migrant workers in Christchurch. In addition, the dialectical sequence of *Obrero* is informed by Aristotle's Rhetoric (Behrens, 1979). First, it is easy to decipher in the film that I am an insider belonging to the same ethnic group and speaking the same language, which positions me as a credible and rightful storyteller (ethos). Second, the film projects the emotional impact on Filipino fathers of having to leave their families behind which raises the larger social consequences of migration (pathos). And third, the film substantiates its political message by collecting and showing visible evidence of exploitation, ranging from archive footage to actual testimonies of workers. In addition, the Canterbury earthquake evokes historical memories, which then situates the story of workers as a continuation of the past rather than an isolated form of migration from the Philippines to New Zealand (logos).

The film has two main characters. The first character, Jerry, is a veteran overseas worker having laboured in at least six countries for a period of 18 years. New Zealand, he claimed, is his sixth work destination. A third-generation migrant worker, Jerry typifies the long history of labour migration in the Philippines. The second character, Michael, is younger and more of an activist, a courageous character. He provides the documentary with a sense of agency as he recounts the establishment of the Association of Filipino Tradesmen in New Zealand, whose members are mostly composed of workers who protested against the overcharging of recruitment fees. Although the workers come from different socio-demographic backgrounds (e.g., Michael is university educated while Jerry only finished high school), their personal narratives intertwine. Michael came to New Zealand before the enactment of the no-placement fee policy. Jerry, on the other hand, arrived in late 2015 when the memo was already in place, yet he and his cohort still paid huge recruitment fees.

Although the documentary recounts the implications of an unethical recruitment system, the story also highlights the collective action and protest of the Filipino workers' movement in Christchurch. As Wayne (1997) argued, a victim motif "dissipates the critical force of the documentary by encouraging empathy (isn't it sad? isn't it tragic? aren't they funny?) rather than (encouraging) analysis" (p. 211). To balance emotion and reason, I adopted the principle of parallelism as an editing style, alternating the stories of the two workers to depict both their individual and collective struggles as migrant workers in Christchurch. The analysis is interwoven and dispersed in the larger narrative as a way of ensuring that the emotional elements of the story are distributed evenly, enticing the audience to remain focused and engaged throughout the film.

Obrero is not the first attempt to represent the struggles of migrant workers arriving in Christchurch after the earthquake. A news crew from the Philippines covered the story in 2014, producing a short news feature based on interviews with construction workers in Christchurch and dairy workers in Ashburton. The item did not deal much with the unethical recruitment of workers from the Philippines. From 2014 up until 2017, the year I produced the film, there were also a number of news reports in the New Zealand media which portrayed the problems encountered by workers in Christchurch, from housing issues to recruitment fees. These political representations are important as "they signal the power, weight and legitimacy of particular groups, identities and ideas in society" (Wayne, 1997, p. 57). However, I argue that these representations were heavily mediated. Mainstream news media producers typically accessed the community of workers through intermediaries such as activist groups and other non-government organisations. In contrast, *Obrero* positions itself strategically as an ethnographic film practice, bypassing the typical (public relations) barriers that connect the community and filmmakers and, instead, taking advantage of my ability to naturally immerse myself in the community of workers. Thus, I was better able to gather unmediated anecdotes directly from the subjects (also see Christensen, 2009).

3.2.2.2. *Distribution circuits*

The film was accepted In Competition at the 13th Documentary Edge Film Festival, an Oscar-qualifying event, and it was shortlisted as a finalist for the Best New Zealand Short Documentary category (see Figure 4). It was well received by audiences in Auckland and Wellington and was included in the DocEdge's Docs4Schools programme. A few months after the New Zealand premiere, *Obrero* was also invited for screening at the Cinematografo

International Film Festival in San Francisco, USA.¹⁹ Unarguably, the festival selection allotted the film a form of legitimacy, providing a boost for a low-budget production that would typically have struggled to reach its audience. However, as Mazierska and Kristensen (2015) suggested, festival-goers are usually cultured and well-informed; hence, festival films tend to “preach to the converted rather than those who need persuasion” (p. 16). I found that random audience members would initiate conversation with me after the screening, and I received occasional messages of support through the film’s social media page. The festival experience reminds me of what Chanan (2007) called “solidarity syndrome”, which indicates that “how the film is received and read depends on where and when the screening takes place and who the viewer is” (p. 28). Those who have seen *Obrero* in film festivals, although already a committed audience, may have become much more aware of the complexity of worker issues in Christchurch and the deep historical roots of the Filipino worker diaspora worldwide. In this sense, a film festival provides an opportunity to deliver the film to an engaged and questioning group of spectators (Tascón, 2015) and those who want to satisfy their epistophilia (the desire to know) (Nichols, 2017, p. 27). Although festivals offer specific audiences the chance to productively engage with films, they do not generally legitimise the radical nature of a film such as *Obrero*.



Figure 4. Post-screening forum in Auckland [June 2018]

¹⁹ Cinematografo caters primarily to Filipino migrant communities in San Francisco.

An aspect that needs further theorising here is the use of alternative distribution circuits or informal exhibition systems that provide *Obrero* with a different mode of audience engagement—one that embodies the notion of communal cinema. Two months after the festival screening, two sets of community film showings were held in Christchurch and elicited reactions from a diverse audience that included students, Filipino migrant workers, local community members, trade union leaders, and local migrant advocates (see Figure 5). As a distribution practice, community or town screenings of documentary films have roots in travelling exhibitions in the early 20th century in the form of state-sponsored agit-trains (sometimes boats) in the Soviet Union. As described earlier, Vertov was one of the pioneers of this travelling cinema. Using mobile multimedia production laboratories usually painted in bright colours and revolutionary slogans, he and his film crew would produce short films (called *agikti*) and newsreels intended to educate audiences about communism and its ideals. The experiment continued into the 1930s, staged by Alexandr Medvedkin. His style was more participatory, co-opting the workers to appear as actors of the film. He called this practice *Kinopoezd*, which involved employing a “politicisation of the production and distribution process, making the film process even more intense, open and mobile” (Kirn, 2015, p. 39). This experiment was considered monumental because the audience-spectators could view themselves a day after the filming—leading to an “interactive modality” of film exhibition.



Figure 5. Community screening in Christchurch [July 2018]

Similar to contemporary festival and community screenings, the cinema train was also a site for political discussion and was characterised by its pedagogic, activist, and occasionally satirical content. No wonder Vladimir Lenin, when talking to Cultural Commissioner Anatolii Lunacharsky, said that of all the arts in the Soviet Union, cinema is considered the most important—referring to its huge potential to reach the illiterate masses in the countryside (Chanan, 2007, p. 235). Both Vertov and Medvenkin took advantage of the potential of film as a carrier of political messages that attracted not just audience interest but, more importantly, participation (Heftberger, 2015). The notion of participation can make community screenings a unique form of engagement as it allows a community of workers (as in the case of *Obrero*) to see their own representations on film.

As expected, the Filipino audiences were responsive to the nuances conveyed in *Obrero* because there was humour that only the Filipino migrant workers could relate to. For example, they laughed when they heard a soundbite of a worker saying that Christchurch has been marked as the “city of cones” due to the noticeable orange traffic and safety cones on major roads and construction sites. This response confirms earlier studies proposing that linguistic humour and context are often sacrificed in the process of subtitling, which then limits the capacity of film to convey the exact translation and context to a transnational audience.²⁰

Both committed and non-committed audiences are attracted to films with highly politicised subject matter. The forum after the *Obrero* screening was lively and generated a number of interesting observations. While the majority of the audience members supported how the film tackled the issues at its heart, one migrant worker stated firmly that the illegal charging of recruitment fees occurred only during the previous Philippine administration and was non-existent in the (current) regime headed by President Duterte. Disagreement amongst members of the Filipino migrant community is to be expected in a documentary given that the latter is always susceptible to the question “might it be lying?” (Eitzen, 1995, p. 81). Rather than viewing these expressed differences as a disadvantage, I assert here that community screenings are a good way to monitor opinions that could inform the manner by which future community gatherings are to be conducted. Moreover, non-committed audiences articulating dissenting opinions can provide the opportunity for greater politicisation and

²⁰ Given that most translators use English as second language, it could evidently affect how films are received within a cross cultural context including the depiction of a film’s nuances.

incite the production of more testimonies to convert the non-believers. As Presence (2015) noted: "... public screenings are a vital part of engendering the political engagement that oppositional film aims for" (p. 194). Because of *Obrero*'s close ties with the Filipino community, community screenings ensure that workers are reminded about the film's cause and allow them to discuss, debate, and disseminate the film's messages. Personally, the community-led screenings fulfil my desire as a Filipino filmmaker to return something to the community that gave life and spirit to *Obrero* as a documentary work.

3.2.3. Documentary and the question of impact

As mentioned above, the distribution opportunities for low budget and community documentaries are mostly limited to film festival and informal screenings. Although *Obrero* takes advantage of other modes of distribution to ensure that its message is delivered across channels, I argue that the film component of the transmedia project—the most familiar form of documentary—serves as an anchor platform that advances the goal of the project as a model of strategic impact documentary. While I generally value each platform equally in terms of their storytelling potential, the film component provides the basic components from which other documentary variants (social media and i-doc) conform, deviate, and remediate. In this subsection, I interrogate the function of the *Obrero* film as a standalone output within the transmedia project and theorise its relationship to the ever-contentious notion of social change.

Jane Gaines (1999), in an influential article "Political Mimesis", mused on the degree to which radical documentaries can produce bodily reactions from the audience. She employed the term *political mimicry* to signify the rationale for using films in the context of organising and to symbolise an off-screen continuation of the struggles depicted in a political film. Gaines asserted that the world of the audience collides with the world represented on the screen; hence, bodily movements (e.g., riots, marching throngs, bloodied bodies) produce bodily reactions beyond the frame and provoke "audiences to carry on the same struggle as depicted on screen" (Gaines, 1999, p. 91).²¹ She revisited Sergei Eisenstein's theory of social change and cinema and restated the same tricky arguments: "What do we count as change? How do we know what effects the film has produced? How do we determine where consciousness leaves off and action begins?" (p. 88). These questions are extremely difficult

²¹ Nichols (2008) uses the term 'indexicality' to connote a similar theorisation that is, documentary, unlike fiction, has existential bond between copy and reality.

to answer, but scholars have analysed some notable films that have produced social change. For instance, Kurt Goldberger's film *Children without Love* [Děti bez lásky] (1964) was said to have influenced a shift in public policy after its representation of juvenile delinquent children in Czechoslovakia (Barnouw, cited in Chanan 2007, p. 188). Errol Morris' true-crime documentary *The Thin Blue Line* (1988) also made a direct political impact after its release. The film depicted the story of Randall Adams, who was wrongly convicted for murder of a Dallas policeman in 1976. The film's convincing argument using testimonials and re-enactment became instrumental in the review of the case and, consequently, Adam's release from prison.

Recently, documentary series relating to crimes, miscarriages of justice, and court trials, often with direct social and juridical impact (Bruzzi, 2016), have become hugely popular. *Making a Murderer* (2015), a 10-part Netflix series that follows the plight of two Wisconsin men accused of murder, uses an evidence verité approach, archival documents, and film footage (Silbey, 2010) to expose seeming corruption in the US judicial system. Audiences actively used comment threads on social media to discuss whether or not the defendants got a fair trial, to speculate on who they thought the murderer was, and even performed the role of sleuths.

Alongside Gaines, Nichols (2016b) too discussed the notion of social change in his pragmatic analysis of political documentary and the barriers that reduce its impact. He advanced three arguments: first, political documentaries are consistently attacked for their lack of objectivity, lowering their credibility as a journalistic medium, and undermining their systemic impact; second, the behind-the-scenes involvement of political movements, which could help realise change, is lacking; and third, the systematised and rationalised measurement of social impact by documentary funders is too complex when positioned as a prerequisite and criteria for funding.

Given its concerns regarding diasporic communities, *Obrero*, as a transnational political documentary, engages with the question initially posed by Gaines about the difficulty of measuring social impact in the transnational sphere. The notion of geographic boundary as a barrier to a film's political impact has received little attention from documentary scholars. For instance, given the increasing impact of globalisation on migration, labour issues often occur in the host country but reverberate in the source country.

To summarise, the argument regarding the impact of *Obrero* as a standalone component of the transmedia project is twofold. First, given the slow timeline of independent film distribution, documentaries that need to cross geographic boundaries must take advantage of different modes of distribution and exhibition to ensure that the film reaches its appropriate audience. *Obrero*'s transmedia approach and practice-led investigations are a way to talk back to—perhaps answer—some of Gaines' vital questions. Second, while a festival release increases the credibility and visibility of *Obrero*, it also limits the film's reach as most festivals prevent the film from becoming available online; hence, its impact in the Philippines is weak. As Goldson (2015) argued, creative documentaries tend to have “long life in the expanded digital environment” (p. 88). In this case, I argue that film festivals can purposefully be used to make the subject matter known, first in New Zealand and then in the Philippines and elsewhere.

3.3. Towards a transnational documentary model

In film studies, the notion of transnational is inherently connected to the cultural works of diasporic filmmakers. There are numerous terms in the literature for this film practice, as highlighted by Higbee and Lim (2010, 11): “accented, postcolonial, interstitial, intercultural and multicultural”. These terminologies all point out to the fluidity of cross-border film production questioning the “fixity of national cultural discourses”. The genre of transnational documentary, on the other hand, is emerging and is a by-product of earlier experiments in screen production. *Obrero* falls under what John Hess and Patricia Zimmerman (1997) referred to as transnational documentary. Transnational is not only a mode of documentary practice but also a logic that rejects the economic and geographic boundaries that divide nations or imaginary binaries that disconnect people. Their manifesto stated a radical objective:

We use the term transnational as both a description of documentary practice, and as a more utopian projection of the fact that political documentary might take within the new world orders. These transnational documentaries displace the economic and psychic nation and the national imaginary, rejecting a notion of the nation as an essentialist given. These films supersede the opposition between the first and third world, between the centre and the periphery (Hess & Zimmerman, 1997, par. 36).

I situate *Obrero* as a response to this manifesto's radical objective and as a continuation of earlier film practice that defy national borders. It can be argued that the radical and cross-border documentary practice in the Philippines began in the 1970s through

the works of avant-garde Filipino filmmaker Kidlat Tahimik (born *Eric de Guia*). His first film *Mababangong Bangungot* (Perfumed Nightmare, 1977) challenged the post-colonial identity of the Philippines and rebelled against the Western influence on local culture (San Juan Jr., 1998). In an interview he said, “I come from an elite, Americanised family and that is what I found myself rebelling against” (as quoted in Campos 2018, p. 198). Kidlat himself defied geographic boundaries by travelling and filming in Europe to demonstrate his radical stance.

Activist, low-budget, community-supported types of transnational documentaries deserve a new category of theorisation as they work with controlled resources but are able to engage audiences across borders. *Obrero*'s transmedia and transnational stance can be interpreted in a number of ways that are pragmatic and metaphorical. First, unlike Flaherty's romanticised exploration of the cultures in the Pacific Islands and the Arctic as exotic cultural “others”, the *Obrero* project applies my status as an “insider” within a diasporic imagined community (Anderson, 1983). When an insider becomes a storyteller, a common disposition is that they do it “from a position of knowing, of affinity, of wielding insider knowledge” (Sikand, 2015, p. 45). This argument is traceable to the literature on identity politics as a critique of ethnography.²² In visual anthropology and indigenous media, the discussion on “*who has the right to represent whom?*” is often labelled as the “crisis of representation” (Pack & Takaragawa, 2013, p. 895, emphasis in original). Minority audiences, often the subject of media reportage and filmic representation, are then called to recontextualise and openly resist the prevailing depiction of the ethnographic subject, or the “others” (Rony, 1996).

Second, *Obrero*'s commitment to social change is one that transcends physical, cultural, and political boundaries. Filipino migrant workers tell their stories from the host country (New Zealand), but their voices echo in the sending country (Philippines) and in other diasporic communities worldwide. It makes sense to repeat Hess and Zimmerman's (1997) argument that “the term transnational also suggests a new way of imagining relations, connections and alliances to defy and remake borders that open up possibilities for change” (n.p.); transnational documentary, therefore, can highlight political currents, tensions, and injustices. Third, labour migration, as a topic of the film, falls under the study of

²² Rony (1996), for instance, examined the pictorial representations of the ‘Others’ in early ethnographic films and argued that the production of these films is “*racially defined*” (emphasis in original) (p. 7).

transnationalism because transnational activities have their roots in the experiences of migrants and migration (Portes et al., 1999). And lastly, the position of the spectators (New Zealand and Philippine audiences) highlights the polarity of identities of the target communities involved. No longer nation-specific, *Obrero* traverses the politics in both countries, engaging the senses of a wide group of spectators regardless of the physical and cultural distance that separates them. Unlike the monomedia production practices of Vertov, Ivens, Grierson, and Lorentz, documentaries exist today in a more sophisticated media ecology, one that has a fragmented audience.

CHAPTER 4

SOCIAL MEDIA, INTERACTIVITY, AND DOCUMENTARY

This chapter is divided into two main sections. The first addresses the key issues and debates surrounding social media and interactivity in an era where the boundary between user and producer is blurred. I review, under this heading, the literature on networked communication, masspersonal communication, audience participation, and the prevailing critical discourse on digital labour and free content. Such a theoretical framework is necessary to illustrate the fast-evolving nature of media platforms and, in doing so, I am able to situate this creative practice methodology within its technical, historical, critical, and theoretical context. In the second section, I branch out in the discussion to pinpoint the implications of these media trends and theories on documentary production and reception. The theoretical exposition in this chapter provides a backbone for an analysis of the efficacy of remaking political documentary for social networks and web platforms.

4.1. Social media and interactivity

4.1.1. Web 2.0: The dawn of the networked communication

In 1983, communications scholar Ithiel de sola Pool underlined the foremost changes that technologies bring to society in his seminal work titled *Technologies of Freedom*. He referred to computer networks as powerful devices that alter the flow of communication and content delivery across distinct media boundaries. He even predicted that networked computers would soon be the future “printing presses of the twenty-first century” (Pool, 1983, p. 224). This is an understatement, one would think, since the computer is not just a printing press today, but also a multimodal and ubiquitous platform capable of transcending spatial-temporal space.

Ten years after Pool published his book, more than two million computers were already connected to the internet. This was an enormous upsurge compared to the two thousand computer units interconnected in 1985 (National Science Foundation, n.d.). However, global communication prior to the internet was already connected. Electric telegraphy and telephony, for instance, had connected the world as early as the 19th century through a networked communication and routing system (Castells, 2009; Flew, 2014). What the internet affords its users, however, is a minimal barrier to long-distance communication (Banister, 2004). It exceeds the limitations of the earlier networked communication models in terms of speed and complexity (Flew, 2014). Blanchette (2012) argued that the internet, with its rapid technical evolution, is one that has “repurposed rather than merely replaced” existing systems (p. 33). Its features, therefore, are recalibrated from previous practices of human communication. She wrote: “infrastructural change proceeds conservatively through mutation and hybridization, rather than making an outright break with the past” (p. 34).

The invention of the World Wide Web in 1991 was a significant turning point. Internet pioneer Tim Berners-Lee envisioned a more connected world through the web.²³ The result was a system of “organizing the Internet sites’ content by information rather than by location” (Castells, 2009, p. 50). As transmission capacity became adequate and bandwidth sufficient, interconnected computers and mobile phones quickly altered the many ways people create, consume, and interact with media. This phenomenon is called the era of networked communication—the “rapid, multi-directional flow of messages and information supported by interconnected online and mobile data-sharing technologies” (Chandler & Munday, 2016, para 1).

Networked communication as a technological breakthrough was unsurprising given that ever since the early development of the internet, the goal of scientists had been for computers to be able to “talk to each other” (Castells, 2009, p. 47).²⁴ Because of the technical limitations in its early years, only a one-way form of communication prevailed over the internet. Its demographic reach was also limited and the technical means of making and distributing online content were not fully operational (Meikle, 2016). This period of one-way and linear means of networked communication was informally labelled as Web 1.0.

²³ Berners-Lee headed a group of researchers stationed at the Centre Européen pour Recherche Nucleaire (CERN), a nuclear physics laboratory in Geneva, Switzerland.

²⁴ The internet started as experiments at the US Department’s Advance Research Projects Agency or ARPA.

The basic argument is that, unlike its predecessor, Web 2.0 is a “radical advance” and “a rhetorical technology” which the computing industry exploits to highlight the dynamics of creating, sharing, and remixing content that already prevail over the internet (Allen, 2008, 2013, p. 264). It gives due emphasis to audience creativity, which “fundamentally transforms the production of symbolic goods” (Anderson, 2016, para 1). In the words of Tim O’Reilly (2007), what makes Web 2.0 unique is how it turns the users into active publics as they partake in the process of content creation and distribution.²⁵ He calls this logic the “architecture of participation”. Without the collective activities and intelligence of users online, Web 2.0 could not have been realised in the first instance. These qualitative changes in internet services point to a paradigm shift in online communication, which is facilitated by sophisticated software programmes that today allow the culture of remixing and reformatting of content (Castells, 2013). When considering Web 2.0 as a set of technologies, it encompasses key concepts such as the prevalence of social software, the sharing of microcontent, openness, and the collection of metadata (Alexander, 2006). Other academic terms that are often used as an alternative to Web 2.0 include: user-generated content, networked peer production, citizen media, produsage, prosumption, collaborative creation, the commons, and the social web (Anderson, 2016).

Many academics have dismissed the use of the term “Web 2.0” as a buzzword. They have argued that it connotes a “digital utopian terminology”—a marketing tactic popularised by and used in the commercial sector to highlight the selling point of Web 1.0’s upgraded version (Anderson, 2016). Privacy and information protection are major drawbacks, too. These are often compromised as tech firms build up their capacity to track the users of their online services (Caviglione & Coccoli, 2011). Graham Meikle (2002) also offered a critical perspective. His notion of Internet Version 2.0 is characterised by commodification, which is instituted by business entities exploiting the internet for their own commercial gain. He disavowed the internet rhetoric that, prior to the new millennium, user-participation was non-existent. Version 1.0, according to Meikle, should not mark a period during which the media audience was passive but a state when the characteristics of internet use included “open architecture, distributed control, a grassroots democratization or popular and political cultures” (Meikle, 2016, p. ix). In other words, while Web 2.0 is overly promoted as the

²⁵ Darcy (DiNucci, 1999) first used Web 2.0 in her in 1999 article titled *Fragmented Future* but O’Reilly is often credited for ‘coining’ the term following his influential conferences and written works on Web 2.0 and the internet’s technological upgrade.

improved version of the internet, such rhetoric hides the fact that the commercial internet now overshadows its prior “open and participatory media space.” As Banister (2004) argued: “the internet was born with a genetic defect” (p. 4). In roughly three decades, a formerly state-subsidised experiment was turned into a profit-oriented platform.

4.1.2. The turn to masspersonal communication

The birth of Web 2.0, the second-generation World Wide Web, not only allowed interconnectedness online but also signalled a rethinking of traditional communication theories. Prior to the turn of the millennium, there was a clear-cut distinction between interpersonal and mass media communication (Reardon & Rogers, 1988). Interpersonal refers to face-to-face communication while mass communication has a wider scope, positioned “as a set of media institutions, as a societal problem, or as an academic field of study” (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001). This epistemological boundary is deep-rooted in the politics of communication departments in the early 1970s. It is also traceable to communication research’s historical association to fields such as psychology (interpersonal) and sociology and political science (mass communication) (Reardon & Rogers, 1988).²⁶

The divide between interpersonal and mass communication research is muddy, disconnecting rather than uniting the theories related to communication. Prior to the rise of social media and the web, many aspects of interpersonal communication did not fit mass media theories, and vice versa. What recent conceptual models do is defy this dichotomy, using the concept for instance of *masspersonal* communication. According to O’Sullivan and Carr (2018), *masspersonal* is an approach that captures the uniqueness of “convergent messages” in digital platforms and defies the notion that the channel determines the type of message or communication (p. 1175). A similar term *mass self-communication* was proposed earlier by Castells (2013) to summarise a form of convergence of communication that exists due to “the cluster of technologies, devices, and applications that support the proliferation of social spaces on the Internet” (p. 65).

Due to convergent features of new media, the speedy fragmentation of audiences, and competing media platforms both traditional and new, an intriguing question has arisen over

²⁶ Other scholars argue that the dichotomy is unsurprising. The scope of mass communication research has direct societal and policy implications compared to that of interpersonal communication (Berger & Chaffee, 1988).

time—will this be the end of the mass communication? The question looms as social media applications today allow ordinary users (including professionals) access to real-time content streaming, borrowed from the principles of radio and television broadcasting (e.g., Facebook Live and YouTube Live). Although some stories still fit the traditional mass communication channels (Chaffee & Metzger, 2001), it has been proposed that advances in technology challenge the future of mass mediated communication.²⁷ This argument was effectively laid out by Bolter and Grusin (1999) in their influential book *Remediation*, where they theorised how new technologies and practices are rupturing our traditional engagement with media content.

In the midst of the changing theoretical paradigms used in this era of networked and masspersonal communication, interactivity as a construct is often highlighted as a novel feature of digitisation. It appears in multiple layers of communication (e.g., interpersonal and mass communication) and can serve to illustrate the congruence between them all (Rafaeli & Ariel, 2012, p. 71). As Walther and Valkenburg (2017) argued: “interactive communication technologies offer ample access to traces of communication that feature both mass and interpersonal processes” (p. 417). In the succeeding section, I discuss interactivity as a construct that dominates computer-mediated or masspersonal communication. But I concede that interactivity remains an elusive term and can mean different things to different authors in different disciplines.

4.1.3. What is interactivity?

Interactivity alongside convergence, hypermedia, and multimedia are the buzzwords of 21st century technology, media, and communication. A quick Google Scholar search reveals at least 7,000 page results with titles containing the keyword “interactivity”.²⁸ The sheer volume of academic articles on interactivity connotes its ubiquitous and overlapping presence across multiple disciplines. As Morse (2003) contended: “the critical discourse on interactivity is ideologically loaded, even schizophrenic in its tension between pejorative connotations and utopian values and expectations” (p. 17). Furthermore, the existing

²⁷ New media also disturbs the concept of “planned flow” in broadcasting due to audiences’ greater control in web navigation. Planned flow, popularized by Raymond Williams (2003), refers to the sequencing of materials that producers observe to shape the structure of their programming.

²⁸ To do this, I enclosed the term interactivity in quotes to limit the search parameters and used “allintitle” command in order for search engine to list down pages that contain the exact keyword in their title tag. Each page result contains at least 10 manuscripts.

literature is quite repetitive. Tanjev Schultz (2000) even lamented that nothing is new in the burgeoning discussions on interactivity. Once an academic term has reached its ultimate popularity, its definition is also often “watered down” (Jensen, 1998, p. 186)

The vast array of scholarship on interactivity and its inextricable link to computer-mediated communication encapsulates the many binary terms that we use to theorise the divide between the analogue and the digital: “active/passive, one-way/ two-way, linear/non-linear, synchronous/asynchronous, mediated/face-to-face” (Jones & Holmes, 2011). Interactivity elicits a feeling that “we know it when we see it” (McMillan, 2002, p. 163). Its self-explanatory and common-sense nature makes it appealing for media researchers to explicate.

Much of the work on interactivity has been multidimensional and classificatory; it possesses multiple typologies depending on the discipline in which it is articulated (e.g., Ha & James, 1998b; Massey & Levy, 1999; Mcmillan, 1998, 2002; Sohn & Lee, 2005). The plurality of scholarship is a useful indicator of the richness and diversity in terms of how interactivity can be understood, but it also poses a problem as its meaning becomes impenetrable. Scholarly explications, nevertheless, are useful as a starting point. A few notable definitions typically concentrate on a precise communicative element. Rafaeli (1988), one of the early theorists who attempted to define the term in the context of media communication, described interactivity as a degree of dependence and connection between messages. He wrote: “interactivity is the expression of the extent that in a given series of communication exchanges, any third (or later) transmission (or message) is related to the degree to which previous exchanges referred to even earlier transmissions” (p.111). Kiouisis (2002) renamed the concept as “third-order dependency” (p. 359). If at least three consequent messages are interrelated, interactivity is assumed present. In other words, his highly adopted definition shifts scholarly focus from the medium to the relationship between messages. Kiouisis’ (2002) extensive explication of the term “interactivity” identified multiple theoretical lenses that authors use to study it. His operational definition is broader in scope:

Interactivity can be defined as the degree to which a communication technology can create a mediated environment in which participants can communicate (one-to-one, one-to-many, and many- to-many) both synchronously and asynchronously and participate in reciprocal message exchanges (third-order dependency). With regard to human users, it additionally refers to the ability of users to perceive the experience to be a simulation of interpersonal communication and increase their awareness of telepresence (p. 372).

Several other scholars contributed to a further problematising of the term. Ha and James (1998b) focused on the “mutual relationship” between the sender and the receiver. They proposed that “interactivity be defined as the extent to which the communicator and the audience respond to each other's communication need” (p. 457). Similarly, Williams, Rice, and Rogers (1988) emphasised this mutuality of discourse but also underlined the extent to which participants can control the communicative process, thus forging a further feature of interactivity. But control does not necessarily translate to interactivity just as “new media's capacity for interactivity does not ensure that interactivity occurs” (Walther, 2017, p. 566). Smuts (2009) wrote that something is “interactive if and only if it (1) is responsive, (2) does not completely control, (3) is not completely controlled, and (4) does not respond in a completely random fashion” (p. 65).

In the context of media production and reception, interactivity highlights how an individual engages with a media text. Many studies have underlined the impact of technical features of the medium on the form and content of mediated communication. Such a focus on the technical attributes of a communication medium, however, excludes how humans exercise control over their media experience (Steure, 1993, p. 15). Interestingly, not all scholars have focused on the technical side of interaction. Others have suggested that interactivity can be conceptualised as a “perceptual variable”, bringing the concept closer to psychology (e.g., Bucy, 2004; McMillan & Hwang, 2002; Wu, 2005).

Defining interactivity is an enormous task and no literature review can ever summarise the vast amount of scholarship on the topic. To address this problem, Gane and Beer (2008) proposed a summary of existing approaches that could effectively unite the overlapping literature. These are:

1. Technical approach, which sees interactivity as a built-in feature of newer technology;
2. Human agency approach, which treats interactivity as an exercise of agency, and the use of human actors;
3. User interaction approach, which stresses how technological advances facilitate the exchange of messages between two or more individuals; and
4. Political approach, which relates interactivity to the changes in “governmentality and citizenship” in the new media environment (e.g., the rise of user-generated content online) (p. 97).

The latter is the most relevant approach when tackling the radical changes brought about by Web 2.0.

4.1.3.1. The radical shift: Interactivity in networked media

At the turn of the millennium, a radical shift in scholarly approaches to interactivity took place. This time, the focus was directed towards the socio-political context of interaction in the new media environment. Explicit applications of interactivity emerged as the core of new media research, for instance, in online journalism (e.g. Bardoel & Deuze, 2001; Steensen, 2011), public relations and social media (e.g., Smith, 2010), website interactivity (e.g. Yang & Shen, 2018), and interactive elements of web-formatted documentaries (e.g., Nash, 2012b). As Barry (2012) noted: “the age of interactivity may have been in existence for a long time, but in terms of its value as a research concept and tool, it has only just begun” (p. 242).

As such scholarship has advanced, greater emphasis has been assigned to the sociality, the connectedness, of the “people formerly known as audience” (Rosen, 2012). This is now the era in which ordinary citizens themselves are content creators, and this blurs the demarcation between audience and producer. Unlike newspapers, television, and radio, the new media’s structures of presentation and patterns of interaction are democratising the audience, a turn towards a “produsage-based participatory culture” (Bruns, 2008, p. 256). New media can assist a shift in the balance of power in the networked environment (Bardoel & Deuze, 2001; Van Dijk, 2012). This is particularly evident in social media as a space where produsage, participation, and interactivity are afforded all at once to its users.

4.1.4. Social media and audience participation

Social media by its very nature is dependent on user participation. Without audiences interacting, producing, remixing, sharing, liking, and tweeting content, social media would be lifeless. In fact, “the very word ‘social’ associated with media implies that platforms are user-centered and facilitate communal activities, just as the term ‘participatory’ emphasizes human collaboration” (van Dijk, 2013, p. 11). Social media encompasses a confluence of terms such as “interactivity”, “participatory”, “user-centred”, and “collaborative”. All these buzzwords pertain to the capacity of audiences to “talk back” (van Dijk, 2013, p. 10) within a networked platform where public and private communication takes place (Meikle, 2016). Furthermore, social media is labelled as an offspring of Web 2.0. It connects individual users

whose public voice, opinion, creativity, and sociality were formerly barricaded by the gatekeepers of the traditional press (Fuchs, 2014; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010; Mandiberg, 2012; Shirky, 2011).²⁹

From a critical perspective, the emergence of user-generated content (UGC) in social media also directs our attention to economic concepts such as “digital labour” and “free content”. Here, social media’s commercial nature is assumed to enable the exploitation of its users’ creativity and capacity to fuel a platform comprised of UGC. It can be suggested that social platforms, unlike traditional media entities, do not create content, they only facilitate the flow of media traffic by providing the networked users a venue through which to communicate, respond, like, share, and engage with communal content. The sharing culture, however, also allows commercial exploitation of user data (Meikle, 2016; Van Dijck, 2013), while the ease of access to corporate social media platforms facilitates a digital version of free labour, one that highlights the economics of free content (Terranova, 2004). Jodi Dean (2010) called this use of free efforts “communicative capitalism” based on her extensive work on blog theory. She argued: “Just as industrial capitalism relied on the exploitation of labour, so does communicative capitalism rely on the exploitation of communication” (p.10).

Because audiences and consumers are now afforded a means to communicate actively using interactive communication technologies, the world quickly saw a resurgence of the active audience, often branded as *networked publics* and restructured by networked technologies (boyd, 2010, p. 39). No longer passive, networked publics operate in the interstices of social media, where the direction of communication is either “bottom-up, top-down or side to side” and where digital content can be commented upon, re/made or re/distributed (Ito, 2008, p. 3). As a concept, networked publics signifies “a linked set of social, cultural, and technological developments that have accompanied the growing engagement with digitally networked media” (Ito, 2008, p. 2).

Scholars have associated the produsage-based participatory culture with the rise of networked publics (Boyd, 2010) within the network society (Castells, 2009; Van Dijk, 2012). Today’s networked public culture is comprised of the following: “(1) amateur and non-market production, (2) networked collectivities for producing and sharing culture, (3) niche

²⁹ Gatekeeping pertains to an editorial process that media entities observe to select, curate, and control the news content for publication, therefore, ultimately responsible in framing the social agenda (White, 1950).

and special interest groups, and (4) aesthetics of parody, remix, and appropriation” (Russell et al., 2008, p. 43). All these domains are utilised by networked publics for a variety of purposes, including personal and political expression. To use social media for political reasons highlights its capacity as a site for public discourse— a digital version of the public sphere.

4.1.4.1. Social media as public sphere

Since the early 1990s, the academic community has been quick to theorise the potential of new media as a site for political discourse and as an alternative platform where public opinion could flourish, albeit in a virtual mode. In the beginning, using the internet for political engagement appeared to be just a “minor side-line” (Dahlgren, 2001, p. 75). But the public quickly adopted web-based media as a platform to engage in politics. As Dahlgren (2001) argued: “Cyberspace is thus becoming a vital link and meeting ground for a civically engaged and politically mobilized stratum of the polity”. This move online fosters the emergence of “multiple mini public spheres” (p. 75). Web 2.0 and social media platforms have “inherent democratic capacities” and can, therefore, “re-configure communicative power relations” within society (Loader & Mercea, 2011, p. 760). Facebook walls (or timelines), for instance, are used by politicised individuals to include personal commentaries on political affairs (Donath & Boyd, 2004; Dahlgren, 2005). Social media is also a meeting ground for small groups of active publics also called “micropublics” (McCosker, 2015) and “video publics” (Zoonen, 2000). Both concepts of publics are historically rooted in sociology, particularly the theorisation of “tiny publics” within the public sphere (Fine & Harrington, 2004).³⁰ The public sphere, according to Jürgen Habermas (1989), is the arena of free speech and the network of dialogue within which public opinion is debated and formed.³¹ The public sphere can intensify the voice of ordinary people, especially in countries where citizens have experienced long histories of neglect. The same voice is required to combat social inequality, for instance, to fight back against neoliberalism and to strengthen the power of marginalised sectors of the polity (Couldry, 2010).

³⁰ Public and audience are interchangeable in many aspects, depending on the publicness or privateness of human activity. Livingstone (2005) wrote that “audiences are denigrated as trivial, passive, individualised, while publics are valued as active, critically engaged and politically significant” (p. 17).

³¹ The Habermasian model has been critiqued as too idealistic view of political interaction (Fine & Harrington, 2004).

The literature on social media's efficacy in assisting activism and political change is polarised. On the one hand, some scholars have highlighted how social media platforms make it easier for users from diverse backgrounds and economic status to access networked services (Loader & Mercea, 2011). They have argued that social media has revolutionised the dynamics of political representation, participation, and video activism in today's public sphere. Individuals can now organise mass uprisings or engage in grassroots politics through social media (Sassi, 2001). For example, social media played an active role in the Arab Spring (the series of mass uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa in 2010). The notion of "Facebook revolution" has come to symbolise large-scale protest movements which are facilitated through social networking sites (Askanius & Østergaard, 2014). What these communicative technologies afford a user is an individual entry point to an interconnected or networked platform where s/he can exercise agency and political participation. Although protests as indicators of social resistance predate the internet, social media's capacity to provide a real-time account of protesters' behaviour is considered a "novel phenomenon" (Jost et al., 2018, p. 86).

Prior to Facebook, a commonly cited story of grassroots activism powered by social media is Philippine President Joseph Estrada's ousting from public office in 2001 after hundreds of thousands of angry protesters gathered on EDSA, a major thoroughfare in Manila, in response to his aborted impeachment trial. Text messages urging the public to convene at the EDSA Shrine quickly circulated and became viral through cellular phones. Text messaging here is considered an earlier form of social media. The massive protest, according to Shirky (2011), marked the "first time that social media had helped force out a national leader". Filipinos' use of cellular phones to organise bodily movements has been labelled popularly as the "text revolution".

Despite people's confidence about social media being an effective vehicle for political protest, a differing body of literature has remained sceptical about the supposed ability of corporate-led social media platforms to truly revolutionise the public sphere. New media is said to facilitate "armchair activism" (Terranova & Donovan, 2013), commonly known as "clicktivism" (Morozov, 2011) or "slacktivism" (Christensen, 2011)—activism that requires little personal effort and, ultimately, is ineffective. The political exchanges on social media are superficial rather than meaningful. In addition, the algorithmic model of social media is flawed and prone to misuse and abuse. The idealism surrounding social media in its earlier

iteration has been corroded, even replaced by a deep pessimism. One of the most recent cases to tarnish its reputation was the data breach scandal in 2018 that besieged the social network giant Facebook. Cambridge Analytica, the data analytics firm employed to promote the Donald Trump and Brexit campaigns, harvested at least 50 million user profiles on Facebook to micro-target a group of publics and influence their voting behaviour (Berghel, 2018, p. 85; Cadwalladr & Graham-Harrison, 2018).³² Micro-targeting publics is as old as analogue public sphere; however, Facebook's inability to protect its users from political manipulation, and its staggering reach, has been heavily criticised and branded as a "crisis in democracy" (Heawood, 2018). Facebook's livestreaming of the terrorist attack in Christchurch in 2019 and its usage by far-right groups has damaged its reputation further.

The literature I have reviewed so far pinpoints both the thematic concepts and chronological progression of Web 2.0 in relation to user interactivity and political participation. The next main part of this chapter elucidates documentary's evolving nature and practices in the age of social network and interactive communication technologies.

4.2. Documentary and Web 2.0

Newer forms of documentary narratives and practices have proliferated in open Web 2.0 spaces rather than in mainstream distribution circuits. They do not replace but complement regular documentaries because technology allows the creation of more sophisticated storytelling. Indeed, traditional stories are transforming into non-linear, interactive, and multimedia stories, which invites a rethinking of what exactly the current state of documentary making is in this age of media experimentation and hybridisation (Nash et al., 2014). As Hight (2008) reminded us:

The challenge is ultimately to either redefine 'documentary' itself or abandon a collective term in favour of identifying a number of distinct practices that overlap the digital and analogue, moving and still image, photographic and graphic, two- and three-dimensional, and distinct practices of engagement centred on a clearly-defined continuum of interactivity and participation (p. 6).

O'Flynn (2012) similarly suggested that documentary has metamorphosed from its "lean-back" style to a modern and innovative "lean-forward" storytelling approach and delivery. Her article attempts to explain the differences between and amongst the terms "web-

³² Brexit or "British exit" refers to the United Kingdom's plan to leave the European Union (EU).

doc”, i-doc and “transmedia documentary”. Confusion reigns, she argued, because of the overlap of features in each variant. However, there are interesting points of distinction amongst them. First, most interactive documentaries do not rely on the medium through which they are presented; they are based more on the interactive and participatory activities of the audience or user. Users can access the works online through a website or offline through a physical installation such as augmented reality. Second, web-doc (web-based documentary) is easier to distinguish because it mostly uses the web, including the popular video sharing websites (YouTube and Vimeo) as mere distribution and viewing platforms for traditional documentaries. And third, transmedia documentary is characterised by the movement of the story or narrative across viewing platforms such as cinema, television, web, tablet, and mobile (O’Flynn, 2012). This is slightly different from Tryon’s (2011) early definition of transmedia documentary as one that makes use of the participatory features of the web and its digital forms for political and social change.

4.2.1. Social network as documentary platform

As a site of reception, a social network offers a number of structural affordances to makers and users: (1) the persistence or the automatic recording and archiving of online expressions and engagements; (2) a replicability or the duplication of content through sharing and reposting; (3) scalability or the ability of content to be visible in a networked platform; and (4) searchability or the capacity of content to appear in online searches (Boyd, 2010, pp. 47-48). Of all these affordances, replicability is the most compelling reason for politically oriented documentaries to migrate to social media platforms. Replicability is closely linked to Green and Jenkins’ (2011) 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” (p. 111).

There is a dearth of literature investigating social network sites as circulation or exhibition platforms for political documentaries. Studies concerning Facebook and its application in emerging digital media practices have concentrated mostly on analysing public service media’s use of Facebook (e.g., Moe, 2013), journalism practitioners’ use of Facebook fan pages (e.g., Duffy, 2011), and the business model of using Facebook (and Twitter) as news platforms (e.g., Ju, Jeong, & Chyi, 2014). However, a few studies have emerged recently that interrogate the implications of digital technology and its production of post-television and post-film documentaries (see edited collection by Nash et al., 2014).

In the industry, filmmakers have been quick to experiment with Facebook as an alternative broadcasting platform for their content. *Goa Hippy Tribe* (2011), directed by Australian filmmaker Darius Devas, is frequently cited as an early case study. The documentary represents the story of Western hippies who reunited at the beach in Goa, India, some 30 years after their first encounter. The project uses two sub-features of Facebook, a private group and public fan page. Both platforms display a series of short videos complemented with nostalgic photos of the subjects and online discussions. Kate Nash (2012) analysed *Goa Hippy Tribe* as a social network documentary and argued that Facebook afforded the audience both creative and communal engagement with the content. She wrote:

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 (p. 30).

Nash's theorisation of Facebook documentary was one of the early attempts to highlight the changes in documentary distribution made possible by the audience's involvement with Facebook.³³ *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 social impact. Video is in the centre of their transmedia initiatives.³⁴

Other contemporary films with significant storytelling activities on Facebook include: *Dominion* (2018), an animal rights activist documentary exposing the dark underbelly of modern animal agriculture; *Give up Tomorrow* (2012), a political documentary about Paco Larrañaga's wrongful conviction by the justice system in the Philippines; and *The Story of Stuff* (2007), an online documentary and social action campaign aimed at increasing awareness on the issue of waste disposal.³⁵ These films may fall under the rubric of "thick text" documentaries, which, according to Corner (2015), are characterised by their status as "authorial artefact" (p. 147). Their strategies on social media are typically in the form of

³³ *Goa Hippy tribe* is also available in multiple formats. Apart from Facebook page and group ([fb.com/goahippytribe](https://www.facebook.com/goahippytribe)), the interactive documentary variant was also launched in 2011 (see <https://www.sbs.com.au/goahippytribe/#/get-your-passport-ready>).

³⁴ Facebook's algorithm now favours native videos compared to videos embedded from outside platforms such as YouTube.

³⁵ [fb.com/DominionDocumentary/](https://www.facebook.com/DominionDocumentary/); [fb.com/giveuptomorrow/](https://www.facebook.com/giveuptomorrow/); and [fb.com/storyofstuff](https://www.facebook.com/storyofstuff)

short-length edited videos that either expand the story, highlight a standpoint, or echo a particular call to action.

There is a paradox, however, in the use of corporate social media platforms as sites for digital documentary (Juhasz, 2014) and video activism (Chanan, 2012a). Facebook has been perceived as an unruly ally of committed documentary and is considered “another capitalist instrument of commodification, including commodification of dissent” (Mazierska & Kristensen, 2015, p 15). When filmmakers use global corporate platforms like Facebook in their advocacy efforts, they are likewise obliged to conform to the same circuit of capitalism (McCosker, 2015). Their disruptive ability, however, is also acknowledged within this critique. Despite the dangers of documentary using corporate structures, the accessibility and reach of global corporate media makes them valuable to low budget filmmakers given the limited distribution platforms otherwise available to them (Presence, 2015).

4.2.2. Documentary and interactivity

Unarguably, political documentary migrates to Web 2.0 platforms for a variety of reasons: digital social interaction; marketing or promotion of films; and simply to crowdsource information from users. Social media may be considered a closed Web 2.0 application in a sense that membership, although free, is required for user interaction to take place. Outside the walls of social media applications, drag and drop website authoring tools are also developing rapidly. Also called “end-user programming”, this do-it-yourself web software affords any individual the means to create web pages without the need for formal training (Cypher, 2010). This is a far cry from a moment in history when “using a computer meant programming a computer” (Cypher, 2010, p. 3). Unlike the static pages in the 1990s, modern web pages are dynamic, multimodal, interactive, and participatory—all characteristics of Web 2.0 platforms. Documentary, alongside fiction, games, entertainment, and other forms of narrative, is adapting its practices in this period of shifting technologies.

Throughout the last 10 years, a new mode of interactive storytelling has been flourishing on the web, in virtual reality and in installation arts. Its content, structure, and appearance are a significant departure from the lean-back and passive style of media consumption. Compared to conventional documentary or film, the new media version embodies the features inherent in modern technologies—hypertextual, multimedia, and participatory (Beer, 2009; Nielsen, 1995). This new modality of storytelling is commonly

referred to as webdoc, transmedia, database, participatory, expanded, collaborative, or simply i-doc.³⁶ I-doc, short for interactive documentary, does not belong to a particular viewing platform. However, the most popular and widely accessible are formats made for the web. 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, p. 1).

Web documentaries, in particular, may contain one of the three interactive structures: the narrative webdoc, which favours the classical narrative arc in presentation; the categorical webdoc, which features micronarratives distributed to project a narrative structure; and the collaborative webdoc, which exploits the potential of user contribution and participation (Nash, 2012b). Because the web carries multiple media at the same time, recent i-docs tend to offer multimodal approaches to storytelling by presenting various evidences, from testimonies and documents to witnesses (Watson, 2017). These include: *Space We Hold* (2017), which provokes the audience to bear witness to the stories of three comfort women in South Korea, China, and The Philippines; *Journey to the End of Coal* (2009), which invites complete user-participation through its multi-linear and user-led investigation of the conditions of coal miners in Shanxi, China; *The Big Issue* (2009), which investigates the state of obesity and its increasing trend in contemporary society; and *Two Billion Miles* (2015), which allows the audience to immerse themselves in the long journey of migrants and refugees travelling to Europe to apply for asylum.³⁷

4.2.2.1. Evolutionary trajectories

The i-doc, as a branch of the wider interactive digital narrative (IDN), is traceable to at least three evolutionary trajectories—text-based, cinematic/performative, and ludic/experimental media (Koenitz, Ferri, Haahr, Sezen, & Sezen, 2015, p. 11). The text-based trajectory is traceable to early hypertext media in the 1970s. Hypertexts allow a computer user to become part of what Pierre Lévy (1997) called a “dynamic and interactive multidimensional representational space” (p. 216). When attached to documentary, the

³⁶ These terms are fairly recent. Non-conventional documentaries before were labelled as DVDocs, DigiDocs, or Docs for Cell Phones (Blassnigg, 2005).

³⁷ <http://www.honkytonk.fr/index.php/webdoc/>
<http://spacewehold.nfb.ca>
<http://www.honkytonk.fr/index.php/thebigissue/>
<http://twobillionmiles.com/>

hypertext mode functions in a way that is most similar to that of classical documentary, as “this mode draws on a closed set of content-rich text-internal elements” (Forceville, 2017, p. 218). Internet pioneer Ted Nelson, who coined the term, defined hypertext as “non-sequential writing or a text that branches and allows choices to the reader (and) best read at an interactive screen (Nelson, 1987).³⁸ It is often described in terms of its differences from the linearity that defines more traditional text. Commonly cited metaphors to describe hypertext are the “network, the spider web, and a game of Chinese boxes” (Cicconi, 1999, p. 25). Hypertext is also theorised as a mode of interactivity where a user can assume an explorer role by navigating and clicking on pre-existing and database narratives (Aston & Gaudenzi (2012).

The cinematic/performative trajectory improves the interactive presentation by adding audio and visual elements to user experience. Modern examples have traces of the avant-garde tradition and postmodernism, for instance, multi-linear narratives and experimental art installations (Koenitz, Ferri, Haahr, Sezen, & Sezen, 2015). I-docs are also categorised as post-modern cinema experiments and often united under the umbrella of “modular narratives” (Cameron, 2008) such as forking paths, de-centring, and non-closure techniques (e.g., choose your own narrative or game-like adventure). Modularity connotes the ability of a user to interrupt and take control over the experience. An early example of a modular non-fiction interactive project was the \$300,000 *Aspen Movie Map* (1978-79) which, for the first time, allowed a person to take a virtual tour of an actual city using a video disk.³⁹ One could stop, meet people, enter a building, or see the city in different seasons. The computer was touch screen, displaying an early picture of human-machine interaction in media production. Multi-linear narratives (also called “elastic media” and “thinkies”) also emerged in the early 1990s with projects such as CyberBELT, a media installation at MIT Media Lab featuring a documentary on the history of Cybernetics. The advances in speech and motion at this stage

³⁸ The hypertext idea has been envisioned by Vannevar Bush two decades before it was officially coined by Nelson. In an article in *The Atlantic Monthly*, he explicates about a future where humans could use a powerful device, a Memex, capable of storing high volume of information and could be interlinked (Bush, 1945).

³⁹ The Arch Mac’s successful experiment paved the way for more advanced and sophisticated visualization, virtual reality and interactive multimodal projects. After *Aspen Movie Map*, they also employed connected-speech recognition and position sensing to interact with a virtual reality project called *Put That There* (1980). Using a physical installation, users interacted by uttering specific commands to the screen projector using verbs such as ‘create’, ‘move’, ‘make’, and ‘put’ (Bolt, 1980).

offered greater interactivity allowing audiences to speak, point, and look around the documentary installation (Bers et al., 1995).

Finally, the ludic/experimental trajectory is characterised by sophisticated modern technologies, especially those that facilitate immersive experiences and advanced visual representations (Koenitz et al., 2015). This trajectory intersects with other developments in the industry, for instance, gaming and augmented reality. An example is the game application *Monkey Island* (1990-2010), which combines narrative and game elements in one format. The game series assigns a role to the user-interactor and often involves revealing the secrets of Monkey Island. Many succeeding interactive documentary projects follow a similar ludic approach, borrowing directly from computer games' navigation style. Examples include: *Halfeti: Only Fish Shall Visit* (2002), which allows interactors to immerse themselves in a small farming district in Turkey before it was flooded by the waters of the Birecik dam; *High Rise* (2009), a multilinear documentary that allows users to explore the lives of people in residential high-rises; and *Fort McMoney* (2013), a docu-game on the oil industry. Many ludic/experimental i-docs use 3D technology to construct, represent, and simulate reality. They can easily fall under several modes of interaction: conversational mode, where a user navigates a simulation of an existing reality with commands and language unique to human-machine discourse; participative mode, where a user actively plays a role in content-creation; and experiential mode, where users can physically interact with the project by entering a tangible space and exposing themselves to an encounter that could alter their perception of the world (see Gaudenzi, 2013).

4.2.2.2. *The problematic of interactivity*

The multilinear and ludic features of most interactive documentaries appeal to audiences because they are immersive and aesthetically pleasing. Although celebrated for these reasons, they are also the subgenre's largest problem. A key point emphasised in the literature is that the cause and effect or linear trajectory of storytelling is compromised in new media platforms. Scholar Lev Manovich (1999) argued that "many new media objects do not tell stories; they don't have a beginning or end; in fact, they don't have any development, thematically, formally or otherwise which would organise their elements into a sequence" (p. 80). He associated cinema with linearity and new media with databases, the "symbolic form" of the computer age. The marriage of storytelling and new media is one of contradictions and opposing values.

Branigan (1992) asserted that narrative is attractive because it represents a logic of linearity, one that is “familiar and natural within a culture, within a way of life” (p. 28). Contemporary audiences today are floating in a cluttered media environment, which means the availability of choices within interactive narratives may undermine audience retention. Scholars have pinpointed a simple pragmatic logic: “making choices creates stress and later raises doubts about the correctness of the decisions made” (Kelomees, 2014, p. 63). In addition, the presence of an “excessive range (of choices) overburdens the user” (Kiouisis, 2002, p. 360). Choices and interactivity are perceived to distract viewers rather than offer deep engagement (Ben-Shaul, 2008, p. 21). This series of negative attitudes towards non-linearity is a continuation of arguments already uttered in the early days of documentary. John Grierson of the British Documentary Film Movement was a long-time critic. He disavowed the use of confusing strategies in the representation of reality and refused to follow the avant-garde tradition in documentary. His opinion is evident in many of his writings and speeches. For Grierson, as interpreted by Nichols (2016) “modernist elitism and textual difficulty were qualities to be avoided” (p. 582).

Interestingly, the linearity of story structure is still valued for its potential to increase audience engagement. In Kate Nash’s analysis of *Bear 71* (2014), an i-doc about a grizzly bear in Banff National Park, she wrote: “While several participants described feeling immersed in the documentary, it was most often immersion in the linear narrative that they found engaging” (Nash, 2014, p. 232; Digital Cultures Research Centre, 2014). Recent studies have confirmed that surrendering control to the audience and allowing them, for example, to switch between different strands of content might limit the capacity of i-doc makers to engage and persuade users (Forceville, 2017).

4.3. Synthesis

This review of the literature explicates the prevailing theories of Web 2.0, social media, and interactivity and relates them to documentary and its changing aesthetics and practices in new media platforms. The conceptual relationship mapped out in this chapter points to documentary’s inherent desire to “interact with its publics and the changing public sphere” (Geiger, 2011, p. 144). Documentary is foremost unavoidably political (Corner, 2016; Chanan, 2007) and its filmmakers are chiefly motivated by their desire to explain, humanise, and interpret complex political and social issues (Ellis & McLane, 2005). Documentary’s migration to Web 2.0 platforms is then understandable given the rapid

evolution of technology, fragmentation of audiences, and the influence of strategic communication in documentary reception (Nash & Corner, 2016). The shift in “technology of production and the spaces of reception” results in differing options of filming and viewing and, in some ways, suggests an expectation on the part of the audience (Chanan, 2007, p. 13). Despite the critiques that label social media as a pseudo-public sphere and interactivity as detrimental to story coherence, digitisation’s impact on the practices and aesthetics of post-modernist documentaries deserves a special enquiry. This is the subject of the succeeding chapters of this thesis: How do social network and interactive documentaries perform as platforms for *Obrero*? To what extent can they produce social impact, and can it be measured?

CHAPTER 5

TRANSMEDIA DOCUMENTARY VARIANTS

The two variants of *Obrero* discussed in this chapter demonstrate how the medium shapes and reshapes the identities of documentary and its shifting aesthetics. First, I examine the production of documentary content on Facebook using data derived from *Obrero*'s use of social media page as a site of audience reception. I also analyse here how political documentary engages with the online public and functions within a fast-paced and highly ephemeral social networking platform. Second, I explore the creative decisions involved in remediating *Obrero* for a web platform, particularly the do-it-yourself (DIY) attitude I wore as a documentary designer. I also analyse the contribution of interactivity in the fulfilment of the documentary's political outreach.

5.1. Facebook-native documentary: Community, film, and cause

Social networks are defined as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.” This definition, espoused by Danah Boyd and Nicole Ellison, was included in their 2007 article titled “Social Network Sites: Definition, History, and Scholarship” (p. 211). Although this definition still rings true, it may no longer capture the expanded utility of social networking as a platform for public and political communication. This section of the chapter aims to redefine this definition using *Obrero*'s Facebook page as source of empirical data in addition to theorising how social network performs as a site to politicise documentary audiences.

The primary sub-platform chosen for the *Obrero* project was a Facebook page because of the social network's ability to reach distinct audiences across wide geographic boundaries: overseas Filipino workers (OFW) in New Zealand and their relatives in the

Philippines; OFWs in other countries interested in labour migration in New Zealand; non-government organisations and advocacy groups; and policy makers in the Philippines.⁴⁰ Facebook pages, compared to ordinary accounts, uniquely assign a new role to the audience—“a fan rather than a friend” (Kirkpatrick, 2010, p. 246). They resemble the style and format of a news bulletin; however, content is delivered via public wall rather than electronic mail. *Obrero*’s Facebook page can be considered a transjournalistic social network documentary, focused primarily on Filipino labour migration in the context of New Zealand’s earthquake rebuild. The primary issue represented and reported on Facebook is the exploitation of migrant workers through the illegal charging of placement fees. 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 graphics, status updates, and user-generated content. Because I deliberately used the page for storytelling rather than for promotional purposes, 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 for this is because a Facebook page offers a one-size-fits-all template for communication. The distribution of multimedia content also generally follows the prevailing logic and style of marketing, advertising, and fan base building—the dominant functions of brand page as a feature. In this case, I argue that the boundary between a documentary and an advocacy campaign is blurred on Facebook because of the formal demands of its page.

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.⁴¹ In the Facebook page that I created, *Obrero* wears multiple hats (or fits in different categories): as a film, as a cause, and as a community. The hybrid identity of the 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 different communities (and understanding both their online and offline sociality), I was able to increase *Obrero*’s

⁴⁰ The page is accessible through www.facebook.com/ObreroDocumentary. It has more than 1000 followers.

⁴¹ As of February 2020, there are 1,519 existing categories and subcategories of Facebook pages. The main categories include the following: 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.

political outreach by engaging with different interest groups. In fact, there is a lesson to learn here from 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 a distinct market value (Green & Jenkins, 2011) or, in the case of the documentary, political engagement. The use of a social network, which is a global platform, also enhances workers' voices, engaging those outside the reach of a regular film festival. This argument is elaborated in the succeeding sections.

5.1.1. Video screen aesthetics and dynamics

Obrero's main features on Facebook are the repurposed and reformatted documentaries intended primarily for social network exhibition and mobile phone distribution. I label them as "microdocumentaries" to signify their succinctness.⁴² They are similar to "mobisodes" or "short episodes of a popular television show that are specifically intended for mobile device viewing" (Safko, 2012, p. 465). They reap the benefit of being spreadable either in technical or in cultural terms (Jenkins et al., 2013). Their digital form means that they can easily be shared and transferred. As a form of video activism, a microdocumentary falls under the category of "small media", a term referring to any form of alternative, participatory, or social movement media that flourishes in the "margins and interstices of the public sphere" (Chanan, 2012, p. 219). Small media was first theorised by Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi (1994) in their seminal work that explicated how video, audiocassettes, fax machines, and photocopied leaflets were used to echo oppositional points of view during the Iranian revolution. Other scholars also have applied the concept to alternative means of film production such as the informal Nigerian film industry (Nollywood), which uses amateur video equipment as opposed to the routines and practices of big media conglomerates (Larkin, 2004).

The microdocumentaries I produced as small media are at the centre of new media practice on Facebook (see Figure 6). They form a hybrid journalistic practice that exists in the intersection between compact cinematics and radical videos. Hesselberth and Poulaki (2017) used the term "compact cinematics" to signify the study of "compact, compressed and

⁴² The term 'microdocumentary' was also used in Aspen movie map (1978-1979) to refer to 'brief interviews' conducted with building occupants in Aspen, Colorado (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.

miniature (audio) visual artefacts, forms, and practices that circulate in our everyday multimedia environment, across technologies, genres and disciplines” (p. 2). 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). As Murphie (2014) argued: “the most enduring effects of digital and networked (signal-based) media have been to fragment media forms, transform practices and concepts of mediation and via this to fragment and transform much of social life” (p. 189).



Figure 6. Screenshot of *Obrero's* most popular microdocumentary

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

Table 2. 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

As a social network documentary, *Obrero* falls under the notion of "bit-sized media culture" (Hesselberth & Poulaki, 2017). This pertains not only to the brevity of the political micronarratives I posted on Facebook but also to the overall tiny bits of multimedia content that comprise the entire social media strategy. 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 viewing⁴³ (see Table 2).

The silent autoplay in-feed videos, launched on Facebook in 2013, has diminished the value of the soundtrack; that is, the aural in social video has been supplanted by the subtitles and intertexts. This shift could be theorised as new media audiences' silent era. This changing mode of spectatorship means that 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 & Thompson, 1997, pp. 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 and, thus, 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 vérité movement). As well as ensuring the Facebook microdocumentaries were logical in structure and could be subtitled, I chose to de-emphasise their cinematic sophistication given that *Obrero's* political and journalistic nature 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. Post-modern documentary then mutates from analogue forms of communication into media formats that are both sociable and spreadable online.

Adjustments, however, are constant in media practice. For instance, Hudson and Zimmermann (2009) raised the notion of repurposing and multi-platforming commercial cinema. Versions of films multiply in the form of "directors' cuts, special editions, ancillary products, tie-ins and spinoffs" for DVD, website, or Video on Demand release (p. 138). As Murphie (2014) noted, "contemporary media embrace this mutability, speed the process up and further diversify it almost as a kind of principle" (p. 193). In addition, the filmmaking industry has been used to negotiating the screen resolution and size of their films based on

⁴³ Speed viewing has also been theorised through the lens of narrative films. Alexander (2017) 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 (p. 109).

delivery platform such as in the case of Pixar Animation Studios, which recomposes each film for different formats. Cossar (2009) described this process as “aesthetic metamorphosis” (p. 3). I position these Facebook practices as a continuation of this creative refashioning of media production and engagement in this age of social networking. To migrate to social media then means documentaries must span boundaries, which makes them able to transcend and embrace the media cultures from old and new platforms.

5.1.2. Microdocumentaries as video activism

The engagement strategies of *Obrero* microdocumentaries as a variant of radical online videos is not dissimilar to those undertaken by early avant-garde filmmakers (Askanius, 2014). As I mentioned in Chapter 2, Vertov also experimented on short-length agitational video pieces exhibited via travelling cinema in the Soviet Union. Despite the short lifespan of this mobile cinema experiment, its influence on the political rhetoric of video activism is evident even today. Activists who record and upload radical video online have been metaphorically labelled as modern-day Kinoks of the Dziga Vertov’s movement. In a case study of activism in Syria, Wessels (2017) noted that the desire of activists to record and “share their direct unmediated observations and experiences of reality” are analogous to the avant-garde tradition developed by Vertov and his collectives (p. 162).

Although microdocumentaries belong to the larger family of radical video culture, alongside the works of “video activist NGOs, access organisations, aggregators of oppositional media and radical video-activists” (Presence, 2015, p. 187) and resemble citizen journalism, I assert that there is still a clear distinction between the sub-genres. Vérité footage of protests shot on the streets tends to be uploaded onto YouTube or Facebook in a relatively raw fashion, while a short narrative or argument—as is the case with *Obrero*—must be creatively treated in that it combines testimonials, intertexts, and supporting footage. Such an approach associates itself more closely with professional media making practices.

Microdocumentaries are also comparable to a concise style of broadcast and online reporting, but they have a strong take-away political message and are intended to create social change rather than merely report. For instance, the microdocumentary about New Zealand’s migrant worker recruitment system exposed the plight of Filipino workers arriving in New Zealand without jobs.⁴⁴ Although it educated the audiences about the complexity of

⁴⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=213181502628228>

the multi-layered recruitment system of workers, the documentary also called for proactive government intervention by highlighting the loophole in the current system and the need to establish a Filipino Labor Office in New Zealand.⁴⁵ In this instance, the microdocumentary illustrates Chanan's (2012b) 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. The video's spreadable format and digestible content, coupled with its use of the Filipinos' local language with intertitles, can also politicise non-committed audiences.

5.1.3. Sociability, virality, and dialogue

In this section, I analyse how *Obrero*'s pieces of small media performed on Facebook over a period of one year and discuss how documentary content spreads and becomes viral. Fung & Shkabatur (2015) referred to "viral engagement" as "a political message or campaign that spreads quickly, reaches a large audience, and calls for action" (p. 155). Social and viral are two different but interrelated concepts. To be sociable is a precursor to virality and ensures that content is "produced in a form that is capable of spreading virally" (Phillips, 2012, p. 669). Highly social videos are also seen to "rise to, and fall from, their peak popularity more quickly than less social videos" (Broxton et al., 2013, p. 241).

There are three definitions of virality identified in the literature. The first suggests virality means that information spreads within a short span of time, while the second describes it as the electronic version of word-of-mouth marketing. The third definition associates virality with activities such as liking, commenting, and sharing, all of which indicate engagement (Alhabash & McAlister, 2015). *Obrero*'s microdocumentaries are not necessarily viral; it depends on how we define virality, for example, as getting one million views. In that sense, aspects of *Obrero* were not popular. For instance, the educational and less political content (infographics and other interactive media) that I posted as bridges or fillers during my inactive days on social media, failed to engage audiences. But the small media that contained political content were highly sociable on *Obrero*'s Facebook page, especially those with specific representation of the workers in Christchurch. The microdocumentary titled *Do OFWs bound for New Zealand still pay the price?* reached at

⁴⁵ The Philippines has 26 overseas labour offices in different countries worldwide. A labour office assists Filipino migrant workers with migration and employment issues.

least 60,000 unique individuals, 30,000 of whom watched the video (see Figure 7).⁴⁶ It also generated almost 2,000 reactions in the form of comments, likes, and shares.

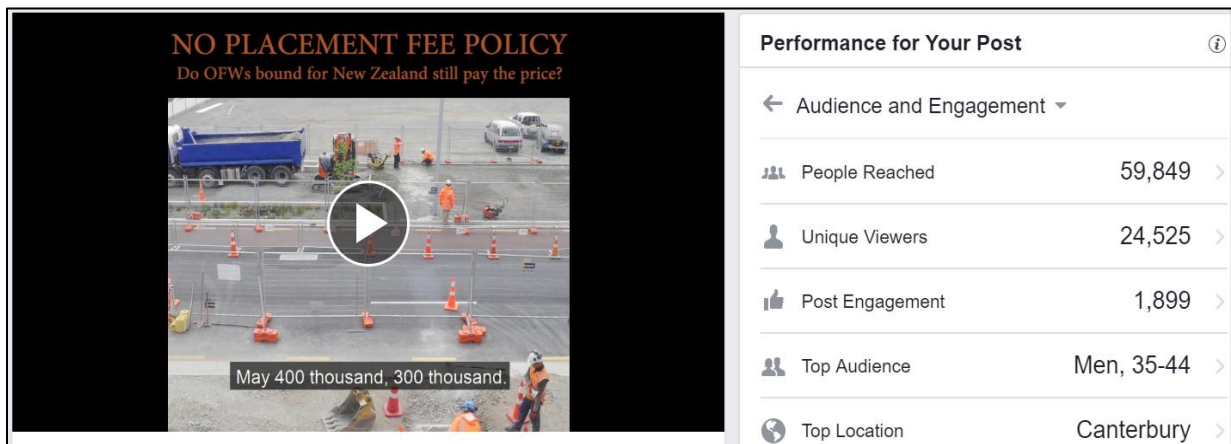


Figure 7. Audience analytics of *Obrero*'s political microdocumentary

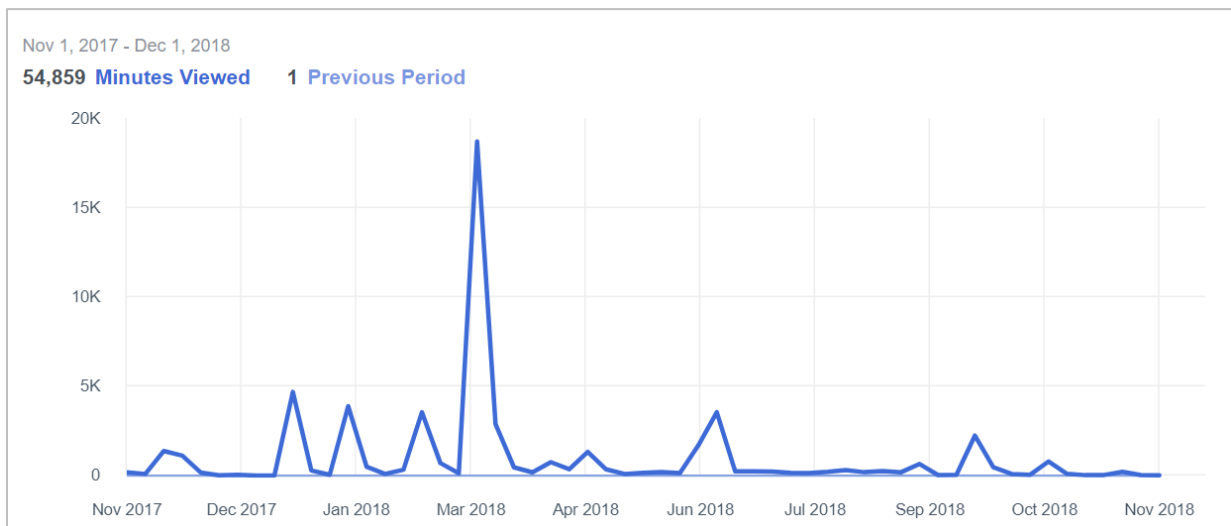


Figure 8. *Obrero*'s video insights showing particular peaks in the page's viewing history

Unsurprisingly, and perhaps consistent with the findings of recent empirical studies on virality, videos remain the most attractive and spreadable content on social media. However, the popularity of Facebook-native videos is gauged by peaks in their viewing history (see Figure 8). Because social media videos are highly ephemeral, they can sink without a trace (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2016). Ephemerality embodies “evanescent, transient

⁴⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=188211158458596>

and brief” media (Grainge, 2011, p. 2) or “short-shelf life” media (Pesce, 2016).

Spreadability, or the duplication through sharing and reposting, remains the most attractive structural feature of social media and is a vital component of our interconnected mediasphere (Jenkins et al., 2013). The strategy is good if the aim is to attract eyeballs, but content’s virality does not necessarily translate to meaningful social change.

Dialogue between me as an author-filmmaker and *Obrero*’s diverse public is another component of social network documentary. Because *Obrero* microdocumentaries appealed largely to reason and emotion, they quickly became microsites of digital conversations. These conversations flourished on both private and public Facebook groups and pages where affected workers 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 exploitation. Apart from reaching audiences across national boundaries, Facebook facilitates open dialogue, which is valuable for filmmakers because audience responses indicate that the political message of their documentaries is valid, legitimate and timely. As argued by Chanan (2000), traditional mass media is a pseudo-public sphere because audiences have very limited means to talk back. The Facebook public by contrast is no longer under my tutelage as the filmmaker. They are active agents of social change and are themselves content co-creators, able to comment, share, and submit user-generated photos.

Facebook users who showed empathy and called for stricter policing and intervention after witnessing the plight of the workers form a digital version of the film festivals’ post-screening question and answer session. By democratising the digital space and opening it up to diverse opinions, documentary makers and audiences discover new means to engage in political communication. This engagement parallels the principle of dialogic communication that is embedded in public relations, defined as “any form of negotiated exchange of ideas and opinions” (Kent & Taylor, 1998, p. 325). As Chanan (2000) has previously asserted: “What distinguishes the documentary as a cinematic form is that it is internally dialogical, or double voiced” (p. 226). Documentary can offer different voices within the narrative such as those of witnesses, victims, or commentators, but the filmmaker nonetheless controls the

overall conversation. Facebook's democratised interface means control over the dialogue (in the form of comment threads) is no longer in the hands of the filmmaker.⁴⁷

5.1.4. The downside of Facebook documentary

Alternative forms of reporting continue to flourish unabated in spaces enabled by corporate-owned media technology (e.g., YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook). Juhasz (2014) argued that “in the digital environment, corporations own and then give away for free, these once hard-to-access tools for the production and dissemination of expressive resistance” (p. 41). Although external to routines of journalism as a profession (Tandoc & Maitra, 2018), Facebook's tempting networked services attract alternative media producers to stay in the platform. Free access to the platform also prevents users from resisting its algorithmic model. As a result, the advertising logic of Facebook is passed on to all users regardless of whether they have a profit motive. Unlike the newsreel collectives in the past that created their own distribution space, and the Indymedia that proliferated in an independent network of websites, alternative media today tends to rely on social platforms provided by technology giants. As Askanius and Gustafsson (2010) noted, this suggests that corporate media have “succeeded in commodifying the technical forms and participatory philosophy behind the user-generated media systems invented decades ago by media activists seeking to counter the broadcast media of the time” (p. 38). Facebook documentary breathes in the age of the commercial internet. And this project is a case in point. *Obrero* is not funded by Facebook or Google, but these corporate platforms have successfully penetrated every aspect of online culture, including many aspects of *Obrero*'s online production—from digital exhibition to audience engagement.

Although largely beneficial in expanding the reach of a political documentary, *Obrero*'s Facebook variant is also not exempt from the notion of *algorithmic isomorphism* (Caplan & Boyd, 2018) or the homogenisation of video culture online. In particular, the techno-commercial culture of Web 2.0 allows the proliferation of mimetic activities, whereby those perceived as best practices are imitated and their models replicated (Caplan & Boyd,

⁴⁷ By distributing content over a social network, I exposed the issue to a range of voices including non-committed audiences who even argued a number of times that the workers were no longer charged placement fees. These dissenting voices, however, were immediately refuted in the succeeding comments with users providing more testimonials of continuous exploitation.

2018; Sehl et al., 2018).⁴⁸ Because mainstream and alternative media are housed within the same space of storytelling, they can suffer from an identity crisis. Both these media types (including *Obrero* microdocumentaries) may be programmed to appear next to each other on a Facebook timeline or in Google search results. Their co-existence in the same Web 2.0 platform, together with native advertising videos that are camouflaged as news, makes it difficult for an audience to distinguish alternative from mainstream media (Ferrer-Conill & Karlsson, 2018).⁴⁹

Publishing documentary variants online (e.g., microdocumentaries) in the same fashion as marketers and advertisers, therefore, can dilute the identity of independently produced documentaries. This confusion is a major downside of *Obrero*'s transmedia model. Trying to avoid prescribed formats and the general algorithmic rules of Facebook could mean reduced audience engagement because playing by the rules is seen to increase visibility (Tandoc & Maitra, 2018). But conformity can also reduce the ability of alternative media and documentaries to distinguish their practice from the mainstream media and even advertising.

In this section, I have documented that micronarratives on Facebook can spread a call for change digitally, one that reaches across borders. But problems, as outlined above, can arise. *Obrero*'s microdocumentaries online are ephemeral, and its political messages can be blurred when hosted on a commercial internet platform. Could *Obrero* flourish in an interactive platform as an i-doc, and is that the solution to the ephemeral lifespan of microdocumentaries on Facebook? Could interactivity strengthen the political outreach of a documentary?

5.2. Interactive documentary: Hybrid format of representation

I unveiled *Obrero*'s interactive documentary (i-doc) to a roomful of Filipino migrant workers attending my community film screening in Christchurch. Attempting to describe and define what an i-doc was, I told my audience: "it looks like a website, but it feels like a film". I then spent the next couple of minutes showing fragments of my i-doc and uncovering the

⁴⁸ The term techno-commercial refers to the "architectures and business models underpinning social platforms" (Poell & van Dijck, 2015, p. 529).

⁴⁹ Some of my audiences labelled the native videos I produced on Facebook as 'news'. The reason is because the style or storytelling treatment of *Obrero* is aesthetically similar to the ones produced by mainstream news outlets.

documentary contents hiding beneath its interface. At that point, it seemed like my i-doc had finally met its first audience.

As an arm of the transmedia project, the i-doc went into production concurrently with the film and social network components. It materialised after a series of drafts, experiments, pre-tests, and post-tests, which were informed by the theory, practice, and criticism regarding interactivity and non-linear storytelling. Given my shoestring budget, my independently produced i-doc offers only basic graphics, an interface, and moving images. Compared to its traditional counterpart—my linear documentary—the web version of *Obrero* embodies the attitude inherent in modern technologies. The content, structure, and appearance dictate a new approach to interactive storytelling, which moves away from the linear, lean-back, and passive style of content consumption. *Obrero* i-doc falls into a hybrid category of documentary, uniting journalism, alternative media, and interactivity in one format. As a webdoc, it observes traditional documentary's "textual conventions and continuities of purpose" (Nash, 2012, p. 197).

Even during the embryonic stage, the production of i-docs had consistently addressed the reportage and representation of the "political". For example, Hazen Reed (1993) tackled a socially relevant issue in his Macintosh-formatted i-doc titled *Portraits of People Living with AIDS* (1995). Reed and his team presented the life stories of four individuals living with AIDS, using a combination of multiple media such as audio, video, and photo essays stored on a computer. The project simulated a game-like interface that allowed users to participate by recording and leaving personal messages for the subjects. Alison Cornyn and Sue Johnson also used a multimedia web documentary project to expose the problems of the juvenile justice system and over-incarceration in the United States.⁵⁰ Titled *360degrees: Perspectives on the U.S. criminal justice system* (2000), the project used video, timeline, first-person narrative, and an online forum to represent the issue. The format takes an avant-garde approach, an "intersection of art, documentary and activism" (Johnson, 2001, p. 12). *Obrero*'s use of a web platform to represent a socially relevant issue continues the traditions set by these early i-doc adopters.

⁵⁰ The i-doc is still accessible as of this writing at <http://www.360degrees.org/>.

5.2.1. The advent of DIY web authoring software

Academics and industry practitioners have shown great interest in off-the-shelf software packages for interactive storytelling because of their capacity to “close the gap between coding ability and creative will” (Wolozin, 2013, p. 68). These software applications provide an excellent platform for filmmakers to create and publish web content despite having had no professional training in computer programming skills. To make a do-it-yourself (DIY) web documentary, one needs to access either an online drag-and-drop web authoring tool (e.g., Wix, Weebly, Strikingly, Simvolvy) or an offline editing and publishing application (e.g., Korsakow, Klynt). Drag and drop website builders are the most accessible to amateurs and often feature a WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get) template. Any of these off-the-shelf software packages can be used in making interactive narratives, although website builders are more generic in purpose and, therefore, not custom-made for interactive narratives. My familiarity with web blogging led me to choose a website builder for my webdoc. Given the enormous amount of information on the web and the attention and engagement issues encountered by most web-formatted documentaries, DIY website builders can do multiple important tasks: create pages, standalone story fragments, and links within the i-doc interface that can easily be shared and circulated. Story fragments can live in the spaces of social media and be discovered by audiences that seek information, thus leading them to the i-doc. Website builders then are beneficial and readily accessible, but have a downside for documentary. Free accounts, which are most commonly used, have restricted features and bandwidth allocation. Moreover, the host platform has the right to use your website for advertising purposes, which can conflict with the political purpose of the original project. This is the paradox of authoring pages on commercial Web 2.0.

As a self-produced web documentary, *Obrero* takes advantage of advanced HTML technology to create interactive DIY web pages (see hypertext model, Figure 9). HTML refers to Hypertext Markup Language, a formatting system that allows proper structuring of elements within a web page (Heiderich et al., 2011). HTML was first introduced in November 1992 and at that time provided only “basic text formatting” to websites (p. 15). The fifth version of HTML, unlike its predecessors, can programme advanced web video settings such as using moving image as page background or enabling full screen mode. It can likewise interlay multimedia content on a webpage. As Dovey (2014) noted: “HTML5 has created the possibility for the text attachments of video content to become far more machine

readable and interconnected” (p. 26). These features were formerly the sole territory of Adobe Flash technology. Flash had enabled “desktops rich graphics, sounds, dynamic charts, and fully interactive experiences containing a variety of combined information and media” (Leggett et al., 2007, p. 5). Many contemporary platforms for interactive storytelling also rely primarily on Flash to weave multimedia and animated content, although recent versions are adjusted to HTML5. Adobe, the software company behind Flash, recently announced that it would cease to update and distribute Flash Player from the end of 2020 (Barrett, 2017). The announcement echoed all over the industry and forced many web designers to transition from Flash to HTML5. *Obrero* was constructed in the middle of this radical shift in web technology. It influenced my decision to choose a drag-and-drop and HTML5-ready web development software to ensure the project’s longevity and accessibility. Nevertheless, there are lessons in the fate of Flash. I recognise that, despite using the most popular technology of the time, an i-doc remains difficult to archive; nothing can guarantee future access and preservation given that the internet is highly susceptible to losing materials and, therefore, cannot “future-proof” content (Grainge, 2011, p. 9).

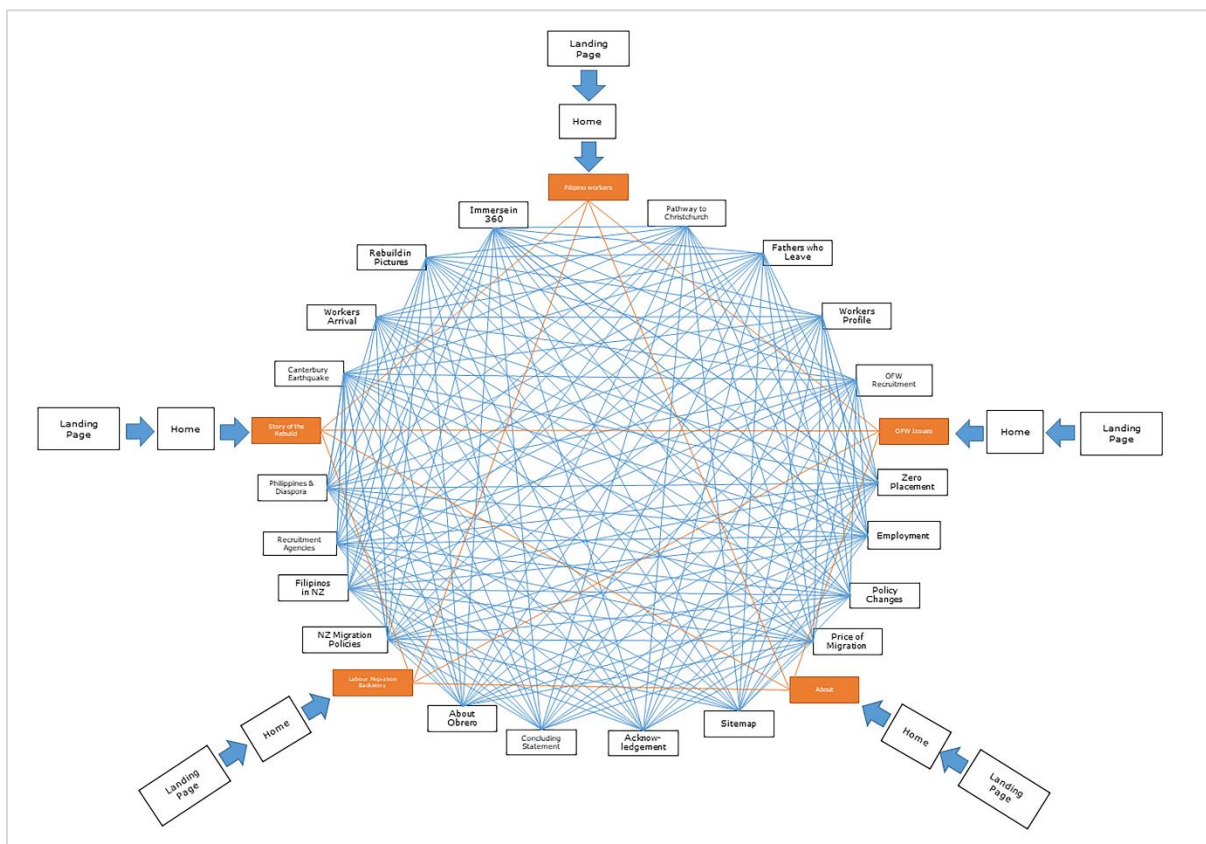


Figure 9. Hypertext/hypermedia model of *Obrero* i-doc

The term *hypertext* appears in the lexicon of software and new media studies and often is analysed in the context of nonlinear narrativity, literary theory, and computer science. Scholars define the term as a software that formats individually separated units into navigable indexes or a technique to organise and embed a large chunk of materials on the internet (Dovey, 2002; Edwards, 1994). In literary theory and computer studies, elements or units in hypertext are called “nodes” (e.g., major headings or chapters of the i-doc). The ultimate objective of hypertext i-docs is to show linkages between and among distinct elements or units of texts and to emphasise user agency or the capacity of a person to navigate a pre-existing database. In the process of user navigation, the presence of the author becomes marginal in hypertext.

5.2.2. Narrative structure and presentation

Hypertext forms of webdocs might be the closest counterpart of classical structures of documentary narrative. They represent one of the most ideal structuring devices for complex information similar to “thick text” documentaries that present themselves as “authorial artefact” (Corner, 2015, p. 147). Narrative remains the fundamental means of “structuring the projected world of the documentary” (Plantinga, 1997, p. 120). Thus, *Obrero*’s unconventional structure disrupts the audiences’ expectations of what documentary film is. Unlike a traditional film with a beginning, middle, and end, i-docs are non-linear and flexible, giving users more control in content navigation. As mentioned in the previous chapter, critics have argued that giving the audience too much control in navigating a web platform is detrimental to story coherence. Others have pointed to technical limitations, poor retention, and the need for higher bandwidth if audiences are to successfully interact with web-based media. Given that control is turned over to the user in i-docs, my aim was not to invite my audience to fully navigate and consume its narrative. Instead, *Obrero* presents a database where the audience can jump from one piece of content to another or choose information that is unknown to them. The rationale behind this logic is the “jump-link” culture of hypertext media, which allows audience to easily jump, choose, or concentrate on specific content rather than complete all possible story pathways (Mayer, 1999).

While it was tempting to simply recycle already existing web templates, I chose to start the project from scratch on an empty screen. My i-doc, therefore, did not resemble a regular website (see Figure 10). To aid the viewing process, I used a branching tree layout

composed of navigable website features (see [Appendix C](#)). The parts or chapters are presented in forking path treatment with sub-topics under each major heading. The order encapsulates a pre-planned story structure with a beginning and end—similar to menu-based interactivity. This means the interactors can choose to consume the story fragments in whatever fashion that suits them.

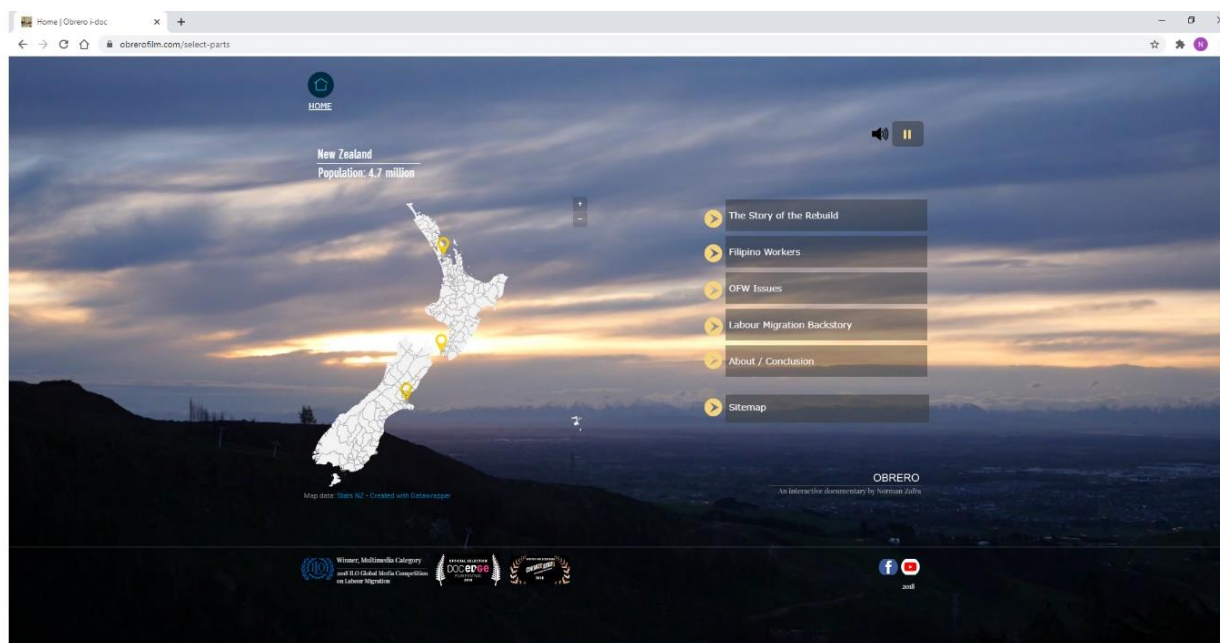


Figure 10. *Obrero's* landing page shows a map and a navigation aid

There are five key components in the *Obrero* i-doc: (Part 1) *The Story of the Rebuild*, which recounts the story of the earthquake as a causal element of labour migration in New Zealand; (Part 2) *Filipino Workers*, which introduces the collective story of the rebuild workers and explains who the workers are and where they come from; (Part 3) *OFW Issues*, which exposes the crisis and contains the climax of the plot;⁵¹ (Part 4) *Labour Migration Backstory*, which contextualises the story and brings the audience closer to the historical roots of labour migration in the Philippines and New Zealand; and (Part 5) an *About/Conclusion*, which ends the narrative with summaries and concluding remarks. The conclusion page brings closure to an open-ended narrative.⁵²

Drawing on Labov and Waletzky's (1997) narrative model, I positioned each part of the i-doc as a linear sequence representing the surface structure of *Obrero's* narrative. The

⁵¹ OFW stands for overseas Filipino worker, a term used to refer to citizens of the Philippines working abroad.

⁵² See i-doc's landing page <https://www.obrerofilm.com/select-parts>

story begins with an *abstract* that summarises the point of the i-doc in a nutshell (Part 1). It is then followed by *orientation* that denotes the location, time, and characters of the story (Part 2). Labour migration as a social issue is introduced through *complicating action* that shows the key conflict of the story (Part 3). The *evaluation* then moves the direction of the story to analysis and narrator comments (Part 4). And finally, *resolution or coda* ends the story and brings the action back to the present (Part 5).

The paradoxical nature of this project is that while the web platform is inherently multilinear, it still follows the tested formula of linear storytelling. The ethos of linearity benefits the i-doc. First, linearity motivates the audience to focus on the story rather than the design or interactivity (Gaudenzi, 2013). This narrative structure allows *Obrero* to convey the personal and collective experiences of workers that are rich in humanistic narratives and context that only a web platform could potentially accommodate. A typical practitioner's logic reverberates here—story trumps treatment. I-docs that are flamboyantly interactive confuse audiences because they need to spend much time speculating on how to begin and end their experience. Confusion is a big drawback and a barrier to engagement. Regardless of i-docs' promise of narrative sophistication and extravagant interface, I argue that political i-docs must maintain simple and direct message constructions that effectively communicate the issues rather than the beauty of their interfaces.

Second, linearity preserves the authorial principle inherent in the documentary tradition—a “successful centennial formula” in storytelling (Almeida & Alvelos, 2010, p. 125). My i-doc is intended to engage and politicise the audience rather than to immerse them in a storyworld or invite to wander into multiple story possibilities. I also intentionally dissociate the project from interactive game narratives. Hence, the presentation is simplified. Although I followed a basic narrative structure, the i-doc still provides an opportunity for the audience to navigate the narrative in ways that suit their prior knowledge of Filipino labour migration in New Zealand. This idea recognises that each audience has different prior knowledge of the issues at hand. Hence, the i-doc does not need to be consumed in full.

And third, linearity facilitates better user engagement as interactors feel more involved if they can follow the story. In the *Obrero* i-doc, they can readily access a sitemap, similar to a website wireframe or blueprint, which reveals the story structure and intends to enhance audience retention (see Figure 11). This creative decision was a response to earlier research suggesting that access to a story structure guides the reader and enhances

engagement with the interactor (Nash, 2014). Because of the i-doc's investigative and political nature, revealing the structure also helps the audience navigate a supposedly unknown media terrain. In addition, less tech-savvy audiences still value the curation and sequencing roles assumed by a documentary designer.

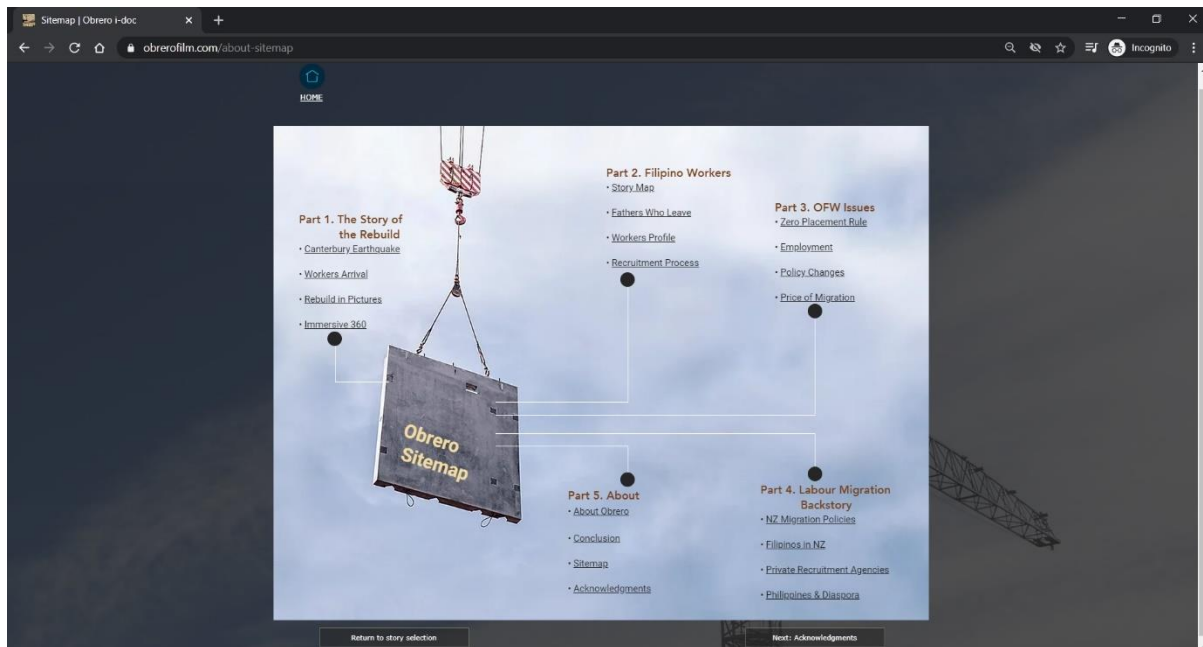


Figure 11. *Obrero's* sitemap reveals the structure of the i-doc

5.2.3. Content production

Obrero i-doc is effectively a combination of loops, a series of short videos, text, and visualisation. These features fall under the rubric of categorical webdocs that 'predominantly (although not exclusively) consist of a collection of micronarratives, short video sequences that in themselves exhibit a narrative structure' (Nash, 2012b, p. 205). The following summarises the types of content I produced for this i-doc.

5.2.3.1. Loops

A looping video background is often utilised in HTML-based websites for its aesthetic features. But it can serve a serious purpose too beyond its status as a web design trend. In an i-doc, a video loop can play the role of a transition device that ensures visual continuity between major parts of the narrative. *Obrero's* video loop captures a periodic motion, roughly 15 seconds in length, accompanied by a looping natural sound (see Table 3). Only the looping videos were native to the *Obrero* i-doc interface. The scenes are used as

page background and are meant to expound the setting/s of the workers' narrative. During the production stage, filmmakers need to deliberately record plenty of longer takes to give them enough leeway in editing.

Table 3. Summary of looping videos used in *Obrero i-doc*

CHAPTERS	VIDEO LOOPS DESCRIPTION
The story of the rebuild	Construction of Christchurch library's five-storey building (in time-lapse)
Filipino Workers	Action video of Filipino workers installing the scaffolding of a cinema and food court building construction
OFW Issues	Scene at Manila's international airport, departure section
Labour migration backstory	Footage of arriving tram at Cathedral Square
About/Conclusion	Construction of Christchurch's Outpatients hospital building

Vertov's experimentation in database documentary is often considered the precursor of this new media and computer culture (Stephensen & Pedersen, 2015, p. 86). But the roots are much older than Vertov's films. Early cinematic devices such as "the Zoetrope, the Phonoscope, the Tachyscope, and the Kinetoscope" were based on video sequences that can be played repeatedly (Manovich, 2002, p. 408). Lumière films are similar to short looping videos (Manovich, 2002). Sometimes called "actualities", this primitive mode of representation was comprised of a single shot. They do not yield a cause and effect relationship in the traditional narrative sense (Chanan, 2007). A few standout examples include *The arrival of the train* (1896, 50 seconds), *A boat leaving the harbour* (1896, 60 seconds), and *Workers leaving the factory* (1895, 45 seconds). Contemporary i-doc scholars have referred to the new media version of these video fragments as "semantic video", "hypervideo", and "web-native video" (Dovey & Rose, 2012). Undoubtedly, video now enters a different category—"from a media on the Web to a media of the Web" (p. 164).

Producing looping videos thus highlights moving pictures as antecedents of documentary as a genre. As Almeida and Alvelos (2010) emphasised, i-docs must be primarily composed of moving images to retain their historical relation with documentary film except in "cases where conceptually the subject demands it" (p. 124). They also noted a

few technical specifications, for instance, an i-doc must have a full screen mode option for better audience engagement that can be accessed through simple and universal input devices (e.g., mouse, keyboard, audio, microphone). However, these specificities aside, any attempt to dictate the features of i-docs can easily discount the fact that the internet is inherently a hub for multimedia experimentation. The field is open for individuals to define a new practice. And audiences, too, could design their own i-doc experience, engage with graphics more fully, and even play with story maps and disregard the video components of an i-doc.

5.2.3.2. *Edited video sequences*

Some of the video components of the i-doc are repurposed versions of *Obrero's* Facebook native videos and its film variant. The i-doc videos are experimental in style, format, screen size, and length, but they are properly subtitled in English to engage a wider public. Background music is outsourced from creative commons websites (e.g., *freemusicarchive.org*) and every aspect of its production relies on cheap technology (e.g., DSLR and mobile phones). The videos I produced for the i-doc are also bigger in scope and objectives than their companions. They aim to educate the audience on important issues such as the social consequences of labour migration (e.g., *Fathers who leave; Filipino victims of the earthquake*); the layered process of migrant worker recruitment (e.g., *Upfront Cost versus Contracted Model*); and the social impact of unethical recruitment system (e.g., *Do OFWs Bound for New Zealand still pay the price?*).⁵³ Similar to the message of my Facebook microdocumentary, I also outlined in the i-doc how the workers moving to New Zealand can spend an entire year simply to recover from their debts. In addition, I also exposed through worker testimonials the consequences of the lack of consistent monitoring of private recruitment entities. These political micronarratives suit a hypertext webdoc due to its ability to emphasise shorter arguments within a comprehensive platform.

Because of bandwidth restriction, most videos in the i-doc which address these policy-type issues were embedded from an external video hosting platform. High-quality videos uploaded directly onto a website encounter streaming and buffering issues, which irritate many users. This is especially true in countries with a slow or moderate internet

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<https://www.obrerofilm.com/christchurch-rebuild-earthquake>
<https://www.obrerofilm.com/filipino-workers-fathers-who-leave>
<https://www.obrerofilm.com/ofw-issues-employment>
<https://www.obrerofilm.com/ofw-issues-no-placement-fee>

connection. For practical reasons, I then opted to embed all other i-doc videos from an external platform that processes videos to suit different bandwidths and internet connection speeds (e.g., YouTube).

5.2.3.3. *Data visualisation*

I squeezed further and varied digital content into the *Obrero* i-doc, which required labour-intensive work. Examples include: a map of New Zealand for audiences to gain a sense of the geography of the country (see landing page); a story map showing countries where Filipinos have worked prior to migrating to Christchurch; and a set of information graphics that extend the workers' narratives. A majority of these visualisations portray figures and data that represent the issues and struggles confronting the labour migration of Filipinos in New Zealand. Indeed, visualisation confuses *Obrero's* identity as a documentary and challenges its attachment to the indexical photographic evidence of documentary cinema. However, these techniques are not foreign to the documentary tradition. The classic New Deal documentary *The Plow that Broke the Plains* (1936), for example, used maps to show an overview of the Great Plains region of the United States and Canada and to demonstrate the quantitative impact of excessive drought in the region. National Film Board of Canada's *Cosmic Zoom* (1968) also turned to visualisation to represent a complex set of scientific information. The film successfully brought knowledge of a remote region and the tiniest component of an element, the atom, to its audiences. This tradition of using data visualisation as documentary evidence has been continued by contemporary documentary films such as *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006/2017) and *Supersize Me* (2004). These films use graphics, visualisation, and animation as rhetorical techniques to reveal compelling facts and statistics that enhance the narrative.

Fallon (2016) argued that data visualisation can “pull together large swaths of information and reveal otherwise hidden dimensions of the world” (p. 299). Visualisation, in the form of charts, can also effectively represent a radical point of view, challenge the dominant ideology, and expose a social problem. More importantly, data visualisation in the instance of *Obrero* also plays an important role in chunking the stories by presenting aspects of labour migration in various visual formats. In other words, the capacity of webdocs to feature interactive graphics reinforces the importance of presenting data as a means of addressing the historical world.

5.2.3.4. *Textual explainers*

The use of text in documentary has been a valuable exercise particularly during the silent era where intertitles afforded continuity to a series of footage weaved together as a form of narrative. Text is also the dominion of newspaper reporting and a staple format of multimedia news packages where photos and videos are strategically inserted in a long piece of text. In this i-doc, I took advantage of textual explainers and text cards to offer particularities otherwise difficult to emphasise in a regular documentary. I explained, for instance, the context and chronologies of labour migration phenomenon in the Philippines through a 300-word body of text as well as the laws (e.g. Labor Code of 1974) that govern the movement of Filipino workers. This body of text supports one of the i-doc's arguments – that is, labour migration is a highly regulated activity in the workers' home country. Text can also effectively provide an ending to a nonlinear narrative. *Obrero*, for instance, features a written conclusion that encapsulates my overall vision and motivation as a filmmaker. Although minimally used in this i-doc, writing textual explainers offers two strategic purposes: first, it breaks the monotony or sameness of media format expected in a video and visualisation-heavy documentary; and second, it creates an opportunity to highlight the i-doc's argument and emphasise more clearly through words the political outreach of a project.

5.2.4. **Measuring the i-doc audience**

As I argued in the methodology chapter, quantitative audience data distinguishes *Obrero* from other lens-based research projects that rely solely on textual analysis as their methodology. The accessibility of audience data serves as a preliminary tool for evaluation, and software programmes can now interpret, translate, and summarise big audience data into digestible, simplified sets of information. Audience analytics is advantageous especially for low-budget documentary makers curious about the efficacy of their communication. Like feature documentaries funded by philanthropists and large social organisations, low-budget, single-authored, and community-based documentaries (sometimes called “open-space documentaries”, see Zimmermann & De Michiel, 2018) also rely on digital analytics to gauge their audience engagement.

In this section, I explore the i-doc's performance using audience analytics provided by tech giant Google. Google Analytics converts audience interaction into quantifiable data and reveals the level of engagement through charts, tables, figures, and illustrations. Adding a Google Analytics tracking code to the i-doc enabled me to track the number of visitors and

the time a user spent on the website, among other functions. In setting up *Obrero*'s website analytics, I followed the prevailing logic that the visibility of the project may be enhanced through strategic use of search engine optimisation (SEO). SEO involves setting up your website so that it ranks well in organic search results. This is done by employing discoverable keywords, for instance, "Filipino", "Christchurch construction", "rebuild workers", and "New Zealand".

Google Analytics as a piece of software belongs to a family of website log analytics programmes and is a key source of behavioural audience data (Tomlin, 2018). Like Facebook's Audience Insights, Google Analytics operates within a commercial advertising logic, so it produces similar quantitative results about audience activity. Because *Obrero* has no commercial intention, I left "Remarketing and Advertising Reporting Features" on Google Analytics disabled. This powerful tool would have allowed me, as a website administrator, to track user profiles and activity, record demographics, and generate interest reports. Enabling this feature or turning it on requires an i-doc user to accept a cookie policy, a form of declaration that informs the user that "cookies" are used to record more detailed information about who is accessing a site. Because of the settings I chose, *Obrero*'s analytics only generate the most basic audience data for the purpose of measuring the reach of the project.

Google analytics data reveal that the i-doc only engaged a small audience when it was first made public in August 2018. In the first three months, the page generated poor traffic, receiving 192 unique users only. The engagement increased in the succeeding weeks but intermittently. After 14 months, *Obrero* received a total of 767 unique users, a low figure compared to the reach of the Facebook page associated with the project. Only a handful of users returned to the website to continue their experience based on the number of sessions per user (see Figure 12). New Zealanders were the most numerous users, followed by those in the Philippines and the United States (see Figure 13). The i-doc failed to reach an audience in the Middle East, where the majority of Filipinos worked before their Christchurch deployment. The data analytics also shows a steady decrease in engagement from the homepage down to the fourth chapter (see Figure 14). Some users preferred to jump straight to the About/Conclusion page to end their i-doc experience. These research findings suggest that the i-doc struggled to generate sustained interest from its users. However, this finding might be debatable given that not all users who visited the website are target audiences of the i-doc.

Apart from low traffic, intermittent user flow, and difficulty in retaining audiences, accessibility remains a major problem as user experience is dependent on the strength of the internet connection. Bandwidth or the speed of data transfer can also vary from place to place. Desktop-formatted i-doc is dependent on high-bandwidth media; therefore, bandwidth is a persistent obstacle to i-doc engagement. While I designed the i-doc primarily for a desktop audience, mobile phones remained the most accessible and preferred platform for *Obrero*'s target audiences.⁵⁴ Mobile users account for 57% of the i-doc's unique audiences, while 41% are desktop, and 2% are tablet users (see Figure 15).⁵⁵ Due to this, I assert that mobile-formatted and/or mobile-usable i-doc must be considered when attempting to reach audiences across wide geographic boundaries or when targeting mobile-centric segments of the population particularly in developing countries.

A challenge for producers is to ensure that mobile i-docs remain navigable despite the screen size limitations.⁵⁶ For instance, while reformatting the i-doc for smartphone devices, I had to remove some of the original web designs and content that could distract the user rather than aid navigation (see [Appendix D](#)). Because the i-doc was designed primarily for a desktop device, the mobile version was not as navigable as I was aiming for. Thus, this led to problems for further audience engagement. Some important buttons that I designed to keep the interaction going between the user and the smartphone failed to respond on many occasions. I argue that repurposing an i-doc for small screen aesthetics is paramount for successful engagement but does have its challenges.

Despite limitations in terms of reach, the i-doc has nonetheless produced qualitative impact not measurable by audience analytics. *Obrero* won the multimedia category of the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Global Media Competition on Labour Migration in 2018 (ILO, 2018). The award gained the i-doc greater visibility internationally. A year after its ILO award, the Commission on Filipinos Overseas (CFO) named *Obrero* as Best Website during the biannual Migration Advocacy and Media Awards held in Manila. The local recognition in the Philippines places the i-doc closer to its goal of engaging policy

⁵⁴ See similar findings by Ducasse, Kljun, and Pucihar (2020).

⁵⁵ Some audiences could convert to desktop mode when viewing the i-doc but not all mobile phone units contain this option. It takes a fully engaged audience to migrate to desktop from a mobile platform to complete the experience.

⁵⁶ Due to budget restrictions, I also relied on my limited capacity as a novice web designer instead of outsourcing the work to a professional mobile web designer.

makers and government and non-government actors who have stakes in Filipino labour migration.

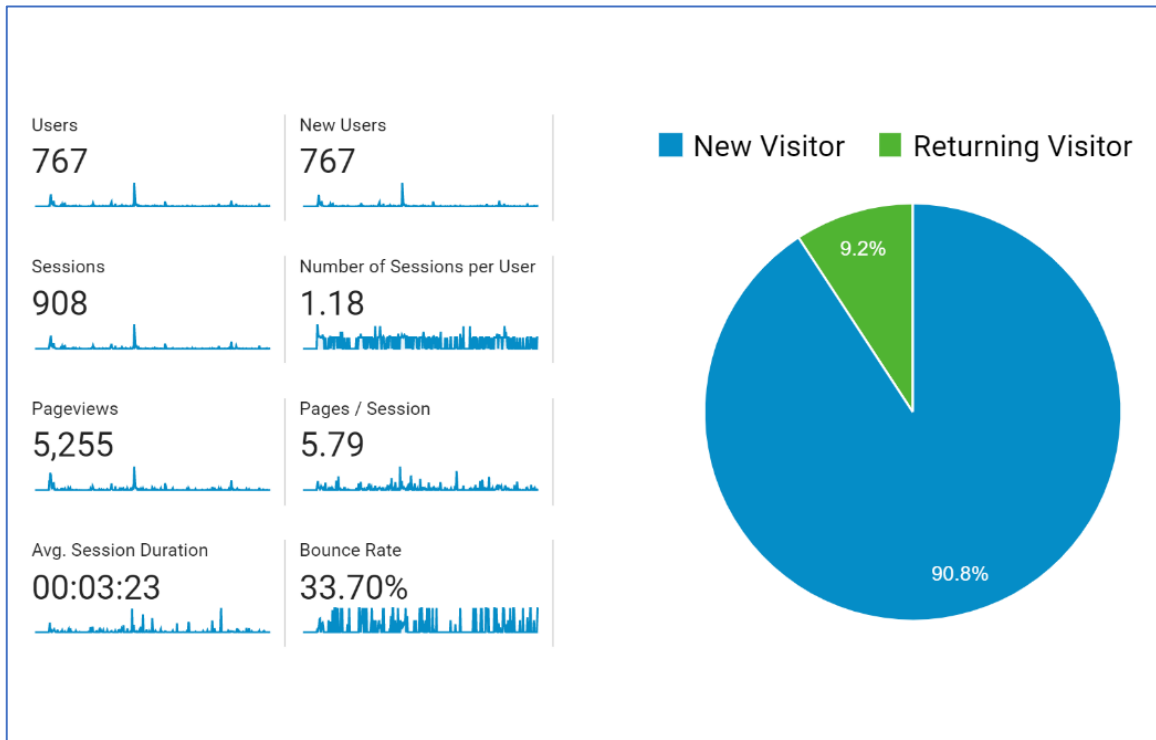


Figure 12. *Obrero's* audience insights for a period of 14 months






Country	% Users
1.  New Zealand	48.75%
2.  Philippines	19.47%
3.  United States	8.48%
4.  Switzerland	3.46%
5.  Canada	1.91%

Figure 13. Demographic reach by country [top 5]

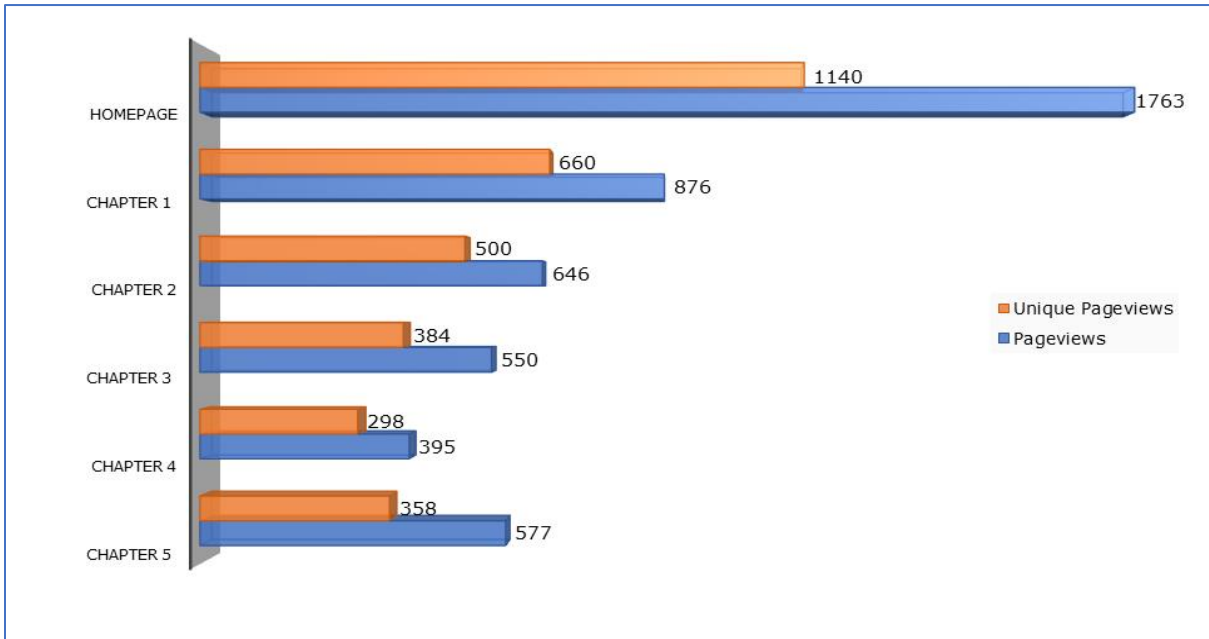


Figure 14. Obrero’s consolidated pageviews and unique pageviews per i-doc chapter⁵⁷

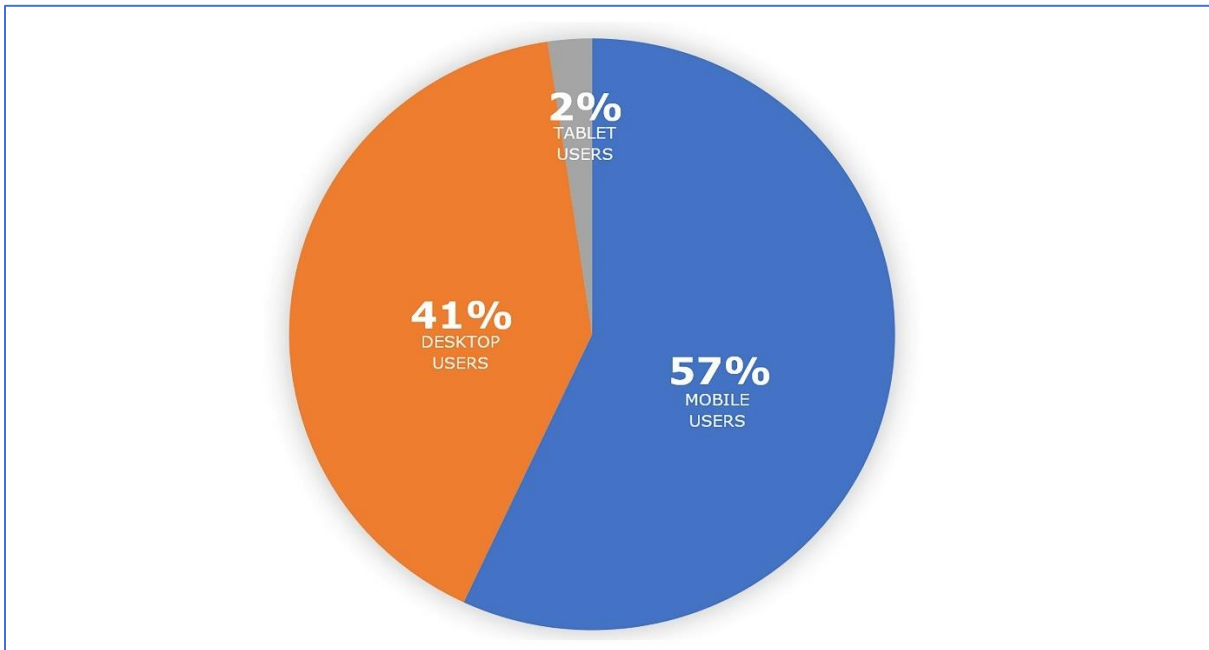


Figure 15. Percentage of mobile versus desktop users

⁵⁷ Figure is based on consolidated Google Analytics data from August 2018 to October 2019. The chapters analysed are as follows: (1) The story of the rebuild, (2) Filipino Workers, (3) Worker Issues, (4) Labour migration backstory, and (5) About/Conclusion.

5.3. Synthesis

As early as the 1980s, the world saw the first order of interactive and participatory media production when the forces of computer science, architecture, and engineering converged to produce the world's first digital media experiments. It was a turning point in history. The computer became *Time Magazine's* "Machine of the Year" in 1982. One article stated: "The 'information revolution' that futurists have long predicted has arrived, bringing with it the promise of dramatic changes in the way people live and work, perhaps even in the way they think" (Friedrich, 1983). During this period, political documentaries were either self-distributed or exhibited in universities, museums, or film festivals (Geiger, 2011a). In other words, it was not the search for digital distribution or an exhibition platform that preoccupied filmmakers of the 1980s but the rise of lightweight audio-video recording technologies that soon found a permanent place in documentary's quest for truth-telling. Decades after, it could be argued that just like any other creative form of expression, documentary has finally joined Web 2.0—offering a unique representation of reality that is susceptible to criticism just like any new experiment.

This chapter highlights that documentaries circulated on Facebook need to undergo an aesthetic adjustment given the shifting consumption modes of the audience online. And documentary makers need to work to accommodate these shifts. But social media is also highly ephemeral, and the short life span of microdocumentaries and other small media impedes social impact. In addition, Facebook remains a profit-driven enterprise. Although I was able to reach my desired public online, many aspects of *Obrero's* Facebook activities conformed to the algorithmic and advertising logic of the corporation, undermining my intentions. As an activist filmmaker, it is paradoxical that *Obrero* is, after all, a form of digital labour.

Using Facebook as a documentary format is a double-edged sword: I take advantage of Facebook's mechanism to advance an ambitious political goal; yet in engaging my public as users, they are taken advantage of and co-opted by the company's commercial goals. Being at the mere receiving end of a social network platform, information such as how Facebook uses, stores, and manages our personal data remains shrouded from us. The social network's ill-defined nature as a technology platform, a publisher, and a media company also raises several concerns about what Facebook can and cannot legally and morally do as a business entity (Levin, 2018). Low budget filmmakers,

alongside many radical media producers, find themselves and their work trapped in the contradictory position offered up by social media.

Migrating a political film to a corporate Web 2.0 platform, therefore, has its advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand, gaining free access to digital audience analytics empowers activist storytellers; they can now comprehend the behavioural qualities, geospatial information, and demographic characteristics of their audience. No longer an elite brand of empirical audience measurement, audience metrics can be used favourably as a guide in navigating a fast-evolving new mediascape and in understanding today's digital publics. On the other hand, data analytics, although useful to quantify reach and engagement, are not tantamount to social impact (Hongisto 2015), which is notoriously difficult to measure.

Obrero's Facebook microdocumentaries had to negotiate the contradictions of posting political works on a commercial platform, while connectivity and technical limitations were the major challenges encountered by the i-doc. Target audiences in the developing countries have little access to high-bandwidth media. As a result, they often rely on mobile phones for internet consumption. Desktop-formatted i-docs, therefore, struggle to reach those audiences. I assert that mobile-formatted i-docs need to co-exist with their web counterparts to increase the visibility and reach of, and engagement with a project. This recommendation is particularly ideal in countries where knowledge of labour migration is crucial in influencing social change.

CHAPTER 6

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

6.1 Introduction

Obrero has morphed into different variants as an adaptive response to global technological shifts. It offers a singular political voice, and yet it presents the social issues at its heart differently across media channels. Extending from a traditional documentary format, it multiplies into non-linear fragments suitable for web and social media consumption.⁵⁸ In this thesis, I use the notion of transmedia to refer to this act of creating a multi-platform story that engages fragmented audiences. *Obrero* is not concerned with building a storyworld as in entertainment transmedia, but rather it addresses an already existing historical world.

As an instance of research, *Obrero* offers two layers of empirical data: as a mode of alternative documentary production/distribution and as an act of audience reception. I argue that these two processes depend, feed, and therefore inform each other. As a producer and distributor of a transmedia documentary, I create, repurpose, and expand the story across multiple viewing platforms. At the same time, I am able to communicate with a transnational and transborder public, pursuing and engaging them through appropriate platforms. Together, these two processes form a cycle where the context of production and distribution directly influence the act of documentary reception, and vice versa (see Figure 16).

⁵⁸ The term 'docmedia', as proposed by Peter Wintonick (2013), places all these non-linear variants into one closely knit landscape.

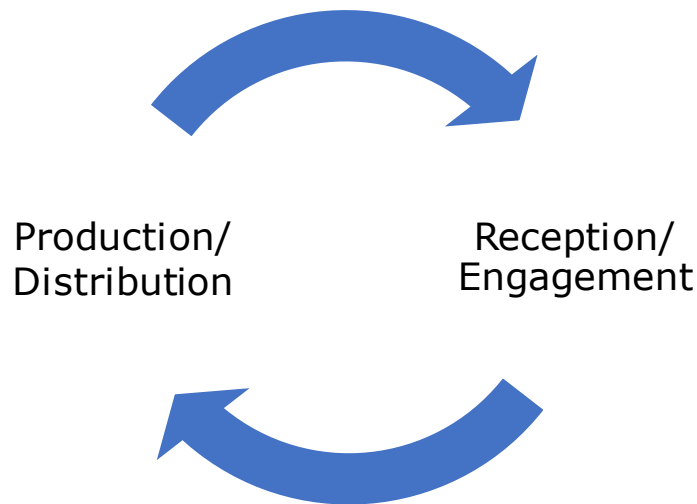


Figure 16. Transmedia as both storytelling and engagement

Although several disciplines have explored transmedia more generally, transmedia documentary studies has attracted little attention in academic research. This thesis makes an original contribution by testing the efficacy of a transmedia approach to producing issue-focused documentaries. On a pragmatic level, the main contribution of this thesis is a novel application of transmedia's entertainment-centred model to low-budget, committed, and do-it-yourself documentary projects like *Obrero*. I recalibrated transmedia's formula and applied its principles to a practice-led research, not only to demonstrate how content flows or spreads across platforms but also to suggest that transmedia can afford and facilitate transnational activism. The contribution of this thesis to theory and practice is an amalgam—part media experimentation, part transmedia manual, and part postmodernist documentary.

In the following discussion of key findings, I offer a two-pronged approach by employing both a critical and a creative lens in answering the questions I posed at the beginning of this thesis. The former interrogates the nexus of Web 2.0 culture and documentary, including my (reluctant) reliance on corporate platforms, to expand the storytelling digitally. In doing so, I address theoretically the contradictions that arise when documentary's radical perspective meshes with corporate Web 2.0 corporate culture. Included under this heading is a critique of labour migration as a topic of *Obrero*. In deploying a creative lens, on the other hand, I focus on how documentary has shifted and

metamorphosed across media as well as exploring how transmedia audiences are addressed and engaged by *Obrero*'s transmedia methodology. I summarise the processes that I followed to ensure that *Obrero* documentary continues to live, expand, and develop across offline and online channels. This concluding section comments on the efficacy of transmedia as a more general strategy to realise political documentary's goals to educate and provoke social change.

6.2 Key findings: Nexus of politics, documentary, and journalism

6.2.1. Traditional versus Web 2.0 documentaries

The first research question relates to how traditional documentary represents a social issue differently than Web 2.0 variants (social network and interactive documentaries). The structure and aesthetic of transmedia documentaries vary from medium to medium, but this research suggests that the classical persuasive techniques informed by ethos, pathos, and logos still matter regardless of the type of channel used. A linear presentation is useful in making an argument, especially for documentaries with a targeted political outreach. In festivals and community screenings, for example, producing and editing *Obrero* as an unfolding story aligns with audience expectations. A narrative arc in this case can espouse an ideological position, communicate an activist stance, and highlight the context of the subject matter more effectively than other approaches (see Waugh, 2011, p. 6). *Obrero* employed a cause and effect trajectory—a narrative style that indicates the principle of why the subject matter occurred.

On Facebook, social issues are presented somewhat like news packages aired over television or uploaded to web channels. The narrative structure on Facebook is also linear but more concise, that is, it worked with what is called “small media”. Published as a social network documentary, *Obrero* is effectively a series of microdocumentaries and political posts on a timeline. Each post reports on a single issue or offers up one element of the bigger narrative such as the no placement fee policy and other issues of labour-hire worker's rights. On Facebook, I replicated the aesthetics most often attached to Facebook native video—the use of vertical or square framing, subtitled, and with visible headlines to capture audience attention. Each microdocumentary contributes to the audience's understanding of the social problems *Obrero* engages with. I argue that, despite the items' short lengths, this approach is

the most effective way to achieve the rhetorical purpose of documentary, given the cluttered environment and bottomless newsfeed on Facebook. The need to change *Obrero*'s aesthetic and narrative to suit Facebook was a result of multiple factors, from audience fragmentation to the common tendency to casually "graze" on social media rather than focus fully.

The webdoc variant of *Obrero* has the most complex structure of storytelling. A database narrative can confuse audiences, as viewers are less directed than in the other two forms. The i-doc, however, is targeted towards policy makers, government entities, NGOs, and advocacy groups. Targeting these audience required me to explain labour migration in its totality, including how its repercussions are felt in both sending and receiving countries. To aid the viewing process, I used the forking path story structure to divide the i-doc into multiple chapters. I also adopted the principle of the digital breadcrumb trail, aimed at increasing ease of navigation and showing pathways and routes to sub-pages. Users can access the breadcrumb trails in three ways. First, I positioned a vertical navigation bar at the landing page to highlight the five main chapters of the i-doc. Second, I made a sitemap of the i-doc to show a complete overview of all subheadings per chapter. And third, I created a set of navigation buttons (appearing on each chapter) that allows users to keep track of their i-doc experience. The buttons are arranged in vertical order to signify the linearity of pre-structured chapters. As a "participatory alternative" of the film variant (Uricchio, 2019, p. 74), the i-doc retains the memorable features or scenes of the traditional film (e.g., the scene of workers installing the scaffolding of HOYTS cinema).

Because of the need to expose the social issues behind *Obrero*, I argue that transmedia political documentaries tend to be naturally transjournalistic in presentation; that is, they expand reportage to propagate the cause and message of the documentary (see Table 4). As argued by Corner (2002), "journalistic inquiry and exposition" is an inherent function of documentary as a genre (p. 259). Both documentary and journalism perform the same "commitments to truth-telling, sense-making, and explaining" (Uricchio, Wolozin, Bui, Flynn, & Tortum, 2014, p. 10). As a form of transjournalism, *Obrero* is a far cry from the shovelware routine of early convergent journalism, wherein a website was treated as a repository only for broadcast or newspaper content (Boczkowski, 2004). Bardoel (2002) argued that the shovelware practice is "parasitic" in that producers draw wholly on traditional media content, repurposing it for internet distribution (p. 503). Transmedia, unlike shovelware, provides content that is tailored for the medium and strategically repurposed for

its native audience. What this current research shows is that transmedia documentary makers are able to employ the transjournalistic treatment of social issues that are often neglected or overlooked by mainstream media.

Table 4. Summary of *Obrero*'s transjournalistic representation of social issues

	FILM	FACEBOOK	I-DOC
Narrative Structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Social issue is presented in traditional linear fashion with a beginning, middle, and end. -Film follows a cause and effect story trajectory. -Characters exercise active agency throughout the story. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Narrative is simplistic and linear, similar to a quick TV news segment. -Facebook page is comprised of a series of posts that strengthen the narrative. -Microdocumentaries focus on representing the issue rather than developing the profile of the subjects. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Social issue is unveiled using forking path or branching tree structure, but with traces of journalistic linearity (e.g., using breadcrumb trail or navigational aid). -Entire i-doc is structured to explain multiple facets of labour migration.
Aesthetics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Traditional film aesthetics are observed, complemented by archive and recorded ethnographic data. -Shots and editing conform to the style of cinema vérité. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Story is segmented into small media employing vertical video to fit the reception pattern of Facebook audience. -Story is enhanced by multimedia content (e.g., infographics, 360degree photos, stills, and videos) to engage audiences. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Story uses standard web aesthetics (e.g., native video, looping audio, stills, and other born digital content). -Hypertext makes navigation non-linear, and data visualisation allows presentation of complex information. -Interaction is fulfilled through command-driven instructions (e.g., watch, download, navigate, and click).

6.2.1.1. Politics of Web 2.0 distribution

What remains the greatest aporia for low-budget and independent documentaries is the antithetical alliance with corporate media platforms that facilitates their political outreach. This is the paradox of activism in the digital age. As Juhasz (2014) reminded us, “in the digital environment, corporations own and then give away for free, these once hard-to-access tools for the production and dissemination of expressive resistance” (p. 41). Facebook’s networked services are designed to enable effective communication, and to encourage users to stay in the platform—alternative media is no different in this respect. Users are drawn to the free access to technical features, but they cannot resist its algorithmic model. As a result, the advertising logic of Facebook is passed on to all users regardless of the presence or absence of a profit motive. Askanius and Gustafsson (2010) made the persuasive argument that the “corporate media have succeeded in commodifying the technical forms and participatory philosophy behind the user-generated media systems invented decades ago by media activists seeking to counter the broadcast media of the time” (p. 38). This is pertinent commentary in relation to this particular practice-led research. While I recognise the validity of critical theories that speak of the hegemonic power of corporate social media, I also know that *Obrero*’s media experimentation could not be fully realised if not for the ubiquity of the networked communication provided by Facebook. The success of Facebook is indicative of its status as “the internet” in developing countries. Alternative documentary making in a transnational context ironically relies upon the powerful media companies that dominate all forms of human communication.

6.2.2. Transmedia as audience engagement model

The second research question moves the discussion from production to reception. Thus, in addressing this issue, I examine transmedia as a broader model for documentary engagement in our contemporary digital age. The project is intended as a strategic impact documentary, one that combines documentary filmmaking and strategic communication to achieve social change (Nash & Corner, 2016). Although transmedia is generally approached here as a distribution methodology, the primary objective is to explore and experiment with the potential of alternative documentary platforms in engaging contemporary and transnational audiences, especially in the case of geopolitical issues such as labour migration. This strategy can span the geographic and cultural boundaries that separate documentary audiences.

I argue that *Obrero*'s social and political outreach lends itself to transmedia as engagement model not only because technology affords the recreation and repurposing of media, but also due to three interconnected logics—subject matter, nature, and the public. When considering transmedia distribution as a model for political documentary, the decision must fall under these logics to maximise its gain. First, *Obrero*'s subject matter is context-dependent. As an overall project, it needs different platforms to extend its narrative and increase its audience engagement. Second, its nature as an independent, microbudget, avant-garde, and committed documentary means transmedia can be well applied as a form of media experimentation, and yet it must remain distant from any commercial agenda. And finally, the different publics I target are heavily dispersed, with sharply divided politics and different stakes in the subject matter addressed.

As an engagement model, transmedia can reach differing audiences otherwise unavailable to monomedia production. To succeed, documentary makers need to straddle both controlled and uncontrolled forms of engagement. Controlled forms refer to audience interaction that I can directly initiate or control as a filmmaker. For instance, I can directly speak to audiences at a community screening, observe their reactions, and gather instant feedback during and after Q&A. Unlike the physical viewing spaces in a film festival, Web 2.0 forms of engagement are more distanced and mediated by mobile and internet technologies. On Facebook, I interact and comment as the administrator of the Facebook page (rather than as an author of my own work). The advantage of this computer-mediated communication is that the possibility of getting diverse opinions from target audiences are greater online than in face-to-face interaction. Social media users also take advantage of their anonymity to echo their radical stand on the subject matter. The open model of *Obrero*'s distribution as a web documentary is a form of controlled media. As the creator, designer, and publisher of the i-doc, I control all forms of its aesthetics and content, and also structure its design experience. Audiences can engage with the webdoc without the need to create an online account.

Uncontrolled forms of engagement, on the other hand, refer to audience interaction that can only be realised once the demands of traditional and new media gatekeepers have been met. Gatekeepers of transmedia documentaries include: (1) the festival organisers who curate and select documentary films for exhibition; (2) the (Facebook) page owners and group moderators who guard the gates of their own social network communities; and (3) the

public and private organisations that facilitate (sometimes award) interactive documentary exhibitions (see Figure 17). This heuristic model could branch out as transmedia documentary makers scout multiples spaces of reception and distribution.

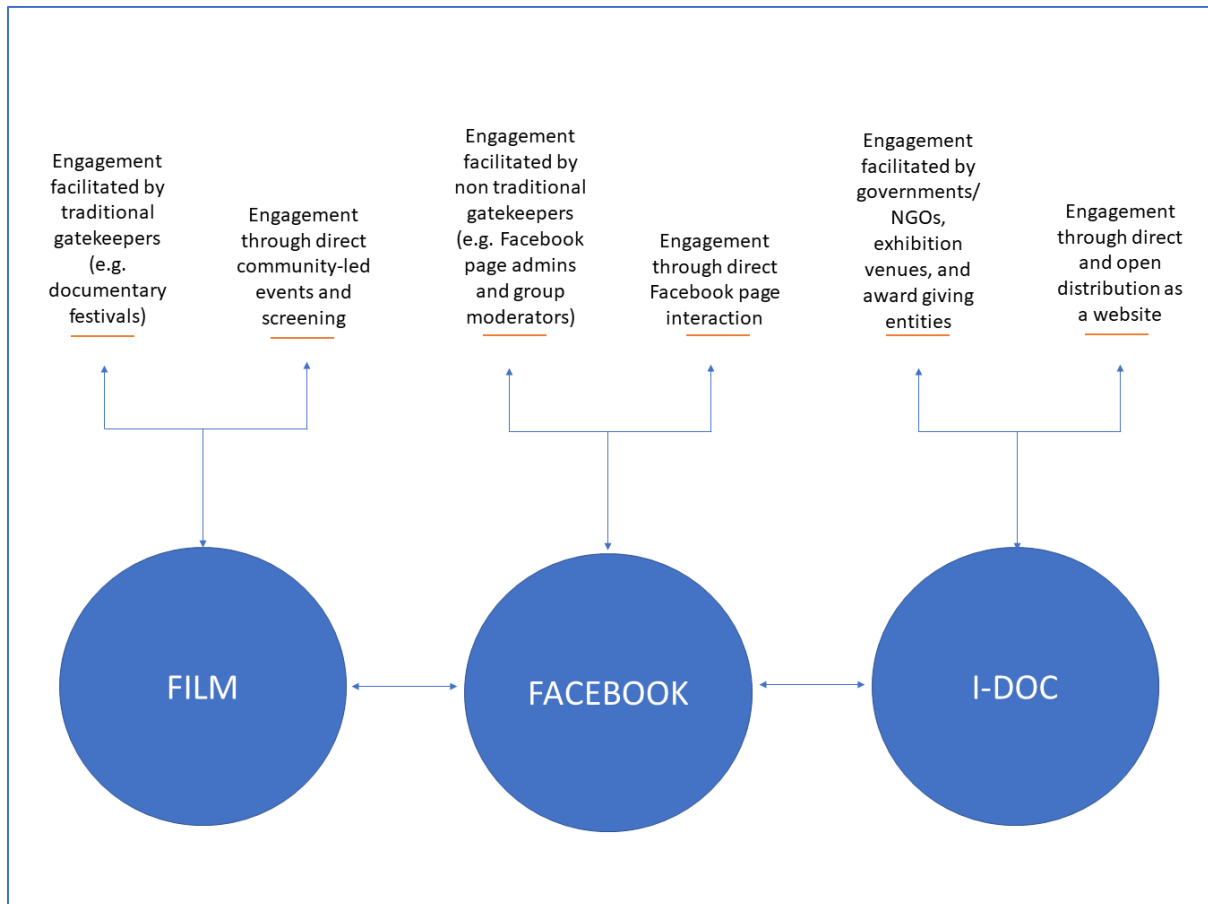


Figure 17. Controlled versus uncontrolled forms of transmedia engagement

6.2.3. *Obrero* as a result of research: Filipino labour migration in NZ

The first two research questions pertain to *Obrero* as a form of practice-led research, in which the goal is to advance the knowledge of documentary practice in a transnational environment. But *Obrero* is also a product of fieldwork, and its ability to depict social reality using lens-based techniques means it falls under the category of practice-based methodology. In this subsection, I answer the thesis' third research question by analysing *Obrero*'s status as critical research. Key findings presented in this section are incorporated into the documentary narrative and collected as part of the fieldwork. Not only does *Obrero* add new knowledge

about the context, politics, and experiences of the Filipino workforce, it also depicts a complex interplay of migration intermediaries and a multi-layered process of migrant recruitment from sending to receiving countries.

This study shows that the entry of Filipino construction workers to Christchurch can be considered a significant moment in the bilateral relationship between the Philippines and New Zealand.⁵⁹ In the first few years of the rebuilding work post-earthquake, New Zealand had turned to its typical source countries for labour. It was estimated that 9.4% of rebuild workers were born in the United Kingdom and Ireland, while only 2.4 percent were born in Asia (Statistics NZ, 2013). These figures were eventually reversed, making Asians, particularly Filipinos, the top source of labour for the Christchurch rebuild. In fact, the Philippines was a destination for a three-day state visit of Immigration Minister Michael Woodhouse in December 2014, where he met with Filipino government officials and facilitated talks about immigration and employment (Philippine Embassy in New Zealand, 2015). Work opportunities for the rebuild were a particular highlight of his visit and extensively covered in Philippine media.

After the recruitment of labourers from overseas, construction rapidly became the largest industry in Christchurch, with one in eight individuals employed in the construction sector (Statistics NZ, 2013). Government figures reveal that an estimated 31,000 individuals were employed for the construction in Greater Christchurch, 50% higher than the pre-earthquake figures (Wendy et al., 2015). In attracting foreign labour, migration intermediaries such as recruitment agencies capitalised on the “work to residency” pathway as a highlight of their marketing campaigns. Stricter policies, however, were introduced later by the New Zealand government in response to some public disquiet about the impact of rapid population growth on overtaxed infrastructure. Permanent residency became a more difficult track for low-skilled construction labourers. These changes included the maximum three years of essential skills work visa and higher annual salary band requirement before application to residency was permitted (Immigration New Zealand, 2017).

The complex nature of immigration in New Zealand combined with the Philippines’ long antecedents of labour migration serve as the backdrop to *Obrero*’s political core—the issue of an unethical migrant worker recruitment system, marked by the overcharging and

⁵⁹ Aside from construction workers, there is also a significant number of Filipino health workers (e.g. nurses and caregivers) and dairy farmers in New Zealand.

even illegal charging of fees. In addition, the documentary touches on the well-being of the workers themselves, distanced as they are from their families and community. Through the documentary production and fieldwork, I revealed the phases of transnational recruitment from the Philippines to New Zealand that are most vulnerable to corruption. Because labour migration is a highly regulated activity in the Philippines, there is sufficient opportunity for money-making and exploitation.

The official recruitment guide published by Immigration New Zealand states that employers could either "appoint a New Zealand recruitment agent to work on (their) behalf or engage a licensed POEA recruitment agent to manage the recruitment process in the Philippines" (Immigration New Zealand, 2018, p. 6). Employers shoulder the cost of their services. But this research shows that placement agencies still charge workers high recruitment fees amongst other fees. Most of the fees were collected at a time when a worker is almost ready to depart. The workers who filed an official complaint through the Philippine Embassy in Wellington were charged as high as PHP 450,000 or roughly NZD 15,000 for the placement fee.⁶⁰ This was particularly rampant between 2012 and 2014, when New Zealand and Philippine government actors failed to strictly monitor and regulate the labour migration business. When workers were unable to pay, recruitment agencies in the Philippines would refer them to a lending company, sometimes owned by the same agency. To ensure timely payment of monthly fees, workers were asked to issue post-dated checks before departure from the Philippines.

Upon arriving in New Zealand, Filipino workers said they kept receiving additional bills. For a period of one year, some workers paid NZD 100 a month to the Christchurch-based immigration consultant who facilitated the visa application and provided them with immigration services.⁶¹ This exploitative scheme did not stop despite some media coverage of the workers' plight. After both governments strengthened the no placement fee policy, recruiters in the Philippines evaded the regulations by requiring Filipino migrants to sign a waiver document that certified that no fees were collected. It might mean a double payment, as was clarified by the Filipino Labour Attaché Rodolfo Sabulao. Some recruitment agencies followed the reformed policy, but others persisted in charging arriving workers in Christchurch and Auckland as much as PHP 150,000 or roughly NZD 4,500. The complexity

⁶⁰ This amount includes a loan interest rate of up to 4%.

⁶¹ See "Balatbat v Sparks" (2015)

and cost of these levies were difficult for the workers. Furthermore, the long bureaucratic red tape involved in the actual hearings of complaints against recruiters in the Philippines produced negative sentiments among Filipino workers.

Many rebuild workers in Christchurch were deployed previously in countries with government-to-government hiring schemes. Some employers in the Middle East and South Korea, for example, shoulder the accommodations and food expenses of Filipino migrant workers. New Zealand, however, treats their migrant workers in a similar way to locals. Filipino workers had to shoulder their living expenses, pay government-imposed taxes, and, when needed, purchase their own service car. Although the Philippine government requires workers to undergo a pre-departure orientation, most briefing sessions did not touch thoroughly these aspects, which added to the big adjustments of Filipino workers arriving for the first time in New Zealand.

The perceived need for *sapalaran* ("to take chances") was evident throughout many of my interviews with the workers. They argued that their chances of getting a well-paid job are better overseas. Migration entails risk-taking, and entering into a risky agreement is the workers' only viable option if they wish to continue the process. Taking a risk is naturally engrained in Filipino psychology. The notion of *bahala na* is the closest cultural value that embodies how Filipinos perceive the risks involved in working overseas. *Bahala na* has no English translation, but it connotes the trait of "determination and risk-taking" (Lagmay, cited in Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000, p. 55). *Bahala na* mentality does not necessarily connote fatalism. Pe-Pua and Protacio-Marcelino explained that Filipinos utter the phrase to "tell themselves that they are ready to face the difficult situation before them, and will do their best to achieve their objectives" (p. 55). This risk-taking attitude, together with their lack of information about New Zealand as a work destination, contributes to Filipino workers' vulnerability to exploitation. As I emphasise in the synthesis of *Obrero's* i-doc, unethical recruitment and the draining of financial resources produce a ripple effect—workers keep mum despite experiencing further exploitation in the host country.

6.2.4. Notes on creative practice methodology

Practitioner-researchers encounter as many ethical issues as do more traditional scholars. The ability of the workers to be able to speak freely to a documentary maker or journalist, in their own language and without the intervention of activist groups, created an

atmosphere of comfort and familiarity during filming and interviews. It required a higher level of sensitivity, commitment, and sound editorial judgment. Due to the political nature of the project, I had to remind myself that I was dealing with vulnerable subjects in risky situations. In this scenario, the duty of a filmmaker is not only to solicit soundbites and narratives from the participants, but also to ensure that they remain protected from any possible retaliation or harm. Cooperating with organised workers collective such as the Association of Filipino Tradesmen in New Zealand moderated these concerns as their political objectives gelled with the perspectives of the documentary. Maintaining relationships with the workers was also vital for the project's prolonged transmedia activism. Although I assumed editorial control throughout the production, I constantly communicated with the workers and showed them drafts of *Obrero* to ensure all details were accurate and that the information provided adhered to the advancement of their social cause. This interaction during and after production was intended to give the workers agency and authorship within the film, thus exceeding what Tascón (2015) referred to as “humanitarian gaze”

The theory and practice arms of this PhD occur side by side and are equal in strength and importance. They support each other—clichéd as it may sound, practice informs theory and theory informs practice. *Obrero*'s conception was not a by-product of my academic work nor simply a necessity for a doctorate with a creative component. I have always had a desire to create a documentary that can capture the realities of labour migration in New Zealand. I first introduced the story to my colleagues at *I-Witness*, a documentary programme I was directing for a Filipino broadcast station GMA Network. But location for us was a barrier and funding available for overseas filming was also limited. The methodology I observed in this project appears to be distinct from my prior experience in television and from what I would have produced at that time. Unlike an episodic documentary that is restricted to a particular length and timeslot, independent production is less constrained. I considered the vagueness of the narrative, my position as a Filipino filmmaker, the changing mediascape, and the fact of geographic boundaries as factors that justified the need to remediate *Obrero* into variants.

As a practitioner-researcher who is transitioning into academia, this thesis allows me to straddle both theory and practice. The creative works and a written output contribute to the production of knowledge in areas difficult to access through traditional scholarship. Thus, creative practice as research represents a novel pathway to knowledge production and the

thesis, overall, provides an innovative model for future scholarship. Coming straight from the industry, I would argue that the knowledge that professionals generate out of practising media do not necessarily reflect the knowledge that traditional scholarship produces by studying and analysing media as text. For example, mainstream media creates new programming formats born out of their prior production experience and the practical study of their audience, in particular its likes and dislikes.

Although these programming formats can be groundbreaking in terms of creativity and professional impact, academia rarely acknowledges them as a form of knowledge production. This is because “any piece of work produced solely for a mass media platform is likely to lose its status as research by becoming ephemera” (Dovey, 2009, p. 54). More importantly, the language of abstraction favoured in academia contradicts the practical language of everyday media practice. The result is a “complex dichotomy” between contributing new knowledge, as the goal of empirical research, and producing “a hit”, as the objective of mainstream media (Dovey, 2009), or, to put it differently, “between the kinds of knowledge honored in academia and the kinds of competence valued in professional practice (Schön, 1983, p. vii).

Entry to sites of practice is a particular hurdle among academics who rely on traditional gatekeepers for access. As Paterson, Lee, Saha, and Zoellner (2016) argued, journalism academics also struggle with “secretive corporate cultures which see little value in inviting observation of their work” (p. 5). This instance of a disconnect between theory and practice may prohibit the flow of knowledge between academia and industry, and vice versa. What remains an opportunity and a challenge for researcher-practitioners is integrating practice, research, and theory in a way that appeals to both ends of the spectrum. And the burgeoning literature on practice-related research seems to offer a brighter future for the greater recognition of practice as research within the academy and the industry at large. Universities that welcome creative practice as research as a legitimate format of knowledge production (Bacon, 2012; Goldson, 2020; Robie, 2015) offer a sustainable venue for documentary makers transitioning to academia from mainstream media.

6.3. Conclusions and Recommendations

The presence of pressing social issues in the developing world indicates a need for many more media outputs—transmedia or otherwise—that are aimed at educating the public.

Due to several practical reasons such as a shortage of public funding, sustainable business models, and the lack of decent internet connections, filmmakers based in the Global South lag behind in developing innovative web-based media, including transmedia production.⁶² Apart from these difficulties, the scarcity of institutional support, censorship, and limited knowledge on how to develop transmedia to address civic causes also push many developing countries behind in terms of documentary production. Transmedia projects are flourishing in the developed world, remaking the history of documentary film, but the focus remains on the “occidental perspective” (Chanan, 2007, p. 185). For example, the i-doc genre (just like the history of documentary films) is present in institutions such as the National Film Board of Canada, ARTE France, National Public Radio, The Guardian, The New York Times, Al Jazeera and the SBS Australia.⁶³ A new wave of independent companies that also actively engage in interactive documentary production include Uopian and HonkyTonk Film in France and Submarine Channel in the Netherlands (Lyons, 2016). A few non-government organisations and UN agencies buck the trend, co-producing i-docs in the Global South that are related to their advocacy work.⁶⁴

This thesis explicates how the documentary genre is enriched and reaps numerous socio-political advantages by working across platforms. Transmedia allows the articulation of voices from the grassroots as afforded by the internet’s interactive features. Hence, *Obrero*’s cross-media approach offers a new mode (and direction) of political communication and redefines the relationship between the filmmaker and the filmed (Ellis, 2012, p. 10) and that between the transmedia practitioner and the audience. No longer under my tutelage as an author or filmmaker, the rebuild workers are co-creators in the production process as they contribute not only their stories but also archival materials of documenting their protests and political movement. In web platforms, the workers (and their network) actively exercise their agency as they comment, criticise, debate, share, and submit user-generated photos. In this project, each documentary variant is a standalone media format with distinct but borrowed characteristics from their analogue predecessors such as film, television, and photography

⁶² I situate the Philippines as part of the Global South, a broad terminology ‘that denotes regions outside Europe and North America, mostly (though not all) low-income and often politically or culturally marginalized’ (Dados & Connell 2012, p. 12).

⁶³ In New Zealand, the Film Commission has recently launched the Interactive Development Fund granting a maximum of \$25,000 for production of interactive media (New Zealand Film Commission, 2017).

⁶⁴ Examples include UNICEF’s Imagine a School (2016) <https://imagineaschool.com> and Amnesty International’s Saydnaya (2016) <https://saydnaya.amnesty.org>

(Bolter & Grusin, 1999, p. 5). Documentary makers informed by remediation theory can make intelligent decisions in the planning, execution, and evaluation of a transnational film project.

More important, the creative component I analysed in this thesis provides the grounds within which to test the subgenre's suitability for its tasks. While I highlight the contributions of the transmedia approach in realising the documentary's political outreach, I also provide critical reflections of the lessons learned and contradictions I unearthed while deploying the three the documentary iterations I tested in this project (see Table 5).

The following summarises key conclusions of this research.

6.3.1. Regular documentary

Although each of the *Obrero* platforms is treated equally in this project in terms of strength and importance, the film remains the most commonly recognised format of documentary. The film was shortlisted as a finalist for the Best New Zealand short documentary category of the 13th Doc Edge Film Festival. DocEdge is an Oscar-qualifying international documentary film festival in New Zealand, the first in Australasia. *Obrero's* official selection in DocEdge led the film to be invited for screening at the Cinematografo International Film Festival in the USA. Cinematografo caters primarily to Filipino migrant communities in San Francisco in California. The screening invitation led the film closer to its target diasporic communities outside of New Zealand.

The festival screening of the film in New Zealand was received relatively well by the local community in Auckland and Wellington. It allotted the film a form of legitimacy, a boost for a low-budget production that generally struggles to reach its audience.⁶⁵ Although festivals generally offer a productive engagement with specific audiences, they do not grant a legitimisation of the radical nature of a film such as *Obrero*. Film festivals attract middle class patrons, already receptive to social issues. Increasing the film's presence in the workers' home country remains a primary obstacle in this project. *Obrero's* lack of visibility in the Philippines can be attributed to the limited distribution opportunities there. Documentary

⁶⁵ Most festivals prevent the film from being publicly available online, thus limiting its impact outside the immediate festival circuit.

Table 5. What worked and what didn't work in *Obrero's* transmedia approach

	ACHIEVED	REFLECTIONS
Conventional Film	-The film received official selection in an Oscar-qualifying New Zealand documentary festival.	-Although being selected into a major festival granted this small-scale documentary project recognition, in Aotearoa (and the US), its limited screening in the Philippines meant that it had little impact in the workers' home country.
	- The film offered an alternative view of the Filipino labour migration in Christchurch and raises issues about migrant labour more generally and its relationship to a host country.	-The film had a relatively narrow focus, on the workers, their situation and their daily experience. It may have been more impactful had it expanded to include insights from employers and Government agencies in New Zealand.
	-The film developed its mini public through community screenings.	- The film itself did not develop new publics outside the festival and community screenings.
Social network documentary	- Facebook allowed the subjects, and the workers more generally, to engage in online participation and dialogue thus extending the creative and conceptual breadth of the microdocumentaries.	The social network documentary became homogenised to Facebook-native videos, and disrupted audience expectations of what is a documentary. Audiences often called the micro-docs 'news' and it is impossible to deploy the aesthetic and conceptual strategies of 'proper' documentary given the constraints of Facebook's platform.
	- Facebook groups and pages where <i>Obrero</i> was circulated paved the way for mini-publics to flourish.	- Facebook's predictive algorithm lessened the ability of the documentary to reach and engage its target publics.
	- The microdocumentaries achieved greater audience engagement than the other variants - most likely because of aesthetic adjustment and concise storytelling.	Microdocumentaries had a short-life span within the social network platform, and were susceptible to ephemeral activism.
Interactive documentary	-The webdoc worked well as a hub (or database) for researchers and academics.	-Its design and structure did not yield narrative pleasure.
	- The project engaged international and local migration actors who could shape public policies (e.g. International Labour Organization).	-The hyperlink format disrupted the coherence of storytelling.
	- The webdoc stood as a fitting alternative for target public outside the festival circuit. Publics can return to verify facts or to expand their knowledge of the issue.	-The website template Wix did not generate a mobile-friendly version of the webdoc. Hence, it failed to reach and engage mobile-centric segment of the target audience which in the Philippines for example is the majority.

festivals remain at the periphery of the country's broader film culture. And commercial television is still the medium for reaching a mass audience. Very few audiences from the Filipino community attended the DocEdge screening in Auckland and Wellington.

My contention is that documentaries that target transborder audiences can purposefully use film festivals to make the subject matter known, first in the receiving country (New Zealand) and second in the sending country (Philippines) and other diasporic communities elsewhere. To transcend geographic boundaries and increase their social impact, there must be cooperation between filmmakers and other agents of social change (e.g., activist groups)—the latter become the “catalyst” of the distribution process, or in *Obrero*'s case, promoters of the project and its advocacy. This collaborative as opposed to individualistic framework, may not necessarily result in an immediate change in public policies, but a film can function as the centrepiece of a political campaign, reaching audiences of diverse backgrounds including academics and policy makers (Whiteman, 2004; Christensen, 2009). Filmmakers, however, can co-opt advocacy groups in the process, not as a funding source but as partners in a grassroots social movement. This is especially true for activists and filmmakers who want complete editorial and artistic independence, resist any obligations imposed by funding bodies, and rely mostly on crowdfunding and contributions from concerned individuals.

The ‘backpack’ film production and the independent stance I employed in this project also contributed to the film's ability to offer an alternative social reality about the conditions of workers in Christchurch. The social issues I represented were intermittently covered by New Zealand journalists although not fully explained, and also less visible in media channels in the Philippines. Although labour migration is reported as a legitimate topic of news, the extremely fast cycle of contemporary journalism could compromise the reportage of community issues in favour of news topics that are immediate and of national interest. The documentary provided insights from non-traditional sources rather than deploying the hierarchy of sources used in professionalised journalism (Atton, 2009). It is akin to the principles of citizen journalism, emphasising the perspective of ordinary people. The rebuild workers are co-creators in the production process as they contribute not only their stories but also their recorded moments of protests and personal narratives often captured through their

mobile phones.⁶⁶ The working relationship I established with the Filipino workers is also more symbiotic than those between mainstream media and the workers. I cooperated and co-produced the story with the workers instead of treating them as mere subjects of the film. The film, however, had a relatively narrow focus, on the workers, their situation and their daily experience. Employers were reluctant to give me filming access to worksites, especially those big construction projects where most Filipinos work. As an alternative, I found that small construction sites whose employers were supportive of the workers' cause and appreciative of their skills, gave me greater access to filming and interviews. It would have been good to hear employers and Government agencies talk in the film. This could have produced greater engagement with the New Zealand audience.

Finally, the film was successful in developing its mini publics through community screenings. Because of *Obrero's* close ties with the Filipino workers, community screenings ensured that they engaged with the film's cause and allowed them to discuss, debate, and disseminate the film's messages. These informal gatherings and post-screening discussions elicited reactions from diverse publics that included students, Filipino migrant workers, local community members, trade union leaders and local migrant advocates in Christchurch. The formation of this mini public through community engagements is an important prerequisite for sustainable political mobilisation. However, the film itself did not develop new publics, such as NGOs and Government actors, outside the festival and community screenings. This reflection might suggest that festivals are not perhaps the way to engage with these latter publics, although the other iterations were able to reach them.

6.3.2. Social network documentary

Among the three *Obrero* platforms, the social network documentary offers the most visible evidence of public interaction. Facebook's architecture afforded the subjects of the documentary, and the workers more generally, a communicative space to engage in online participation and dialogue thus extending the creative and conceptual breadth of the microdocumentaries. This resulting discussion online provides a collective intelligence beyond fandom culture that generally saturates the Facebook site. If we press this proposition further, I can argue that the production of social network documentary does not end with the publication of micro narratives online. It continues to expand as audiences become drawn to

⁶⁶ For example, the labour attaché was captured in a cell phone video addressing the workers who complained against excessive recruitment fees.

participate and contribute to the social dialogue. When done properly, documentaries on Facebook could generate audiences that interact and co-create the media experience

Due to my strategic refashioning of content in this project, *Obrero* flourished in the digital public sphere—co-opting small active audience groups and inviting them to share the project’s message and spread the desired social changes virally. This audience participation paved the way for mini publics to flourish on Facebook. A majority of these publics are formed because of their common engagement with topics and issues that *Obrero* addresses. Critical conversations arise as the content is shared and circulated online. Several other migrant groups (e.g. students, dairy workers) spoke freely about their experiences, thus producing strong evidence of the issues raised by *Obrero* and extending their voices and experiences beyond those featured in *Obrero*’s microdocumentaries.

As I explained in this thesis, microdocumentaries sit at the core of *Obrero*’s strategic repurposing on Facebook. These short narratives achieved greater audience engagement than the other variants. The wider reach and higher engagement are most likely because of the aesthetic adjustment and concise storytelling I employed in the remediation process—consistent and familiar to many of my target audiences and easily digestible to those who have busy and fractured lives. Aesthetic adjustment is relatively easy to achieve given that Facebook offers a manual for producers to tailor their content to the structural affordances of the platform. The format and replicable features of *Obrero*’s Facebook microdocumentaries also blended in a highly saturated media environment.

Facebook, however, is a double-edged sword. Unlike the face-to-face interaction achieved by a film festival screening, I communicate to my Facebook audience in an already highly commercialised environment where messages tend to be more 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 more sober treatment of a social issue. Because mainstream and alternative media (including documentaries) are housed under the same space of storytelling, the latter, always outflanked can suffer from an identity crisis. Political and personal content may be programmed to appear next to each other on a Facebook timeline or through Google search results. *Obrero*’s Facebook variant, therefore, becomes homogenised to Facebook-native videos, and can disrupt audience expectations of what a documentary is - viewers often calling it ‘news’. The mutation of *Obrero* from a traditional documentary format into

miniscule content on Facebook altered the documentary's filmic qualities. Some of the craft elements, for instance, woven soundtracks, powerful testimonials, and visual creativity also became limited. Conformity, then, can reduce the ability of documentaries to be distinguished from the mainstream media.

Another area of critical reflection here is how Facebook's news feed algorithm lessened the ability of the documentary to reach and engage its target audiences. Without knowing quite how this works, this could mean the certain publics that could have been interested in the topic of migrant workers were excluded by Facebook's prevailing business model. What I found useful here as a strategy was to change the geolocation of the *Obrero's* Facebook page to Manila from Christchurch, which greatly increased the number of engaged followers and users from the workers' home country. Why this happened, however, is not explicable and was really part of trial and error process.

And finally, although it can be beneficial in reaching and potentially politicising a transborder audience, Facebook does remain highly ephemeral, and its commercial algorithmic logic is antithetical to the kind of long-term impact that political documentary aims to achieve. The refashioning strategies of documentary media on Facebook works best only when seeking eyeballs. While this is expected given the prevailing commercial culture on Facebook, I argue that this reduces the influence and impact of a social network documentary as attention wanes over time. Publishing Facebook-native videos show that their popularity is gauged by particular peaks in their viewing history. As a result, the engagement remained short-lived as discussion diminished from Facebook newsfeed afterwards. Whether social network documentary has the ability to truly attain its long-term objectives is questionable given Facebook "exerts wider control over the public visibility and economic viability" of social content (Lewis & Molyneux, 2018, p. 14). This limitation proves the transitory character of activism on Facebook. It can be used as a political microsite for dialogue convening like-minded publics, but interest was difficult to sustain and may diminish as video popularity declines.

Overall, repurposing a film for social network distribution led me to brush up my technical skills. As I explicated in this thesis, filmmakers need to understand the structural affordances of Facebook native video (e.g., vertical video aesthetics, video settings), acquire the language of visibility (e.g., metadata, tagging ability), and learn the code of Facebook sociability and searchability (e.g., audience optimisation, page location,

preferred page audience, and audience analytics). All these elements apply to other types of publication on Facebook, from photo to status updates. Despite the limitations encountered by *Obrero*, it might seem logical for documentary makers to remain on Facebook and use it strategically to counter misinformation, contextualise mainstream news, provide a platform for a broader social discussion, and educate the vulnerable sectors of society. But filmmakers must be cognisant on the restrictions that social media imposes on users.

6.3.3. Interactive documentary

As a format of hypertext i-doc, *Obrero*'s multiple pages and subpages worked well as an organised hub of information for researchers, academics and the general public. The webdoc can effectively host both academic research and the data that I generated out of my immersion in the topic of migrant labour and the unstructured interviewing I conducted in the field. Some Filipino workers felt more comfortable to offering their knowledge off-camera rather than through formal interview techniques of documentary and journalism. These incidental findings are difficult to integrate into the film's narrative, but suitable for *Obrero*'s web-formatted documentary. The webdoc overall was able to report on several 'hot button' issues, minimally tackled in the film variant of *Obrero* (30 minutes). Some of these fragments include visualisation on the changing immigration policies in New Zealand, story maps and profiles of the worker community, and several explanations of issues reported by the mainstream press. In other words, the i-doc, given its flexible format, can translate field work data into story fragments that can capture the deeper context behind an issue.

Not only a hub for researchers, *Obrero*'s web variant effectively engaged a wider transnational public such as Government actors that could influence labour migration policies. Historically, committed documentaries are mostly "produced with the primary intention of raising the consciousness of small target 'identity' audiences" (Goldson, 2004, p. 58). Because social issues are entangled with one another, political i-docs at the community level may interest international audiences. The award given by the International Labour Organization gave the project greater visibility internationally. While the local award by the Commission on Filipinos Overseas placed the i-doc closer to its goal of engaging policy makers and government and non-government actors who have stakes in Filipino labour migration. The webdoc through its domain name can easily be shared, transferred, or sent to

various authorities, policy makers and academics as well as the general public for educational purposes and social transformation.

Finally, *Obrero*'s i-doc variant stood as a fitting alternative for a target public outside the reach of traditional festival and community screening circuits. Publics can return to verify facts or expand their knowledge of the social topic. Unlike the film festival or even Facebook newsfeed that tends to disappear quickly, and i-doc exists as an ongoing living resource that is readily available and shareable.⁶⁷

Despite some advantages listed above, remediating a documentary film into an i-doc has limitations. Contemporary audiences today exist in a cluttered media environment, audiences famously are said to have short attention spans. The availability of multiple choices in interactive narratives may undermine audience retention. The complexity of i-docs can easily overwhelm the audience and perhaps confuse them as the message is often buried in the "electronic haystack" (Winston, Vanstone, & Wang, 2017, p. 7). A key point emphasised in literature is that the cause and effect or linear trajectory of storytelling is compromised in new media platforms. *Obrero* encountered such a dilemma. The design and structure of my webdoc did not yield the same narrative pleasure as watching a linear film. Although a website is a familiar platform for communication, a hyperlink webdoc could also disrupt the coherence of storytelling since control is surrendered to the audience. *Obrero*, for instance, targets an audience in the Philippines that is much more accustomed to traditional forms of storytelling. Intricacy and playfulness could easily obstruct comprehension of target audiences, particularly when there is a complex argument at stake. A productive line of further follow up research could be to undertake a qualitative audience study and ask my webdoc users to comment on their narrative experience.

Mobile-friendly formatting is another major issue encountered by *Obrero*'s webdoc variant. Many countries in the Global South rely on mobile phones instead of desktop computers for their news and entertainment. Practitioners need to carefully balance aesthetics and functionality to ensure that even though i-docs are best viewed on a larger screen, those who rely on cheaper technologies such as mobile devices could still access the content and benefit from it. I recommend that a mobile-formatted and/or mobile-usable i-doc must co-exist with its web counterpart to address the mobile-centric segment of the target population.

⁶⁷ This finding is consistent to earlier proposition that described i-doc as a living entity (see Gaudenzi, 2013)

In addition, unlike Klynt and Korsakow software applications, creating an i-doc using Wix website builder has technical restrictions. The production did not generate an editing timeline. It was also not possible for users to translate the viewing experience into a full screen mode.

There is a need to consider that audiences newly exposed to this type of storytelling are adjusting alongside filmmakers. The way to engage audiences is to ensure a familiar narrative style is present, for instance, an arc or argument that they can easily follow and a navigational design that affords ease of interaction. Regardless of user motive, the principle of journalism's nut graph or nutshell paragraph should resonate in i-docs. To engage a digital audience, they must not wander around the page because the interface simply allows it; instead, they must appreciate the reason for, and the context within which the story is being told. As more tech-savvy audiences become more accustomed to i-docs, interactivity may soon amuse and engage rather than distract them. Audiences could turn into a "producerly public", capable of navigating and pursuing multiple fragments, and thus contribute to the "producing side of the equation" (Uricchio, 2019, p. 76). Just like the audiences of my social network documentary who participate and contribute willingly as a public norm, i-doc audiences may soon find their participation and content contribution a natural part of their role as an audience.

6.3.4. Research limitations

This research examines the efficacy of a transmedia strategy in political documentary and accommodates both practitioner and scholarly perspectives. The diversity of data collection points and reflexivity in data analysis remain the strengths of using creative practice as methodology. But this approach has its limitations. This research is mostly tied to a particular context and research environment. Therefore, the findings I generated in this study are unique to a single case study and restricted to producing knowledge in a deductive manner (Jarvis, 1999). Further, the analysis of impact is limited to the quantifiable audience metrics provided by Facebook and by my capacity as a solo content producer. The conclusions are likewise confined to the chosen research methodology. The vastness of possible ways transmedia may be applied in different research and production settings also challenge the production experience I theorised in this thesis. Other projects located in a different geographic and historical setting may produce a different set of findings. Therefore, this research is context-dependent. Despite the intention to widen the scope of the project, I

was limited to studying *Obrero*'s three variants. The experiment I conducted also poses a risk of becoming dated since technology has been progressing at an unprecedented speed. Although restricted in terms of generalisation, a strength of this post-modern documentary experiment lies in its ability to illustrate where failings can occur and identify any downsides to the approaches taken.

Documentary makers also work in a demanding environment that forces them to “assume the roles of PR person, salesperson, fundraiser, public speaker and distributor” (King, 2015, p. 7). Many decisions are made for economic and practical reasons. Given that this transmedia project involved production for three differing media platforms, the research design and methodology was necessarily complex. Any researcher-practitioner can become overwhelmed with the sheer volume of tasks relegated to one person. As an avant-garde production, *Obrero* is “artisanal and independently financed” (Stam, 2000, p. 55) so the lack of resourcing and the heavy workload led to my Facebook posts being irregular. I also lacked the mechanism of a working production crew typically enjoyed by industry-produced film production. The independence, on the contrary, served as a strength as the production remained free from any financial obligations imposed by funding entities.

6.3.5. Recommendations for future research

Acknowledging both the key findings and limitations of this research, I propose the following areas for future scholarship. First, explore netnography or digital ethnography as a methodology to analyse the audiences of Web 2.0 documentaries. The wealth of qualitative interactions of users online may contribute to existing knowledge on how audiences engage with experimental documentaries. Researchers must approach this data collection with the highest ethical regard given that the notion of public and private is problematic on the internet (see McKee, 2009). Second, conduct a comparative research between political transmedia documentaries produced in two geographically different sites of practice (e.g., Global North/Global South), analysing areas of similarity and difference, what worked and what did not work in what circumstances. Third, textually analyse social network and interactive documentary case studies using the lens and theories of alternative journalism. And finally, analyse the transmedia production and organising strategies employed by alternative media organisations, and explore how digital metrics are adapted and utilised in transmedia production such as for the purpose of funding and research.

6.4. Final words: Transmedia state of mind

Obrero captures the emerging practices of open space, participatory, radical, and contemporary documentary projects that today exist in many spaces where audiences reside. It is easy to situate this project as a continuation of radical practices in documentary production—from the days of the Kinoks movement in the Soviet Union, through the activist practices of the Workers Film and Photo League in the United States, to modern-day revolutions documented through mobile and video technologies (Zimmermann & De Michiel, 2018). *Obrero* also exists in a very timely and fast-changing moment in independent documentary history and ecology, one that reveals a meeting point at which the convergence of technology, film, activism, and globalisation may occur. The project intersects with a burgeoning assembly of independent films that represent the realities of migration and its implications on people, politics, policies, and society. The focus of this thesis on technological affordances also reflects the popular dictum “the medium is the message” (McLuhan, 1964). The following final remarks summarise this practice-led research.

Given the slow timeline of independent film distribution and the limited access to exhibition venues, especially in Global South countries, radical documentaries must take advantage of informal distribution circuits to ensure that the film reaches its appropriate audiences. To increase efficacy, documentary films with political messages (such as those concerning diasporic communities) need to transmediate or re-create themselves in differing media formats and digital variants. When planned and executed accordingly, transnational creative documentaries could live a “long life in an expanded digital environment” (Goldson, 2015, p. 88). Documentary’s expansion to newer platforms creates a demand for documentary makers to work with a “transmedia state of mind” such that they are capable of practising the old canons of documentary making while comfortably adjusting to new media production praxis and aesthetics (e.g., social media and interactive platforms). Unlike the boundary-defining monomedia practices of Flaherty, Vertov and Ivens, this new wave of political or committed documentaries exists today in a cluttered multimedia environment, one that requires the rethinking of audience engagement and strategic communication. Filmmakers with political outreach must be boundary spanners—capable of adapting to media ecological changes such as the fragmenting audience and shifting media platforms.

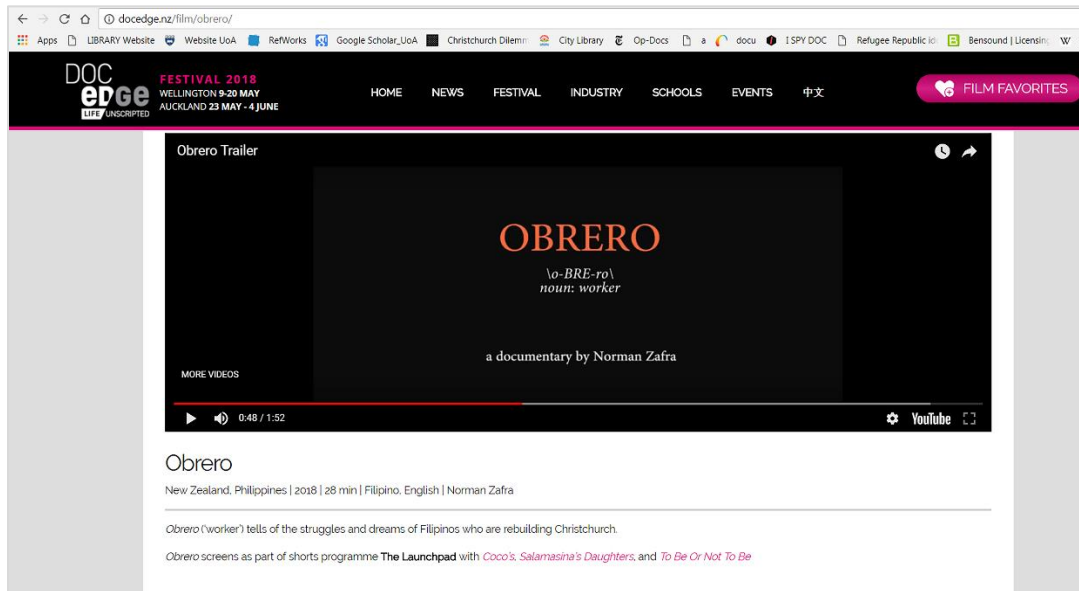
Transjournalism, previously the sole province of large media conglomerates that own multiple channels for news dissemination, is a desirable feature of transmedia documentary.

Obrero shows how alternative media employs alternative circulation platforms to expand the reportage of social issues. Reporting across platforms can also politicise transnational diasporic audiences amidst a changing media ecology. However, this research does not suggest that transmedia is a cure-all solution to the deep social and political issues addressed by *Obrero*, but it should be seen as a strategic option. Some projects need not cross boundaries to raise consciousness on social issues or to influence policymaking.

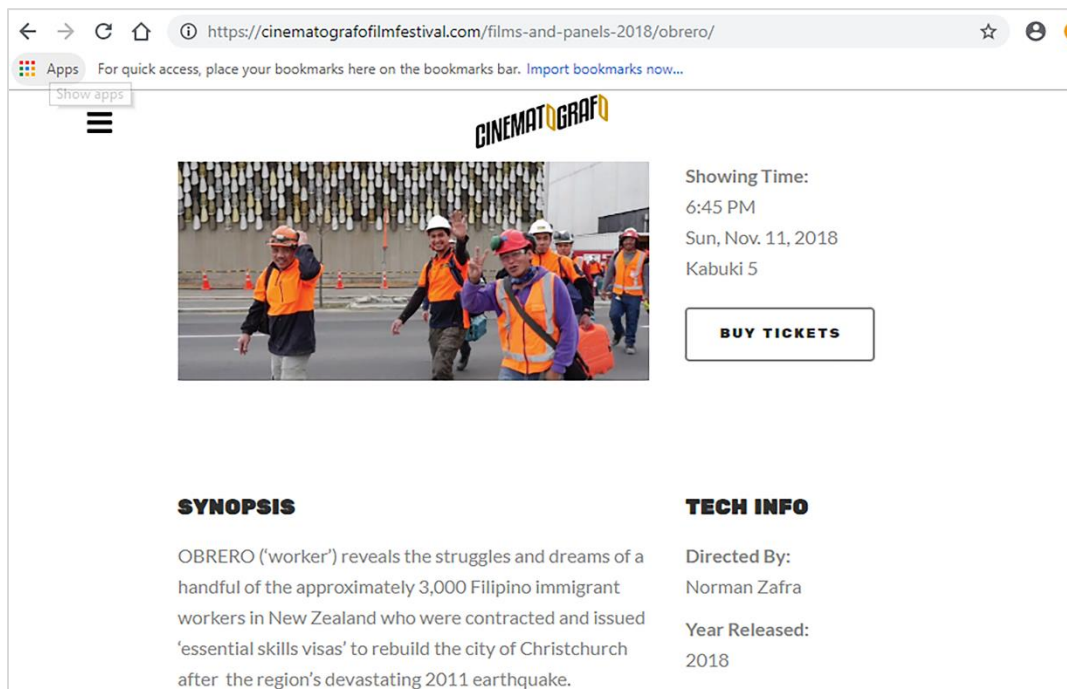
As it is, transmedia cannot cure poor or misleading content, nor correct inaccurate investigations. Documentary makers' decision to transmediate should not be driven by a desire to show off coding, editing, and media production skills. If practice becomes technologically deterministic – which is a danger - it could sacrifice the social, guerrilla, activist, and catalytic purposes of documentary. Not only does political documentary exist in a severely cluttered media environment, it also lives in a world of shifting media and political dynamics—globalisation, fragmentation of publics, misinformation, misrepresentation, and the marginalisation and volatility of alternative media. Transmedia storytelling is desirable and useful, but it must be applied purposefully and with caution. As the old maxim goes, “more doesn't always mean better.”

APPENDICES

A. *Obrero* on documentary festival websites



Documentary Edge Film Festival, New Zealand



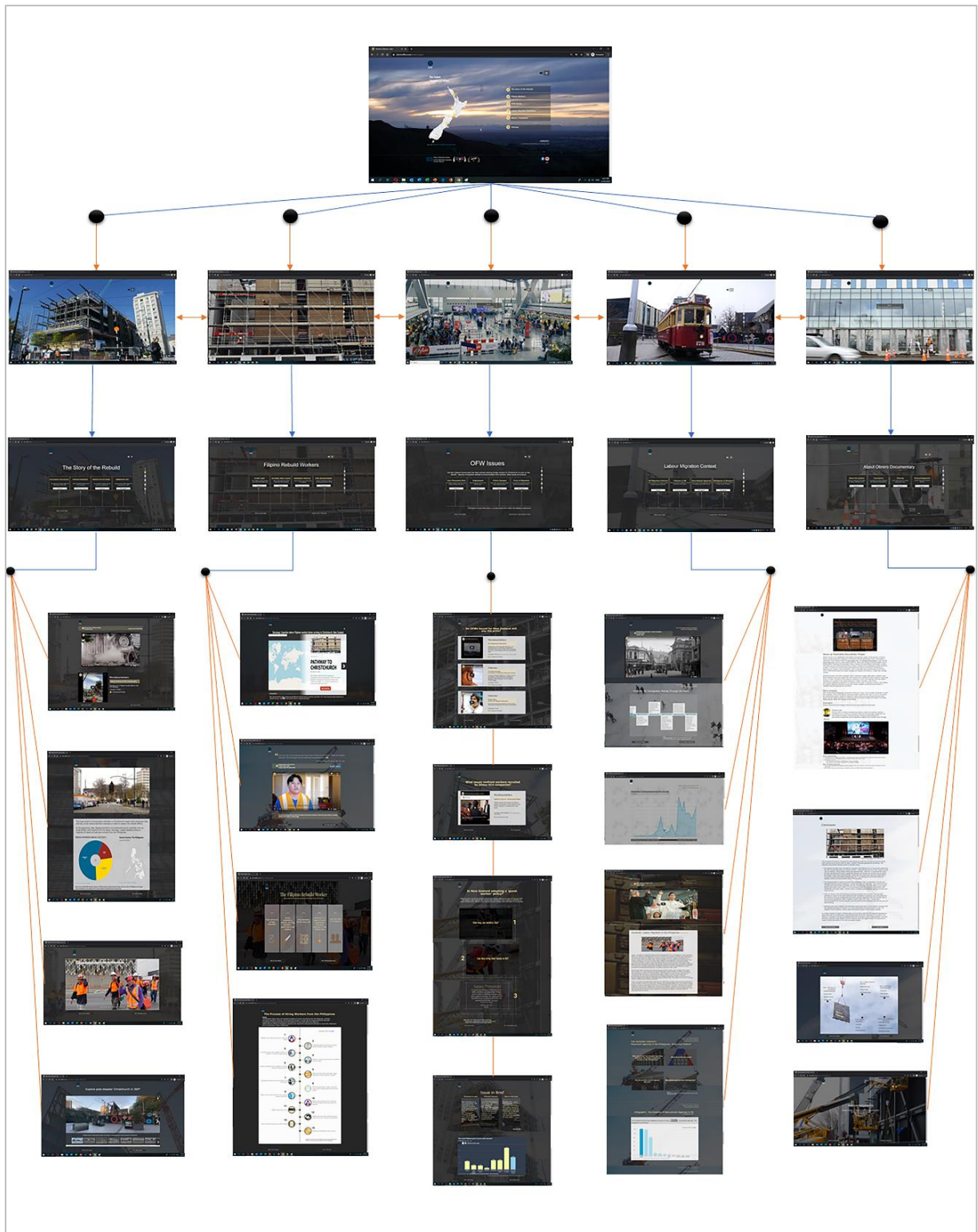
Cinematografo Film Festival, USA

B. Film stills

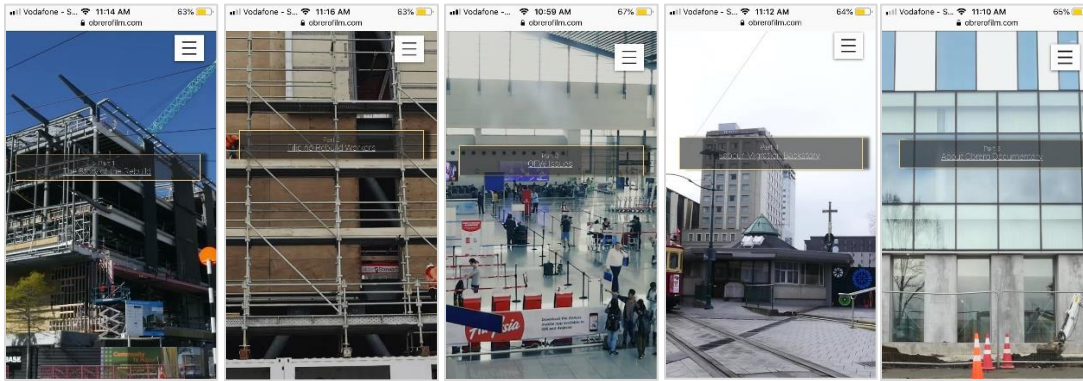




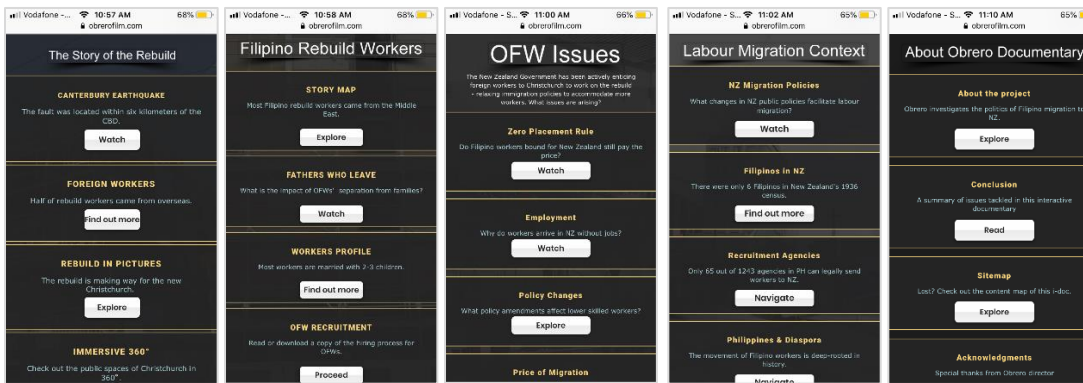
C. Branching tree structure of the interactive documentary



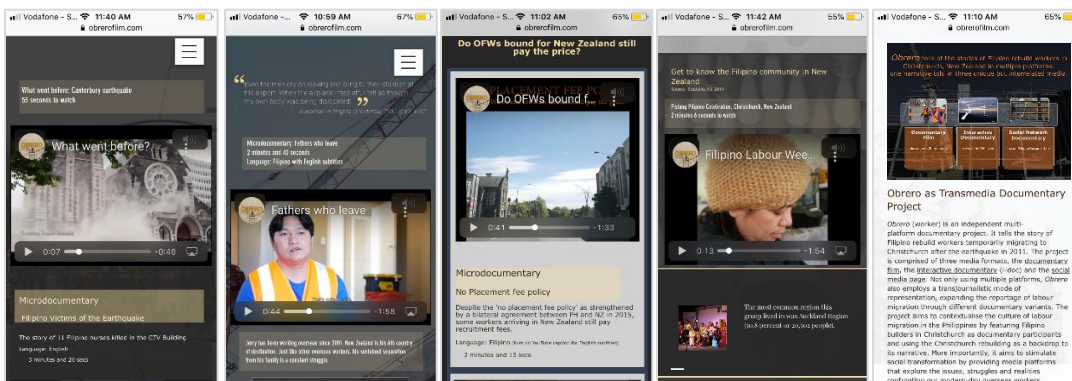
D. Mobile formatted interactive documentary



I-doc chapters

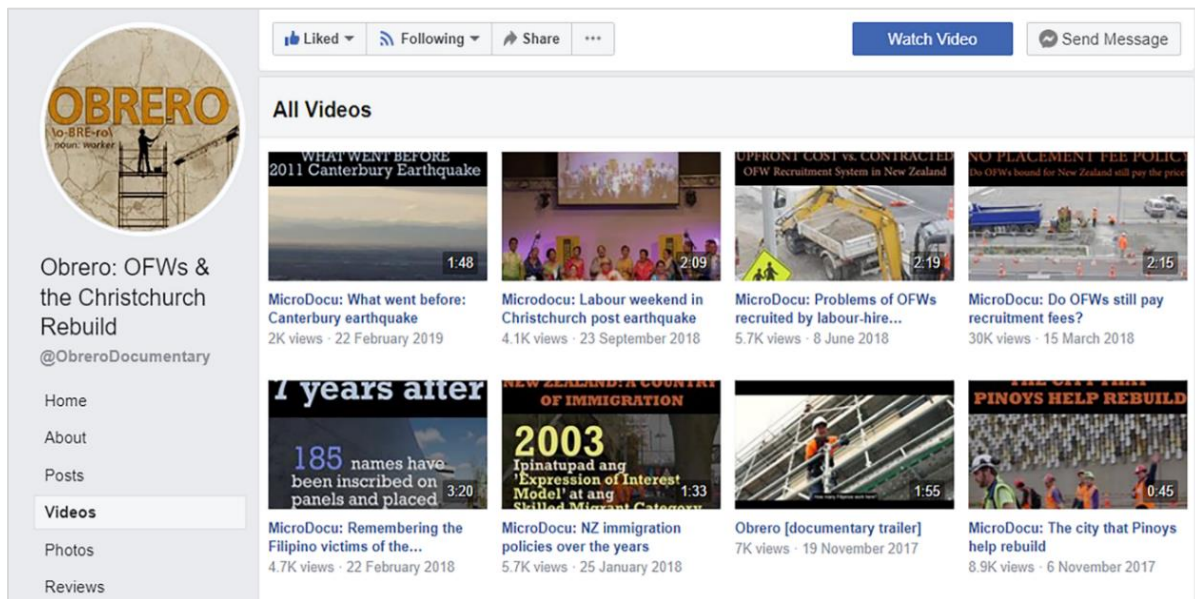


Navigation aids

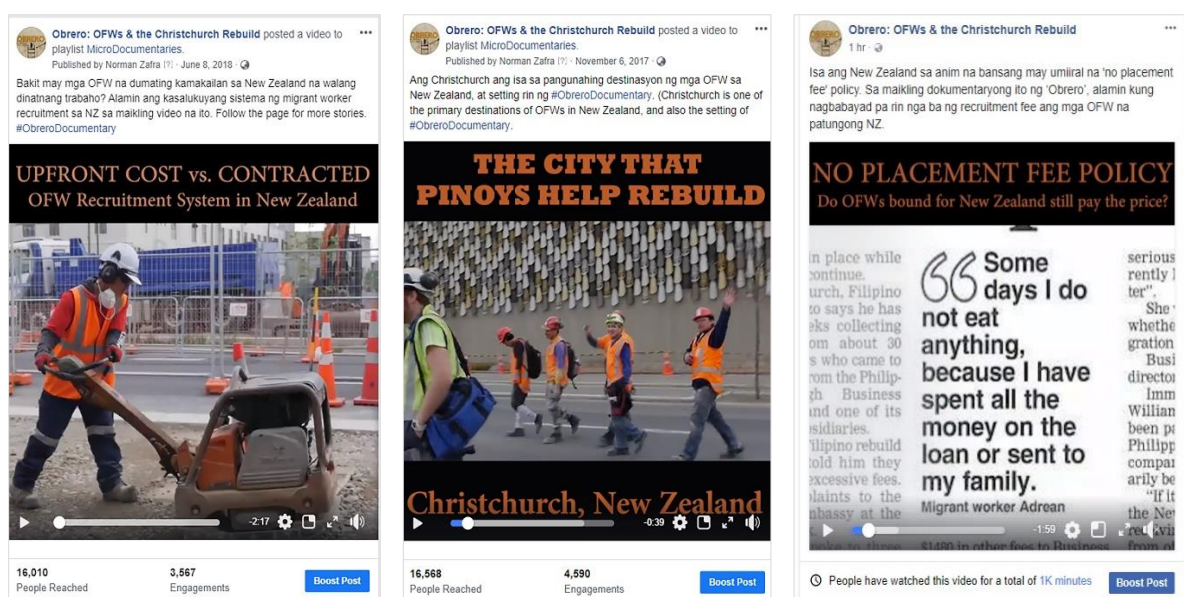


Primary contents

E. Microdocumentaries on Facebook



Video section of Obrero's Facebook page



Obrero's most popular microdocumentaries

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