The (Braided) Documentary Voice: Theorising the Complexities of Documentary Making

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INTRODUCTION

Voice has long served as a metaphor for documentary authorship (Leahy and Gibson 2002). However, recent research on the complexities of documentary production, from institutional practices to the relationships between documentary makers and participants and the affordances of digital media, have brought to the fore the possibility of a 'braided' documentary voice (Aaltonen 2016; FitzSimmons 2009). Voice has also drawn attention to questions of power, the politics of representation and the documentary maker's 'power over' the participant (Nash 2010; Nichols 1993; Winston 1988, 2000). Our aim in this chapter is to explore the braided voice as a theoretical framework for empirical studies of documentary production. In developing this framework we are conscious of the need to link voice, as a metaphor for authorship, to the interrogation of power relations. In particular we want to take up the challenge of engaging in a 'microanalytics of power' (Jenkins and Carpentier 2013, p. 267) that acknowledges the very different levels at which power circulates in the production of documentary.

We start by exploring voice as it has been theorised in documentary studies and the politics of representation before including more recent research on voice and recognition. We will then consider how these different dimensions of voice are evident in our own empirical explorations of documentary-making through two primary case studies. We aim to show the deep imbrication of

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voice as textual, practical and as political, and to show how these various dimensions of voice might be useful as a framework for production studies.

DOCUMENTARY VOICE

In a now seminal article in documentary studies, Nichols (1983, p. 18) introduced the concept of documentary voice thus: 'By "voice" I mean something narrower than style: that which conveys to us a sense of a text's social point of view, of how it is speaking to us and how it is organizing the materials it is presenting to us. ... Voice is perhaps akin to that intangible, moiré-like pattern formed by the unique interaction of all a film's codes, and it applies to all modes of documentary.' Watching documentaries, we encounter the voice of the text which communicates its 'social point-of-view'. For Nichols, the documentary maker should have a 'controlling position' (p. 24) with respect to a film's voice. This controlling position has subsequently been considered as an inevitable, if problematic, aspect of documentary practice (Minh-ha 1993; Nichols 1991; Ruby 1992; Winston 2000).

The past decade there has been an attempt to develop a more nuanced account of documentary voice. FitzSimmons (2009) in particular has argued that documentary voice has been unhelpfully unitary, eliding both the contributions of participants and the impacts of what she calls 'institutional voice'— the multiple ways in which broadcasters, funders and governments 'speak' through the decisions they make at the levels of policy and resourcing. Aaltonen (2016) has recently drawn attention to the important influence of the voices of history and myth. However, FitzSimmons cautions against overstating the contributions of participants, pointing to the persistence of a 'ventriloquistic voice' in which participants are arranged according to the documentary maker's agenda. Forms of dialogic voice, she argues, are characterised by an intentional diminution of the authorial voice and collaborative sense-making. The 'choric voice' offers a way of conceptualising the coming together of multiple voices to represent something collectively,[1] while the 'braided voice' describes documentaries that reflect the voices of many, with the filmmaker's perspective at its core.

FitzSimmons' (2009) notion of braided voice resonates, in particular, with production studies of documentary that have drawn attention to the importance of institutions, funding, policy and production conventions in shaping content (Leahy and Gibson 2002; Sørensen 2012; Zoellner 2009). While FitzSimmons has approached voice from a more macro view, her theoretical intervention also chimes with research emerging since 2010 into the relationship between documentary makers and participants with whom they have been closely involved (see, for instance, a special edition of the *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 2012(3); Aaltonen 2016; Ouellette

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[1]As in Greek theatre, there is a sense of multiple, perhaps anonymous, voices that might come together where a documentary maker has sought to structure reactions or potential actions from an audience.

2016). While our research findings are broadly aligned with FitzSimmons' notion of the choric voice, we have also sought ways of developing the concept to account for the often informal micro-tussles that characterise documentary production. We have therefore turned to recent research into media participation and political voice.

Participation and Recognition: Expanding Voice as a Critical Framework

Carpentier (2011, p. 68) defines participation in the media as having some input into decision-making in the context of media production (content-related participation) or within a media organisation (structural participation). He understands media production as a site of struggle and calls for critical attention to the dynamics of power that shape key moments of decision-making. Although he does not specifically discuss documentary, Carpentier refers to factual TV formats to draw a distinction between emancipatory and manipulatory approaches to production. Where the former is driven by a desire to facilitate participants' contributions to public debate, the latter is concerned primarily with the commodification of participants (a view that aligns with much research on participation in the context of reality TV).[2] While minimal forms of participation are characterised by strong imbalances of power in decision-making (dominated by the (principally financial) goals of media organisations), more maximal participatory intensities move towards an equalisation of power relations and a concern with the participants' discursive contributions. Here the equalisation of power relations represents a key touchstone, either a utopian goal or normative benchmark (Jenkins and Carpentier 2013), in ways that resonate with documentary ethics (Winston 2000; Nichols 1991).

In developing his account of participation, Carpentier (2011) points to a number of structuring elements that may either facilitate or impede participants' involvement in decision-making: identity, organisational structures, technology and quality. These provide a framework for a microanalysis of power and a critical reflection on participatory intensity. Identity points to the role of subject positions, including professional roles such as 'documentary maker' and the extent to which a participant's 'expertise' can shape participation. Organisational structures and cultures draws attention to organisational remits, practices and cultures, as well as to political and economic structures. Technology is deeply intertwined with organisational structure, professional culture and technical quality. While specific technologies have affordances that support and/or shape participation, production cultures and notions of professional standard shape the kinds of technologies that can be used and who can use them (Caldwell 2009).

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[2] See, for example, Grindstaff, L. (2014). DI(t)Y, reality-style: The cultural work of ordinary celebrity. In L. Ouellette (Ed.), *A Companion to Reality Television* (pp. 324–344). Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Participation stops short, however, of being able to account for the vocal ambitions of those who participate and it is this aspect of voice that has, to date, been most absent in accounts of documentary production. As Couldry (2010, p. 1) has argued, human beings are distinguished by their ability to 'give an account of themselves and their place in the world'. Consequently, 'voice' needs to be broadened beyond 'the simple act of speaking in one's own name, important, of course though, that is', to include the '*second-order value of voice* that is embodied in the process of recognising our claims on each other as reflexive human agents' (Couldry 2009, p. 580, italics in the original). Recognition draws attention to listening as 'the other side' of voice (Dreher 2012, p. 159) and it is from this perspective that many of the offers of voice that have proliferated in the media have been shown to be, to different degrees, illusory (see, for instance, Shufeldt and Gale 2007). As recognition, voice takes on a more explicitly political orientation, drawing attention to participants' political motivations for documentary participation.[3] Recognition aligns with participation in its focus on decision-making, but at the same time focuses outward to link the documentary text to the participant's political ambition and the extent to which this is realised.

While recognition has not been an explicit focus of our research to date, we have become aware of its centrality both as a motivation for documentary participation and as central to the relationship between the documentary maker and participant. Recognition also strikes us as relevant to a more fulsome exploration of documentary ethics. During our research we became aware of the importance of recognition for trust and respect (Nash 2010) and of communication in the documentary relationship (Sanders 2012b). Listening to the voices of documentary participants is not only a precursor to participation, but it is also fundamental to what we see as documentary makers' ethical attitude towards those they film. An openness and responsiveness to the voice of the participant is, we suggest, a touchstone for ethical documentary-making. Bringing the perspectives discussed together, we suggest that the braided documentary voice is characterised by a move towards more maximal participation evident across identities, institutions, technologies and notions of quality. Further, we suggest that it is characterised by a focus on realising the political ambitions of documentary participants beyond the documentary text.

In Search of Braided Voices: Re-Viewing Studies of Documentary Production

The original research we draw on in this section was conducted as part of our PhD research into the ethics of documentary-making (Nash 2009, 2010; Sanders 2012a, b). Coming from different theoretical perspectives we shared a conviction that production studies offered an important way to recast the

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[3] The Fogo Island Process, developed by Colin Low/the National Film Board Canada, is an example. See www.nfb.ca/playlist/fogo-island (last accessed 31 July 2018).

ethical debate in light of the experiences of documentary participants. Although our initial research was not explicitly driven by the theoretical framework explored, here we hope that the value of looking anew at our research data will become apparent.

Self-Representation and (Professional) Identity

The following is based on an interview study of four Dutch documentary participants, of which two are included here.[4] Ben and Debby (pseudonyms) collaborated in different projects with different filmmakers. However, both expressed explicit ideas about their representation vis-à-vis each film's subject matter and the ways in which they wanted to contribute to decision-making processes. Both showed an awareness of their participation as contributing to the documentary narrative, and thereby its voice. Both also, at some point, struggled with the filmmaker to secure their interests with respect to their representation, specifically in relation to identity and quality, thereby co-creating their 'threads'.

Ben was invited to participate after he had appeared in other media, speaking about the same topic: his interest in a specific political party. He was one of a number of participants in the film. At the time of the interviews, he was working as a night nurse. Although at the beginning of the filming process Ben decided to 'let it happen' rather than discuss every question or topic in advance, three examples illustrate Ben's efforts to control his representation.

Thinking particularly of his children, he decided not to go into specific details about their lives, school and community:

> Look, I have been a member of the parent council, and then you just know more but then I won't, I also don't think that is respectful to then throw out that information in front of the camera. ... So there ... I stood, stammering ...

Here, Ben positions himself as a community member whose obligation to his community outweighs the interests of the film and filmmaker. Filming at his house, Ben recounted on one occasion that 'Things can just get too close, if they really touch you personally. You have things ... you don't want to tell and I came very close to that ... Like "hey, I really rather not have all this".' He decided to stop his collaboration and a lengthy discussion with the filmmaker took place that afternoon. He was also careful to exclude certain experiences in his past, arguing that 'that is over and I am older now ... it's 10 years on now ... I learned from it and yeah, that's not necessary ...'. Here, Ben considers the boundaries of his participation from a private perspective.

Ben recounted that in the beginning of the filming process he was very aware of not only what to say but also how to say it and to 'not say it the wrong

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[4] Due to limited space, we cannot go into methodological details but refer to our PhD theses (Nash 2009; Sanders 2012b) for further information.

way'. In particular, he discussed with the filmmaker which aspects of the political party he wanted to be associated with and those he did not. With regard to one of latter, he said 'that is not a problem for me … so, I don't need to go into that too much', distancing himself from a specific issue.

In short, these three examples illustrate that Ben demonstrated an awareness of the link between his participation and self-representation, and consciously delineated his participation around how he wanted to be depicted as a community member, a private person and an affiliate to a political party.

At the same time, Ben also contributed to his self-representation by requesting the inclusion of several elements. To portray him as a professional, Ben and the filmmaker had agreed to film him at work. Ben described picking out a patient he deemed suitable to be filmed based on how he wanted to depict his profession. In addition, Ben requested the inclusion of images of him with his son. For personal reasons this was important to Ben and his wife who, he recalled, was keen not to be included in the film ('if maybe they might take me out as long as [son] is included …'). The filmmaker obliged and a scene of Ben with his son was included. This supports his self-presentation as a family man who, in this case, displays a certain relationship with his son.

So, in addition to delineating and limiting his representation, Ben contributed to further construct his representation as a professional and as a family man (an identity he underscored elsewhere in the interview by referring to his life as 'suburban bliss'), by expanding his participation. Thereby he co-constructed his representation, contributing to the construction of ultimate voice of the documentary through his 'thread'.

The second participant to be discussed here is Debby. Having recently finished her PhD research on an art collector, which resulted in a biography, Debby participated in a documentary about the art collector, initially as a consultant. She became the main participant in the documentary after suggesting the approach for the film:

> [H]e asked me like, 'would you know a perspective' and I pretty boldly said … 'the search of the biographer' … I did not intend to push myself forward but I just recognized exactly what he was trying to do.

Debby was ultimately 'followed' as she sought to uncover the character of the art collector, with the story told through her eyes. Two issues characterise her participation: the way she co-shaped the story based on her expert input and her professional identity as an academic.

Because Debby was initially asked to contribute as a consultant she had the opportunity to co-construct the story and engage in a more maximal form of participation with relation to the documentary. Debby recounted she did not agree with a number of central themes and the weight the filmmaker attached to others. She was able to steer the film in a direction that she felt was more appropriate by including relevant topics and information on the basis of her

expertise. She also described evaluating beforehand the information about the themes and topics to be addressed during the next day of recording to see if anything was missing that she thought needed to be included so 'that I should, if we are recording, then make sure that that topic is discussed as well'. As an 'expert', Debby was able to use her power in the production 'team' to include information she deemed important or relevant.

Like Ben, Debby was very conscious of the way in which she would be represented, and she worked to shape how she was portrayed vis-à-vis the art collector. The filmmaker wanted Debby to identify with the collector (even to the extent of mimicking the collector's pose in a painting). Debby recalled:

> [A]s an academic, if there is anything drummed into you … it is that you should keep a distance and that you should look at your subject as objectively as possible and … That [mimicking idea] quite quickly was dropped from the story.

Debby refused to be displayed in a mirror image with the subject of the film because this did not align with her idea of what it means to be academic. This also draws attention to the visual qualities of participation and voice: it is not just what participants say, but also what they do and the context of the act that constitutes their contribution and, through it, the voice of the resulting film.

Debby's self-presentation also surfaced during the filming of a scene in which she had to convey some factual information. While she needed some time to convey a sentence that would properly capture the information, the filmmaker pushed her with his suggestion. She refused and interrupted the filming process, asking for a 'time out'. She then conceived of a suitable sentence and filming was resumed. In this instance, Debby again safeguarded her self-presentation as an academic by approaching, in her explanation, documentary as research:

> I also personally think it doesn't suit the idea of a documentary. I think a documentary is an investigation … and I also understand you don't have the luxury to nuance everything in notes and, well … Look, making a mistake is one thing but if someone tells you 'this is incorrect' I really think you cannot pursue …

By referring to an investigation and the use of notes, she self-presents herself as a researcher.[5] This also calls attention to the issue of (perceived) quality. For Debby, the quality of the documentary is highly related to its academic accountability (rather than to questions of veracity or aesthetics). Discussing her contract, she mentioned this explicitly: 'the image that especially arises from me as researcher and that should tally with uhm how I am and with my integrity and with my way of doing research …'. Here, Debby is confronted with the institutional 'thread' which also seeks to assert power over her contribution: she requested a veto but did not get it.

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[5] With reference to the film but, in this instance, also to the interviewer.

Like Ben, Debby consciously considered how she wants to come across and delineated her representation in both sound and image accordingly, exerting power over the production process where needed and possible, to safeguard and construct her 'thread' as academic.

Voice, Participation and Trust in Documentary-Making

The second case study through which we will engage with the notion of the braided voice is Nash's (2010) study of Tom Zubrycki's *Molly & Mobarak*, which focuses particularly on the relationship between Tom Zubrycki and Lyn Rule, a central participant. The documentary explores the experience of asylum seekers in Australia through the story of Mobarak Tahiri and his relationship with Molly Rule, with their complex friendship serving as a metaphor for the relationship between asylum seekers and Australian society. Previous publications (Nash 2009, 2010) explore *Molly & Mobarak* from the perspective of power, highlighting the complex contest between documentary maker and participant. In revisiting this material, we aim to highlight the implications of this contest for thinking about documentary voice. While focusing on the very significant ways in which documentary content is shaped, often informally, by the participant, we also wish to draw attention to the different levels (identity, organisational, technological) at which the participants' agency is constrained.

Lyn Rule was invited to participate in the documentary because of her political activity, but unlike Debby in the example already considered, she was not positioned as an 'expert' in relation to the project. From the perspective of identity, she occupied the position of documentary 'subject' and Zubrycki that of 'documentary maker'. This non-expert positioning underpinned Lyn's experience of filming as characterised by both control and loss of control. On the one hand she sought to play a key role in shaping the documentary by controlling what could, and could not, be recorded. However, her subject position as a participant (rather than a collaborator) meant that this control was informal. So on the one hand Lyn felt in control of the filming, saying, for instance, 'I can control that [the filming], that's nothing. If it's going to do some good' (Nash 2009, p. 164). But that control often took the form of 'little ways of stopping him [Zubrycki]', preventing Zubrycki from filming informally by swearing or playing music (both of which would make the recorded footage unusable). She also withheld information from Zubrycki where she didn't want filming to take place (with mixed success). At the same time Lyn actively shaped the documentary by making suggestions about filming and encouraging Zubrycki to stay in her house while he was filming. It was this intimate access to the family that actually made the documentary's 'romantic' narrative frame possible.

While Lyn's subject position was important so too were technology, quality and organisational structures. The documentary was shot on digital video for television broadcast. In describing the experience of participating in the filming, Lyn referred a number of times to Zubrycki's camera, which she described

as 'hidden in some sneaky little spot where he could pick it up and start filming' (Nash 2009, p. 165). The flexibility of digital video, which allowed for single-person operation and higher shooting ratios, gave Zubrycki the means to capture various intimate moments in the day-to-day lives of the documentary participants. At the time that *Molly & Mobarak* was made, single-person filming on digital video was an established practice, although there was limited familiarity with ProAm video equipment. Further, the need to ensure quality sufficient for television broadcast precluded a more participatory approach to recording.

As an independent documentary maker, Zubrycki worked at arm's length from the broadcaster that commissioned *Molly & Mobarak*. However, it was also the case that the project was shaped in key ways by organisational, and legal, processes. The formal process of securing the participants 'consent' for example, served to highlight for Lyn the fragility of her power over her own image in the documentary. She felt that signing the release form equated to 'giving away all your rights really', relinquishing control over her image to Zubrycki and the broadcaster. For Lyn, the offer of a right of veto represented the point at which she was most explicitly positioned as a participant in the project. She spoke about requesting the removal of a couple of specific shots and saw this agency as central to her giving her informed consent.

Approaching voice from the perspective of recognition highlights the importance of Lyn's political ambitions as a motive for documentary participation. Identifying the moment of seeing Zubrycki's earlier documentaries as fundamental to her decision to participate, she says: 'I realised that there was a chance that this was going to become a film and it wasn't just some guy who didn't know what he was doing; it was clear that Tom knew what he was doing and there was a chance, a high probability that there was going to be a film made and that if it was going to be of any value to migrants' (Nash 2009, p. 186). Zubrycki's earlier documentaries provide a foundation for Lyn's participation because they demonstrate both his political viewpoint and his knowledge and skill as a documentary maker. In reflecting on her participation, Lyn highlighted the fact that *Molly & Mobarak* was screened in the national parliament, thus pointing to the significance of recognition and political voice as relevant to a consideration of documentary production.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have sought to develop the concept of documentary voice as 'braided', such that it might provide a framework for production research across a range of documentary practices. We have done so by bringing documentary-focused accounts of voice (both as unitary and as braided) into dialogue with both research into media participation and a more explicitly political notion of voice as recognition. Reviewing our own empirical research, we have sought to demonstrate, however tentatively, the utility of this framework for illuminating the different dimensions of contest that characterise

documentary production. We have sought to move beyond voice as a metaphor for authorship to consider how it is that documentary participants and other actors (filmmakers, institutions, technologies, policies and so on) shape documentary content and the documentary's voice.

We have found that documentary participants have a clear sense of their motivation for participation and that they are conscious of their participation as a way of contributing, with varying goals, politically. Participants have an interest in the documentary text, seek to exercise control, to different degrees, over the text or at least their part in it, and are enabled or constrained at various levels, from the interpersonal to the institutional and beyond. However, their co-construction of their threads for the documentary braid is evident.

A key aim of this chapter has been to draw attention to the complexity of documentary voice. Documentary-making is characterised by collaboration that can be all but impossible to detect at the level of the text. We have only begun here to consider the ways in which moments of key decision-making are structured by the complex to and fro of power at the level of interpersonal relationships, interactions between individuals, the various organisational structures of media production and so on. While we wish to draw attention to the agency of documentary participants, it is our contention that this agency must be understood with reference to a broader analysis of power relationships that draws attention to the different levels at which the participant's agency is countered. We believe that the framework for the analysis of power presented here allows for such an analysis and that it facilitates an analytic flow between textual, productional and political notions of voice.

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