

## Interacting With Gender Violence

Interactive Documentary as a Means of Social Engagement and Affective Mobilization

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### Abstract

Stemming from a process of non-linear narratives in a digital convergence landscape, interactive documentary proposes an innovative change in the documentary realm by allowing the user to choose how to consume the contents and produce a universe of narrative possibilities where the stories begin and end by linking to each other. This paper examines to what extent interactive documentary may constitute a voice of process (Couldry 2), assuming to be a resource that may contribute to social change by seeking awareness of gender violence and justice for the victims. The empirical study focuses on two interactive documentaries approaching violence against women: *Mujeres en Venta* and *The Quipu Project*. The methodological approach draws upon a three-fold dimension: discourse analysis, multimodal analysis, and the interaction structure. Results show that both projects explore user's interaction and participation to favor engagement and immersion with the narrated reality, aiming to promote social change.

The empirical study has identified that the two documentary projects use narrative resources from traditional documentaries and simultaneously introduce relevant novelties to the perspective of user interaction and participation, aimed at favoring the engagement and immersion with the narrated reality. *Mujeres en Venta* and *The Quipu Project* propose a multilevel communicative flow, which encompasses three combined dimensions: aesthetic, narrative, and emotional (Mora-Fernández 198–200).

### Keywords

Interactive Documentary; Gender Violence; Multimodal Analysis; Social Engagement; Affective Mobilization

## 1. Interactive Documentary and Social Engagement

Interactive documentary presents a fertile opportunity to explore social engagement and intervention for social change since such format provides the audience with the freedom of exploring a variety of contents and delving into the perspective of the story that interests them the most (Aston and Gaudenzi 130; Galloway et al. 330; Nogueira 50). Beyond the classic inference that documentary is a representation of reality (Grierson 97; Nichols 5; Bruzzi 9, 12), its interactive form grants a chance of reshaping the narrative and playing an active role in negotiating with reality (Whitelaw 330; Gaudenzi *The Living Documentary* 26, 27). Regarding interactive environments, several authors (Miller and Allor 55–59; Wiehl 30–32) argue that interactivity enhances the audience's emotional engagement and social mobilization. However, there is little or no literature focusing specifically on interactive documentaries and gender violence. Therefore, the main question is to understand if interactive documentaries may effectively engage audiences towards social change, namely, to address gender violence.

This paper explores social engagement and affective mobilization through the analysis of two interactive documentaries focused on the representation of women's violence: *Mujeres en Venta*, an interactive project denouncing women's trafficking for sexual exploitation in South America; and *The Quipu Project*, a collaborative interactive documentary focused on testimonies of women victims of unconsented sterilizations in 1990s Peru.

## 2. From Social Documentary to Interactive Audience's Engagement

Overtime documentary has taken on a voice in favor of social causes and civil rights, particularly since the mid-1960s with the proliferation of social movements and minority groups that embraced documentary film as a tool for communicating specific political messages and engaging the audience in their causes. Documentary films have the ability to represent the “historical world,” as they are intended to have an impact by drawing attention to social issues, recurring problems, and sometimes, even proposing possible solutions (Nichols 192). In his personal manifesto, Peter Wintonick argues that documentary filmmakers owe to the future “to speak out against injustice” pouring their “work and activism into the forge of human service” (2). John Corner even considers that one of the documentary functions is precisely to provide “publicity and propaganda for dominant versions of citizenship” (259). The in-camera presentations, through voice-over or interviews, afford an experience of looking at visual evidence and witnessing, placing the spectator as a member of a social collective, and implying her/him as a putative participant of the social sphere (Chanan 268).

The twenty-first century introduced a ground-breaking phenomenon to the realm of documentary. Broadband internet, efficient video codecs, and the spread of interactivity across several digital objects transformed the creative practices of documentary film, from production to distribution and reception, and most particularly expanded the form to an interactive mode. The term “interactive documentary” coined by Mitchell Whitelaw refers to a non-fiction work that is a representation of the world, conveying an authorial perspective about the subject

matter, and, as Galloway underlines, using “interactivity as a core part of its delivery mechanism” (330–331). As such, in the context of participatory culture and convergence (Jenkins 3), interactive documentary “exists simultaneously as a product and as a process” (Nash 385) since it provides the audience with the chance of manipulating and participating directly in the narrative’s development.

The development of documentary to an interactive form opens new possibilities to perform social functions and engage the audience in social causes. Granting to the audience such a degree of autonomy and freedom inevitably creates “expectations around their ability to participate with, contribute to, or share with others” (Miller and Allor 2). While the spectator becomes an active participant, interactive documentary opens room to “greater digital dialogue, pluralism, tolerance and participation” (Wintonick 2), creating a privileged space to raise awareness and mobilize citizens to social causes.

### 3. Form, Content, Interaction

The complexity and multimodality of web pages present an additional research challenge and presuppose a comprehensive methodological approach (Herring 338, 339). As such, we will employ an articulation of methodologies that combines content analysis and discourse analysis (Neuendorf 33–36), drawing a three-dimensional exploration of: 1) discourse analysis of the testimonies; 2) the type of media format available in each documentary; 3) the navigation structure designed from the available links. Discourse analysis draws upon Roman Jakobson's linguistic meta-functions (66–71), i. e. referential function, emotive function, conative function,

poetic function, phatic function, reflexive function. Considering the multimodality of the interactive documentaries, we conduct a thorough analysis of the contents based on Kress and van Leeuwen's Visual Grammar (78, 181–184), including the various media elements, such as still and moving images, textual information, sounds and graphics, and the navigation interface. Lastly, we investigate the interaction strategy behind the contents to unveil the paths available through which the audience can navigate.

#### 4. Denouncing Gender Violence

We propose an in-depth analysis of two interactive documentaries—*Mujeres en Venta* and *The Quipu Project*, both objects focused on denouncing gender violence and affording testimonials from victims. *Mujeres en Venta* is an interactive documentary about women's traffic and sexual exploitation and presents a hypertext mode of interaction (Aston and Gaudenzi 47–53), providing the audience with customized navigation through the contents. In addition, *The Quipu Project*, also affording a hypertext mode to the interactor, comprises a collaborative strategy of collecting personal stories of women forced to sterilization in Peru during Alberto Fujimori's government.

##### 4.1. *Mujeres en Venta* (Women for Sale)

*Mujeres en Venta*, or *Women for Sale*, addresses the issue of women trafficking for sexual exploitation in Argentina and shows the panorama of human trafficking networks that capture, deceive, subjugate, exploit, rape, and, sometimes, end up killing women. Throughout the interactive narrative, the user can access over 136

media items, distributed into five chapters: “Recruitment,” “Trafficking Routes,” “Exploitation,” “Rescue,” and “Get Involved.” The five chapters contain a total of 45 videos, 26 of which present testimonies from four victims and two relatives, and 19 feature interviews with experts, including representatives of governmental and non-governmental institutions, journalists, investigators, and police officers. Three functions of language are identified in a total of 56 minutes and 12 seconds of statements by the 25 subjects: emotive, referential, and conative.



Figure 1 - landing page of the documentary *Mujeres en Venta* (Irigaray and Moreno 2015), where the audience can access the five chapters

The emotive function (Jakobson 66–67) is the most relevant in the subjects’ discourse throughout the documentary, summing a total of 29 minutes and 17 seconds. The testimonials present the victims’ point of view, talking in the first person, and sharing their experiences, impressions, and thoughts. The emotional tone is identified in the reports of victims and their relatives, sometimes expressing very painful testimonies of sexual exploitation experiences, such as the following excerpts:

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One time, he made me work with 14 men. I was very sore and the following night he made me work all the same. (Vanessa Payero, victim, chapter 3)

It was like being a slave, they pressed me and told me they would kick me out, beat me to death, that I would not be able to work anywhere else and they would kill me if they saw me working somewhere else or on the streets.

(Elizabeth Torrano, victim, chapter 3)

The second more relevant speech function in the documentary is the referential function (Jakobson 66), with a total of 25 minutes and 34 seconds. Most of the videos where the referential function was identified are interviews with members of government institutions, NGOs, and researchers devoted to working against women's trafficking and sexual exploitation. Such statements convey mostly a factual speech, in descriptive and objective communication, revealing few personal impressions.

Although the conative function (Jakobson 67–68) is subtle, one may identify it in brief excerpts, for only 51 seconds in total. In this case, the participants' main goal is to engage the viewer with the issue of human trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation, using such strategy to draw attention and hold the interactor accountable:

If as a society we don't understand that the client, when he goes to one of these places and sees these childish bodies, almost teenage 12, 13, 14-year-old girls, drugged at the brothel, and still goes to these places (...) If as a society we don't understand that there lies the key to human trafficking, we can have all the necessary laws, but we still act as a society that allows rich men to

visit these places and use these bodies, and as a slave society to the service of the one who pays... (Adriana Dominguez, activist, chapter 03)

Whereas in most videos one of the functions stands out in parts of the speech, the functions were not analyzed as separated and, therefore, emotive, referential, and conative functions overlap during some statements. Thus, in this last excerpt, in addition to the conative function, we also identify the emotional function when the subject appeals to a call for action, with a strong emotional charge. Activist Adriana Dominguez conveys information to emotionally engage the interactor, mobilize society, and express her thoughts and personal views on the role of citizens as a fundamental part to fight human trafficking and sexual exploitation. In this case, the speech was simultaneously considered under the emotive and conative functions.

Regarding the multimodal analysis (Bateman and Schmidt 149–153), *Mujeres en Venta* presents a vast and diverse content, with a total of 136 elements, where the video is the most relevant media, not only in terms of the number of items (45), but also in terms of their length (55:42), followed by graphic elements (34) and textual elements (26), consisting of short sentences and slogans. Besides interviews, the documentary comprises several sound elements (21), but those consist mostly of background music. Although the sound elements do not convey information, they significantly contribute to the audience's emotional engagement and overall mood of the user's experience. The interactive documentary presents various content, ranging from a collaborative map with the locations of the traffic network to sound elements and from still images (photographs or photographic compositions), segments of short



videos to informative materials on the subject with the possibility of augmented reality using QR Codes.

As for the interaction strategy, *Mujeres en Venta* presents a linear navigation structure, based on the sequential organization of the available content. By activating the vertical scroll bar, the interactor navigates through the content available: the automatically displayed videos, static and dynamic graphics with textual and visual information, and still images (both photography and visual compositions) used as background. Several layers of various types of media, providing both visual, audio, and textual information, intend to present the multiple facts related to the subject matter.

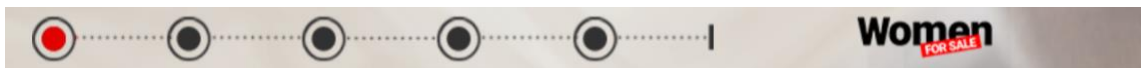


Figure 2 - *Mujeres en Venta*'s navigation strategy

The interactor is provided with the ability to control the display duration of each content, stopping in each element, or moving forward. The interface also allows to go back and rewatch previous content. Although the documentary presents a linear time-based chronological narrative, the content is organized into five central nodes (or chapters), which structure the navigation experience. The strategy of superimposing several layers of semantic meaning and the use of QR codes with augmented reality may also contribute to a higher degree of immersion and engagement.

#### 4.2. *The Quipu Project*

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*The Quipu Project* is a participatory oral history process focused on the victims of a non-consenting sterilization program promoted by the Peruvian government. About 272,000 women and 22,000 men were sterilized without their consent under a health program created by Alberto Fujimori's government. The victims are almost exclusively from rural and poor indigenous communities, without a voice or representation in the media. *The Quipu Project* is a participatory transmedia project fostering to create awareness and uphold justice for these victims through a collective narrative, which gathers testimonials and preserves a collective memory.

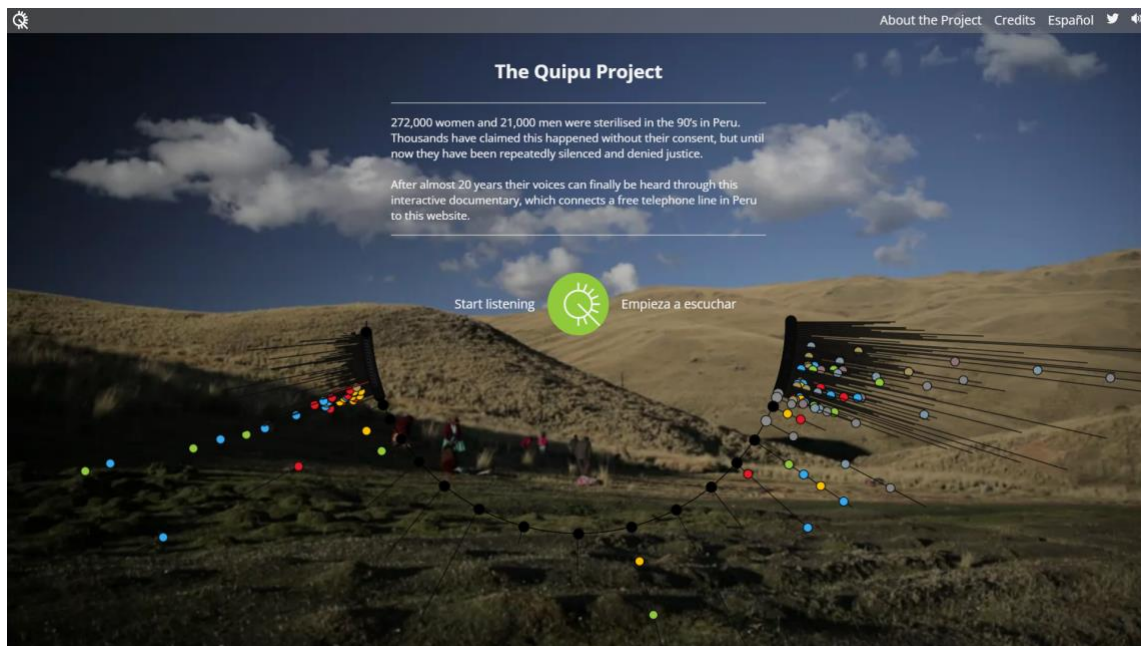


Figure 3 - landing page of the documentary *The Quipu Project* (Court and Lener 2015), where the audience can access the audio testimonies

The documentary is an interactive online platform that provides audio testimonies of women who called an exclusive telephone line set up for this project. Supported by a two-way communication logic, *The Quipu Project* allows women to respond to others through a telephone line and, thus, proposes a connection between victims from different communities and the audience. Using the metaphor of the quipus consisting

of knots on ropes that the Incas used to collect and keep records, the documentary has a navigation structure organized in three parts: informative section, testimonies, and participation by telephone.



Figure 4 - an Inca Quipu, used for collecting data and keeping records, such as taxes, census, calendrical information, and for military organization. Image retrieved from *The Quipu Project* (Court and Lener 2015)

Three language functions (Jakobson 66–67, 69) are identified: referential, reflexive, and emotive.

The informative section presents an introduction to the documentary, information about the tradition of the quipus and instructions. First, the discourse related to the quipus tradition is framed under the referential function:

Knotted strings used by the Incas and Andean civilizations to keep records. The brightly coloured cords are also thought to have been used to tell stories through the generations. (*The Quipu Project* 2015)

Secondly, the introduction presents the documentary context through a sequential animation, followed by audio with background videos of the areas inhabited by rural and indigenous communities, referring to the context. The navigation instructions in the documentary fall under the reflexive function. The emotive function is the one with greater expression in this documentary, presented in the 135 audio testimonials of victims and organized into four sub-themes: “The Sterilization Programme,” “The Operation,” “The Life After,” and “Looking for Justice.”

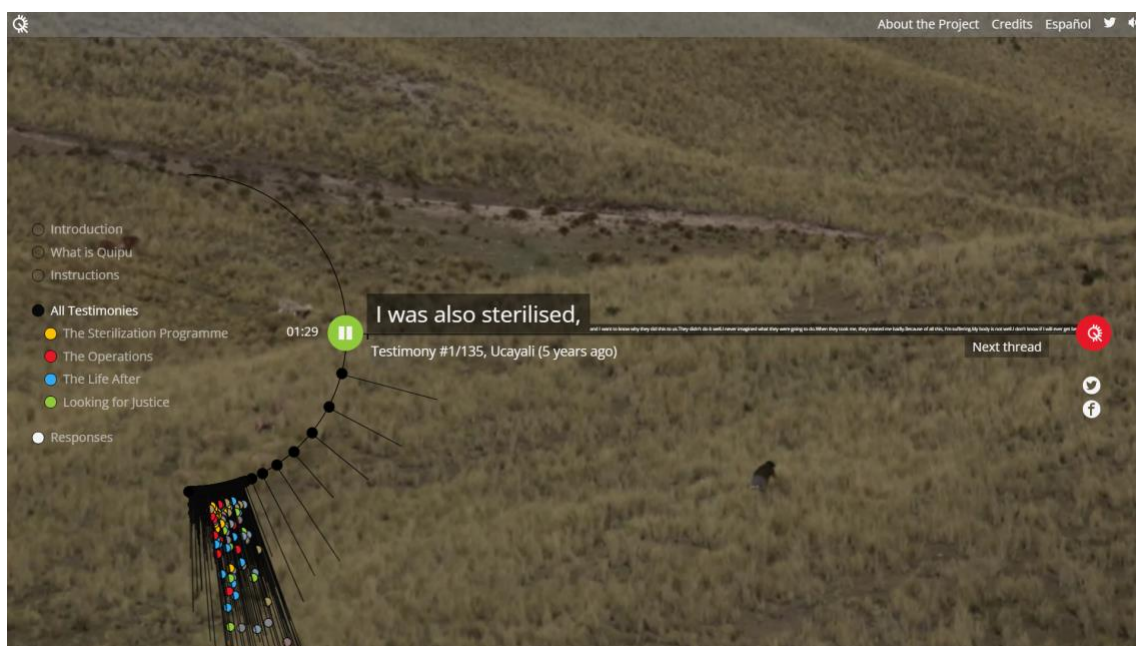


Figure 5 - *The Quipu Project's* menu where the audience can access the four sub-themes

The 135 testimonies consist of victims' sharing their experiences of violence, the context in which it occurred, and their personal and social life consequences, accounts of which can be found in the following excerpts:

I was sterilised without my consent in Mollepata. They came to my house many times. They looked for my husband at the farm and forced him to sign.

(Testimony #55/135, Cusco)

I went for a health check at the clinic. I was pregnant at the time, so I went for a check-up. They told me ‘You are not pregnant so we will sterilize you’.

(Testimony #101/135, Anonymous)

The third part of the documentary, “Responses,” is participatory and consists of telephone contributions. The emotional function is central to the 60 available audio clips, organized in an interconnected way with testimonials:

Hello, friends in Peru. We're from the ‘Las Raras’ podcast in Chile. We’re calling to say that we admire your strength and bravery to tell your stories and seek justice. From over here, we stand with you.

The multimodal analysis (Bateman and Schmidt 149–153) of the documentary evidences the centrality of the audio (135 testimonies and 60 responses). The video, comprised of the textual and graphic components relevant to each of the audio recordings, serves as a visual support for the audio elements. The text elements consist of audio subtitles that reinforce the messages, and the graphic elements that provide context, using color according to the audio typology.

The documentary features a tree-navigation structure organized into three main parts. The media components are interconnected from the central themes of the testimonies and responses. Therefore, each audio is an element interconnected to others by thematic context and also through the participatory dimension that translates into an interaction of content as responses. The structural design of the



information space anchors in interactive navigation paths, visually represented as interconnected, revealing the user's role and emphasising the involvement and immersion proposed in this interactive structure.

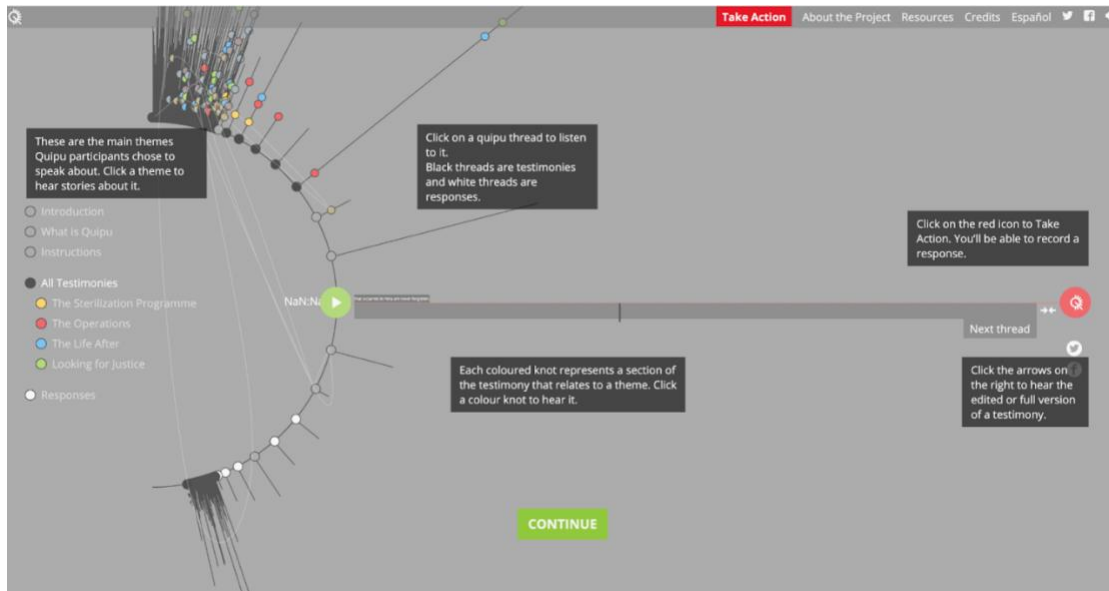


Figure 6 - *The Quipu Project's* navigation strategy

## 5. Conclusions and Final Considerations

The two interactive documentaries analyzed in this paper present a new form of documentary practice with the potential to engender the audience's empathy through an "affective encounter" (Gregg and Seigworth 1). Both projects mostly display discourses identified under the emotive function, which unveils strong contamination of subjectivity inherent to the first-person discourse of the victims' testimonies. The use of new media technology, as deployed in this corpus of analysis, displays an interface and design structure for the dissemination of vast archives of information, media, still images, sounds, and graphics, displaying several layers (Gaudenzi "Strategies of Participation" 138) and exposing multiple perspectives about the subject matter. Regarding the multimodality of the documentaries, whereas *Mujeres*

*en Venta* constructs its narrative mainly with video segments, *The Quipu Project* conveys the message mostly through sound elements. Besides, while the former displays a linear structure, providing the audience with the chance of controlling the rhythm, duration, and sequence of elements, the latter organizes the elements into a tree structure, having nucleus nodes as points of departure for the interaction, from where the audience can move to sub-nodes and deepen their experience. *The Quipu Project* also affords a collaborative strategy by collecting contributions from participants, providing an opportunity for enhancing new civic participation expressions.

Both projects analyzed aim to contribute to social change by featuring gender violence and promoting a sense of community that provides a voice to marginalized subjects with fewer participation in the public sphere. Both the victims and the audiences may project and identify themselves in the testimonials. Performing the emancipatory promise of digitization for fragile and minority groups and using digital technologies to provide victims a voice, both interactive documentaries enable disseminating and interacting with content. Furthermore, through engagement and immersive experiences, affective mobilization calls the public to account and leads them to feel responsible and take a stand, promoting social change. Finally, by seeking social justice from immersive experiences, the projects promote engagement and awareness concerning violence against women.

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