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Different Kinds of Storytelling:
Ethnographic Writing and Documentary Film-Making

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Abstract

This paper compares and contrasts ethnographic writing to ethnographic film-making as different ways of crafting a narrative. Films have the ability to reach larger audiences, including our own informants, and to make audiences feel connected to the central participants who seem to speak directly to them, but are less conducive to providing the broader context for those stories or showcasing stories that are less visually interesting. Film also seems more effective for making an intervention in policy or public opinion. Both modes of storytelling involve the selection of a few key incidents from a much larger set of footage or fieldnotes to tell a compelling story, shaped by emotion or theory, and the manipulation of the strongest elements available to construct that story. Documentary film-makers are more willing to discuss the construction of their product than ethnographic writers. Finally, the form of the final product, whether dissertation, monograph, or film, shapes the process of inquiry and discovery, affecting what is learnt and what is possible to tell. I came to documentary film-making as a result of my dissatisfactions with ethnographic writing, but I have realised that film does not replace writing; rather, they work in tandem, with different goals and possibilities. Based on my experiences of writing three monographs and making, in a less skilled fashion, two short documentaries on the same themes, this paper reflects on ethnographic storytelling through different media.

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Different Kinds of Storytelling: Ethnographic Writing and Documentary Film-Making

Cati Coe

I turned to documentary film-making because of my disenchantment with ethnographic writing. By this point in my career, I had written three monographs and numerous journal articles and edited several collections of scholarly essays. In some of my more recent projects, my research participants had hoped that the research would improve their lives in some ways. In a project on transnational families (Coe 2013), Ghanaian immigrant parents living in the United States (US) railed against the costs, rules, and bureaucracy of US immigration policies which prevented the reunification of kin for many years; or against the long, irregular, and poorly paid work that made it difficult to raise a child in this country, often resulting in a baby or child being sent to Ghana to be raised there by an aunt or grandmother. In a project on African home care workers in the US, a home care worker from Guinea expressed anger at the agencies for their exorbitant profits by which her patients paid a lot for her assistance, but she received only half of it. She was only willing to be interviewed because she hoped I would be an ‘arrow’ in advocating on behalf of care workers (Coe 2019a). Although I discouraged my research participants from hoping for change, I was sympathetic to their desires and secretly wished that my writing could make more of a difference in their lives. My academic writing did not reach a wide audience because of its length, theoretical argumentation, and anthropological terminology, despite public interest in the topics of immigration, aging, and care. These nagging thoughts stifled my motivation to write another book based on research I was conducting on changes in aged care in Ghana.

And so I began to explore different styles of storytelling. I tried writing opinion pieces (Coe 2019b, 2019c, 2017, 2016). These short pieces consist of an opening vignette, several facts, and concluding recommendations regarding action and policy. Often they felt highly simplified – even simplistic – reducing the nuance and complexity of my more ethnographic writing. Some of them led to other media presentations, such as radio interviews, but in general this writing too left me feeling ineffectual. I began to explore visual storytelling, which I thought would be more accessible to my research participants in Ghana, who primarily read religious literature but also consumed television and talk radio.

Because of my research on changes in aged care in Ghana, I began considering making a film about a social group of older adults, organised

through the Presbyterian Church of Ghana, who met on a weekly basis to sing, tell stories, dance, and play games. The district organisers of the group were an unlikely pair of strong personalities: a dour retired minister who reminded older adults of their upcoming death to bring them closer to God, contrasted by a lively, practical retired kindergarten teacher who wanted to make sure the gatherings were fun. In her practical focus on action, the teacher reminded me of my own mother, and I felt drawn to her. I wanted to make a film about her and the activities of the group, since they were visually and aurally arresting with recitations of jokes, riddles, and Ananse folktales, and participants playing *ampe* (a children's game), board games, and music. Unfortunately, the kindergarten teacher passed away before I had a chance to organise the resources to make the film – one of the problems of studying aging! In the summer of 2019, I saw the opportunity to make a film about another similar social group when I would be in Ghana for another bout of field research.

In preparation for my trip, I attended an intensive film class organised by a community centre in the US city where I live. These classes are offered to the community, including to young people, in a commitment to help residents tell stories about their own marginalised communities. What took me by surprise was that I was expected to make a film *during* the class, and not simply afterwards, as I had planned to do once in Ghana. I thus ended up shooting the footage for *two* films that summer. My student film was based on interviews with Auntie Gifty, a Ghanaian home care worker in the US, which I entitled 'Stories from Home Care' (Coe 2020a). I chose to focus on her because she was an excellent storyteller and because the bitterness she felt about her work had been the guiding spirit behind the book I wrote about home care (Coe 2019a); as I wrote, her voice was always in my ear, encouraging me and helping me see the importance of my efforts. The second film, which I called 'Making Happiness: Older People Organize Themselves', focused on an aged fellowship group in Ghana, organised under the auspices of a Presbyterian congregation (Coe 2020b). With the help of a small grant from the community centre, I was able to work on 'Stories from Home Care' with an editing consultant, Ann Tegnell, who taught me a great deal about storytelling through film.

Making a documentary film based on considerable prior ethnographic research made the process quite different from engaging in new ethnographic research: I already had access and permission from the participants. As the ethnographic research was already complete, I had a clear conception on what I could obtain and thus what I wanted to see and hear for the purposes of the film, although, as in ethnographic research, the results are always something different, pulled by the desires of the participants and the exigencies of the situation. The film-making thus felt much more directed and less open-ended than the prior fieldwork. However, I would argue that even in

fieldwork one has a sense of the end product which guides what one will focus on and collect.

For both films I used a lightweight digital camera (Sony α7s), two high-quality external microphones (lavalier and directional), and a tripod. Because of cost constraints, I was the camera-person, interviewer, director, producer, sound engineer, and grip all at the same time, which was a bit overwhelming. Working in a team would have been easier but might also have damaged the intimacy that was made possible by working alone. In comparison, anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff worked with a film crew on her documentary film 'Number Our Days' (Littman and Myerhoff 1976), which she produced in parallel with a book of the same name (Myerhoff 1978). Working with a film crew allowed Myerhoff as ethnographer to appear on screen, adding to the emotional impact of the film because of her own vibrancy and the ability to document her close and caring interaction with her informants. When contrasting this fieldwork with previous fieldwork in Mexico, Myerhoff poignantly remarks that it made sense to her to study aging in a Jewish community because she herself would become an old Jewish lady (she never in fact had that opportunity – she died in middle age). In some ways one could even say that Myerhoff almost steals the show.

One of the most important differences between fieldwork and film-making is that, both in Ghana and the US, the participants in the films understood the purpose of my presence and activities in a way they never had during my ethnographic research and were noticeably more enthusiastic and supportive of my efforts. In Ghana, doing fieldwork, I am often confused for a development worker or potential patron, or even a language student or instructor because of my fluency in Twi; 'anthropologist' is not a known local position. Making a film, on the other hand, was a clear task that people everywhere understood. Aunty Gifty was thrilled to be in a film and was pleased that it would bring attention to home care, although we had difficulty coordinating our schedules and she was perhaps not sufficiently aware how many hours I would need to be with her for a documentary film. The members of the New Tafo aged fellowship group in Ghana similarly welcomed me, because they felt that the film would contribute to their efforts to attract further support from the Presbyterian Church leadership. I ended up interviewing thirteen participants, including the local chief, because they all wanted to contribute. Although I was not sure the film required so many interviews, I could not decline their enthusiasm.

Despite my previous interactions with research participants, sometimes long-term, I learnt more about them through the process of making the film. The main reason was that the film-making provided the rationale to do a lot more hanging out with people and following them around – in sum, to do more fieldwork. It gave me a reason to conduct multiple interviews, such as with one person like Aunty Gifty, allowing me to hear multiple versions of

her life story at different moments in time with different emphases and nuances, making it clearer what was important to her in such stories. I had a more visceral understanding of her lack of a stable home after we struggled to find a place to sit and film an interview. As for 'Making Happiness', after several participants in the aged fellowship group discussed the boredom they felt in their homes, which the activities of the fellowship group relieved, I asked one of the organisers whether I could visit her household and film its daily activities. Her assent allowed me to get a good sense of her lively, intergenerational household, which contradicted her sense of loneliness and boredom. Across multiple interviews I picked up that the leadership of the Presbyterian Church only half-heartedly supported the group's efforts, leading to dismay and discontent by group members about how aging issues were being marginalised in the church. Thus, film-making seemed to support deep ethnographic research by giving me further opportunities (or excuses) to understand people's perspectives and lives by accompanying them and asking them about their experiences.

In other ways, however, the film-making process seemed to go against my desire to learn ethnographically. I often found that I could concentrate either on being present ethnographically or on conducting the film-making: Did I want to stop an informant whilst talking to adjust the light and achieve a better quality shot or did I want to interrupt to ask them to repeat what they had said without hesitations and distractions, or with more detail and full names so they would be clearer? Should I direct how and where they should stand, or should I just follow them around, with no attempt to control light and noise? Through the decisions I made I found that, at heart, I was an ethnographer first and a film-maker second: I really did not want to interrupt the speakers or change their posture in order to achieve a better film. For example, when filming 'Stories from Home Care', Aunty Gifty was driving a patient home after an event and I was filming their conversation, sharing the back seat with Aunty Gifty's possessions, because she was staying with a friend on her couch. As an ethnographer, I was happy to be hanging out with a home care worker and her patient, listening and occasionally chiming into their jokes. As a film-maker, I knew the footage I was getting from the back seat was terrible – the back of their heads jerking up and down with the unevenness of the road. For the purpose of the film, I was also unsure whether I should be silent or join into their jokes. When they stopped at a McDonalds for a bite to eat, I was excited to have the opportunity to film their faces; but then I was prevented from doing so as McDonalds has a policy that no filming may be done on their premises. The film-maker in me sighed in exasperation; the ethnographer put the camera down and enjoyed sharing the food and interacting with the two without the distraction of filming, resigned to writing up the event in fieldnotes afterwards.

The technical quality of the films suffered as a result of my ethnographic instincts, and yet both films benefitted from the rapport, connection, and ease established by my ethnographic heart. It was clear to me that the form of the final product, whether in writing or in film, shapes the process of inquiry and discovery, affecting what is learnt and what is possible to tell.

As my film class repeatedly reminded me, the power of films is in the emotion they elicit. Audiences feel connected to the central participants presented in the film, who seem to speak directly to the audience. Their humanity is on display visually and aurally. For example, whilst the strong personalities of Myerhoff's research participants are visible in her book, her film makes that impression much more immediate. In films, a story about one person seems more powerful than one about several people, in some ways the opposite of ethnographic writing where some of the ethnographic authority comes from telling variations of a single story and having different kinds of informants. My goal when editing the footage was to tell a compelling story, selecting key incidents from a huge array of footage that would move my audience and manipulating the strongest elements available to construct that story. In this sense, I did not find it so different from ethnographic writing, where I chose incidents and vignettes from a much larger set of field notes, interviews, and archival information to illustrate and flesh out a theoretically organised argument.

What did seem different, however, was how much information I could put into each film. A film is much more compressed and condensed than ethnographic writing. Writing is better at providing context and background. The film cannot be as informative, because not all background information can be communicated visually. Relaying context through text or voice-overs has a distancing effect, the opposite of the connection I wanted the audience to feel with the participants in the film. Ultimately, I decided to cut down on the amount of narration I wanted to include and rather considered the films as supplemented by my written material which provided the context. This approach contrasts with Myerhoff, who narrates much of the context in her film and inserts an interview of herself, the combination of which allows her film to raise the same central insights as her ethnography *Number Our Days*.

What also varies between the two products are the different traditions of editing stories. Documentary film-makers are more willing to discuss the constructedness of their product and manipulate its elements than ethnographic writers, perhaps because they are in the same community as artistic and fictional film-makers. From my perspective, film-makers make edits that would make me cringe as an ethnographic writer, like moving elements around to construct a coherent and concise story. This editing is more than eliding out hesitations, stutters, coughs, and sighs. For example, in 'Stories from Home Care', Aunty Gifty told a deeply moving story of helping one of her patients die peacefully. From audience reactions during the editing pro-

cess, it was clear that this story was the emotional high point of the film. At one point, Aunty Gifty referred to the patient's son as 'whatcha-ma-call-it's son', in an effort to avoid using her patient's real name. My editing consultant, Ann Tegnell, warned that this could make Aunty Gifty seem unsympathetic to her patient and destroy the caring persona that had been established in other segments. To prevent her appearing as an unsympathetic figure to the audience, I substituted the term with the word 'his', which Aunty Gifty had said elsewhere. The switch was relatively easy, given the editing software we had available, and is unnoticeable unless you listen for it. Similarly, when Aunty Gifty tells the story of another patient, I inserted the location from elsewhere in her narrative so that the clip was clearer to the audience. In another clip, Aunty Gifty's patient waved goodbye to her as she dropped him off at his apartment. Because I had the camera focused on him rather than her, I had no shot of her response. Instead, I inserted another shot of her from a different moment. Thus, film-making traditions promote greater manipulation of the elements to produce a desired effect: in this case, to maintain emotional connection to Aunty Gifty and to make her stories clear with the minimal number of words. The manipulations had to be invisible or the attempt would backfire, making the audience aware of the film-maker's presence and wondering about my intentions behind the edits. As my goal in 'Stories from Home Care' was to establish and maintain a connection between Aunty Gifty and the audience, I reorganised Aunty Gifty's stories to make them clear and compelling: the more I left out what was unnecessary, the more what remained attained power.

In contrast, 'Making Happiness' clearly had to focus on a group of people in order to highlight the activities of the aged fellowship group. With the founder of the organisation having died a few months earlier, there was no compelling personality around which to organise the film. I also felt obligated to include a snippet from every interview I did, or participants would feel left out. Instead, the drama lay in the organisation these older people had built and the dominant emotion of joy that they experienced in coming together. Most of the footage came from the activities of the fellowship group, which demonstrate the engagement of participants. These are interspersed with short clips from interviews with participants – just a sentence or two – to establish context and clarify what was happening during the various activities displayed. Editing in film-making, as in writing, is essential: often whittling away and honing in strengthen the core. For 'Making Happiness' this process required clarity and discernment about what the core was and was not; editing was the critical labour of discerning and focusing on the core.

I am still learning the technical aspects of film-making, whereas I have become a more proficient writer over the past forty years, honing my craft continuously over that time period. With this my writing has become easier, taking less time and eliciting less anxiety. Filming and film editing are

new and exciting. Editing is time-consuming, with minor edits improving the piece with each review of the film. The process reminded me of writing essays in high school, when I needed to read an essay multiple – sometimes a hundred – times before it was ready to submit, because I needed to train myself to see the problems.

At the moment I do not know whether my films will be any more successful in moving my audience emotionally or bringing awareness to the problems faced by my research participants. Distribution of films is not easy. Even if freely available on YouTube, people are busy and do not necessarily have the time to watch a film of ten to fifteen minutes unless they find it compelling. Ultimately, I see my films as complementary to my ethnographic writing, where the films can be viewed on their own but also reflected in association with my accompanying books. My ethnographic writing provides more context, assuring my audience that Auntie Gifty is not the only home care worker to experience foreclosure on her home, and illustrating the variations in older people's organisations and activities in Ghana. I came to documentary film-making as a result of my dissatisfactions with ethnographic writing, but I have realised that film does not necessarily resolve those concerns. Nor does it replace writing. Rather, for me, writing and film-making are tandem processes, with different goals, emphases, and possibilities.

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