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Chad Raphael
Santa Clara University, craphael@scu.edu

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Broadcast Network Documentaries

Chad Raphael

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Documentaries are nonfiction programs that convey experience, provide information, and offer analysis. Many memorable and respected programs in American television journalism were documentaries. In part this is because documentaries offer journalists the luxury of more airtime to explore a single topic in greater depth than the shorter-format evening news or newsmagazine programs. In addition, documentarians are often freer to express their own conclusions on controversial issues than beat reporters, who are more constrained by the demands of objectivity and balance.

Although the line between documentary and docudrama is often blurry, documentaries are less likely to dramatize or re-enact events. In contrast to talk shows, documentaries aim to go beyond "talking heads" offering opinions to convey the lived experience of people, places, and events. Documentary makers usually construct their programs from some combination of recordings in the field, compilations of archival materials, interviews, graphics, and animations. Many types of broadcast documentary have emerged over the years, including investigative, social, political, historical, cultural, biographical, diary, and those focused on nature.

Radio Documentary

Documentaries held a small but significant place in American radio. From the beginnings of radio broadcasting in the 1920s through the 1940s, the handful of hours per week of documentary programming on each network were really docudramas that presented re-enactments of historical and current events. Yet programs such as *Great Moments in History* (NBC, 1927-1928), *The March of Time* (CBS, 1931-1945), and Norman Corwin's (1910–) patriotic reports on American institutions and World War II (CBS, 1941-1945) helped to develop some of the conventions of radio and television documentary. Such programs also offered

network affiliated stations an important way to fulfill their public service programming obligations as then required by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC).

Two main barriers limited development of radio documentary before the 1950s: the limits of bulky and unreliable recording equipment and the networks' reluctance to air recorded material because of poor sound quality. Advances in recording technology – including magnetic wire, discs, and, eventually, audiotape – allowed some experimentation with recording live voices and sounds from the field. Growing interest in documenting cultural and social life during the 1930s inspired a handful of reports on folklore, folk music, and the impact of the Depression. These programs were produced by the Library of Congress, the Smithsonian Institution and other government agencies. During World War II, recorded reports from the front began to break down network resistance to airing material created outside the studio. After the war, a few programs began to weave clips of reality sound with narration, including Edward R. Murrow (1908–1965) and Fred Friendly's (1915–1998) *Hear It Now* (CBS, 1950-1951), which quickly became the basis for their early television documentary series, *See It Now*.

However, the economics of commercial radio continued to relegate documentary to the margins from the 1950s onward. The networks' hold over radio waned with the rise of independent radio stations, television networks, and alternative program packagers. Most local stations adopted music formats with only brief breaks for news that left little room for long-form treatment of issues.

In the 1990s and 2000s, radio documentary enjoyed a small creative renaissance on the two American public radio networks: National Public Radio and Public Radio International. American RadioWorks was the largest in-house producer of public radio documentaries, while Soundprint primarily developed and distributed programs made by independent and station-based producers. Both created a steady stream of investigative, historical, and cultural documentaries told in a narrative style. The most notable of these programs, *This American Life*, introduced a new format with its 1995 debut that explored a common theme through individual stories told in the first person by those who lived them. Wry, literate narration by host Ira Glass (1959–) and the breadth of topics explored, ranging from war to summer camp, offered an

innovative way to view social and political life through personal voices that created a kind of collective diary.

Television Documentary

Television documentary emerged in the 1950s, influenced by traditions inherited from radio news, photojournalism, documentary film, and movie theater newsreels. These different influences were not always easy for journalists to reconcile. Some producers saw themselves primarily as filmmakers telling stories through images and location sound recordings. In contrast, many reporters tended to favor an illustrated lecture approach in which their narration and interviews were the primary focus.

Documentaries, which were scarce on American television in the 1950s, were of two main types. The first, historical documentaries, were compilation films that knitted together archival footage unified by a dominant narrator who told the story, setting the conventions for historical documentaries for years to come. Each of the major commercial networks produced a compilation series in cooperation with the military. *Victory at Sea* (NBC, 1952-1953), relied on footage shot by the U.S. Navy to recount the naval battles of World War II to the dramatic musical score of Richard Rogers. *The Big Picture* (ABC, 1953-1959) drew on Army footage and sources to portray military history and leaders. *Air Power* (CBS, 1956 - 1957), produced with help from the U.S. Air Force, told the story of World War II's aircraft and decisive air battles. These series were later syndicated to stations around the country, where they were re-run for many years. *The Twentieth Century* (CBS, 1957-1970), narrated by Walter Cronkite (1916–), depicted historical events through the biographies of key figures, often including retrospective interviews with participants. *You Are There* (CBS, 1953–1956) dramatized events by placing modern reporters within recreated historical scenes.

The investigative documentary debuted in the 1950s. *See It Now* (CBS, 1951-1955, then intermittently until 1958) marked the first critical journalism on television, giving birth to the second major documentary type. A team headed by reporter Edward R. Murrow and producer Fred Friendly shot their own film and conducted their own interviews rather than using re-enactments. The series focused on current and controversial issues rather than major historical

events or widely admired heroes. The program was more likely to question political leaders and policies than to collaborate closely with government agencies as co-producers. In its most famous reports early in 1954, *See It Now* critiqued Senator Joseph McCarthy's anti-communist investigations, profiling some of the victims of his often unsupported accusations of communist activity. Although Congressional sentiment was already turning against McCarthy at the time of the reports, *See It Now* probably helped diminish public support as well. However, network and sponsor discomfort with the program's courting of controversy and commercial pressures to air more lucrative programming forced eventual cancellation of the series and its replacement by the occasional *CBS Reports*.

The 1960s can be seen as the golden age of television network documentary. Early in the decade, each network developed a prime-time documentary series: *CBS Reports, NBC White Paper*, and ABC's *Bell and Howell Close-Up!* At the high point of the documentary boom, the networks aired 447 documentaries in the 1961-62 season, over twice as many as four years earlier. The heavy investment in documentaries was the result of several factors. As public service programming, documentaries helped the networks appease angry regulators after the quiz show rigging scandals of the late 1950s. FCC Chairman Newton Minow (1926–) pressured the networks to expand informational fare to improve what he called the "vast wasteland" of commercial entertainment. The Kennedy administration hoped that documentaries might support American efforts around the world to contain communism. The networks believed that documentaries would increase the influence of American television as the networks expanded into global video markets. Television journalists hoped documentaries would help raise their prestige to the level of top print journalists, while offering citizens more thoughtful explanations of current events. By 1969, the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) began to provide a new outlet for documentary journalism that exposed social problems and critiqued American institutions.

Although the networks experimented with many different approaches to documentary in the 1960s, their most enduring contribution may have been to the development of investigative television reporting. Network journalists helped create the first sustained period of muckraking since the beginning of the 20th century. While most scholars and journalists think print media have been primarily responsible for watchdog reporting on government and corporations, the

networks created their documentary units several years before major newspapers developed permanent investigative teams. The number of investigative documentaries on television compared favorably with the number of major press exposés each year---and the documentaries reached many more Americans. In the early 1960s, about 90 percent of American households saw at least one documentary per month. By the early 1970s, a prime-time CBS documentary drew seven to twelve million viewers, while the largest urban newspapers reached fewer than a million readers each.

The most famous of these television reports were as carefully researched and argued as their print counterparts. For example, in *Harvest of Shame* (CBS, 1961), Murrow attacked the poor working and living conditions of migrant farm workers by following some of them on the east and west coasts. *The Battle of Newburgh* (NBC, 1962) criticized opponents of public support for the poor by closely examining the evidence and arguments of an anti-welfare town manager in New York state. *Hunger in America* (CBS, 1968) exposed federal food programs' failure to address widespread malnutrition among Appalachian whites, southern blacks, Native Americans in the southwest, and Mexican-Americans in Texas. Several documentaries exposed the dark side of America's war in Vietnam through first-hand reporting. Like most investigative reporting, these documentaries often relied heavily on government sources and interest groups for their framing of the issues, yet they helped to amplify those voices to a larger audience.

Journalists invented many of the conventions of television documentary in this same period. Taking advantage of newly-available lightweight cameras and sound equipment, documentary producers were freed to leave the studio interview setting to offer more intimate and dynamic portraits of people and places. Robert Drew (1924–) produced path-breaking documentaries for Time-Life's television stations and then ABC in which moving cameras followed political leaders behind the scenes for the first time to record them during moments of reflection and crisis. The first of these, *Primary* (1960), followed John F. Kennedy and his opponent Hubert Humphrey in public and private for the last five days of the Wisconsin presidential primary and influenced how political campaigns would be represented for years to come. This informal and less stagy style became known as *cinema verite* or direct cinema. *Biography of a Bookie Joint* (CBS, 1961) inaugurated the use of hidden cameras, which would become a staple of

investigative television reporting, in this case to capture the doings in an illegal betting parlor operating with police protection in Boston. Documentaries began featuring confrontational interviews between journalists and their sources, introducing another mainstay of television reporting.

Investigative reporting, however, attracted intense opposition from government and business officials, advertisers, and nervous network executives. Complaints to the FCC about documentaries' fairness and accuracy grew. Executive branch officials and Congressional committees conducted lengthy probes of television documentary practices, accusing the networks of staging events, encouraging subjects to break the law, paying participants for their stories, and reflecting political bias. Perhaps ironically, airing hard-hitting documentaries helped stimulate threats to regulate network news. When Congress investigated whether CBS journalists deceptively edited an interview with a Department of Defense official to make him sound untruthful in *The Selling of the Pentagon* (CBS, 1971), CBS President Frank Stanton (1908–2006) narrowly escaped being cited for contempt of Congress because he refused to relinquish reporters' work notes and unused footage (outtakes). While the documentary boom arose in part to assuage ire at deceptive game shows, critics accused some documentaries of being equally fraudulent.

Nowhere was this backlash against documentaries felt more directly than at PBS which depended, in part, on public funding. The noncommercial network focused heavily on informational and educational programming to fulfill its mandate. This included airing some contentious documentaries that challenged major institutions. One such report, *Banks and the Poor* (PBS, 1970), assailed banks for discriminating against low-income borrowers and Congress for failing to address the problem because of its members' financial ties to the banking industry. The program incensed bankers, some of whom sat on local public station boards of directors. President Richard Nixon's administration sought to restructure and rein in public broadcasting to limit the autonomy of program producers by trimming budgets for program production. Public affairs documentaries on PBS declined in the ensuing decade.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the documentary also began a slow decline on the commercial networks. Political and legal pressure from government and corporate targets of documentaries alienated sponsors, network executives, and affiliate stations (who refused to carry some of the programs). The rise of television newsmagazines, led by *60 Minutes* (which premiered in 1968 on CBS), demonstrated that programs with several briefer stories reported by a regular cast of celebrity journalists could attract larger audiences and more advertising dollars than long-format documentaries on a single issue. In the 1980s, the FCC dropped regulations that had spurred television stations to provide public service programming. The networks cut back unprofitable news programs because of declining audiences and advertising revenues in the face of growing competition from cable and satellite television, home video recorders, and, by the mid-1990s, the Internet. By 1984 the three commercial television networks aired just 11 documentaries between them all year.

The documentary survived in the 1990s and early 2000s , mainly on PBS and cable television networks. On PBS, the long-running *Frontline* series and the documentaries of Bill Moyers (1934–) kept the investigative tradition alive. *POV* (short for "point of view") aired more personal, independent documentaries, some of which addressed public life, often from the standpoint of unsung individuals. Ken Burns (1953–) reinvented the historical documentary, starting with his 12 hour epic *The Civil War* (PBS, 1990), by mixing imaginative use of archival photographs with contemporary cinematography, music, and actors' readings of historical documents to bring the past to life. Series such as *Nova* and *Nature* continued to introduce viewers to recent developments in human understanding of nature and science.

Cable networks offered a new home for documentaries that were less constrained than on broadcast networks. Some cable channels specialized in presenting particular types of documentary, such as The History Channel (historical documentaries) and Discovery (science and nature documentaries), while others regularly incorporated documentaries into their entertainment schedules, such as the Independent Film Channel, the Sundance Channel, and Home Box Office (HBO). The Documentary Channel focused entirely on presenting documentaries of all types. Most of the most significant and award-winning documentaries of this period premiered on cable, such as Spike Lee's (1957–) *When the Levees Broke* (HBO,

2006), a four-part examination of human suffering in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina and an indictment of the federal government's response to the crisis.

Conclusion

The broadcast network documentary is significant for several broader trends in American news. First, the documentary has been especially likely to provoke controversy over journalism ethics. Documentary makers have experimented with how best to tell stories and express views on public controversies. Such innovations as field recordings, hidden cameras, and combative interviews have sparked discussion over the proper balance between journalists' duties to record reality and to interpret it, or to reproduce powerful sources' views verbatim and to reveal their inconsistency and evasiveness through editing. Documentary has also been a frequent touchstone for arguments over whether journalists should pursue objective and balanced reporting of competing views or make reasoned judgments about which views are better supported or more fair-minded. Documentary producers are divided over whether they have a responsibility to go beyond exposing social problems by offering potential solutions. At the same time, reliance on reenactments (and claims that some documentaries have relied on misleadingly staged scenes) continues to provoke arguments about the responsibility of journalists to disclose their methods for constructing truth.

The documentary has often raised questions about who is a journalist and who is not. For most of their history, the main commercial networks were reluctant to air documentaries made by independent (non-network) producers. With a few exceptions, documentaries were produced by network news departments to ensure fairness in issue treatment, consistency of journalistic standards, and to promote network journalists. In contrast, PBS and cable television have relied mainly on independent producers, who often bring different perspectives to bear. Yet independent producers may identify more closely with one point of view on a topic or constituency and may prioritize journalistic values differently. Some have not been trained as journalists.

Finally, development of the television documentary illustrates both the promises and perils of the decline of network news' dominance. Forty years ago, network television journalists had bigger

budgets, and more production and air time to explore often controversial issues in depth than do network staffs today. During the 1960s and 1970s, documentaries could reach and influence millions of Americans. Because so many might watch, however, documentaries became a focal point for criticism of television journalism generally. Powerful forces in government and business pressured network executives to rein in documentary reports to avoid offense, lawsuits, regulatory oversight, and lost advertising dollars.

By the 1990s and 2000s, changing economics and deregulation of television fragmented the mass audience and all but erased the documentary from the commercial network schedules. Broadcast documentarians could no longer command the resources and broad public attention they had in the past. This distinction passed to documentaries first released in movie theaters, which were often buoyed by organized political campaigns, such as those of Michael Moore (1954–) (*Fahrenheit 9/11, Sicko*) and former Vice-President Al Gore's (1948–) exposition of global warming, *An Inconvenient Truth*. PBS and cable channels also suffered some economic and legal pressure to quell or restrain investigative reporting. But these networks aired more documentaries produced by independent journalists for audiences more likely to tolerate journalism with a point of view.

Although documentaries have never been plentiful, they have often drawn high esteem within and beyond broadcast journalism. Because they permit journalists to tell lengthier stories and to express a point of view more clearly than other types of news, documentaries may have greater impact on public consciousness. Documentarians pioneered many techniques of television news and, in the process, prompted many recurring questions about broadcast news ethics. Not all documentary makers have identified themselves as journalists in the traditional sense, a role that grows fuzzier as more voices produce documentaries for cable and public television. Some mourn the passing of a golden age of television documentary.. But many feel that documentary makers are freer today on public broadcasting and cable networks.

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See also: Docudrama; Documentary Film; Ethics; Federal Communications Commission; Investigative Journalism; Magazine News Programs; Mass Media, Possible Decline of; National Public Radio