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ORAL HISTORY, VISUAL ETHNOGRAPHY, AND THE INTERACTIVE DOCUMENTARY

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“Tell me a story,” is the plea of the oral historian to the narrator. Those stories are powerful, at times becoming what Walter Benjamin (1969) called *mémoire involuntaire*: memories lodged in our brains despite our efforts to the contrary. Oral historians, as Donna Haraway (1988) notes, must come “to terms (that) the agency of the ‘objects’ studied is the only way to avoid gross error and false knowledge” (pp. 592–593).

However, oral history also has another demand: publication or an active insertion into the public sphere beyond the traditional archive. The interactive documentary, or i-doc, is one way to achieve this goal. As Judith Aston (2016) notes, the format allows for user engagement and participation of an almost-encyclopedic amount of data housed in a navigable virtual space, demonstrating a type of “embodied interaction” (n.p.). If the analog documentary is a linear story with a pre-ordained beginning, middle, and end, the i-doc allows the user to “play” the story, navigating between ideas, people, and things in a nonlinear manner. The order of the elements is less important than the stories that are being told.

In some ways the i-doc producer and director are attempting to behave like Toto in the classic Hollywood film *The Wizard of Oz*. In a scene toward the end of the film, Dorothy and her friends stand before the Wizard in a green-hued great room. They have returned from a successful mission to destroy the Wicked Witch of the West, and are seeking their reward. As the Wizard hems and haws, attempting to renege on his promised gifts, Dorothy’s dog Toto creeps over to a green curtain. As the dog tugs the curtain aside, a small, unimposing man is revealed, working an elaborate control panel. “Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain,” the Wizard intones—though, of course, it is evident to Dorothy and her friends (as well as the audience) that the man behind the curtain is the Wizard himself.

By pulling back the metaphorical curtain on the storytelling process, the i-doc producer and director are allowing viewers/users to see behind the “curtain” and point out the artificiality of the idea of story/narrative construction within documentary practice. Instead, the storytelling power and agency are potentially transferred to participants who traditionally have little or no editorial power: story narrators and users. The creator, narrators, and viewers share authority in the i-doc.

This chapter explores an i-doc (www.pinupthemovie.com) and how the producer and director have made conscious choices to achieve narrator agency. In the project, many of the women self-identify as feminist and claim that pin up offers them feelings of empowerment. The i-doc

allows for robust exploration of these claims. Unlike the traditional documentary, where the bulk of interviews end up on the virtual cutting room floor, interactive storytelling allows for the inclusion of full archival interviews embedded alongside traditional edited stories. We argue that the i-doc offers much potential for visual ethnographers: story-driven narrative, narrator agency, academic contextualization, and user- and narrator-friendly archival storage in a single web-based platform.

Oral history versus visual ethnography

Oral history, while methodologically related to ethnographic research, exists in a tense relationship with ethnography. True, both talk about a “thickening” process that occurs in the collaboration between scholars and members of a culture (Geertz, 1973; Portelli, 1998), and both use interviews with cultural members as the backbone of research. But oral history and ethnography are not the same. As Ryan (2015) has discussed previously, the relationship between the two can be fraught. Oral history uses the concept of a “shared authority” (Grele, 2006), or a negotiation between participants and the scholar as to how the life history is framed, how the stories gathered are interpreted, or even the continued participation of those sharing their life history in a project/archive (participants can withdraw at any time). The person sharing their oral history is considered a “narrator” of their life story, an acknowledgment that they not only are in control of their life history, but that their specific knowledge gives them the authority to theorize about the historical and cultural events they experience (Portelli, 1998). The conversations should be rich and detail-laden, supported by personal analysis by the narrators.

Oral history calls this concept “thick dialogue” (Portelli, 1998), borrowing from the ethnographic idea of “thick description” (Geertz, 1973). But there is a key difference: the narrator holds agency over how her story is told, while within ethnographic work the self-reflexivity of the researcher is key. Ethnographic thick description shifts the burden of analysis from the shared authority, to a more unilateral approach to scholarship. Informants in ethnography are considered knowledgeable situated agents, but are not expected to offer the philosophical analysis of the event studied: this is the domain of the scholar conducting the research.

This split is often echoed in the academy, where oral history projects frequently are exempt from university oversight via Institutional Review Boards. In the United States (where the authors of this chapter both live and work), research is considered “a systematic investigation, including research development, testing, and evaluation, designed to develop or contribute to generalizable knowledge” (Protection of Human Subjects, 2018). As of January 2017, oral history was defined as an “explicit carve-out of activities from the definition of research” (Menikoff, 2017, p. 7240). Because of its shared authority and specific focus on the personal stories of the narrators, oral history is considered akin to journalism, documentary, and other non-research scholarly activities. It is its non-universality that makes it exempt from institutional oversight. Ethnographic research, with its grounding in the anthropological tradition, is not accorded the same exemption.

Both oral history and visual ethnography share something more than a methodological approach. Each also demands that the research project have some sort of outcome visible to the larger public—projects cannot exist only in an archive or scholarly journals. But this demand comes with its own set of problems and issues, especially when made manifest in the documentary format. For the visual ethnographer, the question becomes how to incorporate transparency within the filmmaking process itself, demonstrating to potential audiences that a cameraperson, producer, director, editor, etc. are all involved in creating a representation of “reality” (Hermer, 2009). This can include such techniques as incorporating elements that call attention to the fact

that the filmmaker was present: the dip of a boom mic, wild sound from an off-camera discussion, etc. For the oral historian, the idea of a complete “shared authority” would potentially extend to the finished product itself, offering narrators a preview screening or edit approval. This can be profoundly disorienting to the researcher trained in the documentary or journalistic tradition, where the authorial authority is valued.

Disrupting the documentary tradition

The merger of oral history with documentary is nothing new. Oral histories are frequently used as a storytelling tool within non-academic nonfiction films. Tom Brokaw’s *The Greatest Generation* was both a book and documentary film; the former *NBC News* anchor used oral histories to tell stories of average Americans who came of age during World War II. *The Life and Times of Rosie the Riveter* was originally broadcast on public television in the United States. Connie Field’s documentary told the stories of women who went to work on the factory production line during World War II, and has been selected for preservation by the National Film Registry at the Library of Congress in the United States because of its significance. In the Academy Award-nominated *Harlan County USA*, director Barbara Kopel follows the families impacted by a coal miner’s strike over unionization in Kentucky in 1973. The National Public Radio (NPR) *StoryCorps* project invites people to interview family members. Excerpts from the interviews are broadcast on NPR’s news programming, and are also produced for a website as animated videos. The interviews are archived at the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress.

But in all of these examples, despite the grounding in oral history methodology, the projects may do a disservice to the intent of oral history. The interviews are edited, with verbal stutters such as “uh” or “like” removed and off-topic ramblings condensed (when included at all). Even more specifically, the goal of the “shared authority” of oral history may be outweighed by the commercial or narrative demands of a feature documentary project.

Typically, and traditionally, those demands flow in a fairly rigorous, formulaic fashion. This standby, which Rabinger (2009) dubs “a contract with the audience” (p. 21), guides not only documentary production, but novels, stage plays, and Hollywood feature films, as the three-act dramatic structure. The format dates back to Aristotle’s *Poetics*; in more common parlance, it is known as Freytag’s pyramid. This storytelling shape relies on: exposition, an initial incident, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution, and dénouement in linear fashion. Structure works in response to the viewer’s built-in expectations, writes Bernard (2011). “There’s no such thing as a lack of structure,” (p. 51) she contends. In other words, it is expected that the documentary “story” will have a beginning, a middle, and an end. That framework is the expression of authorial control.

But what happens to documentary film when, as is in the case of oral history, some authority is ceded? What happens when a filmmaker begins to experiment with format, to hybridize the expression of the documentary through a marriage of film and web-based storytelling? Or, to put it more succinctly, what happens to visual documentary storytelling when there is no expectation of a traditional narrative arc?

These questions arise when a documentary moves from the filmic structure (an edited story designed to be viewed in one sitting and/or in a linear fashion) to something that is less structured and that offers less authorial control. It is a challenging experiment—and something that is not entirely new to us. As filmmakers and scholars we are frustrated with the idea that stories are left out of our projects, discarded on the proverbial cutting room floor because they do not serve the overall story arc. In our previous project, *Homefront Heroines: The WAVES of World*

War II (2012), we gathered more than 50 oral histories. They were all female military veterans who had served in either the United States Navy or Coast Guard. But when we began film production we cut down the number of interviewees to less than ten, and even some of those ended up being discarded from the feature documentary.

We crafted two solutions to this problem. In the feature film, we used what we dubbed a “Greek chorus” effect: the voices of several additional women, unidentified and off camera, talked about key themes that emerged during the oral history interviews. Our thought was that the multiple layered voices allowed the viewer to understand that other women theorized similarly about the impact of their naval military service. We used a consistent audio cue, a specific piece of music combined with a montage of voices from the oral history interviews, to help signal to viewers that the “Greek chorus” was starting. Each segment was covered with historical video or archival photos.

The second solution was to create a non-filmic experience related to the project (www.homefromtheroines.com). The website included mini video profiles about the women interviewed for the overall oral history project, and features about common experiences using multiple voices embedded in pages with information about the uniforms, boot camp, etc. We were also able to include interviews with scholars whose expertise included military history, women’s history, fashion, propaganda, and World War II; like the narrators, some of these scholars had been interviewed but not included in the documentary film. We are working with the plug-in Oral History Metadata Synchronizer (OHMS) to embed full oral histories, transcripts, and indexes within the website as well.

The site is an information-rich repository, designed in many ways to sate curiosity and share knowledge and experience. However, having completed our next project, *Pin Up! The Movie* (2015), a feature-length documentary about contemporary pin up culture, we sought additional augmentation; we wanted to not only sate, but create curiosity. We wanted to embrace not just the notion of agency in our subjects, but accord viewers the same. We sought out a boundless structure, one that would add expansive dimensionality to Freytag’s pyramid. The interactive documentary, or i-doc, provided that vehicle.

Viewer agency, gamification, and interactivity

Practitioners and theorists of the i-doc consider it an evolving process and product which, in large part, eludes definition. Judith Aston, Sandra Gaudenzi, and Mandy Rose (2017) cast a wide net in attempting to describe the practice: “our definition of i-docs is deliberately open ended. We embrace any project that starts with the intention to engage with the real, and that uses digital interactive technology to realise this intention” (p. 1). In these projects, co-creation via interactivity is essential; the audience or viewer is central to its development, not adherence to narrative structure. The viewer acts as the engine that propels the narrative.

To ground this abstraction in something tangible, it is helpful to think of the Netflix 2018 interactive feature, *Bandersnatch*. In this fictional effort, viewers are prompted on screen to choose various actions for protagonists, from the banal (what breakfast cereal to eat) to the bloody (whether to kill someone). The viewer uses a remote control to make a selection, and is given options to return to crucial decision points if the selection outcome is unsatisfactory. In such fashion, more than a trillion possible story combinations exist as viewers create their own adventure. However, despite all these permutations, *Bandersnatch* contains just five possible story conclusions. It remains wedded to Freytag’s pyramid.

In i-docs, the point of view is typically lensed through the eyes of the individual, not that of a fictional protagonist. It is a first-person perspective delivered through a web-based platform

that, in many regards, mimics game play. Users gain access to story elements only after viewing certain segments, or only learn about certain elements of the documentary's subject matter by doing a deep dive into individual topic threads—which may or may not be necessary for a working understanding of the overall subject.

If the strategies sound familiar, they should. Gamification applies “game-related elements to nongame contexts” (Basten, 2017, n.p.), in an effort to enhance usability, gain trust, and increase motivation for users. Dirk Basten (2017, n.p.) argues that “playful experiences help make nongame scenarios more motivating and engaging,” and says that users tend to fall into two categories: explorers who want to find hidden “Easter eggs” and achievers who want to complete all the challenges/story lines available. Craig Hight calls the nonlinear web-based documentary “a radical departure from the norms of continuity and evidentiary editing that are central to an analogue-based ‘commonsense’ appreciation of documentary form,” but adds that it raises a key question: “how does the creation of pathways through database-centered content relate to the creation of narrative and argument that are of such central concern to documentary practice?” (2008, p. 6).

Thus, the i-doc is not necessarily seeking one of five pre-ordained conclusions à la *Bandersnatch* (which itself argues that viewer choice is just an illusion), but instead is attempting to pull back the curtain and transform the notion of “playing” a film. In the i-doc it is not enough to simply press the “play” button and watch. The format, when done well, demonstrates the research that goes into the documentary itself. It allows viewers the option to wander off into side tangents and spend as much—or as little—time with the topic as desired. The director and producer do not determine when the story ends: that is ultimately up to the user.

These projects rely on connected viewers and participants. As i-docs innovator Katerina Cizek, the co-creator of *Highrise*, notes, the productions “make quality media with partners instead of just about them” (2017, p. 39). In *Prison Valley* (2010), David Dufresne and Philippe Brault examine the prison-industrial complex during recession-era America. Viewers (players) can interview a journalist, a sheriff, or a prison guard, join in online debates, or send emails to characters in the story. Part immersion journalism, part documentary film, part game, that spirit also informs Dufresne's *Fort McMoney* (2013), in which the ethics and economics of oil sand development in Fort McMurray, Alberta is interrogated by an outsider (the viewer). Some two thousand hours of film was produced in the making of the project, offering a plethora of outcomes. “*Fort McMoney* does not want to moralize,” writes Kate Nash, “it's the players themselves who, through their actions, develop their moral sense” (2017, p. 14).

Pin Up! The Interactive Documentary: a case study

Pin Up! The Movie was not edited from two thousand hours of film; though our small crew may have felt that way. Nonetheless, after editing was completed for the feature-length documentary, we believed many voices and many avenues for investigation had been left out. To orient readers, pin up is a global subculture of mostly women who dress in vintage style clothing and makeup. The documentary followed pin ups, photographers, and fashion designers in two locations: Southern California and Colorado's Front Range. Its story arc was familiar to documentary and film viewers, following a typical sports or contest formula (think a low-budget *Koran by Heart* or *When We Were Kings*). One group of women was competing to win the crown at a 1940's-style ball, and the other was seeking to work with a prominent photographer to be published in a magazine. In other words, the stories centered around contests and competing; developing audience empathy with the participants, learning who won (and who lost), and following up

in a third act coda that updated what happened to the film's main participants after the contest ended or publication occurred.

It was also a completely artificial construct. The director (Ryan) coordinated with the photographer for the Southern California shoot, scheduling a hair and makeup instruction session as a casting call, and letting participants know that one or two would have a chance to be followed in a documentary. The photographer had a previously established relationship with the magazine to publish a group of her photos every month. For the Colorado story line, the director worked with the contest organizer to pre-identify four participants. While the four were followed the day of the contest, the rest of their stories were shot weeks and months after the event. We knew the "winners" of both story arcs before the bulk of the video was shot, and structured our documentary accordingly.

But as we dove deeper, we recognized that the film could not do justice to the subculture's global aspects. The film featured, for the most part, two geographic locations; its shoestring budget (roughly \$50,000) prohibited travel to other locales. As a result, before the feature film had been edited, we decided to experiment with the i-doc format to focus on the more global aspects of the story. *Pin Up! The Interactive Documentary* had a beta launch in 2017, with a full launch scheduled for 2020.

We cast the i-doc using the social media platform Instagram, holding a year-long contest where the audience (mostly pin ups) could vote for who should advance. A rotating panel of judges finalized the selections. Some months we had two winners, because of an audience or judges' tie in voting. In others, we offered pin ups a chance to "take over" the film's Instagram account in exchange for a feature in the i-doc. More than 250 women and men entered the contest. We ended up casting pin ups from every continent but Antarctica, with the bulk coming from English-speaking countries.

Because the stories were going to be on the web, we opted to take a looser approach with regards to production aesthetics and standards. We did not have external funding in place for the i-doc; two crowdfunding campaigns and a small grant were the extent of money we received for the project. So we opted to experiment with online video calling features to record the interviews. For the most part, the audio and video quality was strong. The interviews were sometimes shot in a widescreen horizontal orientation, but others were shot vertically, handheld on a cell phone. We did not correct our narrators; for us the vertical orientation seemed more authentic for phone-based video interviews. This allowed us more creativity when editing stories, with the ability to tile photographs or graphic effects alongside the narrator.

The i-doc provided a platform to share people, places, and ideas without the burden of a prescribed narrative, though there most certainly was an intricate plan to connect individuals and story. We used the online gaming platform Twine to develop our basic i-doc storyboard. Twine's rudimentary interface lets users create their own games (i.e., choosing between options). For us, it allowed insight into the results of those choices. We could see when a choice ended up in a dead end, or when a choice would result in the user traveling in a circular pattern. The Twine i-doc storyboard resembles a very large, complex spider's web (see Figure 9.1).

To develop the website, the project used the content management system (CMS) RacontR, which was developed from the backbone of projects like *Prison Valley* and *Fort McMoney*. The CMS code facilitates creating interactive hot spots on the screen. This allows the film to jettison the drop down menu format that we used in our previous project for true interactivity. Videos and other elements are fully embedded into the site, and there is an option to export the HTML package to privately hosted sites (content creators can also leave the i-doc on the RacontR pages for hosting). If the Twine version of the project resembles a spider's web, the back end of the RacontR version is a spider's web on steroids (see Figure 9.2). The mishmash of



Figure 9.1 Twine. Kathleen M. Ryan and David Staton.

linked elements illustrates how viewers can dip in and out of one of an ever-growing number of stories within the larger project (part of the beauty, and frustration, of the i-doc is to know when enough is enough; when do you stop adding to the collection of rabbit holes?).

The interface places the viewer within a boudoir filled with various amenities. Interacting with these—a dressing table, a radio, a television set—allows for exploration of the project. Interested in the fashion and glam side of the story? Click on the vanity to learn how to create the perfect Victory Roll. Concerned with contemporary, celebrity manifestations of the culture? Dive into stories and video performances via a vintage radio. Want to learn more about a particular pin up from another part of the globe? You can explore her musings and motivations by clicking on the map on the wall. There's no overarching story formation and for that reason, there's no hierarchy or privileging; the rockabilly section is accorded equal importance as the roller derby component as is the hair and makeup how-tos.

More importantly, there is no passivity. The user must interact with the various elements on the screen in order to learn more about the subculture. The stories do not have to follow a narrative because they are their own self-contained narrative; each two to five minute segment has its own story arc before linking to other, related, stories. The website is fluid, evolving, and accords agency to the user. There is no overall “ending” to the i-doc because the i-doc itself intentionally rejects linear narrative structures.

Problems (and potential) in emerging technology

For i-docs producers, this can be a liberating exercise, but it does not come without some constraints. For us, the constraints were most evident when we followed oral history protocol in the online project. Each person was asked to provide photographs or videos to help tell her story, and each was allowed to view her story after it was edited. For the most part no one asked for changes, or the changes requested were minor. But one, a white pin up based in South Africa, asked that we rework a section in her story when we talked about black South African pin ups in the subculture. She worried that a regional word choice (the use of the term “coloured” to refer to pin ups of mixed race or from multiple ethnic heritages) could be seen as anachronistic or offensive to someone from outside of South Africa. We removed the term. Another woman broke up with her wife during the production; we are working with her to create a revised story that reflects her newly single status.

But this raises another question: in the case of a story that rejects a traditional narrative structure with no overall beginning, middle, or end, how does a producer or director know when the

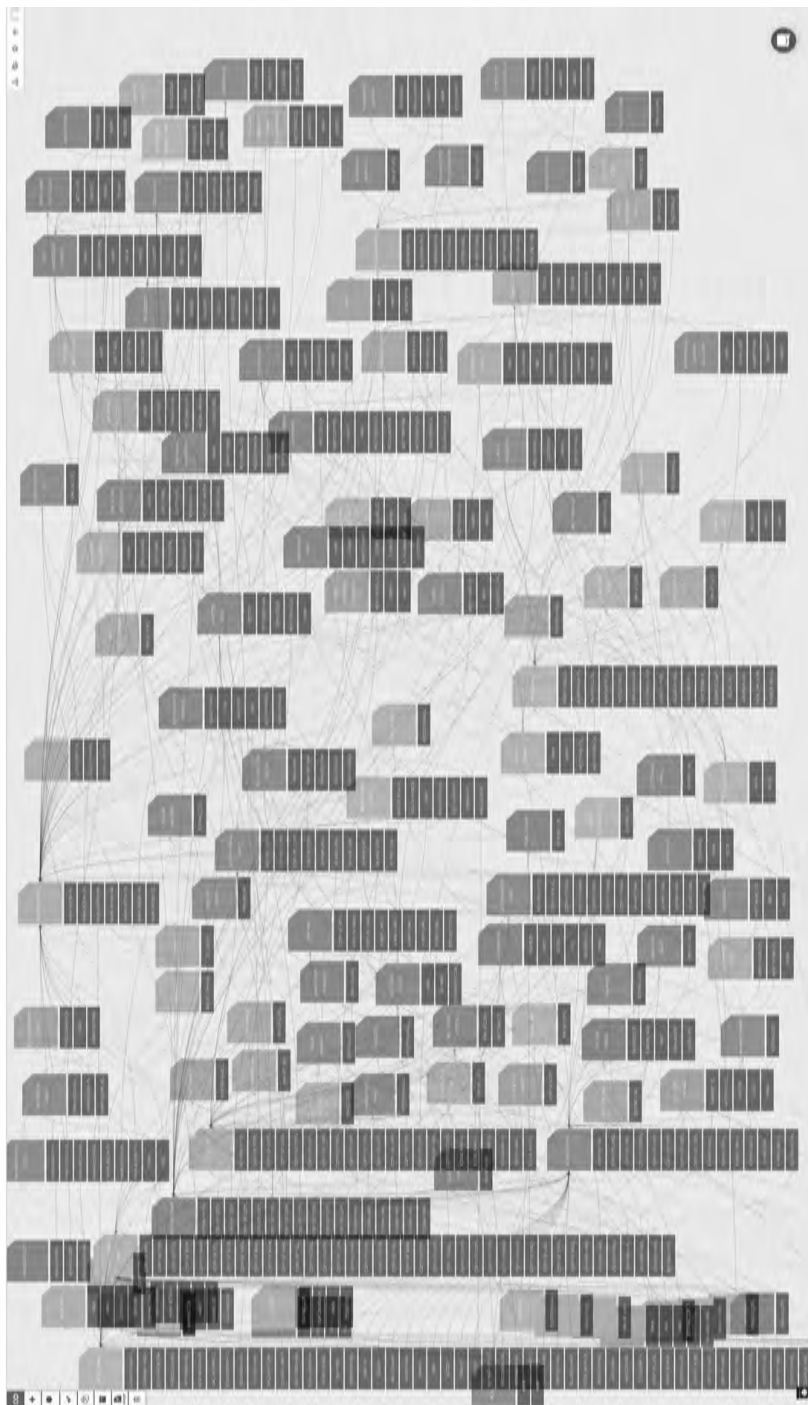


Figure 9.2 RaconR. Kathleen M. Ryan and David Staton.

story is “done”? Of course, all projects may have issues with completion, especially in academic circles where a premiere screening date may not be set in stone. There is always one more interview, one more artifact that could make the project “better” or at the very least “more complete.” But unlike the traditional documentary, where one has that tangible “thing” in the format of a film exhibited in film festivals/academic conferences or distributed (independently or via a contractual agreement), the i-doc can potentially be published and updated an infinite number of times. It can be difficult to determine when one can legitimately say “enough.” Is it when the funding for a project runs out? When the creative team gets bored with the subject matter? When one reaches an arbitrary deadline, such as a tenure and promotion review? Our solution has been to have an initial beta test publication followed by an official publication. Other projects do periodic updates. *Highrise*, initially launched in 2010, did a series of updates over the following five years, including a collaboration with the *New York Times*, a 360° documentary *Out My Window*, before culminating in a live performance at Hot Docs in Toronto in 2015.

This raises a related issue: the project’s cost. A sophisticated, layered, detailed project like *Highrise* demanded a group of high end innovative risk takers as investors, including the National Film Board of Canada and the *Times*. That sort of support may not be available to a smaller production. For *Pin Up! The Interactive Documentary*, we relied on a negotiated licensing fee with RacontR, paid for by one of our home institutions. A graduate student developed the boudoir as part of his research assistant assignment; undergraduates assisted with the shooting and editing process, funded in part by university grants to engage students in research. But without this sort of institutional support, our project would not be completed.

Embedded into the definition of i-doc is another challenge: emerging and evolving technology. It is, notes Hight (2017), a co-creator: “At a fundamental level, we are collaborating with programming code when we engage with, respond to, or create content using an application or platform” (2017, p. 72). Simply put, the speed of change has changed; seemingly each week there’s a game-changing new software application or technological breakthrough for filmmakers to consider. Software (or technology) is very much an actant in the filmmaking process.

For the i-doc this is further complicated by what “interactive” means. Mixed reality encompasses a range of technologies, from online interactive to augmented or virtual reality. But even these different platforms are not clean-cut. When one talks about augmented reality (AR), does it refer to geotagging objects in the “real” world with digital stories, such as in *The Story of the Forest* exhibition at the National Museum of Singapore, where users capture images to learn more about the plants and animals in the paintings? Or is it like the app *321 Launch*, where users watch space rocket launches from Cape Canaveral in Florida in real time, digitally projected into a home or office? Virtual reality (VR) similarly offers a multitude of options, from simple 360 video, scrollable on a laptop, to fully immersive headset-based experiences.

As filmmakers, we struggle with balancing the potential of the multitude of platform options, our desires to explore the technologies, and the realization that we cannot be an expert in every new technological innovation. Each platform impacts storytelling in different ways. At the 2018 i-docs Conference in Bristol, we came to the realization that it is okay to acknowledge that one or two individuals may not be able to successfully produce immersive online, AR, and VR content at the same time. If a project demands multiple platforms, multiple producers may be necessary.

In this sense—technology as an actant or co-creator—innovation can become friend or foe. As Lev Manovich (2001) noted, new technologies can disrupt narrative and create new forms in its forceful wake. In a prescient sense, Manovich wrote about the format these new media object might take: “Many new media objects do not tell stories; they don’t have beginning or end. ... Instead, they are collections of individual items, where every item has the same significance as any other” (p. 218). His ideas echo the embodiment of the contemporary i-doc.

In our explorations, the new narrative possibilities within the i-doc allow us to solve some of the issues that trouble us about traditional documentary. To be specific, we can avoid the trap of the “voice of god” scripting format, where a narrator offers details and contextualization and helps to shape the narrative arc. Because the i-doc is not limited by the time constraints (fitting into a standard television, classroom, or film festival time slot), it can present the stories of individuals in their own voices without commentary, while adding elements such as an embedded production blog or other pages clearly identified as being in the voice of the filmmaker. Choices made within the filming process, struggles or conflicts, and even the overall themes found within the interviews can be explained and discussed there, using either academic or more colloquial language. The i-doc offers the ability to include full interviews, transcripts, user-generated content, and other information gathered within research and shooting.

In other words, the i-doc allows visual ethnographers and oral historians the ability to make their choices obvious—and allows audiences to come to the same or other conclusions via individual exploration. Ceding authority to both the narrators and viewers, makes the scholarship process more transparent. Far from showing a bumbling Wizard attempting to control experiences, pulling back the curtain within the i-doc opens the potential for agency for scholars, narrators, and audiences.

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