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How do you introduce and spark interest in a political topic to a broad audience through the genre of documentaries?

Politics is something that surrounds and impacts us every single day and has done throughout history. It affects how we live, how we treat each other, and how we leave the world for the next generation. It is a delicate, complicated structure, any disruption can cause it to crumble, which is why it's vital to treat it with care and respect. Although it is a subject that affects everyone daily, it's difficult to engage the majority of a country's population and have them be invested in the changes in politics and create an understanding of how their single vote and advocacy can impact everything. Politicians recognise the ignorance the average voter holds in politics, Karl Marx acknowledged, saying, "The oppressed are allowed once every few years to decide which particular representatives of the oppressing class are to represent and repress them"(The State and Revolution, 2006). Due to the lack of understanding and education of politics, the ones creating the most oppressions in our society can get away without much repercussion. Media is notorious for impacting one's image of politics(Nesbitt-Larking, 2007), and documentary is a format at the forefront of being able to convey information visually and inform the general public about occurrences within topics like politics. They're able to present heavy topics and still engage the audience, and even encourage them to go out and cause change. Many existing documentaries have impacted the political sphere and created discussions around the topic, '13th'(2016), 'Knock Down the House'(2019), and 'Bryn Fon: Chwilio am Feibion Glyndwr'(2021) being only a fraction, and ones I will explore as well as others. Exploring how they achieve their impact will allow me to go onwards and create my political documentarian piece, which hopefully will spark new conversations in people who wouldn't generally involve themselves.



Fig.1 Showing a frame of the animated infographics used in 13th

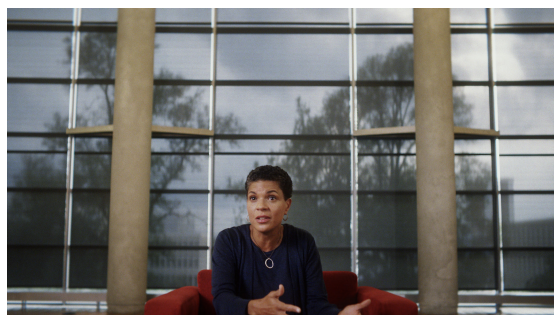


Fig.2 Showing a frame of a talking-head interview for 13th

Research is universally known as the starting point for any project and especially in making a documentary, can make or break the final piece(Fitzgerald and Lowe, 2020). Knowing beforehand can allow the narrative to be broken down in a more accessible way, rather than relying on the audience already knowing all the context(Burns, 2021). The critically acclaimed expository documentary '13th' by Ava DuVernay shows exactly how research benefits a documentary piece by unveiling the exploitations of the American prison system. DuVernay's documentary is a primary example of how creating a political documentary can engage the public in discussions the government attempts to avoid, with its impact on the Black Lives Matter movement. DuVernay reduced the information she collected from a six-episode miniseries to a 100-minute limit,

as she thought it was a topic too important to lose an audience(Clark, 2016). In doing this, key, indisputable information from her research was highlighted, guided by a mixture of animated infographics(Fig.1) and talking-head interviews from academics(Fig.2). By breaking up the information presented to the audience with different mediums of learning, the audience can become engaged with what they're viewing, and as such go away from the documentary more educated in reality. Research shows that multisensory learning benefits greatly in retaining and analysing presented information;

Memory research shows that multisensory exposure can result in superior recognition of objects compared to unisensory exposure. For example, it has been suggested that auditory-visual synaesthesia can provide a superior memory capacity.

Luria, 1987, as cited in Shams and Seitz, 2008

Animatedly visualised information would trigger a different response of retention to talking heads, which is more auditory based, and so constantly switching between these mediums would theoretically keep retention at a constant high.

Overall, this documentary excels at balancing the amount of information to give to an audience while still keeping them watching with the information presented by reputable figures and easily digestible montages and infographics. '*13th*' utilises its unique editing style, created by Spencer Averick, to retain attention, and has since been emulated by other sensationalised documentaries, such as '*The Social Dilemma*'(2020) and '*LA 92*'(2017).

As defined, bias is most known as, "the action of supporting or opposing a particular person or thing in an unfair way, because of allowing personal opinions to influence your judgement" (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d) and this is one of the first lessons taught in journalism - something which drives political documentaries. Showing bias within a political piece can indeed engage viewers who perhaps have the same political views or have little knowledge on the subject, but it can also drive the opposite side away, not allowing any proactive conversations to be had(Otway, 2015).

Rachel Lears' political documentary, '*Knock Down the House*' can be said to be against the statement of keeping bias away from creating a documentary. The piece follows four women running for their local congress under the grassroots projects "*Brand New Congress*" and "*Justice Democrats*". All four candidates are progressive democrats, and throughout the documentary, present themselves as such by going through their views, why they lean left and what they would change if their campaign were successful.

In this example, the filmmakers themselves stray away from presenting their own bias by using the documentary format of the 'fly on the wall', or observational. All bias shown comes from the participants, rather than the documentary's producers.

I don't know what truth is. Truth is something unattainable. We can't think we're creating truth with a camera. But what we can do is reveal something to viewers that allow them to discover their own truth.

Michel Brault, n.d

As a filmmaker, interpretation must be allowed within any sort of piece. Even in factual pieces, such as documentaries, cossetting viewers and telling them what to think will only lead to further naivety and ignorance. By presenting information and representatives from both sides of the conversation, without any unconscious bias within the edit, this can be achieved. A personal opinion from the creator can be inputted but should be presented more as a reflection on the information, rather than something the audience feels obliged to agree with(NYFA, 2017).

A story can be presented in any way possible, including in documentaries. Going into a topic, it could be said that there are three main motivations for creating the story in a documentary format, which is passion, curiosity or resolving, all of which can create a narrative of learning, adapting and evolving one's perspective about the subject.

An example of a documentary where all three motivations could be present is S4C's '*Bryn Fôn: Chwilio Am Feibion Glyndwr*', where Welsh singer Bryn Fôn delves into why he was arrested for showing solidarity with the 80s nationalist movement of burning English-owned holiday homes. His connection with the story, and his conversations with others who were affected by the movement - including Dewi Prysor, Siôn Aubrey Roberts (the only person ever jailed for involvement) and an owner of a burnt-down home - allowed him to conclude the documentary with multiple perspectives, and some questions answered. Even though there is still, and probably will forever be, some mystery surrounding who were the members of Meibion Glyndwr, his exploration was one of the first to be visually captured, during a time when holiday home conversations were on the rise again.

Upon approaching filming the documentary, there comes a point where it must be decided "Who narrates the story?". In many cases, as it was for Bryn Fon's piece and as well as, '*Louis Theroux: Forbidden America*' (2022) and '*Stacey Dooley Investigates*' (2020) a primary journalist and/or presenter takes the lead role of placing themselves within the structure of the narrative, sometimes referred to as "gonzo journalism" (Woodward, 2020). In these cases, it could be said that they become vessels for information, asking questions the audience would want to be asked and shaping the received information into progress within the documentary. There are differences in the style of presenting Louis Theroux and Stacey Dooley have, which work in both of their cases.

Louis Theroux shows true no bias, he integrates himself into his different environments and interacts with all and every background and can see past the forefront image which may be presented to the public. His format of presenting works great for the topics he covers, a lot of which involve far-right activists, and getting deep into their organisations gives an interesting look into their mindsets. With Stacey Dooley, however, she covers most topics involving the subject of feminism, one of her most recent covering stalkers and the danger they bring to women. Though she does show bias within her presentation, emotion works with the people she talks to, many being victims of assault, her showing empathy and sympathy put the interviewees at ease, allowing their stories to appear in an accessible way.

Theroux, when discussing the formatting of his documentaries, said;

Sometimes people say I'm faux naive or that I ask naive questions. You know, I'm not the best person to judge whether or not that's fair but I do think that part of the journalistic posture, when you're on TV, is that you can't be seen to know too much. Partly [because] it's not very appealing if you sort of know all the answers to the questions you're asking...

BAFTA Guru, 2018

In this case, letting the people he interviews give the context to their story allows Theroux to capture the person's reasoning and personality. It also allows the interviewee to feel a willingness from Theroux, creating a trust that any journalist would crave, and creating an immersion that Theroux and the audience can partake in. He proves that being able to adapt to the people you interview is key. This works best when exploring a specific group or mindset, however, when going into topics involving people who might reserve themselves and information, i.e politicians, it's important to take a different approach and know beforehand what information you're hoping to achieve (Burns, 2021).

In dealing with interview-style conversations involving higher figures who deal with large societal situations, it's important to again, place the audience first and try to gain what would be most beneficial to them. However, instead of allowing the interviewee to give context and story, it's

important to present this instead from a third-person perspective, to avoid any warping in favour of one side from the participator, and be aware of any motivations that the figure could have in changing the minds of the public about the topic (Brewer, 2009). Even in cases where there isn't a prominent narrator, having an understanding of what questions are being asked to interviewees is crucial, whether that be the question appearing on screen as it's being answered, or simply having the question being repeated in the answer.

Though I have never attempted at creating my documentarian piece, they are by far one of my favourite genres to watch, and so I have a great interest in creating one. After researching existing content involving politics, and upon reflecting on my past work, I have discovered that there are many skills required for making a documentary that I already possess. An example of this would be my researching skills, something I have expanded upon before and have applied to stories to ground them into reality, such as my semester one piece '*Little Toes*'. Upon creating this project, I delved into miscarriages and commented on how this trauma can have a deep psychological effect on the mother. The topic I presented was a sensitive one, as politics is, and I felt the great responsibility for representing it respectfully and truthfully, and Brault comes to mind in reflecting on my understanding of 'truth'. My truth is not another person's truth and observing how research can effectively create a great documentary, I can see how I can take my research and apply it to a piece other than a fictional story, and how I can present it through different, engaging mediums. To successfully replicate this, I should explore innovative ways I can present information, interviews and data, and as '*13th*' did, switch between them to raise engagement.

I especially am interested in creating a political documentary because, as a self-proclaimed democratic socialist myself, I involve myself in political topics and find it difficult to engage in political conversations without showing bias towards my beliefs. I find it difficult living in a country led by a right-leaning elitist government and sympathising with the people who support the policies they pass. Bias has been shown in my past work and I have written political explorations before, one being the drowning of Capel Celyn (Tryweryn) and my familial connection due to my grandfather's sculpture symbolising the event. Though I was passionate about writing the essay, my upbringing and beliefs only allowed me to view the event from one side of the conversation, without much consideration for supporters of the opposite. I believe this made my piece insufficient. Another perspective could bring a different dimension to the work, creating an interesting discourse within myself and others. However strong I feel that my political opinions may be subjectively 'in the right', to be able to create a documentary that can be taken seriously by the general public, it is vital that I instead remove these opinions entirely while presenting the information. Again, Brault's quote is considered when thinking of ways to achieve this, I need to engage with people from all backgrounds and opinions, allow them to have a platform and later reflect on what was said, "How can I use what was said to progress the story?". Even if I don't completely agree with the opinions given, I need to ponder if there's anything I can take away from the conversation for myself in my own way of thinking and are there points the audience would benefit from hearing. In doing this, I can achieve a fair representation of opinions and information.

It's easy to overlook that there needs to be some redemptive quality, some quality of, how is this enriching my understanding of who I am, who we are as people, where is the hope, and where is the intriguing ambiguity.

Louis Theroux, 2022

Reflecting on Theroux's quote, there needs to be a personal interest in the subject, something which I always aim for when beginning a project. Without motivation or connection to the piece, I believe it becomes obsolete. My short piece '*Venefica*' was a project reflecting my interest in Welsh pagan

history, and I used this interest to create a short story showing a different side to the image media portrays of druidic rituals, where it was instead about healing and love. Again, because of my Welsh upbringing, learning about the land I live on created respect in my Celtic ancestry, and I wanted to show my pride in being involved in such a vast and historic culture. I believe that I can take my interest in politics and my curiosity in documentaries to create a piece that echoes my Welsh heritage. Similar to Bryn Fon's piece, I believe I could bring an interesting discussion about Welsh politics to the wider public.

I rarely use first-person narratives in projects I create, however after observing documentarians like Theroux and Dooley, I'm inspired to create a piece with an 'on-site' narrator. In narrating the story, my connection to my country's politics could prove to be interesting if the narrative was from my perspective, interacting with people with the same, and different opinions from mine and seeing where my mindset leads to by the end. Discussing with both sides of the argument would require me to ask non-biased questions, and could even ask the same questions to each participant and reflect on the differences in the answers.

To conclude, there is a skilled craft in producing a documentary, especially when the topic covered is political. I believe that they allow one to ponder, about themselves and others. Observing different political documentaries through an analytical eye has opened up a new perspective on the creation of the art. I believe that all in all, it all boils down to my initial interest in the subject and how I can replicate the same feeling to the audience in a visual way. It would involve creating just enough mystery for the viewers to want more information, more knowledge, which would result in independent research and bringing them out of the ignorance society has built around them using the tools provided by the piece. That, in my opinion, is the answer to introducing a political topic to a broad audience through documentaries - make them think for themselves.

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