**Discourses in Documentaries**

Documentaries are written using many of the codes and conventions of television news. Like news, they are a discourse in themselves, with their own particular language uses. The public's right to know is one of the most important claims in support of democracy and free speech. It is also the main justification of the documentary maker.

**'Telling the public'** has definitely made a difference at times. Documentaries have resulted in changes to legislation and, occasionally, even the dismissal of governments. There are many well-known examples. In Australia, the Four Corners documentary Moonlight State, about official corruption, contributed to the fall of the Bjelke-Petersen state government in Queensland. In Britain the documentary drama Cathy Come Home (1966) resulted in action to improve the living conditions of the homeless. In the United States, Harvest of Shame (1961) was successful in bringing about legislation to help migrant farm workers.

Documentaries have also shamed corporations into changing their behaviour. Super Size Me had a major impact on McDonald's menus, and Bowling for Columbine convinced Wal-Mart to restrict the sale of ammunition.

Other **important aspects of documentary discourse** include the following:

• **Objectivity**: Like news programs, many traditional documentaries participate in a discourse of objectivity, appearing to present unbiased facts. This might be seen as a 'closed discourse', says analyst Myra Macdonald, because the objective point of view seems so natural and fair that it is hard to see any other way of seeing things.

• **Subjectivity and personalization:** Many modern documentaries have taken a different approach and present intensely personal, individual stories that audiences may unwittingly take to stand for the experiences of whole sections of society. Documentaries share this characteristic with current affairs programs.

• **Categorization:** Since many documentaries are concerned with improving the conditions of society, they often tend to place people into categories. This may mean they also give them victim status.

**Representation in documentaries**

The documentary is created out of the actual or real by a series of transformations, including scripting, filming, editing and transmission. The documentary therefore represents a transformed world and not the whole truth.

**Cause and effect**

Some analysts have criticized documentary makers for failing to look at the causes of events. They accuse them of glorying in the sensationalism of the problems rather than examining the deeper issues. As a result, such programs merely gain sympathy for those suffering the symptoms and effects. In this way many controversial issues become acceptable subject matter, says commentator Brian Winston. The best that can happen is that the audience will dip into its pockets and donate money for homeless shelters, for example. Documentary makers rarely question the deeper organization and fairness of society.

**Truth**

Since the beginnings of the documentary, people have struggled with ideas of truth and reality. Sometimes documentaries have been accused of presenting lies and fabrication. John Corner believes would be better off applying the idea of evidence rather than truth.

Recording technologies, he says, produce only traces of the physical world. These traces can be used as evidence of actuality or reality, and this evidence can then support the exposition.

On the other hand, reporters can easily do what lawyers are often seen to do in Court - find only experts who support their own point of view, says veteran current affairs presenter Peter Couchman.

Now, with regard to the matter of truth, in the natural sciences, for example, no-one hesitates to talk about truth and among ordinary people no-one hesitates either. But among sophisticated people, you're supposed to question the notion of truth.

It is a truism that your point of view on the world is going to colour the way you approach things. But by no means should it lead us to question the belief that we're trying to find out the truth about the world. The denial of the urge for objective reality, that's a tremendously effective propaganda weapon. It fully incapacitates anyone who accepts it. ‘Of course, wealthy and powerful people are never going to accept it, but they're delighted to have everyone else accept it.' Noam Chomsky, media theorist and critic

**Representation of individuals**

There is a complex relationship between the people who are shown in a documentary, the documentary producer and the audience. The complexity comes from three directions. **First,** there is the importance of the public's right to know. **Second,** there are the rights of the individual being filmed. **Third**, there is the audience's reaction. Current affairs programs and documentaries are often about society's 'victims' - people who have been unable to defend themselves.

Unfortunately this has often included an inability to defend themselves against filmmakers. Documentaries use human beings as evidence in their expositions. They exploit people and expose their lives. This may be with good intentions, but the results can be disastrous.

Two documentaries concerned with poverty made in Canada in the 1960s turned out badly for their subjects, who felt humiliated and degraded after the screenings. They were mocked by their neighbours and eventually felt they had to remove their children from local schools.

More recently in Australia, a pregnant teenage girl who featured in Dennis O'Rourke's film Cunnamulla threatened legal action, saying she was embarrassed and upset at her portrayal.

**Institutions and documentaries**

Unlike current affairs programs, documentaries are not good ratings boosters for the commercial networks. They are the first programs to be cut if money is tight. Commercial networks often see documentaries made in the public interest as non-profit items of little interest to advertisers.

Commercial interests also influence the subject matter of documentaries. In a New York Times article, John Culhane listed a number of subjects that are taboo on commercial television. They included controversial investigations into big business, the networks themselves, the military-industrial complex and nuclear power. Controversy that risks offending advertisers is not popular with commercial television networks.

Public service television, such as the ABC, features many more documentaries than the commercial networks. Yet public service television can also operate under pressures that affect the subject matter of programs. Too much criticism of the government of the day can result in future budget 1 efficiency cuts'. So program producers will sometimes censor a program themselves to avoid the risk of giving offence.

**Audience**

When documentary producers talk of the 'public's right to know', they are making an assumption about the audience. They are suggesting that if the audience is shown that something is wrong, public opinion will mobilize to correct it. There are many cases where this has occurred, but there are also many where it has not. Modern audience research has shown that media effects and audience reaction are highly complex.