

## Interactive Documentaries (Representing Reality)

**By: Hsham Majed Aburghif**

A PhD Researcher and Documentary Filmmaker at RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia

Email: [hshamaburghif@gmail.com](mailto:hshamaburghif@gmail.com)

### Abstract

By analysing three interactive documentaries chosen as models and highlighting other international i-docs, this article explores the forms of storytelling used to create an interactive documentary on digital platforms by examining the prospects for employing its elements (contents, interactivity, mechanism and weaknesses and strengths). I determine to what extent interactive documentaries can affect representation. To understand this question, I focus on exploring and discussing some critical points: Does the interactive documentary make users/viewers pay more attention to the representation than traditional films? Does it motivate them to explore it as an artefact or an object? Does the representation process change users' moods and attitudes to express their engagement, interaction, experiences and understanding of the subject?

The problem revolves around revealing and knowing the methods of employing digital media in interactive documentaries. At the same time, the importance of this article comes from the scarcity of media studies concerned with interactive documentaries. This article aims to attract the filmmakers to the various issues that interactive documentaries represent and take advantage of them—further, the influential power of the i-docs on public opinion. Additionally, the method used is descriptive and analytical of phenomena of the i-doc, the content analysis as a tool for data collection.

**Keywords:** Interactive documentary, Storytelling, Digital platforms, Interaction, content, User, Representation.

## Introduction

This section presents the narrative, contents, interactivity, creativity, and user interaction. Additionally, this section presents related works in this field while creating distinctions between the interactivity and contents of the case studies. It also determines the need for this process of non-linear as it has come from the literature and discusses aesthetics as content and interactivity methods. 'This first decade of interactive cultural media is reminiscent of the first years of the cinema when the cinema to graphic language had yet to be defined. The novelty of the image in movement from that time to the search for authors and viewers is similar to the novelty of today's interaction, and the consideration of the first cinema as being vulgar entertainment is also similar to that received by electronic games' (Berenguer, 2007, p.121). We are witnessing a broad change in interactive species production's traditional roles. It translates into new practices that have begun generating innovative business models in these sectors and for an interactive and non-fiction approach. The i-doc provides the audience with unique experiences outside the traditional documentary context. However, it is still a young field that has not been fully explored. (López-García et al.) Sums up that 'Formal and technological innovation has led to the appearance of novel journalistic narrative forms, and therefore media focus its efforts on developing new and innovative ways to present, produce and tell the information. In this regard, and during the last years, society has attended to the arrival of new journalistic narrative forms as the result of the diverse and manifold possibilities opened by the novel technological features, such as Virtual Reality and 360-degree video, interactive documentary or Web-Doc' (p.51).

Adopting the language of interactive documentary in information transmission expands more options because of its potential to experiment and create new ways to tell/show what is happening in communities and pass it on to the user. Manovich (2002) argues that the computer age came after two periods: the era of cinema, the rich narrative as a vital form of cultural expression; secondly, and the novel generation. Hence, the new media in the digital era introduces its corresponding 'database' as an artistic form. He asserts that 'New media artworks have more traditional "experiential" or aesthetic dimensions, which justify their status as art rather than information design' (ibid, p. 83).

The feature that identifies the two fields of a documentary (linear and non-linear) is exact: We move from the beginning point to the endpoint in the linear principle. While in non-linear, we begin with a suggested point.

Gaudenzi (2013) writes that the interactive documentary concept has not yet been determined because it is an emerging field. Scholars who define the term treated the i-doc as developing the documentary linear convergence within digital convergence. Gaudenzi approaches Whitelaw's position, saying that the i-doc does not need to re-run traditional linear documentaries and display its ways of dealing with reality. This new narrative form of reality within the digital environment relies on interactive narration that is based on the employment of all forms of multimedia and its applications; To provide us with interactive privacy of use that makes the user a participant in the narrative or in determining its path.

Many scholars like (Miller, 2001; Aston and Gaudenzi, 2012; Berenguer, 2007; Gaudenzi, 2013; Nash, 2012; Harris, 2017) tried to present the definition of the interactive documentary and treated this term based on their vision of it as an evolution of the documentary. Aston and Gaudenzi (2012) state that a web documentary is a form of reality narration and not just a development of documentaries. Therefore, web documentaries are a new form and not just an extension of linear documentary film. Miller (2001) defined an interactive documentary as an interactive non-fiction film where viewers can choose whatever material they want to watch in any order and multiple audio tracks. At the same time, Berenguer (2007) defines interactive documentary as a type of 'interactive narration' that appears alongside hypertext and video games. For him, the narration becomes interactive through new media. At the same time, Nash (2012) argues that the web documentary is a new vision of an old concept that contains a documentary discourse that includes a contemporary structure that works within a specific function and approaches a particular context. While Harris (2017) sums up that 'Broadly defined by 'nonlinear' spatiotemporal organisation, their interactive capacities enable multiple pathways through documentary footage and materials. It is often suggested that this nonlinearity is politicised by i-Docs to enable polyvocality and the destabilisation of dominant narratives' (p. 25).

Since this article seeks to identify i-doc/web-doc within the digital environment, its types and functions, and its components, to what extent does the narrative correspond to its interactive patterns? Therefore, understanding the interface, narrative, creativity, contents, and user and user interaction is essential. The user interface is very much on the "screen", just like electronic games or virtual stores on the web. It is a form of projection based on the re-representing reality on the screen within the graphic, interactive and logical hyperlink rules.

Gaudenzi (2013) describes that hyperlink capabilities provide photographs, texts, maps, data, recorded sounds, video images, animation, graphics, and the so-called "infographics," i.e., graphics made by computer programs and on which specific data or information are placed.

The i-doc/web-doc is produced in a collaborative group setting, as Aston and Gaudenzi (2012) value the collective basis of web documentaries. They make it clear that it crosses the traditional narrative structure and pursues non-linear strategies thanks to the digital environment in which it is located. Therefore, these interactive documentaries are database-based and seek to build a different reality through new interactive cognitions. It is a multi-layered narrative (the layers here are the multiple forms of multimedia) and carries a global anthropological background because it manages to communicate between cultures and crosses the user's social, economic and cultural boundaries. Filmmakers utilise the cinematic form through the tools and symbols of the i-doc to aperient a relationship between the subject and users/viewers. Gaudenzi (2013) argues that in hypertext, a user has levels of interactivity with the content that will vary depending on the project. Many academic bodies showed their interest in web-doc/i-docs, which prompted them to establish a group of projects concerned with producing interactive documentaries.

### **The Purpose/Aims:**

This article aims to attract the filmmakers to the various issues that interactive documentaries represent and take advantage of them—further, the influential power of the i-docs on public opinion to capitalise in the subsequent films.

### **The importance:**

The importance of this article comes from the scarcity of media studies concerned with interactive documentaries and analysing the methods of employing digital media. Further, the benefit from the successful experiences of other filmmakers in adopting interactive documentaries.

### **The problem:**

The problem revolves around revealing and knowing the methods of employing digital media in interactive documentaries and identifying their nature, size, and artistic and technical values that govern them. It is through examining to what extent interactive documentaries can affect the representation of people and places.

## The Methodology

The method used is descriptive and analytical of phenomena of the i-doc, the content analysis as a tool for data collection of the three case studies.

## Users Level

The i-docs/web-docs are a new form of narration of reality through non-linear paths that allow the user to interact directly and functionally in real time. Since then, i-docs have allowed filmmakers to relinquish some control, so this will enable viewers to participate in the experience and contribute content that influences the show. The story can therefore develop in real time due to the nature of the web. In addition, interactions in the web medium can elicit a specific intellectual and emotional response from the user. However, it takes intuition and experience to know which interactions to use at the exact moment to create a comprehensive story experience with other ready-made options that can complement and support meaning. Nogueira states that 'The diversity and multiform interactive structures contribute to a varied presentation of the interactor's subjectivity, positioned as internal representations, such as sensations, perceptions and affections. In this perspective, through different ways of affection (2020, p. 65).

The essential elements determining the methods of employing visual elements in interactive documentaries are the effective use of the feature of choice, interactivity and clickability of the contents. They are the essence of the attractiveness of the i-doc to keep the audience engaged for a long time by providing the technical possibility to load videos and contents more quickly for smoother playback. Nogueira (2020) puts it 'The more open the documentary structure is, the higher the degree of sense of control that will likely be generated in the interactors' (p. 65).

Further, not expanding options that lead to dead ends in the continuation of the interactive display, as viewers/users want to be able to make meaningful decisions that affect the story. Regarding the sense of presence, Nogueira (2020) argues that 'While interacting with digital objects, the awareness of the physical self is replaced by the sense of being surrounded by the diegetic world of the interactive documentary, since the experience allows interactors to virtually visit, inhabit and interact with those worlds' (p. 54). The user experience is the most crucial point after use, so the first technical challenge is providing users with an efficient delivery mechanism. The next challenge is to provide enhanced experiences.

### **Narration within the interactive documentary**

The experience of the traditional documentary is limited to the narrative value presented by the filmmaker. The function of a documentary, in general, is to provide information and documents in varying proportions. However, the process of the interactive narration stimulates the user experience more procedurally, as the i-doc and new technological systems embody the actual meaning of the experience because they contain multiple pillars and constantly evolve and improve that enhancement. Through its interactive narration, the i-doc arranges the narrative structure; then, the role comes up upon the users' narrative and what is the degree of their presence within this interactive narrative. Berenguer (2007) states that 'Interactive media require complicity to discover, choose, reflect, participate and even create. They, therefore, bear no relation to the ruling audio-visual tendencies, whose aim seems to be the complete mental paralysis of the viewer. Instead, they constitute a prolongation of this audio-visual media, a new twist to ambition – first literary and then cinematographic – of discovering common or fantasised reality, which is more than just colour and sound is, precisely, interactive. The viewers of this new medium – now called interactors – benefit in terms of presence and identification, intervene in the audio-visual experience and, at the same time, share it with others' (p.121).

### **Interactivity within the interactive documentary**

The i-doc is tested based on the signs and methods of navigation and interaction, which shift until users' cooperation and involvement are desirable. Gaudenzi comments that the notion of interactivity exists in products that offer any exchange; Physical: the body's business through the mouse or different devices to encourage the user to share. So can define it as a speech that tries to convey a confirmed kind of knowledge associated with reality. On the other hand, Nash (2012) explains how to interact and communicate with the audience in distinctive ways through the i-doc. Concepts intersect to build the meaning of interaction within web documentaries, especially in the face of the development of technologies and tools of simulation and representation that have created many alternative modes of interaction. Initially, because the documentary is a narrative of reality, then we are faced with the concept of interactive reality narration. According to Aston and Gaudenzi (2012), there are different modes of interactive documentaries: hyperlink mode, conversational mode, and participative mode.

Some international interactive documentaries will be a highlight to learn about the different shapes and structures used to give the reader a brief idea of these formations and details. Still, the next section of the article I devoted to an in-depth analysis of three interactive documentaries \_\_\_\_\_ *Pirate Fishing (2014)*, *Fukushima (2016)* and *Refugee Republic (2014)* \_\_\_\_\_ and what could benefit them for the future work of filmmakers and those interested in the genre. Moreover, for a broader understanding of the new controversial relations of the narrative interactive technical environment, it is worth knowing that the users interact as a cognitive, functional or explicit interaction with projects of the i-docs. They might be semi-closed, like in the *'Welcome to Pine Point (2011)*, semi-open interaction, like in the *'Brèves de Trottoir' (2010)*, or entirely open interaction. It is somewhat a mixture of traditional linear narration and branching structure. Parallel formatting means that viewers are presented with their choices in the story, and although these decisions change the path they take, they return. The main narrative chain of the pivotal moments is always more complex and interactive; the users can choose their own story or events through your creation of the actual event.

The i-doc/web-doc *'Journey to the End of Coal' (2008)* falls into the semi-open level; it is an interactive way that guides the users/audience into the depths of China's coal mines, and it provides an opportunity and the possibility for the viewer to choose the film's direction. The viewer can even go further by asking questions to the miners, thus collecting additional information in the text and speech and throwing even the backup shots. Here the work maker presents a message with the depth of the world and the societies facing the consequences of an economic crisis that is still intensifying. Moreover, *'The Prison Valley' (2010)* is another semi-open-level interaction that shows and revolves around the idea that the local economy depends on some prisons in a specific city in America. The viewers/users are asked to log in with social media to experience the story. Further, *'Soul Patron' (2010)* is also semi-open, where the journey begins at Kuma Koro Temple and travels through Tokyo and Osaka to Kyoto.

### **Analysis of the case studies**

There are some ideas from the three case studies (*Pirate Fishing (2014)*, *Fukushima (2016)* and *Refugee Republic (2014)*) that filmmakers can utilise. In *Pirate Fishing (2014)*, the interface represents the city and invitation text, and the content includes interviews, photos, images and text through a Hyperlinks mode. To *Fukushima (2016)*, the interface consists of a video about the city,

and the content includes more interviews, texts, maps and images. While the Refugee Republic (2014) features more interviews with the refugees and shows their camp, there is also more clickability in this i-doc as it is rich in stories and events inside the centre.

Interest in the narrative was evident in the case studies; the realism presented in the case studies is the contributory reality between the filmmakers and the users. The truth gives the user choices in physical interaction through many different interaction levels and realistic imagination. The interactive documentary narrative is more interesting than the traditional documentary. Because it contains facts, it creates more interest in the subject. The interactive narrative has positively impacted me as a user and made it easy to change the mood, which allowed a greater expression and understanding of the matters raised. The narrative in the case studies represents reality as it challenges the narrative unity that dominates the traditional film.

The use of images and maps also helps to immerse and represent reality. The diversity of content encourages the users to change the story according to their vision and desire. Interviewing some people and showing their experiences and stories has added to representing reality. The case studies' variability in describing the different countries' details through time and space made them more realistic \_\_\_ representations of fact.

The interactions in the case studies improve decision-making, as most interactions develop specific exchange strategies. It helps the user to understand the reality represented through interaction and participation in decision-making. Gaudenzi states that the i-docs, as a creative format, request some user interaction. It transcends the cerebral action to recognise authentic reality and potential new self-patterns (2013). The processability of the interactive documentary to subtract and address social values influences public opinion, encourages social change and is a model for coordinating awareness and unifying visions. It also moves the viewers/users from collective understanding to changing the issues represented. It also can help marginalised communities and support their issues by communicating with other communities and representing their authentic reality.

The case studies have fragmented the content into separate parts to facilitate the stories' journey using the hyperlink mode (Aston & Gaudenzi, 2012). Using this hyperlink mode, filmmakers might emulate the essential functions of their works, such as the specific component of the stories and fragment the content into some distinct parts/elements. Hence, users can go everywhere.



The users can access the content and develop the narrative. They can choose which video to play and which content to create their own story. Therefore, the degree is non-linear with multiple branches (closed database). According to the Gaudenzi structure model, I summarised the analysis parameters for the case studies in a table in the next section.

### Analysis parameters for the case studies: an i-docs

(Table-1) Analysis parameters for the case studies.

CATEGORY	<i>PIRATE FISHING</i>	<i>FUKUSHIMA</i>
<b>Producing</b>	2014, Al-Jazeera English Chanel-Qatar, Julianna Ruhfus. URL: <a href="https://interactive.aljazeera.com/aje/2014/piratefishingdoc/">https://interactive.aljazeera.com/aje/2014/piratefishingdoc/</a>	IRSN with the support of NRPA, 2016- Project leaders/François Rollinger & Valérie Marchal (IRSN). URL: <a href="http://www.fukushima-dialogues.com/">http://www.fukushima-dialogues.com/</a>
<b>The Interface *</b>	Image of one of the trawlers/ the title shaped as a big fish/ mailbox message to interact and track the pirate's trawler.	The image from the city represents there is no human life.
<b>Target audience</b>	Young people who love the games.	Adults play a role in discourse/attention in the target audience rather than technical or technological innovation
<b>Interactivity *</b>	High level of interaction	Browsing & clicking
<b>The User/Participant *</b>	Participates in several ways/different stages	Browsing & clicking
<b>The Content *</b>	Graphics and simulations are very immersive, Interviews, images, maps	Immersive maps, images, graphics, interviews, timeline, texts/diversity of content drives the user to change the story.

<b>The Narrative/power</b>	Traditional documentary with some interactive/ It is linear.	It's non-linear/the users can go everywhere/create their own story.
<b>Modes*</b>	Hypertext mode. The user chooses hyperlinks to create paths to access the contents.	Hypertext mode/the Hitchhiking mode
<b>Images</b>	Drag the images to the notebook/get points.	Image is merged with full text/ select image to read the text.
<b>Text</b>	The presence of the text has been reduced.	Used the text very widely, which gave the user a sense of boredom.
<b>Distinction/Uniqueness</b>	i-docs aspects & features take us deep into world reality through this uniqueness/There is a lack of statistical data and information.	I-docs features/more realistic/maps and timelines contain statistical data.
<b>Reality/Experience</b>	Marine-Life Adventure/engaged in an "Investigative Adventure"/researcher/reporter.	Journey to discover the earthquake/repercussions.
<b>Inspirational</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide tools/Give the narrative more attention.</li> <li>• Problems embedded/representing and condemning the many issues that concern communities.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>. Connect and integrate/stimulate and generate sufficient impact on public opinion/represents a way to confront and provide solutions.</li> <li>. Supporter in social change.</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Representation of reality/through the resources of the interactive environment illustrates actual actions in the world.</li> <li>• Wide global audience/leave local to the world/raise awareness or challenge.</li> </ul>	<p>. Ideally, accomplish this by encouraging/participating/improving/building.</p> <p>. Helps marginalised people/know their reality closely/supports their case/validates their values and their lives will improve.</p>
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- **By using Gaudenzi’s structure model.**

### Conclusion

The inspiration from the genre of the i-doc is because it provides tools to better understand the subject by dividing the story into different parts to become more exciting. Also, it provides a comprehensive picture of the matter that gives the narrative more attention by connecting and integrating various areas such as creativity, audio-visual, digital and interaction with participants to stimulate and generate sufficient impact on public opinion. This representation of reality is not limited to arousing only the point of view. The interactive and content environment resources illustrate actual actions in the world represented to confront and provide solutions.

People who are socially marginalised can communicate with others through the virtual world; this leads to support for their case that validates their values. The possibility of socially marginalised communities seeing their problems embedded in the digital environment reinforces the feeling that their voices will eventually be heard. They will gradually be accepted among people, knowing their authenticity closely. The i-doc represents and condemns the many issues that concern socially marginalised communities; it becomes a partner or supporter in social change by favouring those affected. 'Integrating key points about representation through these three interrelated concepts—numerical representation, quality of representation, and centrality of representation—allows us to understand the totality of marginalisation' (Erigha, 2015, p. 80). Interactive documentaries would ideally encourage the participation and improvement of public discourse while considering building a global audience and raising awareness.

The interactive nature, content, and some narrative elements became inspiring to narrate filmmakers' projects. They can utilise some of these features to validate the social values represented in their projects. I would conclude that relying on the interactive documentary as a shared benefits project is necessary by relying on the representation that reflects the reality—seeking to confront the reality of marginalisation and poverty misrepresented to some people. 'Of great concern to marginalised groups is the precise quantity that constitutes adequate representation in media' (Erigha, 2015, p. 79).

Significantly, it will consider critical points to promote and support other projects, such as the social values in the three case studies. It represents and condemns the many issues that concern the communities. The case studies use the mode of clickability, and a significant presence of the observational way through a simulation and the illustrative method is present. It has connected and integrated various creative, audio-visual, digital, and interactive areas with participants to stimulate and generate sufficient impact on public opinion; it has represented a way to confront and provide solutions. Furthermore, after getting to know the people depicted, the possibility of seeing their history embedded in the digital environment reinforces the feeling that eventually, they will hear their voice through the i-docs that disseminate information.

Generally, thanks to the tremendous technological development, documentary films can invest in digital media within the logic of competition to achieve the most significant percentage of follow-up and viewing. The use of new media technology increases the power of the interactive documentary as it is linked to global networks, allowing complete access to interact and learn. It also facilitates spreading expansive archives of information, photos, media, and opinions that more traditional forms cannot intake. This wealth of different data is expertly researched and organised by the contribution of the filmmaker by placing it within a non-linear framework that encourages the viewer/user to build meanings and their level of involvement actively. Future extensions of these interactive documentaries could explore other not-covered features after obtaining promising representation indicators. 'These transpositions will clarify a current trend [...] to give learners a direct and transparent access to the real' (Sébastien and Ibanez-Bueno, 2017, p. 1). As such, due to the significant features of the i-doc: the use of a hyperlink that provides the user rich experience, the use of multiple media formats and interactions, navigation strategies, and user interaction,

The i-doc is an appropriate format for representation. Interaction features may present new possibilities for user engagement and immersion, affecting presentation.

### Recommendations

- Encourage and support researchers to research and practice in the field of interactive documentaries by considering the proposed ideas and hypotheses in this area.
- Draw attention to the i-docs and clarify the potential for development and improvement in their employment.
- Filmmakers have to collaborate with people and companies with experience in programming and applications to create and produce i-docs with severe and valuable content and ideas of both form and content.
- Establish festivals to encourage filmmakers to do more productions of the i-docs/Web-docs.

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