Routledge Studies in Media and Cultural Industries

THE PEOPLE WE WATCH

DOCUMENTARY CONTRIBUTORS AND WHAT THEIR EXPERIENCES TELL US ABOUT THE CULTURAL INDUSTRIES

Emily Coleman

ROUTLEDGE

‘*The People We Watch* opens up a brilliant and nuanced interrogation of the documentary subject at the heart of contemporary television production through careful empirical research with the voices of participants and crew. Given the current spotlight on the treatment of those involved in making television, read this book to understand the important ethical and civic questions at stake for the industry and for future research’.

Helen Wood, *Professor of Media and Cultural Studies, University of Aston, Birmingham*

‘This wonderful study breaks new ground by listening to the ordinary people who contribute to “factual” television. It’s an extraordinarily skilful and important contribution to media industry studies and to documentary scholarship’.

David Hesmondhalgh, *Professor of Media, Music and Culture, University of Leeds*

‘*The People We Watch* is a meticulously researched, sensitive look at the making of documentary television programmes and the oft-neglected perspectives of the ordinary people who agree to appear in them. This book is a gem for scholars, producers, and lovers of nonfiction media’.

Ruth Palmer, *Associate Professor of Communication, IE University, Madrid*

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The People We Watch

The People We Watch explores the politics of contemporary media production from the point of view of the ordinary people it represents.

Based upon a series of in-depth interviews and the author's own professional experience of working in the television industry, this book examines how documentary contributors feel about participating in the media and the ways they are portrayed, considering how their experiences take shape within the structural context of the cultural industries.

This insightful text will interest scholars, students, and researchers in media and communication, sociology of the media, documentary studies, and film studies, as well as those studying the cultural industries, media production, creative labour, and cultural policy.

Emily Coleman is a postdoctoral fellow at King's College London, whose research has been supported by both the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Economic and Social Research Council. Previously, she worked in the TV industry for over 15 years, producing and directing factual programmes and documentaries for the BBC, ITV, Channel 4, Channel 5, and Sky.

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For Henry, Martha, and Cleo

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1 Introduction

The cultural industries have undergone a period of rapid expansion and transformation, with the pace of change accelerating since the beginning of the digital era, creating a startlingly different media landscape within the space of a generation. Scholars have debated the societal impact and the political ramifications of these developments at length, creating a substantial body of work about the lives of the creative workers who must navigate this turbulent environment, but what do they mean for the ordinary people who appear on the other side of the camera – for the people we watch?

In recent years, there has been a growing perception of unscripted filmmaking as manipulative, predatory, and morally dubious. From Oscar-winning features including *The Act of Killing* (2012) and *Amy* (2015) to true-crime streaming series such as *The Staircase* (2004) and *Making a Murderer* (2015–2018), or the so-called 'poverty pornography' of programmes like *Benefits Street* (2014–2015) and *Skint* (2013–2015) on UK public service television, concerns have been raised about abuses of power and exploitation, the unmanaged impact of public exposure, and the inadequate levels of support offered by the industry. A number of high-profile documentary contributors have spoken out about their negative experiences. Following the release of Asif Kapadia's biography of Amy Winehouse, her father Mitch complained he'd been portrayed as a 'money-grabbing, attention-seeking father who wasn't there', telling journalists the personal impact on him had been so devastating that he'd suffered a nervous breakdown.[1] Margie Ratliff – who agreed to take part in *The Staircase* to prove her family's innocence after her dad was accused of her mother's murder – described the series as a 'huge invasion of privacy', in which their private trauma was repackaged as public entertainment.[2]

In addition to criticisms about misrepresentation and manipulation, other contributors have claimed they were financially exploited by the makers of their documentaries, who monetised their stories but failed to share the profits with them equitably. *Paris Is Burning* (1990) – a documentary about ballroom subcultures in 1980s Harlem – took $3.8 million at the box office, but gave only $55,000 to be distributed between the main cast of 13 drag

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queens and transgender women, who were shown to be living in conditions of extreme poverty and deprivation.[3] One of the film's stars, Pepper LaBeija, told the *New York Times:* 'I feel betrayed…They all got rich, and we got nothing'.[4] More recently, *The Elephant Whisperers* (2022) became the first Indian documentary to win an Academy Award, but its success was overshadowed by accusations that the filmmakers had failed to fulfil the promises they'd made to the mahouts who starred in the film, who filed a legal notice saying they'd been induced into taking part with offers of a decent home, a vehicle, educational help for their granddaughter, and a lump sum fee – none of which ever materialised. The production company denied these claims.[5]

In these examples, it is the documentary-makers who are the subjects of criticism, but it is equally common for disapprobation to be directed towards the participants themselves, who are derided as fame-hungry, greedy, and narcissistic on the one hand, or vulnerable victims on the other. Hundreds of viewers in the UK complained to the media and telecommunications regulator Ofcom about the Channel 4 documentary series, *Benefits Street* (2014–2015), which was set on James Turner Street in Birmingham, where it was claimed that 95% of householders did not work. In the furore surrounding the show, its contributors were described by *The Observer* as a 'set of puppets' and 'lambs to the slaughter'.[6] The late Member of Parliament for Grimsby, Austin Mitchell, denounced the series, and others like it, as 'misery telly...concentrating hatred on the least well educated and most deprived... kicking people when they're down (and gullible)'.[7]

Around the world, in countries including Australia, Canada, and France, there have been regulatory changes and a renewed focus on duty of care. In the UK – where this research project is focussed – following a series of highly-publicised suicides of former media contributors, the government launched a parliamentary select committee inquiry, and subsequently Ofcom, the media and telecommunications regulator, made changes to the Broadcasting Code. A new, stricter, duty of care protocol came into force in April 2021, applying across all factual genres. The amended rules state that contributors must be informed about potential risks, and 'due care' must be taken to mitigate them, with a particular emphasis on contributors who might be categorised as 'vulnerable'.[8] Broadcasters and production companies have responded by investing in mental health screening and psychological aftercare. However, a lack of research has meant that these changes have been largely driven by criticism rather than an informed understanding of the factors which shape contributors' experiences and have the potential to jeopardise their wellbeing. Despite all the speculation, the truth is we know little about what kinds of experiences media participation offers to ordinary people. While a great deal of academic research talks *about* contributors, very little has spoken *to* them. The result is that we have an insufficient understanding of their perspective: do they inevitably feel exploited and abused by the media, or are they getting something meaningful out of the arrangement too?

Given the current context, we need to know more about media contributors to ensure the measures that have been taken to safeguard them are effective, but also because their experiences have much to tell us about the cultural industries and how they work. Contributors represent a fault-line where competing tensions meet: between commercial imperatives and creative goals, personal privacy and the public right to know. They occupy a dual status as both insiders and outsiders, both subject and object (Palmer, 2017). They are central to the production process, but with the objectivity of the uninitiated, well-positioned to share fascinating and valuable insights, but rarely given the opportunity to do so.

This book sets out to examine the politics of the media from the point of view of its participants. Using their lived experiences as the basis for analysis, I demonstrate that the creative output and wellbeing of contributors, producers, and the production environment are all intrinsically connected and have been fundamentally reshaped by the neo-liberal reorganisation of the industry.

Ordinary people in the media

According to Graeme Turner (2010), media culture has taken a 'demotic turn', characterised by an abundance of opportunities for ordinary people to participate across a diverse range of formats and platforms, which developed alongside the arrival of the internet and the dawning of the digital era. The proliferation of 'the ordinary' is not only a way for the media to answer the increased demand for content but is also reflective of significant transformations in wider society. Mark Andrejevic (2004) identifies several historical factors underpinning the shift, arguing the valorisation of ordinariness emerged during the transition from the post-war Fordist model of industrial production to the era of flexible capitalism, when the destabilisation of mass society necessitated a remaking of boundaries in order to maintain social and cultural hierarchies. The apparent invitation for ordinary people to share control of the media became ideologically important at a time when real control over financial resources was becoming concentrated in the hands of a privileged few. Andrejevic argues the ostensible democratisation of celebrity has played a role in enabling a growing societal divide, offering symbolic compensation for accelerating inequality.

This proposition invites us to consider the value of media participation, and whether the growing presence of real people in the media corresponds to an expansion in opportunities for positive recognition and representation. In other words, it asks the question of whether increased visibility has led to empowerment, and a democratisation of the representational resources of the media?

It is firstly important to acknowledge the power of simply being seen, and the striking impact it can have upon our collective definitions of what it is to be an ordinary person. In her research about the 'lifestyling' of factual TV in the 1990s, Charlotte Brunsdon claims the inclusion of gay and mixed-race couples depicted doing everyday activities – hanging wallpaper, choosing what to wear, making their breakfast – made a 'considerable contribution to changing ideas of what it is to be British…These people were just not on television 25 years ago' (2003, pp. 13–18).

Yet for many ordinary people, gaining access to media representation entails finding themselves caught between 'normalized absence' and 'pathologized presence' (Phoenix, 1987, p. 51). Joshua Gamson writes about the impact of public visibility for the outrageous LGBTQ+ contributors on TV talk-shows: the 'misfits, monsters, trash and perverts' (1998, p. 4). As a gay man, and a fan of what he terms 'trash TV', he describes the thrill of seeing people whose life experience is 'tilted towards invisibility' getting their shot at media accreditation and pushing the edges of normality ever-outwards: 'It looks, for a moment, like you own this place' (1998, p. 5). To enter media space, on whatever terms, is to stake a claim to being a legitimate member of the public – yet the price of entry is high, Gamson claims, because these formats exploit as inherently as they empower. A platform is offered to a hitherto ignored and marginalised group, but in a way which distorts, commodifies, and instrumentalises them for commercial gain: 'There is no choice between manipulative spectacle and democratic forum, only the puzzle of a situation where one cannot exist without the other' (1998, p. 19).

The risks and opportunities offered by such forms of mediated visibility, John B. Thompson (2005) argues, are not only a way of bringing aspects of social and political life to the attention of others but also have become the principal means through which values are articulated and contested. The struggle to be seen and heard is an inseparable part of the cultural conflicts of our time, and this tension is only exacerbated by how difficult its impact is to control. In her work on reality TV, Annette Hill (2007) argues it is the role of contributors to be humiliated, shamed, and exposed, parachuted into emotionally-challenging situations and provoked into extreme reactions. Audiences are suspicious of their motives, she claims, perceiving their willingness to debase themselves through the pursuit of fame, and judging them to be therefore less entitled to an ethics of fair treatment. The idea that ordinary people in the media are scorned and exploited is reiterated by Bev Skeggs, who claims the function of participants – particularly white working-class women – is to signal the constitutive limit of bourgeois respectability: 'Class relations are being made through these processes' (2005, p. 974).

Contemporary debate tends to focus upon the negative impact of 'the new' – such as social media criticism, or the advent of more constructed formats, which have blurred the boundaries between documentary and reality TV. But as much as the exploitation of contributors may seem to be a modern concern, claims that documentary-making is an exploitative practice are nothing new. In fact, they are as old as the genre itself (Coleman, 2025). In the 1920s, Robert Flaherty spent 16 months filming the everyday lives of the indigenous Ungava Inuits in the Barrenlands of Northeastern Canada. Numerous writers and scholars have since criticised *Nanook of the North* (1922) and the discourses surrounding it, questioning the authenticity of the film and its role in perpetuating anthropological myths (Rony, 1996; McGrath, 2006). Nanook wasn't really called Nanook, but Alakariallak Nujarluktuk. He was exposed to physical dangers during the production, hunting polar bears and walruses without the use of his rifle. During his time in the Arctic – and despite the presence of his wife on the shoot – Flaherty began an affair with one of the women he filmed with, only to leave when she was five months pregnant with his son, never to return. Nanook died on a hunting trip during a particularly brutal winter in 1923, the film's worldwide commercial success doing little to ease the hardships of his daily life.

Like Flaherty, the Grierson-era documentarists of the 1930s focussed on the daily lives of ordinary people, making films about fisherman, shipworkers, coal miners, and slum dwellers; and social issues such as malnutrition, labour strikes, and overcrowded schools. However, the former TV producer and documentary scholar Brian Winston was cynical about their professed political intentions, claiming 'they were nothing but poseurs, clutching their double-firsts from Cambridge' (1988, p. 35). By training their lenses upon the marginalised, the filmmakers guaranteed they would have the upper hand in almost any situation, and their contributors were easily manipulated (1988, p. 41). According to Winston, the Griersonian focus on victims has been assimilated within the documentary tradition, yet their plight remains unchanged, and the films have patently done more good for the documentarists than they have for their subjects (1988, p. 52).

While the critique is aimed at the media, an unflattering depiction of contributors emerges from Winston's account, and others like it, positioning them as deserving victims. They are deluded, fame-hungry, work-shy, naïve, or narcissistic, and with a degree of inevitability, will be chewed up and spat back out again by a ruthlessly commercial industry. In short, they are being exploited, and their complicity denotes a failure to grasp the reality of the situation they are entering into.

Accusations of exploitation are commonplace in discussions about media contributors, but the term tends to be deployed casually, without theoretical precision. In other work, I argue the type of creative work performed by contributors lacks the sense of coercion and consequence that is typically associated with labour exploitation (Coleman, 2025). Unlike capitalist workers, media contributors are not compelled to participate by economic necessity – in fact, many of them receive no financial incentivisation at all. Similarly, to liken the role they play to that of a commodity – a mere raw material in a capitalist production process – is to offer a characterisation which lacks any sense of autonomy and agency, paying insufficient attention to the values and motivations they embody, which are extrinsic to commodity production but equally compelling. The conceptualisation of contributors as exploited victims offers a partial account of media participation, but it lacks an understanding of them as conscious and motivated agents *as well as* potential subjects of exploitation. According to Jon Dovey (2014), the apparently contradictory dynamics of exploitation and collaboration are inseparably intertwined – an insight which shifts our emphasis away from merely calling out bad practice towards examining the ways in which the modes of participation available to real people are mediated, and how their agency functions within these contexts. Exploitation is, therefore, a core concern, but a term which must be approached with caution, mindful that its connections to economic relations could be reductive, and to an extent, missing the greater point of what it is that contributors are actually doing when they take part in media productions.

The cultural industries

In order to build a more comprehensive account of the role played by media participants, it is firstly useful to examine the context of the cultural industries, and the nature of creative work in the media which forms the backdrop to their experiences. The discourse of concern about media contributors has arisen during a period of profound change, in which the cultural industries 'have moved closer to the centre of economic action' (Hesmondhalgh, 2018, p. 4). The digital era has heralded the creation of a hyper-competitive media environment with a fragmented audience. Changes have been driven by disruptive policy and technological innovations, alongside economic pressures upon the foregoing funding models. The market forces unleashed by these developments have favoured conglomeration, consolidation, and internationalisation, with a handful of vast global corporations dominating the industry, and the cultural products they make circulating across national boundaries. Although television, film, and the documentary genre have withstood these seismic shocks, the era of platform digital media has transformed the culture and politics of the industry in a multitude of different ways, some of which are only now beginning to become apparent.

A significant body of scholarly work has focused on the impact of these changes upon creative workers who operate in the media industries, which have evolved from stable, unionised workplaces, to a deregulated environment, where freelancers work in conditions of chronic precarity and insecurity. Research has shown us how these changes are embodied in the lives of cultural workers, where the pleasures of producing creative work are offset against considerable stress and anxiety (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011). Risk is devolved from companies to individuals, who can only meet the unrealistic expectations of their employers by working harder for fewer rewards (Lee, 2012). Research by *The Time Project* found that every week, TV production staff are working 14 hours more than the average worker – the equivalent of two extra days per week.[9] The consequences of challenging working conditions spill over into personal lives, hampering the ability of creative workers to start families, enjoy financial stability, sustain their careers in the long term, and to progress into senior roles (Wing-Fai et al., 2015; Percival, 2020). These sacrifices are justified through a romanticised discourse of self-actualisation operating at the level of individual subjectivity, with the image of media work as 'cool, creative and egalitarian' often at odds with a more ambivalent reality (Gill, 2002).

We know a great deal about how the pressurised and precarious working environments of the creative industries impact upon workers, but what remains under examined is how they also affect the people *they* are working with. The potential knock-on effect of exploitative conditions and workplace bullying is raised in an article by David Lee (2012), whose interviews with a sample of creative workers suggest that ethical behaviour towards participants becomes harder to sustain under such circumstances. Lee writes: 'The moral core of television practice is being corroded from within because of the transformed institutional, economic and political context within which it is taking place (2012, p. 494).'

Yet while the connection between the industrial context and the slew of worrying anecdotal experiences circulating in the public domain is alluded to in research about the cultural industries, it remains largely unsubstantiated by empirical data. Graeme Turner observes: 'While the participation of ordinary people is continually claimed as a benefit to be realised from each new [technological] development, their actual participation becomes less and less the focus of investigation and research – indeed simply less of an explicit issue (2010, p. 5).'

This is particularly true in respect of the documentary scholarship, where the lack of systematic attention paid to contributors is notable. Beyond a handful of papers focussing on single case studies by scholar-filmmakers such as Kate Nash (2010) or Steve Thomas (2012), there is little research to draw upon. Willemien Sanders puts this absence down to 'long-standing claims to truth and the myth of transparency' within the genre, which fuels the misconception that participants are 'just being themselves, going about their business' (2016, p. 202). However, this project builds upon a number of important insights and approaches that I wish to recognise and develop.

Firstly, I want to acknowledge the influence of previous studies of contributors in different media genres, such as print journalism (Palmer, 2017), talk-shows (Grindstaff, 2002), and reality TV (Andrejevic, 2004). Ruth Palmer's study, in particular, is notable as the first systematic account of media participation from the perspective of contributors. Palmer interviewed 83 ordinary people who had been the subjects of newspaper stories and found that rather than being duped and conned, most subjects are making rational and balanced calculations about the risks of participation, and although they sometimes feel ill-used by the media, there are also potential benefits arising from their involvement. Palmer's interviewees are a diverse collection of people with differing levels of agency, whose relationships with journalists are complicated by asymmetries of power, but who nonetheless often derive pleasure from participating. Her ground-breaking work demonstrates the potential of such empirical study to generate new insights and reset entrenched ethical debates.

Secondly, I want to locate this research within a lineage of production studies, which were pioneered by the likes of Gitlin (2005 [1983]), Schlesinger (1978), and Silverstone (1985), who embedded themselves within various production environments in order to learn about working practices and cultures. Significant contemporary contributions include John Caldwell's study of the rituals and routines of film and video production workers in Los Angeles (2008); Georgina Born's impressive ethnography of the BBC (2004); and Hesmondhalgh & Baker's behind the scenes account of the making of a TV talent show (2011). Vicki Mayer, Miranda Banks & John Caldwell – whose work has added greatly to this field – describe media production studies as taking 'the lived realities of people involved in media production as the subjects for theorizing production as culture' (2009, p. 4).

Finally, the third strand of research I am developing through this work comes from the documentary scholars who have employed a variety of different frameworks in order to examine the nature of documentary-making and interrogate the 'difficult space' between documentary-makers and their subjects (Piotrowska, 2013b, p. 2). These works include Kate Nash on power (2010), Patricia Aufderheide on ethical practice (2009), and Agnieszka Piotrowska on psychoanalysis and documentaries (2013b). These key contributions offer a variety of tools with which to understand the experiences of contributors, and form the basis for much of the following analysis.

Researching documentary contributors

This research is based upon in-depth interviews with a sample of 31 documentary contributors and producers, the majority of which were carried out between December 2018 and June 2020. My initial interest in the topic was sparked by my own professional experiences of working as a producer/director in the TV industry for over 15 years, where working with contributors was both an enormous privilege, and a source of ethical stress. Navigating the uncertain boundaries of these relationships, and struggling to maintain the precarious balance between the personal and the professional was a daily challenge, which was rarely satisfactorily resolved. I was intrigued by the high demands that documentaries make upon their participants, who often share deeply private and intimate aspects of their lives, over extended periods of time. This intense level of commitment is a distinctive feature of documentary-making compared with other types of media contributors who have been studied previously: for example, Palmer's (2017) news subjects had typically fleeting relationships with their reporters; and Grindstaff's talk-show guests spent just a few hours in the studio, their participation structured by the industry maxim she quotes: 'Bring 'em in by limo, send 'em home by cab' (2002, p. 129). By contrast, most of the people I interviewed were filmed over the course of several months, years, or even (in the case of one of my interviewees) whole lifetimes.

As documentary scholars have long debated, hard and fast distinctions between genres are difficult to draw, which has theoretical implications in terms of how the object of study is conceptualised, as well as practical implications in terms of sample selection. Memorable attempts at definitions of what constitutes a documentary include John Grierson's 'creative treatment of actuality' – which captures something of the genre's contradictory impulses – and John Corner's description of a 'series of transformations', which directs attention towards the processes of documentary-making as well as the end result (see Creeber, 2015, p. 148). It is also useful to consider the etymology of the key terms. Documentary is derived from the Latin word *docēre* – to teach – betraying an intention to instruct and guide, rather than merely observe or reveal; whereas the Latin root of fiction is *fictiō* – to mould or to shape – denoting a relationship to realism which disrupts the habitual framing of fact and fiction as binary opposites.[10] John Ellis argues the boundaries between the two are in fact both 'soft' and 'essential' (2005, p. 356) – a claim which suggests the only practicable way of studying documentary is to embrace a degree of messy ambivalence, to work with tendencies rather than absolutes. My approach, therefore, has been to include as wide a variety of documentary styles as possible, from BAFTA-winning features to more tabloid or constructed formats, my main guiding principal being that I wanted to speak to people who were filmed within the broad context of their real lives, rather than people who had been parachuted into an entirely artificial scenario (although as we shall see in later chapters, the degree of construction is not always made apparent to viewers).

Some scholars and documentary-makers have taken the opposite view – that people who care about documentaries should fight to differentiate them from other, more dubious forms of 'unscripted' content, often blaming the perceived decline in ethical standards upon this dilution of the idea of what a documentary should be. Beyond the apparent difficulties in where and how to draw this line of separation, I want to highlight some of the drawbacks in how a more rigid approach to definitions has shaped the existing field of research.

One of the legacies of the documentary scholarship's connection with film studies has been a historic focus on film, to the detriment of television. In the UK, TV remains a major funding source for documentaries, but these productions have been largely ignored in favour of a small canon of cinematically-released features – a selection which is both 'exclusive and conservative' (Bruzzi, 2006, p. 4). Allied to this tendency is an over-emphasis on the role of auteur directors, and a narrow methodological concentration on textual analysis. There is, of course, a long tradition of dismissing what is perceived as culturally lightweight, from novels to soap-operas, yet there is much to be learned from their role in shaping our perceptions of ourselves and one another. As Stephen Coleman says: 'It is through mediation that the world becomes public and through exposure to the media that the public becomes worldly' (2010, p. xi).

My sample of interviewees is hugely diverse – not only in terms of social characteristics such as age, gender, and race but also life experiences – including a Holocaust survivor, a renowned heart-surgeon, a sex worker, an anti-abortion activist, and a disabled world-champion powerlifter. I gravitated towards interviewing people with high levels of personal investment in the documentaries they have taken part in – people with something significant at stake – but have made an effort to include minor as well as major contributors, and those who have played supporting roles as well as the main protagonists. I contacted most people through personal websites or social media, but in some instances, I used press offices or my network of personal and professional contacts to find interviewees. Factual production in the UK is a small world, and inevitably, some of the documentaries I've studied have been made by people I know or have worked with. A handful of the interviewees are people I had pre-existing relationships with – former work colleagues, and in one case, relatives. I chose to interview these people because I knew they had exceptionally interesting stories to tell, and I wanted to include their accounts within my research. I judged that any potential compromise to my objectivity was outweighed by the value of the contribution they could make. Roughly 80% of the sample are participants and 20% documentary-makers. Although my focus is on the experiences of the contributors, I found it was necessary to interview a sub-sample of documentary-makers as well, in order to make the context of their participation explicit.[11]

The interviews were deeply qualitative, and often very lengthy. I prepared by watching my interviewee's documentaries (in some cases, viewing many hours of material), speaking to them and other people involved in their stories over the phone, reading reviews and interviews in the press and on social media, and writing memos to document my ideas as they took shape. I transcribed all of the interviews laboriously by hand to familiarise myself with the material and used a grounded theory approach to analysing the data inductively. In opposition to academic norms, I've largely chosen *not* to anonymise my interviewees, because the specificity of their subject-position is an important part of understanding their experiences. By definition, their stories are already circulating in the public domain, and by not naming them, there would be a danger of implicating other people who took part in these productions. Many of my interviewees agreed to get involved in this project because they actively wanted to add their voices to public debates, or to comment upon their representations.[12] In an effort to make my research process more inclusive, and to minimise the risk of repeating representational harms, every interviewee has been given the chance to read the research prior to publication, to add or amend their comments, and to anonymise their contributions either partially or fully. The experiences my interviewees have shared with me – both positive and negative – have formed the starting point for this research, which I've then attempted to contextualise alongside the extensive existing scholarship about the changing political economy of the media industries.

The structure of the book follows a roughly chronological logic, moving through the various stages of production until transmission and beyond. In Chapter 2, I discuss the various motivations that influence documentary contributors' decisions to participate. Historically, the validity of these motives has been disparaged by critics and scholars, but my argument is that a clearer grasp of their reasoning is an important foundation for any research about their role, because until we know more about what ordinary people hope to gain from participating, we cannot evaluate the extent to which the experience fulfils their expectations. Documentary contributors are often dismissed as fame-hungry narcissists or victims of the media. I begin by unpicking these stereotypes, offering examples from my research which challenge these assumptions. I then make an alternative claim: that media participation is an inherently political act, and that by simply occupying this space, contributors create a powerful cultural statement, whether this is their intention or not. However, the notion of media participation as a form of citizenship is complicated by the biases and values of the platforms themselves, and contributors sometimes find they are misrepresented in ways which make them complicit with the very norms they set out to challenge.

Chapter 3 is about the casting process. Here, I analyse the mechanics of different techniques that are used to recruit participants, and the ways these practices shape their experiences. Firstly, I offer a historical perspective on how casting developed as a distinct phase within the production cycle, considering the impact this reorganisation has had upon contributors. I then compare various approaches to casting – from the casting call to the casting trawl – demonstrating how each one conditions the nature of the interactions between the cast and crew, shaping their relationships, and ultimately, the resulting documentary. My analysis of the casting process shows how existing patterns of recognition and representation are reinforced through production practices, resulting in a participatory deficit which has profound social consequences.

In Chapter 4, I examine how consent works in the documentary context, as both a bureaucratic process and an ethical concern, allowing us to consider the legal and moral obligations producers have towards their subjects. Ostensibly a process which formalises participation and enshrines the rights of contributors, my research reveals how consent can also become a means of disempowering them and shoring up inequalities. In this chapter, I investigate how the ideals of consent are tested by challenging situations, such as working with vulnerable contributors, or when contributors attempt to withdraw from the production. I discuss how production routines are arranged to obtain consent while minimising the risk of disruption, and question what justifiable limits can be placed upon individual autonomy. I conclude that principles of free speech, public interest, and editorial independence which are often evoked to override contributors' rights of consent can also be utilised to protect underlying commercial interests.

Chapter 5 deals with the relationships between documentary-makers and their subjects. Scholars have often focussed on the interpersonal power dynamics in documentary relationships, but in this chapter, I analyse the work of building and maintaining them as a practice of creative labour, performed within the challenging conditions of the contemporary media workplace, where conflicts of interest are embedded within the production process. I reflect upon the consequences for both documentary-makers and their participants, when a job entails the production of intimate connections – which are genuine, but nonetheless instrumental – and subject to commercial pressures and imperatives. My conclusion is that because much of the relationship-work of documentary production takes the form of invisible labour, conducted on the margins of the more tangible tasks of filming and editing, appropriate professional frameworks have yet to be developed, with worrying implications for training, regulation, and duty of care.

Chapter 6 considers the wellbeing of contributors, examining the potential risks and benefits that participation presents. Using examples from my research, I consider how the production process can cause harm to contributors, and what could be done to mitigate these dangers. In this chapter, I consider the UK's duty of care regulations in greater detail, arguing their effectiveness has been compromised by their failure to pay sufficient attention to the structural causes of contributor distress. By analysing the experiences of the people in my sample who Ofcom would categorise as 'vulnerable', I demonstrate how the measures that have been put in place to safeguard them are simultaneously undermined by problematic working practices in the industry. The argument I make is that the wellbeing of participants is inextricably linked to both the wellbeing of producers and the political-economy of the media industries.

Chapter 7 focuses upon the patterns of presence and absence which arise during the processes of filming and editing. I begin the discussion by examining different forms of absences, omissions, censorship, and self-censorship. I then explore forms of staging, construction, and simulated presence, employed by documentary-makers to fill these gaps and effect the appearance of naturalistic reality. Several of my interviewees took part in documentaries which were filmed using a 'fixed-rig' – a technological innovation which replaced the traditional film crew with remotely-operated cameras, heralded as 'television's holy grail' by producers who claimed it would offer unmediated access to real life (Littleboy, 2013, p. 134). Their experiences offer a compelling explanation of the reasons why technical solutions cannot collapse the differences between representation and reality. Finally, I consider the influence of culturally-embedded narrative norms, which mean that contributors can find their amorphous experiences bent into the shape of a story arc, with a defined beginning, middle, and end. My research demonstrates how individual experiences are filtered through layers of cultural preference, rendering our resources for collective remembering unreliable, and propelling certain categories of human experience – such as trauma and grief – beyond the limits of mimetic representation.

Chapter 8 considers what happens when contributors view the final cut and meet their mediated selves, and how they navigate the transition from documentary subject to representational object. Drawing upon Freud's essay about 'the uncanny', scholars have previously noted the unsettling effect of watching oneself on screen, and the loss of control it denotes (Piotrowska, 2013a; Palmer, 2017). My aim here is to develop these ideas by describing how the production arrangements are utilised to manage the politics of representing human subjects. Contributors reflect upon the disparities between the real-life events they experienced and their depictions on screen, discussing issues such as the reordering of time, memory, and authorship. When the documentary is broadcast, it becomes part of a broader media ecology, and participants are exposed to the judgements of the audience via social and secondary media. This chapter describes how they navigate this process, and ultimately, the resumption of their real lives as the experience of participation comes to an end.

The final chapter brings together the main findings of my research and reflects upon what we can learn about the politics of the media by considering the experiences of participants. I offer ten key conclusions and consider the implications for policy and practice, while also describing the enormous potential of documentaries to transform people's lives.

Notes

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3 Vincent, A. 2019. After the ball: Paris is Burning and the tragic true stories that inspired Pose. *The Telegraph*. 22/03/2019.
4 Green, J. 1993. Paris has burned. *The New York Times*. 18/04/1993.
5 Singh, M. 2023. 'The Elephant Whisperers' Mahout couple sends legal notice to Kartiki Gonsalves. *Nepal Weekly*. 07/08/2023.
6 Bennett, C. 2014. Benefits street: Will their lives be better when C4 has gone? *Observer*. 10/02/2022.
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8 Ofcom. 2020. Protecting participants in TV and radio programmes.
9 The Time Project: Understanding working time in the UK television idustry. (2022). SMTJ.
10 Merriam-Webster Dictionary 2022.

11 Within the parlance of this book, as well as using my interviewee's specific job titles, I occasionally refer to them using the more generic terms 'documentary-makers' or 'producers'. In factual production, the roles of producing and directing are often combined, and some of the people I've interviewed will perform different roles on different projects. By using the term 'producers', my intended meaning is the people who broadly-speaking produce documentaries, rather than the more limited job title.

12 The appendix includes a list of the people interviewed, along with a brief biographical note.

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2 Motivations

This chapter is about what motivates ordinary people to take part in documentaries – and despite the lack of previous research, there is certainly no shortage of speculation. According to popular opinion, contributors are vulnerable victims, who are duped and manipulated into taking part, who stand to risk much but, in reality, have little to gain from the experience. Other accounts claim, they are guided by narcissistic self-interest – the pursuit of fame and fortune, or an egotistical desire for attention – which clouds their better judgement and makes them, to a certain degree, complicit when the outcome is not what they imagined. Yet despite the pervasiveness of this type of critical commentary, the truth is that we have insufficient knowledge about how people are persuaded to engage with the media, and what kinds of values and meanings they confer upon participation. Developing a clearer grasp of the complexities of contributors' motivations is, therefore, not only a way of debunking the misconceptions but is also a vital preliminary to any kind of research about the role of ordinary people in the media – because until we know more about what they hope to gain, it's impossible to judge whether the experience ultimately lives up to its promise.

A great deal has been assumed about why members of the public would choose to go on camera, and over the next few pages, I will discuss these clichés in more depth, interrogating their validity and challenging their logics. In doing so, I demonstrate that the stereotypical ways we have understood contributors' motivations are reductive simplifications, which have the effect of closing down debates about media representation rather than opening them up. Instead, I argue that participation is an inherently political act – whether intentionally or otherwise – which has become an important way of enacting citizenship, albeit one which is constrained by the competing values of the media.

Victims and dupes

The scholar whose work is most associated with the idea of subjects as victims is Brian Winston, who claims the media's preoccupation with the disadvantaged represents an abandonment of their role as 'watchdogs of the

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guardians of power' (1988, p. 41). From films about the urban underclass, to malnourished schoolchildren, to migrant workers, to the mentally ill, Winston cites a 'parade of the halt and the lame', which began with the inception of the documentary tradition and continues to this day (p. 53). By focussing on the powerless, rather than scrutinising the powerful, he argues that documentary-makers all but guarantee they will have the upper-hand in the relationship. Their attitude to their subjects is reckless and self-serving, putting their wellbeing in jeopardy. This dysfunctional dynamic is endemic, and exacerbated by the industry itself, which 'tends to make moral behaviour an unaffordable luxury' (2000, p. 162). Winston's conclusion is that a clearer duty of care is needed in order to stop the 'unfettered media right of exploitation of those in society least able to defend themselves' (1988, p. 55).

The 'dupes' argument is a related one, but with a greater emphasis upon the manipulative powers of the media to deceive and betray their hapless participants. Calvin Pryluck claims producers secure the co-operation of members of the public by exploiting their urge to communicate, their loneliness, and their insecurities – yet taking part is rarely in their best interests. In fact, they have 'little or nothing to gain from participation' (1976, pp. 23–24). In the aftermath of their documentaries, people are left debased and humiliated, mocked by their neighbours, their children bullied at school. These kinds of ethical lapses are recurrent, not isolated, and are tampering with fundamental human rights to privacy and self-determination.

More recently, the stereotypes of media contributors as victims and dupes have been reproduced in research about reality TV and the televisual representations of social class and the welfare state (De Benedictis et al., 2017; Kozma, 2018; Skeggs, 2005). Myra Mendible (2004), for example, writes about humiliation as a prevailing theme of reality television. Participants understand they are being humiliated, but willingly submit nevertheless, because their awareness is overridden by a desire for prestige, status, and attention: 'How can you feel "put down" if millions of people think you're worth watching?' (2004, no pagination). The claims in this thread of scholarship are often posited through a sense of concern on behalf of contributors, and the commendable desire to side with them against the media, who are perceived as irresponsible and unaccountable for their negligence. They seek to draw attention to the political consequences of negative or damaging misrepresentations, but do so while paying limited attention to their subjects' own perspectives. The newspapers, however, tend to be blunter in their criticisms, and will often circulate the same stereotypes in a more derogatory fashion. While the 'poverty porn' documentary series *Benefits Street,* for example, was criticised by the British tabloid press as 'depressing, exploitative, and brutally sensationalist', the contributors who took part in it were equally derided as 'people not clever enough to realise they're being stitched up'.[1] Before I put forward my own arguments, I want to be upfront in stating that my research *did* produce evidence of deceptive or manipulative practice, and that some of the contributors I spoke to did indeed feel they had been victimised or duped. One told me: 'In hindsight, it feels like they were being quite fake…I guess that's the nature of their work, but it makes you feel like you've been played'. However, my data also suggests that contributors have a far greater level of awareness and a more sophisticated understanding of the proposition than these types of accounts would imply.

A particularly striking example from my research is Emily Ingold, a young mother from Northamptonshire, who took part in a Channel 4 documentary series called *Shut Ins: Britain's Fattest People* (2014–2021). The format – which follows overweight people undergoing bariatric surgery and includes gratuitous footage of nudity and excessive eating – was described by *The Telegraph's* reviewer as 'exploitative and troubling'.[2] The British Obesity and Metabolic Surgery Society tweeted their concern that the salacious programme title was contributing to social stigma. Such objections are not without foundation. As Sender and Sullivan report, obese people are under-represented on television as a whole, and when they do appear, they are frequently cast as figures of fun or failure, their physical forms taken as 'evidence of an inner malaise…and failures of self-esteem' (2008, p. 573).

During my interview with Ingold, I asked whether she herself felt as though she had been exploited by the programme-makers. Ingold was highly aware about the problematic depictions of obesity in the media and acknowledged the risk of humiliation she was taking by agreeing to participate. 'I was scared that I'd be portrayed as fat and lazy, which is what obese people are branded as', she told me. 'It is a disease, but it's not recognised as one… there's such a stigma'. It would be less accurate to describe Ingold, therefore, as being duped into taking part, than as somebody who recognised the transactional nature of the proposition, and calculated the reputational risks were outweighed by the access the documentary would give her to life-saving weight loss surgery, which had been denied to her by British National Health Service and was otherwise unaffordable. In an email, Ingold told me: 'It was such a pros and cons situation. The pro being the life-changing surgery and the con…being made to look like the overdramatic, stigmatised version of an obese person for the nation/world to see'.

Although I do not wish to gloss over the exploitative aspects of this exchange, it is important to make the point that Ingold did have an accurate grasp of what was at stake and did not consider herself to be a victim, but rather a person who was doing everything within her power to prioritise her physical wellbeing and secure the help she urgently needed. Saying yes to the documentary was one of a very limited set of options through which Ingold could take positive action and materially change her circumstances. Ingold told me she did not feel exploited by the documentary-makers and that participating had a positive transformative effect upon her wellbeing. Ingold's account exposes unacceptable deficiencies in the welfare state – gaps which contributors sometimes resort to using the media to fill. This was a theme which recurred throughout my research – from people seeking access to therapy and services, psychological support for mental health problems, or justice for crimes committed against them – in many cases, the media answering a 'lack' by offering access to something people desperately needed which was not otherwise within their reach. It also reveals a fundamental flaw with the 'victim' label, which is that it often has little resonance with the people it is applied to – a difference in perception which suggests that, to some extent at least, critics are failing to grasp the full complexity of these dynamics.

Fame and fortune

Over the last few years, the idea that media participation has enabled ordinary people to experience a form of celebrity and build lucrative careers has become cemented in the public's imagination. Back in 2001, Chris Rojek used the term 'celetoid' to describe a particular brand of fame conferred upon people with no particular talents, who enjoy 'their moment of fame and then… disappear from public consciousness quite rapidly' (p. 12). Since then, the advent of social media has enabled people to extend and leverage their fame, and some have proved extremely talented in their entrepreneurial ability to monetise the profiles they have built. In 2017, Helen Wood, Jilly Kay Boyce and Mark Banks suggested that becoming an 'ordinary celebrity' through media participation could even constitute a new labour model, providing an income and other benefits akin to a conventional job (p. 117). More recently, the era of the reality TV influencer has arguably peaked, with contributors leaving reality shows having accrued huge social media followings, which they have leveraged into six-figure deals with fast-fashion brands, entrepreneurial business ventures, further television appearances, and substantial personal wealth. Clearly, only a small percentage of media contributors will have this kind of trajectory, but perhaps the prospect of such 'easy graft' is sufficiently enticing to have a persuasive effect on the rest?

The direct payment of contributors has always been a contentious issue. Scholars such as Andrejevic (2004) and Hearn (2006) are troubled by contributors' status as unpaid workers, generating profits for capitalist organisations without recompense. Hearn argues that the labour of self-presentation they perform marks a new twist in capitalist relations, where work is increasingly integrated into every aspect of life – 'the corporate colonisation of the "real"' (p. 131). These arguments have also played out in courtrooms around the world. In 2011, a French court ruled that participants on the reality show *Temptation Island* (2002–present) should be paid a salary and given the status of workers. In 2019, the New South Wales Workers Compensation Commission found that a participant in *House Rules* (2013–2020) was legally an employee of the network, and therefore entitled to compensation for being bullied and harassed throughout filming. Equally, however, the media is often criticised for the practice of 'chequebook journalism', where payment is seen to 'encourage people to lie or embellish facts to gain money…impede the free flow of information…[or] induce people to breach others' privacy' (Franklin et al., 2005, p. 35). Forms of payment have also been suggested as a method for broadcasters to fulfil their duty of care to contributors, for example, by establishing mental health, pension schemes, which contributors could access for ongoing support.[3]

Although payment has become more commonplace in reality TV, with their relatively low budgets, documentary-makers claim that their ability to offer direct financial incentives is limited. Few of my interviewees were paid to participate, and those who were received a small token fee – typically in the region of a few hundred pounds, and unlikely to have a decisive influence. Claire Lewis is a producer who is best known for her work on the iconic *Seven Up* (1964–present) series, which has followed the same group of contributors over the course of their lives, since they were seven years old. ‘Money only works in very large amounts’, she told me. ‘You can bribe people with extraordinarily large amounts of money, but you can’t bribe people with tiny amounts. It’s not the same’.

In addition to budgetary restraints, documentary-makers have traditionally justified their reluctance to offer payment with recourse to ethical objections. Their concerns include the impact payment can have upon relationships and the undesirable way it shapes the dynamics of filming. Peter A. Gordon, an executive producer who has worked in TV for over 30 years, explained: ‘The argument was if you paid somebody, it would taint what they said’. However, my research indicates the norm of non-payment is not applied consistently. Claire Lewis told me the contributors on *Seven Up* all receive ‘a small amount of money…enough to have a really nice holiday. It’s enough to stop them feeling deeply resentful, but it’s not enough to make them do the programme if they don’t want to do it’. Lewis argues that paying the cast is an essential part of securing their long-term cooperation: ‘They’re our talent. They’re talent with a major “T”. If they decide they don’t want to do the film, we don’t have a film’. As her quote suggests, the people who tend to get paid to appear in documentaries are unique or irreplaceable cast members who find themselves in a stronger negotiating position, or public figures who might have an agent to barter on their behalf.

Julian Dismore is a producer/director whose credits include *The Mega Council Estate Next Door* (2020) for Channel 5. He objects to the ethical argument for non-payment on the grounds that it’s an exclusionary practice, pointing out that some people are less able to give up their time for free: ‘There’s a major concern that there are so many hurdles put in place…[and then] only folks who…have enough money to be able to devote their time to being on television, and don’t need money, can appear on television’.

Although every documentary makes different demands upon its contributors’ time, many of the people I spoke to made extensive commitments. Emily Speirs has been filmed for the Channel 4 series, *Born to be Different* (2003–2020), for her entire life, since she was an unborn baby in utero and her mother first discovered she would be born spina bifida. This might be an extreme example, but several of my interviewees were filmed over the course of a number of years. More typically, people will be filmed in intensive bursts over a more limited period of time. Jenny Smith is the headteacher of a school in Walthamstow which was filmed for *Educating the East End* (2014). She told me the production team were ‘working ridiculous hours’, shooting throughout the school day, then interviewing staff and pupils into the evenings and weekends, which added extra hours onto their already-busy working days. Smith estimated she was interviewed for a total of approximately 15 hours ‘and out of that 20–30 minutes may have made it into the final thing’.

Paying contributors could be a way of making participation more accessible to broader sections of society, but the money that is spent tends to be given to those who need it the least. The inconsistency with which payment norms are employed suggests that ethics are flexible, but commercial interests are not. Several of my interviewees felt it was unfair that one side should be paid for their labour and not the other. Director Sue Bourne told me:

> Don’t you think that is hypocritical beyond belief? All of us are making a living – in some instances quite a good living – out of making our films. We go into people’s lives, we expose them to all sorts of things, not all of them good. We demand a lot from them, and we don’t give them a penny to say thank you. I think it’s shocking.

The level of actual profit accrued by production companies and broadcasters is routinely obscured from both the documentary-makers and their contributors, but in the instances when it was apparently obvious that a production had been a commercial success, contributors sometimes felt taken advantage of. Jenny Smith told me: ‘It leaves a very bad taste in the mouth…you see people making profits out of it. You get nothing, and you’re the subjects of it’.

For some people, money was linked to a sense of worth, and feelings of being valued or undervalued, or even exploited. Lucy Wilson[4] is a sex worker who was told she couldn’t be paid to take part in *Louis Theroux: Selling Sex* (2020) as it might be construed as soliciting: ‘If it was a doctor, you’d pay for their knowledge. Why not pay us for ours? It’s that whole thing of you’re not worthy of being paid…Why are you being paid and I’m not?’

But not all of the contributors I spoke to believed they should have been paid. For some, receiving payment would’ve constituted an uncomfortable alignment with stigmatised stereotypes of media contributors, which they were at pains to disassociate themselves from. Jo Lockwood was filmed for more than two years for the Channel 4 documentary, *The Making of Me* (2019), as she underwent a gender transition. She told me:

> I can hold my head up high, if someone ever criticised me for doing it, and said you’re doing it for the money: no, I wasn’t…I’m not selling my story. No one can ever judge me…I never received a penny.

Taking money for participation can undermine the legitimacy of the other motivations contributors bring to the production. Jeff White is an anti-abortion activist in California who's taken part in several documentaries, including BBC Three's *Brainwashing Stacey* (2016). He explained: 'It's a symbiotic relationship. We have a cause. My job is to shout it from the rooftops. The media is a way to do it. I wouldn't expect to get paid'. In his estimation, any financial payment would be less valuable than the freedom to participate on his own terms. White told me: 'If someone's giving you $15,000 to say something, you've got to say what they expect you to say'. Tensions between the creative and commercial are internalised by the contributors themselves, and therefore, refusing money is a way to resist the pressures of commodification and objectification. Agnieszka Piotrowska describes documentary participation as a 'fragile and precious gift for all involved', which like love or friendship, defies capitalist relations and should not be subject to being bought or sold (2013, p. 71). My data supports this claim, insomuch as that when people were paid, the money in itself never felt like adequate compensation for what they had given. Director and scholar Daisy Asquith recounted an instance where she had been able to share the money left over from a budget underspend with her contributors – who up until then, had happily given up their time for free. I asked her if they were appreciative of her gesture. 'Not really!' she told me. 'They were like – is that all?'

For contributors, the direct financial benefits of taking part in documentaries are unconvincing – certainly not commensurate when weighted against their investment of time. However, many of the contributors I interviewed disclosed to me that they were motivated by the opportunity to accrue material benefits indirectly. Several sought publicity or promotion for a venture or project. They drew upon an understanding of media exposure as a powerful tool in a process of self-entrepreneurship – a strategic decision to develop and promote a personal brand, which can be monetised later down the line. Alison Hearn describes participation as an exercise in remodelling the self, performed by neo-liberal subjects in response to the precarity of work in the twenty-first century: 'Participants are labouring to create a product they know has a market value – fame' (2006, p. 136).

As well as being a capitalist practice, the pursuit of fame has been seen by some scholars as symptomatic of an era of self-absorption and normalised narcissism. In the 1970s, the American historian Christopher Lasch wrote that 'the new narcissism' had become 'the moral climate of contemporary society' – a psychological response to the individualism, loneliness, and lack of connection in modern life, which had displaced politics, religion, and community (1978, pp. 26; 36). This theme was taken up more recently by Opree and Kühne (2016), who argue that modern media phenomena such as reality TV and social networking have both fuelled and created new outlets for narcissistic individuals, fostering values of materialism and entitlement. Other research suggests that narcissists are more likely to find the idea of fame alluring. They spend more time fantasising about being famous, and perceive it as a realistic future goal (Greenwood et al., 2013). Young and Pinsky (2006) claim that producers gravitate towards narcissistic contributors because of their superficial likeability and tendency to create drama. However, evidence from the documentary-makers I interviewed challenges this perspective. Most told me they were actually less likely to select people who displayed narcissistic tendencies. 'If they're doing it for fame or money, that's a problem', said director Jerry Rothwell. 'I want to get to the truth of their experience. If your motives are other than telling the story, you may tell that story according to those motives rather than in a truthful way'. Sue Bourne told me she actively preferred to cast contributors who were reluctant to participate:

> I love people who say they don't want to be in the films. I much prefer that. It means they've thought about it. They're not wannabees who just want…the 15 seconds of fame. It's people who are really are thinking carefully about the repercussions of exposing themselves and their families, what it means and what could happen to them.

However, the most significant objection to the idea that media contributors are motivated by fame (or for that matter, fortune) is that for the vast majority, this is not the outcome of the project. Most of the people I spoke to did not feel their personal visibility had increased significantly, and even those who did reported that the effects were short-lived. Jenny Smith explained: '[We] live in such transient times. It's all forgotten pretty quickly'. One of my interviewees, however, did experience the kind of instant fame which Rojek described. Jonny Mitchell was the headteacher in Channel 4's hit series, *Educating Yorkshire* (2013), which was watched by over 4 million people and won an Emmy, a Grierson, and a National Television Award. Mitchell told me about the surreal period of his life which followed, where he was mobbed by strangers in bars, found his photograph printed in *Heat* magazine as 'Torso of the Week' and was sent a pair of knickers through the post. However, he ultimately found that fame was not compatible with his everyday life. He was unable to take advantage of the offers he received to take part in reality shows without sacrificing his vocation: 'I'm a public servant…I have a day job and my governors will want to know where I am'. Not only did Mitchell tell me that he had 'never taken a penny' for any opportunities which arose through his media appearances but there were also negative consequences for his private life. 'I won't say that me and my now ex-wife weren't having marital issues anyway, but the experience of the aftermath expedited my departure from my marriage', he told me. 'She said [the fame] went to my head. Arguably for the first four or five weeks, it really did'. In order to move on from *Educating Yorkshire* (2013), Mitchell decided to leave Thornhill Community Academy and apply for a job elsewhere. Despite the personal costs, Mitchell insists he has no regrets, but took part in the documentary in spite of the prominence it brought him, not because of it: 'I didn't do it for the fame and approbation. I did it for the public good: to open their eyes'.

This sentiment was echoed by many of the other interviewees I spoke to, who considered media exposure to be an ambivalent prospect. Contributors often experience a disjunct between different framings of the self, where the public nature of documentary breaks down hitherto compartmentalised aspects of identities, creating intersections which may be unwanted or undesirable. Some people spoke about the risk to their professional reputation. Jo Lockwood – who has a high-profile career as a corporate consultant – told me she was nervous about exposing her private life to her professional network: 'I was worried about it damaging my brand by showing me as a blubbering wreck'. Others felt personal discomfort about the idea of becoming the focus of discussion or scrutiny. Liane Piper, who took part in a documentary about body dysmorphia, told me: 'I hate being the centre of attention…I've got very low self-esteem...I hate being noticed. I like to slink by in the background'. As much as the desire for attention might incentivise some contributors, it is equally clear from my research that many people are reluctant participants, which begs the question, why would they say yes?

An important point which arose from my findings is that people by and large did not seek out attention for its own sake. Most people who decide to put themselves in the public eye do so for logical and understandable reasons. Kate Warrender and Steve Plaskitt agreed to take part in a true crime documentary about their son, Charlie, who died after a night out while serving with the Royal Navy in the Seychelles. They told me one of their main motivations was to correct a very public misrepresentation which had been made about his death previously: 'The headline in the local paper was "Sailor Dies of Drink and Drugs". The actual article was not so bad – it was more factual – but that headline on the front page of the newspaper…it just wasn't fair'.

When Charlie's body was found dumped in a park the next day, the money in his wallet had been stolen, his bank account raided – yet despite the suspicious circumstances, neither the Seychelles nor British police forces launched an investigation. After a year of combing meticulously through the available evidence themselves, the family presented their findings at the coroner's inquest, which concluded that Charlie was not a drug user, and the lethal dose of heroin which killed him was 'likely administered by a third party'.[5] The inquest confirmed their son was not responsible for his own death, but the only way to counter the misinformation circulating about him was to once again put his story into the hands of the media: 'Although it was something we didn't want to do, it was something we needed to do for Charlie', Warrender told me, 'to challenge the story that was out there, so that people who knew him would know the truth about what happened rather than the headline'.

My data suggests the decision to participate in documentaries is often motivated by a desire to generate mass attention – however, typically this attention is not the end in itself, but intended to serve a calculated purpose. Rhetorical work is being performed by the accusation that contributors are drawn to the media spotlight because of narcissism, which undermines their legitimacy, but fails to explain the motivations of reluctant contributors, for whom the attention is not the prize in itself, but the admission cost of gaining a platform for their message to be heard.

The politics of participation

Having complicated some of the stereotypes about documentary contributors, and the misperceptions about why they choose to share their lives in such public, and often risky, ways, I now want to explore a different idea – the idea that irrespective of the particular motivations that individual contributors may bring to it, media participation is an increasingly important way of performing citizenship in digital cultures.

In their book, *Being Digital Citizens* (2020), Engin Isin and Evelyn Ruppert define 'the citizen' as not only a person who is a member of a nation-state, but more broadly, as a 'figure that emerged in particular historical and geographical configurations and a dynamic, changing, and above all contested figure of politics that comes into being by performing politics' (pp. 20–21). Citizenship is defined by a series of rights – be they civil rights, such as the rights to free speech and privacy; or political rights, such as the right to vote and run for public office; or social rights, such as the rights to welfare and healthcare. Isin and Ruppert identify performativity as one of the key forces through which citizen subjects come into being, because these rights are neither fixed nor guaranteed, but must continually be contested and claimed, and to do so is a performative practice. Citizenship, therefore, is concerned with how people enact themselves as subjects, and for some people, media participation offers a powerful political practice.

In the 60s and 70s, feminist documentary-makers created films with the rationale that sharing personal experiences on camera had a potentially empowering impact, validating the views of participants and increasing their visibility (Ouellette, 2015). Klein and Coleman (2021) extend this idea to reality formats, whose cultural value is more usually dismissed and denigrated, arguing that appearing on TV could be considered an alternative mode of self-representation at a time when the legitimacy of conventional politics has been undermined by widespread public distrust, apathy, and cynicism. My research substantiates these claims. Several of my interviewees explicitly told me they wanted to take part to effect social or political change, characterising their participation as a means of civic engagement and a way of contributing to larger public conversations, mobilising their narrative histories in order to challenge the existing state of affairs. Child psychotherapist Lydia Tischler spent her teenage years imprisoned in concentration camps at Auschwitz and Terezin, but didn't begin to talk publicly about her Holocaust experiences until she was in her eighties, when her concerns about the contemporary socio-political environment and the rise of anti-Semitism motivated her to speak out. ‘I think it’s very important for people like me, who experienced it first hand, to talk…about it’, she told me. ‘To put some sort of explanation of what can lead to this – when you project all the badness onto *the Other,* and ignore the potential Nazis within ourselves’.

Like Tischler, some contributors are able to connect their embodied experience to a political alignment or principle in an attempt to shift perceptions relating to a particular issue or concern. Vicki Beckett was filmed for a Channel 4 documentary about stillbirth, shortly after she discovered her baby’s heart had stopped beating during a routine antenatal appointment. Beckett had a similarly explicit political rationale for taking part, wanting to draw attention to the UK Government’s lack of adequate investment in maternity services, which has led to a chronic shortage of midwives, experiences of care deteriorating, and a failure to reduce rates of stillbirth.[6] She told me that taking part in *Child Of Mine* (2018) offered her a way of reclaiming her agency in a situation where she otherwise had no control: ‘I was just motivated because I was pissed off. I still am to this day…I wanted to make a noise and I was given a platform’.

For other contributors, the political value of their participation was centred less on what they were actually saying or doing and was more a matter of visibility. By virtue of some aspect of their identities, simply being seen on screen was a means of challenging societal norms or prejudices. These people described a conscious sense of becoming a representative of a social group who are maligned, misunderstood, or marginalised in public life. Having watched two preceding series which focussed on male headteachers, Jenny Smith saw taking part in *Educating the East End* (2014) as an opportunity to convey a message about women and leadership: ‘It was…about female empowerment and stepping up’. In some cases, marginalised interviewees equated the lack of public profile their social group commands with discrimination and a diminution of their rights, or with taboos and stigmatisation which make their daily lives more difficult. Sex workers Lucy Wilson and Georgia Tyson told me: ‘We don’t have any protection, and the general public just don’t know anything’. The impact of occupying such a public platform is so powerful that to do so is *always* a political act – even when it isn’t necessarily the intention. Emily Ingold took part in *Shut Ins* (2014–2021) in order to access weight loss surgery, but her participation inevitably exposes deficiencies in the National Health Service, who refused to fund her treatment or offer any support for her eating disorder, her doctor telling her: ‘You’ve just got to get on with it’. Similarly, Rich Willis – a world champion powerlifter who has diastrophic dwarfism – told me he felt that being filmed doing everyday things – such as taking his daughter to school and cooking her dinner – has had a greater impact than coverage of his sporting achievements. ‘People see you’re getting on with your normal life, doing the same things as everyone else, then that mystery – why people want to look at you – that dissipates. They understand you’re just like everyone else’.

The most obvious objection to the idea that documentary participation is a practice of citizenship is that the opportunity to take part is only extended to a small minority of people, and even those who are offered this chance are not able to speak on their own terms. Documentary production is marked by the same inequalities of participation as other forms of political or civic activity, as I explore further in the following chapter. Furthermore, some interviewees told me that not only did their political goals go unmet, but the final documentary actually colluded with the same problematic tropes and misrepresentations they had set out to challenge. Jenny Smith, for example, who had wanted to showcase a school with strong female leadership, told me she was disappointed about the representation of the ambitious, intelligent female pupils in an episode which was supposed to focus upon their achievements: 'It became about the skirts and the make-up and the boys, which was not what it was supposed to be'. The documentary-makers repeatedly used shots of Smith changing from her trainers into her heels when she got to work, and in every interview to publicise the series, journalists asked her about her shoes. *The Daily Mail* ran an article with the headline: '*Educating the East End in stilettos*', which said that Smith's 'greatest tactic' was 'wearing sky-high stilettos to tower over pupils' to compensate for her 'not having the "natural authority" of a male head'.[7] 'That drove me mad', Smith told me. 'Why are we being reduced like this?'

Conclusion

Listening to documentary contributors giving their accounts about their motivations disrupts the simplistic clichés about the pursuit of fame and fortune, mindless attention-seeking, and self-aggrandisement which have dominated discussions about their role. These pervasive stereotypes prime us to be cynical about the suggestion that participants might be motivated by political goals, yet there is no binary distinction between self-interest and civic engagement – it is entirely possible for both to operate in parallel. At the centre of the urge to participate is an orientation of the mediated self to others which – despite the complexities of their individual motivations – is always a political act. As director Sue Bourne put it in her interview: 'They've got *something to say*. They want to be heard'. Furthermore, the inattention that has been paid to contributors' political motivations within public debates and the academic literature prevents us from asking more interesting questions, about the extent to which media participation delivers upon these perceived promises and enables ordinary people to perform politics.

Reframing media participation as a way of enacting citizenship restores a sense of rationality and agency to contributors, who have so often been discredited by a lingering, but under-evidenced suspicion of naïve victimhood or individualised narcissistic self-glorification. However, my research also suggests that the people who ostensibly have the most to gain from taking part often discover that visibility in itself is not a remedy for the exclusion and misrepresentation they suffer in their everyday lives. Being given access to a platform is not, in itself, a means to democratise civic participation, because media platforms are not neutral, but rather are imbued with the values of the wider political-economic systems they form part of. The opportunity to take part, which appears to offer contributors a means of claiming citizenship rights is, at the same time, a method of containing them.

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3. Stone, J. 2023. 'I was terrified of being known as the girl who was attacked while on The X Factor': Lucy Spraggan on rape, recovery and reality TV. *The Guardian*, 15/07/2023.
4. Lucy Wilson is a pseudonym, used at the interviewee's request.
5. Parveen, N. 2016. Dead Royal Navy sailor was probably given heroin, says coroner. *The Guardian*. 15/06/2016.
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7. Cox, L. 2014. Educating the East End in stilettos. *Daily Mail*. 04/09/2014.

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3 Casting

This is a chapter about the various ways that ordinary people are recruited to take part in documentary productions. Examining the process of casting raises issues of access and fairness and gives an insight into working practices in the media which can render certain people and social groups either more or less visible. By analysing the mechanics of how potential contributors are identified, selected, and persuaded to take part, my aim is to demonstrate how the method itself can inform the outcomes. There are two main arguments I want to pursue. First of all, that the different experiences described by my interviewees occur within a commercially-driven context, where the relative availability or scarcity of potential contributors has a determining role in how the casting process is enacted. Secondly, that the casting techniques adopted by a particular production will condition the incipient relationships which develop between contributors and crew, shaping their interactions – and ultimately, the resulting representations.

As a way of approaching this analysis, I firstly offer a historical perspective on the development of the casting process as a distinct phase within the factual production cycle, often conducted by its own specialist team of producers, describing the impact this reorganisation has had upon the people who take part. There are a number of typical approaches to casting which operate within the industry. In a casting call, producers will sift through a potentially large number of applicants in order to find their contributors. In a casting trawl, the crew sets out to proactively find participants based upon a wish-list of characteristics. In other circumstances, documentary-makers must gain access to a specific person or group in order to tell their story. Over the following pages, I explore each of these scenarios in turn, asking how the different methods impact upon the people who go through them, and what they reveal about the priorities and values of the media.

Casting in factual production

Though the phrase has been widely adopted within the industry, its connotations of manufacture and performance make ‘casting’ a far from neutral term, and a description of the recruitment process which is not uncontentious. Jerry

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Rothwell, whose career began in community filmmaking before he became an acclaimed director of feature documentaries, told me he hates the idea of casting and the kind of relationship with contributors it suggests: ‘It feels like it’s putting them in a role within the film, whereas actually, the film should be based around the contributor’.

The etymology of casting originates from the Middle Ages, the verb *cast* meaning the act of throwing, flinging, or hurling. In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the word *cast* referred to the form taken by a substance after it had been thrown or moulded, leading to the generation of further new meanings, including the theatrical sense of a group of actors coming together to create a performance which was in common usage from the seventeenth century onwards.[1] *Casting* became part of the language of theatrical production from the nineteenth century, with the phrase ‘the casting couch’ suggesting impropriety and the abuse of power (Fortmueller, 2022). Throughout its lexical history, casting has implied an act of construction, where a product is somehow crafted or moulded into shape rather than simply discovered or exhibited. An implied sense of contrivance and manipulation is inherent within its origins.

Several of the documentary-makers I interviewed connected the arrival of the term *casting* within factual production to the development of reality TV and the rise in formatted programming, where members of the public would be used interchangeably within formulaic returnable series (Brunsdon, 2003; Bell and Hollows, 2005). The adoption of the phrase *casting* is revealing in terms of the changing values of factual production, with entertainment, ordinariness, domesticity, and replicability increasingly prized, and the space for so-called ‘serious’ standalone documentaries squeezed out of primetime scheduling (Brunsdon et al., 2001). By the turn of the century, TV participation had begun to suggest a different set of meanings to the public as well. *Seven Up* (1964–present) producer Claire Lewis told me:

> The landscape had completely changed. *Big Brother* had happened, constructed programmes started to happen, and people suddenly realised what being on telly was about as a real person…The minute there was that dawning of consciousness, we weren’t dealing with a very naïve, wonderfully immature television audience. Everything changed…our contributors changed.

The advent of reality TV, and other aesthetic adaptations, however, are themselves symptomatic of broader shifts in the political economy of broadcasting and are a consequence of changes in the cultural landscape as well as a cause of them. Within factual production, casting became a distinct and separate process not only because of generic innovations but also because of the reorganisation of working patterns as part of the process of deregulation and neo-liberalisation which has been taking place in the cultural industries since the 1980s. Influenced by the post-Fordist emphasis on specialisation as a means of creating efficiency, dedicated casting teams were established to recruit contributors before passing them onto a shooting team. The ability to run various production processes in tandem has helped to shrink schedules and cost cuts. In a highly competitive TV commissioning environment, it has also become increasingly common for casting to take place during the development stage, before the documentary goes into full production, so that broadcasters are able to approve contributors before committing funding. However, my research suggests the fragmentation of creative roles has been problematic for contributors due to the consequential loss of consistency and overall authorial responsibility. Peter A. Gordon is a multi-award-winning executive producer who has worked in television for over 30 years. He told me: ‘The division of labour that now exists – it’s not the one person who makes contact, maintains contact and then does the editing – it’s probably three or four different people…so the nuances of what was said and what’s understood are gone’.

Although the contributors I spoke to were largely unaware that things were once done differently, several spoke of their sadness or disappointment when a crew member they had bonded with suddenly vanished. Jo Lockwood, who took part in *The Making of Me* (2019) – a Channel 4 series about trans people’s lives – told me:

> I didn’t realise at the beginning that [the director] was freelance. So there were some times where she’d disappear for three or four months, seeing other people…Once the filming stopped, she said “I’m off for another job now, I’m off that show.” We said, “Hang on! We expected you to be our friend till the end! And you’re off! You’re not even part of the final edit.” That was a shock to us, where we found at different stages of production people were coming and going, and then disappearing.

In some instances, the interchangeability of production staff can have more serious consequences for contributors. Liane Piper was filmed while undergoing therapy for a debilitating anxiety disorder. For her, the sudden loss of a trusted presence was deeply unsettling. She told me:

> I don’t like meeting new people. I always wonder what they’re thinking of me. I’d have to take the producer to one side and say, “Do they believe me? Do they think I’m lying? Do they like me? Do they think I’m annoying?” I didn’t really like it when it changed. I was more comfortable when I got to know somebody.

Being passed from pillar to post generates a lack of accountability, creating a situation where it is unclear who has ultimate responsibility for editorial decisions about the documentary. This in itself suggests an erosion of producer autonomy and can lead to a breach in the painstakingly-built relationships of trust between documentary-makers and their participants – but it also suggests an attitude of replaceability which extends to both producers and contributors alike.

Having discussed in general terms how the restructuring of creative labour has influenced the development of the casting process, and the consequences these changes can have for contributors, I now want to describe more specifically how casting is performed within different production contexts. While there is no one single method – the process being influenced by subgenre, institutional or individual preferences, programme budgets and schedules, to name just a few potential variables – my data suggests that the relative availability of suitable contributors can be a decisive factor in determining which approach is taken, and this choice can have a significant impact upon the resulting documentary.

The casting call

Several of the people I spoke to initiated their relationship with the production by responding to a casting call, where members of the public are invited to reply to an advert, which may typically be circulated on social media, in the press, or on a flyer left in strategic locations. In their interviews, they evoked a feeling of competition about the casting process, and a perception that the producers had a large number of potential contributors to choose from. Emily Ingold, who took part in *Shut Ins: Britain's Fattest People* (2014–2021) on Channel 4, told me: 'It was a really long interviewing process, loads of stuff to go through, always being told at the end of phone calls, "We really like you but don't get your hopes up, because we've had lots of people apply"'.

People who were recruited through a casting call described a process of ascending through various rounds of selection, where their application would be considered by people of increasing seniority within the production team. Test footage was often shot to be shown to executive producers or commissioning editors, with the understanding that these people would be the final decision-makers. From the very beginning of their involvement with the production, an idea is conveyed to contributors that the people who have ultimate control are not the same people with whom they have direct contact. In these accounts, there was a prominent sense of audition and performance, the process itself helping to establish a shared understanding of participation as a privilege, with the production in a position of relative power to pick and choose who they want to take part. This can have a persuasive role in convincing contributors who might otherwise have reservations about participating, making them feel as though they have been plucked from a crowd, and are lucky to have been selected for a rare and prestigious opportunity. Jo Lockwood told me:

> My wife was getting more anxious about the whole thing, because she's definitely not one for the spotlight or the public eye. I said, "We're a long

> way off, there's hundreds of people in this." So we did the Skype chat, they videoed it, recorded it. They said, "We'd like to get serious" – and we went, "Oh…shit!"

Psychologists have written extensively about the 'scarcity principle', noting the effect of unavailability in magnifying people's desires to obtain whatever is being withheld from them (Lynn, 1992). By creating the feeling of scarcity within the casting process, producers make the proposition of taking part seem more enticing and desirable. But in such circumstances, when they are free to choose from a large range of potential contributors, what criteria do they use to make these decisions? What kinds of characteristics are producers looking for when they are choosing their participants? Previous research suggests sought-after qualities include a propensity to perform exaggerated, sensational versions of the self, creating moments of conflict, drama, and jeopardy (Gamson, 1998; Higgins et al., 2012). In the late 90s, Laura Grindstaff spent several years working as a participant observer on TV talk-shows and reality formats. She writes: 'The "best" guests were not only forthcoming about the personal details of their lives, but also willing to "play" themselves with a maximum of emotional and physical expressiveness in ways that reinforced prevailing class-based cultural stereotypes' (2009, pp. 71–72). For the contributors' part, Alison Hearn likens their willingness to perform to 'donning Mickey Mouse ears at Disneyland' (2006, p. 134). They are already *au fait* with the performative expectations of various TV genres and set out to deliver what is required of them in order to be chosen.

Some of my interviewees perceived sensational aspects of their personal histories lent them a kind of prestige within the casting process. Philipp Tanzer – who took part in BBC Three's *I Am a Men's Rights Activist* (2020), and has had his story featured in the media numerous times – told me producers are drawn to his 'weird past', as a former Mr Leather and gay porn star, whose mother was murdered by his stepfather. However, as much as his personal history makes him distinctive within the casting process, he also recognises it can be a barrier to being taken seriously: 'It can help, and it can hinder. It helps because it creates interest and it engages people…but if you're weird, you can be attacked by other people, "Oh, he's just a weirdo"'.

The interviews I conducted with documentary-makers, however, tended to complicate the notion that what they are seeking is extreme performances or colourful personal histories. Several told me their personal casting values favoured the ordinary over the sensational. Sue Bourne, a director known for making documentaries about the minutiae of everyday lives, told me: 'Lots of people when I talk to them initially say, "You won't want me. I'm really boring". No one's boring. Everybody's got a story…Sometimes it is in the apparently ordinary that you find something'. Similarly, Jerry Rothwell told me: 'My starting point is that everyone is interesting, therefore, it's about how do you form a relationship where people can reveal their interestingness?'

This quality of 'interestingness' was something that I spoke about with documentary-makers at length, while I also asked the contributors to explain why they thought they were chosen. Some listed personal characteristics such as charisma, good humour, or 'a spark'. There was an emphasis on unusual experience over the commonplace – people who 'didn't fit the typical mould'. Sue Bourne described the casting process for *A Time to Live* (2017), her film about people living with a diagnosis of terminal illness. Most prospective participants told her they wanted to spend their remaining time with their families, and she decided not to cast them, as this emotional territory felt too obvious. Equally, however, she didn't want to choose people who were exceptional in some kind of clichéd way – who were planning on completing 'stupid bucket lists' or 'running six marathons' in their final days. Instead, Bourne told me: 'I'm looking for *truth*. That's what I think. I don't know if I'm a particularly good filmmaker, but the one thing I am good at is interviewing people. I do get people to open up. You sense the honesty of what they're saying'.

Honesty, articulacy, and openness were qualities which were mentioned in many of my conversations. While the commercial value placed on exaggerated, performative, or sensationalised content creates a pull in a certain direction, a set of contradictory values prioritises authenticity and self-disclosure, suggesting that casting is a more nuanced and variable process than is generally granted. The imperative for contributors to be willing to share emotional revelations about their personal lives could be taken as further evidence of the media's systematic exploitation of contributors, but there is a distinction to be made between vulnerability and victimhood. The expectation that contributors will bare their souls does not simplistically equate with their abuse, but it does entail a level of emotional investment which implies an immense responsibility on the behalf of producers to safeguard their subsequent wellbeing.

The casting trawl

In many productions, producers are looking for something more specific. Their film requires contributors who fit a particular profile, or have a certain story to tell, and so the pool of potential participants dramatically shrinks. Many of the contributors I interviewed were proactively approached as a result of a targeted search. Sue Bourne described to me how a typical casting trawl might work on one of her documentaries, where having done some initial research, she would draw up a wish-list of archetypes who she envisaged would be the best people to help her tell the story:

> We wanted a teenager, a mother at home with young babies, a divorcee – we had a list of types. We'd drawn up a list of about 20, if not more, and then we targeted our research to go to charities, organisations, local newspapers, newspaper articles, and did it like that.

Claire Lewis concurred: 'If you want to represent certain views within the programme, you have to go and look for those stereotypes…the fact is they usually do fulfil what you think they're going to do'.

As well as using intermediary organisations, producers will also look for accounts that have already been published. Peter A. Gordon told me:

> I would've found [my contributors] through reading about them, which means they've previously given an interview to someone else, or through an organisation or a help group, where there would always be a mediator…otherwise, how would I find them? I'm not going to go knocking on doors. It would always be through somebody.

Using newspaper cuts to source contributors and stories is a recycling of material which is already in the public domain. The cannibalistic nature of the media means that 'new' content is actually often old content in the guise of a different format. One director I spoke to raised concerns that casting had become a 'desk-job', and therefore people who were not easily discoverable using such techniques dropped off the radar of most productions. People who are already less visible or marginalised within society – the old, the very young, the disabled, or non-native English speakers, for example – are harder to include if casting teams conduct their work solely from the office, as the constraints of budget and schedule often dictate. On the other hand, people who already have a certain level of visibility – who've featured in the media before, who engage with online platforms, or who already have a public profile – are easy to locate and often find themselves at the top of the pile. Irrespective of any intentions the production team might bring to the project, the methods they use mean the outcomes are tilted towards a particular direction from the outset. Rather than redressing participatory inequalities, the casting process is liable to magnify existing patterns of visibility and absence.

If recycled media content plays a passive role in enabling producers to access contributors, institutions and organisations often take a more active role, putting forward potential contributors from their membership or affiliations, or even becoming the setting for the documentary series itself. Productions are frequently centred in public institutions, such as hospitals and police stations, where a reliable churn of dramatic stories is guaranteed. Many of the contributors I spoke to were positive about the link between public institutions and the media. Kulvinder Lall is a cardiothoracic surgeon at St Bart's Hospital, who took part in *Operation Live* (2018), a Channel Five documentary which broadcast live from an operating theatre. He told me the BAFTA-nominated series was reputation-enhancing for the hospital, doubling recruitment overnight, and raising public awareness about what really happens during surgery. 'It's all been positive', he claimed.

However, there is a potential for documentary productions to be compromised through an over-reliance upon institutional access. Claire Lewis, who has made several such documentaries, said: 'Talk about editorial control! There is no editorial control on any programme like that, otherwise you can't do it'. Lewis told me it was common for institutions to demand to see rough cuts or make changes to the final film – particularly if storylines showed them in a negative light. When documentaries are entirely dependent upon the co-operation of institutions, there is a pressure to make sure their agenda is met; otherwise, the crew may not be welcomed back. These arrangements incentivise documentary-makers to produce uncritical representations in order to maintain their access.

From a pragmatic point of view, wish-list casting is an eminently sensible way to approach the task of recruitment. Clearly, finding what you want is much easier when you know what you are looking for. However, there is something inherently reductive about casting to type. One director described this kind of 'shopping list' approach

> Tick tick tick. They go hammering in, and they're not interested in the person. It's always about what *they're* looking for, for *their* programme. It's not about a genuine interest in that human being…It's just about… how many of the boxes that I have to tick off do you tick?

The contributors I spoke to often thought they had been cast to exemplify a preconceived notion of identity. Lucy Wilson[2], who took part in a Louis Theroux documentary, told me: 'They find someone as close as they can to fulfil these stereotypes they have in their head, and then perpetuate it on screen'. Conflict can arise when the match between the wish-list and the contributor is imperfect. Some contributors felt they were being edited to resemble someone else's idea of a character, and that certain aspects of their identity were more welcome than others. Wilson continued:

> They put a stereotype into the spotlight, then they egg you on to behave in a way that they want you to behave, then only take those bits so they can say, "The stereotypes are true!" They take narratives away from people who live in very complex situations.

Rich Willis, an athlete with diastrophic dwarfism, expressed his ambivalence about the media attention he received when he became a world champion powerlifter – happy to find his achievements celebrated on the one hand, but equally struck by the contrasting lack of curiosity about disabled people's everyday lives on the other. He told me:

> People…are more interested in those superhuman efforts than what it must be like for someone with dwarfism or any disability who goes to university then studies to become a doctor or a surgeon, or get a PhD – how amazing is that, given all the obstacles they have to encounter? To me, that's more superhuman than lifting a few weights.

Because of its extraordinary longevity, the iconic documentary series *Seven Up* (1964–present) has given us the opportunity to observe the consequences of casting to type play out on screen. Claire Lewis has been the producer and main point of contact for its participants since the 1980s. She told me:

> They were stereotypically represented. They were chosen to be examples of social class…The girls were chosen to be examples of working class and the boys were chosen to epitomise the upper class…They didn't set out to find personalities…they weren't looking for particular people, they were looking for representatives of a particular story.

The formula of *Seven Up* (1964–present) was engineered to make a point about social class and determinism, but its casting also unintentionally reflected the dominant values of wider society in 1960s Britain, which have since been questioned and challenged. The late director, Michael Apted, was criticised for the overwhelming focus on the stories of white males and the lack of contributor diversity. Lewis told me:

> When I met Michael, when I started on *28 Up (1984),* my first question to him was…"Where are the women?" He said because when they made *Seven Up (1964-present)* it was pre-feminism…Women didn't have careers, they stayed at home and had their families…Television was made by men…It never entered anybody's heads.

The unbalanced casting had significant representational consequences, which Apted described as 'a felony that was going to haunt me as long as the series survived…choosing only four girls was bad planning and it meant we missed out on the women's movement, one of the most powerful social and political upheavals of my lifetime' (Lewis, 1991, p. 11).

Stella Bruzzi describes the casting of *Seven Up* (1964–present) as an attempt to create balance through pairings, 'binary opposites through which the underlying arguments could be explored' (2007, p. 10). The pairs included two trios of East End girls and privately-educated boys; the rural working class contrasted with the landed gentry; and the juxtaposition of a boarding school pupil against two boys growing up in a Barnardo's children's home. Interest was directed towards the extreme ends of the social spectrum, and what lay between those poles was largely excluded. Preconceived notions of values and lifestyles helped Granada TV make their point about social class, but frictions arose when the life events or behaviour of contributors disrupted the simplistic coherence of the roles they had been cast to play. When the father of John Brisby, one of the upper-class boys, died when he was nine years old – problematising his portrayal as the beneficiary of a privileged childhood – it was never mentioned on screen. 'Anything that doesn't quite fit what he [Apted] wants to portray of me doesn't play', another of the contributors told Bruzzi (2007, p. 94).

Understandably, as the *Seven Up* (1964–present) project progressed, the differences between individual contributors and their underlying social scripts began to cause tensions. In *49 Up* (2005), one of the working-class girls, Jackie Bassett, confronted Apted on-camera, irritated by his assumptions and misunderstandings, refusing to be reduced to a cliché. Lewis told me: 'Jackie never forgave him for stereotyping her...[she] always resented being used as a stereotype...Jackie said, "You'll edit the programme how you see fit. I have no control over that"'.

Another one of the upper-class boys, Charles Furneaux, pulled out of the series altogether after *21 Up* (1977), then later threatened to take legal action against Granada over the continued use of his archive despite his withdrawal. The grouping of contributors into threes, organised by their social class, gave a 'falsifying sense of homogeneity', Bruzzi claims (2007, p. 93). The contributors did not necessarily agree that their social class was the most salient aspect of their identities, in some cases rejecting the whole agenda. As they grew into adults – with families, careers, and complex personal histories – the portraits of them created by the documentary series could no longer be reduced to a single social characteristic. As Lewis told me: 'They outgrew their social class and became people'.

Unique contributors

Casting isn't always about making choices. Sometimes, a documentary can only be made if its producers are able to get access to a particular person or group. 'You're working with the people who are at the centre of the story, whose story it is', Claire Lewis said, describing this situation from a filmmaker's perspective. 'They could be articulate, inarticulate, shy, extrovert – you're literally stuck with the real people'.

In 2008, Sue Bourne made the documentary *My Street* (2008), about the residents of the 116 houses on the road in West London where she has lived since 1993, most of whom she had never met before. There was no casting process to speak of – only the task of persuading whoever answered a knock on their door to take part. These people ranged from a man with Tourette's syndrome, to a convicted drug smuggler, to a Margaret Thatcher impersonator. The apparent randomness of the casting became the documentary's unique selling point, and a way of exploring the changing social dynamics of an area in the midst of gentrification: 'I wanted to say this could be your street...'. For another documentary, Bourne wanted to study the phenomenon of family annihilation by examining the case of Robert Mochrie, a former civil servant who murdered his wife and four children before committing suicide. She described how difficult it was to convince the traumatised and bereaved surviving relatives and friends that participating could align with their best interests, when it would be so much easier for them to decline: 'Trying to persuade [the family] was one of the toughest, toughest things...Why on earth would they want this brought back up into the public domain?'

In such situations, the power balance tips. Without the contributors' involvement, there can be no film, and so rather than competing against one another for the privilege of taking part, participants must somehow be persuaded. An important debate for journalism scholars centres upon the nefarious charisma of media workers, and how it is utilised to perform such tasks. In the much-quoted opening to her book about the ethically-dubious relationship between Jeffrey MacDonald – a man awaiting trial for murder – and his biographer, Joe McGinniss, Janet Malcolm writes:

> Like the credulous widow who wakes up one day to find the charming young man and all her savings gone, so the consenting subjects of a piece of nonfiction writing learns – when the article or book appears – his hard lesson.
>
> (1990, p. 3)

According to Malcolm, McGinniss befriended MacDonald, pledging to help exonerate him, but then used their conversations to write a sensationalised true-crime thriller portraying him as a ruthless killer. McGinniss denied cultivating MacDonald's trust under false pretences but was forced to pay a settlement when he was later taken to court. Ruth Palmer characterises this dynamic as the 'seduce-betray scenario', arguing that while it fails to accurately capture the experiences of the majority of journalism subjects, it nevertheless contains a degree of emotional truth about the encounter (2017, p. 1).

Ultimately, Bourne managed to convince Robert Mochrie's closest friends and neighbours – even down to the family's milkman – to put their trust in her professional integrity, but it should also be stressed there were other good reasons for them to take part. With statistics showing family annihilation was on the rise, they were presented with an opportunity to explore some of the contributing psychological factors, and to counter the distorted portrayals of their loved ones that had appeared in the tabloid press.[3] However, in other examples, my research did provide a degree of evidence of the industry using the 'seduce-betray scenario' as a casting technique. Several of my interviewees described a process akin to being courted by producers. Just as the casting call and casting trawl condition the production dynamics in a particular way, the process being wooed leaves its own distinct impression: because the feeling of being desired, sought out, and prized is hyper-flattering. Jenny Smith, the headteacher from *Educating the East End* (2014), told me there were times when she felt the school's families were convinced to take part against their better judgement:

> The production company can be very persuasive…They're very good at getting what they want…They give families lots of attention, they made them feel great, they build up a really good relationship with them. They take around cakes, they take them out for dinner. Because they build up that trust, the families often do say yes.

As Smith's account demonstrates, the line between trust and manipulation can be blurry. It could be argued that taking contributors gifts and buying them dinner is simply good manners, and a recognition of their efforts in helping to make the documentary – particularly given that the majority will not be financially rewarded for their time. However, the element of calculation underlying such beneficence is not lost upon the contributors themselves. Jo Lockwood told me:

> They want to emotionally bond you into the process. There's a lot of effort in the early stages to make you feel comfortable – and then you do feel like a bit more of a star. It's great sometimes – you've got a production crew around you, getting you coffees, driving you here, "You want a sandwich? We'll get you a sandwich. Just sit there, Jo, don't worry about it"…And then you realise – I wouldn't say they're fake. I wouldn't say anyone on the production crew was fake…but I understand the game now. I know how it works.

These moments of insight reset the power dynamics, presenting challenges for the documentary-makers as their contributors' sense of their own value and agency grows. I asked Claire Lewis how she had persuaded the cast of *Seven Up* (1964–present) to make such an extraordinary lifelong commitment to the production. She told me:

> I can't persuade them to do it. They either want to do it or they don't… I don't think you can persuade people to do things they don't want to do…They have complete power. Apted has no power, I have no power, ITV has no power – they hold it all. The question was, how long would it take them to realise?

As Lewis' comment suggests, once filming is underway, *all* contributors become irreplaceable, indispensable production assets, without whom the documentary could not be made. At some stage in the production, contributors recognise their changing status, and this developing awareness accounts for one of the inbuilt tensions of documentary-making.

Conclusion

Having compared different approaches to casting, I want to bring my arguments together to make two key points. The first is about the influence of the commercial context, and how production processes are enacted in accordance with a set of commercial demands. My research suggests a shifting dynamic between contributors and the production, which is largely based upon their relative availability as a resource. When potential content is plentiful, and there are many possible contributors to choose from, would-be participants must compete to take part. By contrast, if content is rare or unique, their stories can become highly sought after, and a process of courtship and persuasion follows in order to secure their co-operation. While there are many different and individual ways to approach the task of casting, to a significant extent, it is economic and organisational imperatives which underpin the process, rather than any moral sense of participants' rights and worth as human subjects, or even the preservation of editorial integrity.

Secondly, I want to make the point that there is something inherently reductive about the casting process, which by default works to amplify voices we have already heard while muting those which are marginalised. By casting according to wish-lists, producers are not so much democratising media participation as unintentionally confirming their own biases. My research suggests that rather than redressing participatory inequalities, the consequential outcome of a typical casting process is liable to institutionalise systematic inequalities and reproduce historic patterns of discrimination.

Notes

1 OED 2022. OED. *Oxford English Dictionary*.
2 Lucy Wilson is a pseudonym, used at the interviewee's request.
3 Edwards, S. 2003. 'The house was full of family portraits that will live with me forever'; TV Documentary Re-examines 'House of Horrors' Tragedy. *South Wales Echo*. 24/07/2003.

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4 Consent

Consent is a fundamental, yet fundamentally flawed concept in documentary production. The term is used to simultaneously capture a bureaucratic procedure and an ethical concern (Anderson and Benson, 1991). By the narrowest of definitions, consent is a legal stipulation, whereby contributors are asked to sign a release form granting their permission to be featured in a documentary. The requirement for all participants to give their written permission is ostensibly an affirmation of their inviolable right to make this choice; however, the request for them to sign is instigated by broadcasters and producers, and ultimately, as my research will demonstrate, it is *their* interests that the consent procedure is designed to protect. There is an evidential quality to consent. Release forms provide proof that contributors have made a commitment to participate – but meaningful consent is more than an administrative act of form-filling. A more expansive conceptualisation operates in parallel, which can be characterised as a process an ethical engagement with participants. It is the drawing and redrawing of boundaries which takes place in increments with every interaction and editorial decision that is made.

In this chapter, I want to show how the same principle that is intended to enshrine the agency of contributors can also be used to disabuse them of their rights. By considering how consent is produced in documentaries, my aim is to identify the instances in which it empowers and safeguards contributors, and also the counter-examples in which it impinges upon creative collaborations, sows distrust, and shores up participatory inequalities.

Consent as a legal procedure

According to Mark Cenite's (2009) research, the release forms which are widely used in TV and film are simply a form of contract, whose legal authority derives from general contract law. A standard release form gives the producers the rights to use the material they record without restriction in any media format, existing or yet to be devised, throughout the universe and through perpetuity without liability to the participant. Kate Warrender

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emailed me a copy of the release form she was asked to sign before taking part in *The Real Death in Paradise* (2022). She told me:

> You realise when you read that…you are utterly powerless in this relationship, because that says *we can do anything*. We can use this information however we want. We can do what we want with it…You sign the document knowing what it is that you're signing, but…you've got to agree to that, or the programme won't be made.

The language of release forms is powerful, sweeping, and for many people, intimidating. Furthermore, what contributors may not appreciate is that from a legal perspective, the form supersedes any spoken or written agreement which may have been made prior to its signing (Cenite, 2009, p. 25). The significance of this is that any assurances given to contributors by the production team about how the documentary will be put together, or how it will represent them, do not carry the force of law. Documentary-makers are not legally obligated to make good on their promises beyond the scope of the release form.

My research indicates there is great confusion about the significance of release forms. On the one hand, documentary-makers tended to decry them as worthless – a trick of smoke and mirrors, giving the appearance of great importance without having much concrete value. *Seven Up* (1964–present) producer, Claire Lewis, told me: 'Everybody tries to pretend when you sign a consent form it's irretrievable. It's not…A contributor can withdraw their consent right up to the minute before transmission…You can sign a release from, but you can still withdraw your consent'. Director and scholar Daisy Asquith described release forms as 'not worth the paper they're written on'. She explained:

> If they decide they don't want to be in the film anymore, they can just do it. You cannot put a film out once someone says, "I don't want to be in it anymore," "I hate it" or "My life has changed." You can't do it.

The contributors I spoke to, on the other hand, tended to see the moment of signing a release form as final and binding. One told me: 'I had no control. I'd signed my life away'.

The contrast between these two viewpoints is revealing. Kate Nash perceptively describes the signing of the form as a '*ritual* of consent', which, in reality, may have greater symbolic than legal significance (2012, p. 328, my italics). The authority of release forms could, in practice, be difficult to enforce, but if the contributor feels they have made an obligating commitment, then they might as well have done so. It is a misapprehension which, deliberately or not, serves to obscure contributors' power from their own comprehension. Director Jerry Rothwell told me: 'People spend a lot of time trying to tell them they don't have any power, so they don't exert it. Actually, they have incredible power. All release forms are worthless. They're worthless if somebody wanted to say no.'

The ultimate power that contributors have is to withdraw from a production, but the ritual of signing a release form creates the false impression that they have already abdicated this right. As Claire Lewis explained: 'We don't want to hand that control to contributors. Why would we? We want to make the films we want to make. We don't want them interfering – that's the collective philosophy.'

Despite the apparent power-grab that the signing of release forms symbolises, as these comments suggest, the documentary-makers I interviewed often expressed a degree of ambivalence or even negativity about the process, finding the forms intrusive or counter-productive to their creative ambitions. Kate Nash likens the signing of release forms to 'a kind of handing over of valuables' – a source of 'ethical stress', which protects the interests of broadcast institutions, but undermines the development of the relationship of trust necessary to make a film (2012, pp. 328–329). Daisy Asquith told me she 'hated releases' and had often resisted pressure from broadcasters to get them signed before end of filming. She told me:

> The moment itself when you put that form in front of people changes your relationship with them…they're going, "Oh, it's this legal thing going on…" You're filming them when they have no power and they're defensive, hiding, trying to be in control.

Better documentaries are made, Asquith argues, when contributors retain a sense of their agency, and the relationship is built upon mutual trust and shared vulnerability, rather than a legal agreement.

The signing of a release form is a moment within the production cycle which teases apart the competing obligations documentary-makers feel towards the broadcaster, their contributors, and their creative goals – obligations which are by no means always in accordance, foreshadowing the potential for torn loyalties and conflict if and when the interests of these parties diverge as the production process plays out.

Consent as an ethical process

The BBC's own editorial guidelines concede that the signing of a release form is not a panacea in establishing consent, stating:

> As consent forms contain limited information, they do not necessarily demonstrate that there has been properly *informed* consent.[1]

Here, the concept of informed consent is brought into play, creating a distinction between the legalistic model and a higher standard, addressing an ethical dimension as well. Informed consent has been a focal point for documentary scholars. The criteria they suggest to test whether consent is 'informed' often include freedom from coercion and deception, full knowledge of procedures and anticipated effects, and individual competence (Anderson and Benson, 1991, p. 59).

The likelihood that any one of these factors could be achieved within the documentary production process has been disputed. Calvin Pryluck (1976) argues the very presence of a film crew is coercive, and any hope of informed consent is undermined by unequal power relations between documentary-makers and their contributors. In most circumstances, having had no previous experience of being filmed, contributors are poorly positioned to understand the dynamics, or have a realistic idea of what to expect – as one contributor told me: 'I don't think you can understand what doing something like that is until you've actually done it, and you realise how bonkers it is'.

Informed consent is premised upon an understanding of consequences, but Bill Nichols questions the extent to which documentary-makers are able to foresee what they will film or its ensuing effects (2017, p. 11). My research certainly offered vivid examples of this unpredictability. Paul Dilley gave his permission to be filmed for the Channel 4 documentary series, *Emergency Helicopter Medics* (2019), when he'd begun to feel unwell after playing a round of golf, and an ambulance arrived with a film crew in tow. However, he could not have foreseen that ten minutes into the ambulance's journey, he would suffer a series of cardiac arrests. By the time the ambulance reached the hospital, the paramedics had restarted his heart a total of 18 times. 'It was the most challenging call out they'd ever had for a heart attack', he told me. 'Everyone thought I was dead or would be brain-damaged. I did pass away for 46 minutes…I had no oxygen to my brain. I was on life-support'.

Dilly gave consent without knowing there was a high probability that he would not survive the ambulance journey, and the filming could've included his own death. I asked him how he felt, in retrospect, about having those critical moments filmed, when his life hung in the balance. 'I guess for me, it would've been OK', he said. 'But how my family would've felt, I don't know. Having my last hours filmed would've been horrific for them'.

Despite this, Dilley defended the right for documentary-makers to film people *in extremis,* saying: 'It's not about that person [who is being filmed]. It's about trying to save the next person'. The air ambulance service which saved his life is funded entirely by charitable donations. Dilley reiterated how vital it is that their work is publicised in order for them to be able to continue operating. Objections to informed consent cannot therefore be straightforwardly upheld, because potential incursions on personal privacy must be balanced against the public interest in obtaining such footage.

During medical emergencies, events can be so shocking that they eclipse the significance of the filming altogether. Luisa Hammett took her 17-month-old son, Cody, to Great Ormond Street Hospital for what she believed would be a nerve-wracking but technically low-risk operation to remove a suspected tumour in his brain. She agreed to be filmed but had little idea of what she was about to be told about the severity of Cody's condition:

> Our doctor in Cardiff said it was fine. They do this procedure and it's over and done with. Then when we got to Great Ormond Street, they explained the procedure and the pros and cons – it was a whole different kettle of fish. It's not straightforward. We could lose him.

On camera, the Hammetts were told that Cody had a rare malformation of blood vessels deep in the brain, called a Vein of Galen. Three different outcomes were equally possible from the operation – he could die, be left severely disabled, or make a complete recovery – but if they decided not to go ahead with the treatment, at some point, his heart was likely to fail. When being given such devastating news, the ability of contributors to consent to filming, or indeed to process any other information, becomes impaired. When I asked her about this scene in the documentary, Hammett told me: 'Half of it you don't take in…I've got no recollection. You block so much out…I can't remember any of that conversation, other than the bit where [the consultant] said…he might die'.

Under circumstances such as these, much rests upon the strength of the relationship between the contributors and the production team. Rather than perceiving their presence as intrusive, Hammett looked upon the documentary-makers as a source of support, who helped the family while away the long anxious hours of waiting, treating them with genuine care and concern. The production team's willingness to empower their participants and invest them with a degree of continuing control was an important part of forming this bond. Hammett told me:

> They always said to us, "If you want us to stop, if you want us to leave, if you don't want us there at all, we can stop at any time We can stop filming halfway through, we won't carry on."…They were so discrete… you don't even know they're there.

In other examples from my research, however, the contributors really *didn't* know the film crew were there. The justification that consent can be taken retrospectively when filming *in extremis* is used by many documentary-makers recording unpredictable developing situations. Janet Morsy was taken to A&E at St George's Hospital in London after being stabbed by a stranger in a random attack in a supermarket carpark. The first time she was aware she had been filmed for *24 Hours in A&E* (2011–present) was several days later, when she discovered a slip of paper that had been left in her handbag by the production company.[2] Morsy was so grateful to the medics who had saved her life, that she agreed to give her consent in order to highlight their good work – but it was only during our interview that she realised the remote cameras recording her medical treatment would've been monitored live by a production team in a nearby gallery, and that she was being watched by people she couldn't see. It is hard to imagine a more private space than A&E, where in the aftermath of traumatic events, patients give their medical histories and undergo invasive procedures. It's a place where people suffer, and in some cases, people die. What is striking when considering the example of *24 Hours in A&E* (2011–present) – which has been in production for more than ten years and has broadcast over 250 episodes – is the lack of debate about this use of public space by media organisations, and the apparent sleight of hand which has been performed, whereby consent to be filmed is assumed, and permission is required only if the material is broadcast.

The fact that observational filming is so unpredictable means that many documentary-makers think about consent in a more open-ended way. Jerry Rothwell has made several films where consent is a central issue – including *Heavy Load* (2008) about a disabled punk band, and *The Reason I Jump* (2020) about children with non-verbal autism. 'I feel like it's not about the release form; it's a *process of consent*', he told me. 'Consent, for me, is a relationship. It isn't about whether they've signed that form or not'.

The principle of adopting a rolling consent process as best practice, however, is belied by the fact that in most productions, consent is only obtained on one occasion, and contributors are rarely shown their documentaries prior to transmission. In general, previews are perceived to be an unnecessary risk. Rothwell explained: 'There's a lot of discouragement from the production side, because it's dead inconvenient'.

However, this perception of inconvenience is perhaps overstated by the industry. As John Ellis (2011) points out, the digital editing process is inherently more manipulable and collaborative than film was. Documentaries routinely undergo multiple rounds of changes at the behest of executives, commissioners, and legal departments – yet there remains an ethos of keeping contributors well away from the edit until it's too late for them to exert any control. Several of the documentary-makers I interviewed were critical about this practice. Daisy Asquith told me: 'I think it's appalling to make people sign a piece of paper before they've seen what you've done'. Asquith said she always gives her contributors the opportunity to view before transmission, and only on one occasion has it had a detrimental impact. She described a situation where a participant made a dramatic revelation on camera, then later begged her to edit it out: 'It was the best thing we'd filmed…but it might've ruined her life…She might've killed herself, genuinely'. Asquith agreed to cut the scene, but the commissioner was 'furious'. Reflecting upon the dilemma, Asquith still feels it was the right decision to put her contributor's wellbeing first, but she told me both the documentary and her reputation suffered because of it. In common practice, very few of the contributors I interviewed were given the opportunity to view their documentaries before broadcast, perhaps indicating that, in most cases, production priorities are differently ordered.

Consent and vulnerable contributors

A precondition of informed consent is that contributors must be competent to make the decision – yet documentaries are frequently made with people who are underage, and with vulnerable adults. The BBC's Editorial Guidelines defend the right of the media to 'reflect the world as it is', justifying the escalated risks:

> In our output, we can offer a voice to people confronting complex challenges arising from extreme poverty, illness, learning difficulties or forms of dementia, bereavement, old age, mental health or other issues and enable them to communicate their experiences to a wider audience.[3]

In several examples from my research, the issue of competence was an inescapable part of the documentary's narrative. Sue Bourne's autobiographical film, *Mum and Me* (2008), was reviewed by *The Herald* as 'an unflinching portrait of her life with her elderly mother, taken hostage in her own body by the cruel thief that is Alzheimer's'.[4] They described the film as 'surprisingly funny and tender…as well as awfully indiscrete and painfully honest'.[5] I asked Bourne whether she had reservations about making it: 'Fuck did I! No, no, no, there were huge reservations, because my mum…wasn't able to give full consent. So was it exploitative? It could've been seen as that'.

Bourne told me her executive producer originally advised her against making the documentary, but later, having seen test footage of her mother – indefatigable and candid, with faultless comic timing – came to understand why she would want to:

> He said, "I get it now. Your mum's a star." And he said, "Do you think your mother, in her heyday, would've liked the fact that you're making a film about her, exposing her to the public when she's demented? Do you think she'd like that?" And I said, "Well, she quite likes attention!"

Joking aside, Bourne told me her family wanted to make the film because they had something important to say about living with Alzheimer's, which they thought could help other people in similar situations. Bourne described a process whereby a senior member of the production team was elected to advocate for her mother's best interests and ensure they were factored into every significant decision that was made. Ironically, it seems that in this case, as well as other examples from my research where competence was an obvious concern from the outset, consent was a more considered and robust part of the filmmaking process, and the ethical dimensions better attended. More worrying were the cases where competence to consent could be easily sidestepped – for example, when children were filmed, and their parents could simply be asked to give consent on their behalf. Jenna Presley agreed for her 12-year-old son, Archie, to be filmed for *Feral Families* (2017) – a Channel

4 documentary about home-schooling. In one scene, Archie was shown struggling with his reading. Presley felt the scene was used to imply that her teaching was failing to equip him with basic skills, but the commentary failed to disclose that he is dyslexic. She told me: 'After the show, his friends saw it and people took the piss out of him…He got really bullied afterwards… He thinks he's stupid now, because of that one clip which I asked them not to use.'

By their nature, media appearances are highly public. Reputational damage can be challenging for any contributor to deal with, but during formative teenage years, the psychological effects may have an even greater impact. Jonny Mitchell told me he was shocked at the level of vitriol directed towards some of his pupils on social media during the broadcast of *Educating Yorkshire* (2013). Social media users were taking screenshots of the children, turning them into memes, and referring to them using crude and derogatory sexualised language. Afterwards, he told me he felt guilty for the part he'd unwittingly played in exposing so many children to the heat of public scrutiny: 'I've put lots and lots of people in the spotlight…many of them with significant issues or mental health…How do you prepare a 14 or 15-year-old kid for that?'

Having worked in television for over 30 years, Peter A. Gordon expressed his reservations about the filming of minors *per se*:

> I've always thought that children present a bigger issue. Broadcasters can hide behind the whole idea of informed consent. You can talk to the parent or the teacher and they say, "That's fine, let's do it, little Jimmy will be fine." You almost have to have an extra layer yourself that self-disciplines…[because] kids are exposed, and they are quite raw.

Brian Winston agrees that, at its worst, consent can be abused by broadcasters, becoming a means of sidestepping ethical responsibilities, hiding dubious practices behind the shibboleth of a release form (2000, p. 162). The problem with the prevailing legalistic model of consent is that sometimes, rather than offering a means of connecting with the moral obligations documentary-makers have in respect of their subjects, it can be used as a substitute for them.

Withdrawing consent

When filming has had unintended consequences, expectations have not been met, or the best interests of those involved have diverged, contributors may wish to rescind their consent. However, once the documentary is underway, production companies are in a position of financial vulnerability. Their investment could run into many months of time and many thousands of pounds, but their product has not been successfully completed and delivered, and they are unable to recoup their costs. Given the scale of the financial risk, it would perhaps be naïve to imagine that attempts to withdraw from a production could play out irrespective of economic considerations, but in the discourse surrounding consent, justifications tend to be built around principles – chiefly, matters of public interest and editorial control. But how legitimate are these arguments, when weighed against an individual's wishes, and to what extent do they conceal an underlying profit motive?

Lucy Wilson[6] is an artist and sex worker, who agreed to take part in *Louis Theroux: Selling Sex* (2020) – a documentary which she hoped would challenge stereotypes and destigmatise sex work. She signed her release form 'in a very rushed way, after filming at 9pm'. Wilson is autistic and had asked for her carer to be present during filming, but this request, she told me, was routinely disregarded. Her carer and co-contributor, Georgina Tyson, told me: 'She set boundaries and [the production] crossed them constantly'.

Towards the end of filming, Wilson – a teetotal recovering alcoholic – was asked to attend a shoot in a pub – an environment where she immediately felt wrong-footed – and was explicitly told to come alone. At that interview, Wilson told me:

> They just probed me. They told me to bring pictures of me as a kid, so I did. They probed from them…"What was it like growing up?"…I did not want to say that on TV. I don't tell people, nor have I ever told people…

Wilson ended up confessing that she had been sexually abused by a family member during her childhood – a secret she had previously only confided to a handful of close friends.

> I broke down on camera. You have to remember I've never spoken to anybody about this – not even a therapist…I said something I did not want to say. That was not the way I wanted my friends or my family to find out.

For Wilson, one of the motivations to take part had been to offer a more empowered portrayal of sex workers, who she feels are misrepresented in popular culture as traumatised, damaged people – and yet in the final documentary, against her best intentions, Wilson ended up colluding with the very characterisation she set out to challenge. In hindsight, she was able to reflect upon why this happened:

> The whole time I was on-screen, I was really paranoid…I was acting really weird. I ended up trying to use [being abused] as an excuse for why I was so weird. They made me feel isolated and like a freak, so in turn, I wanted to demonstrate why, to save myself. They'd manipulated me into this position, where I felt like in order to escape it, I had to say some big ultimate excuse which would free me from anything bad I'd said.

The anticipated judgements of the future audience, and the backdrop of stereotypical tropes already circulating in the public domain, not only informed the approach of the producers but also laid out a narrative arc which Wilson found herself compelled to follow. The resulting documentary did not offer, in her estimation, an insight into the reality of her life. Instead, it was a misrepresentation in which she became complicit in order to comply with a pre-fixed performance of self which she understood would be accepted as mitigation for the socially stigmatised choices she had made.

Immediately after filming, Wilson tried to withdraw her consent, but was told 'there's nothing we can do' and 'it won't really work without you'. She told the production team she felt suicidal about the prospect of her deepest secrets being publicly broadcast, and complained to the BBC, but after an internal investigation the programme was transmitted as planned. Wilson's family disbelieved her allegations and are no longer speaking to her.

Ultimately, Wilson felt the documentary was a missed opportunity, which failed to add anything constructive to the conversation about sex work – an opinion echoed by some of the reviews. *The Telegraph* claimed: 'This tired film taught us nothing new about the sex industry'.[7] *The Independent* wrote: 'In truth, this film feels as though it could have been made at any time in the past 15 years'.[8] In an op-ed, she wrote for the now defunct *Gal Dem* magazine about her experiences, Wilson argued: 'It is exhausting as a community to constantly try to educate the media and the public on the realities of sex work, just for them to hi-jack the narrative for their own purposes'.[9] I asked Wilson why she thought the media struggled to represent stories of sex work in a way she judged to be authentic. She told me:

> Because it's really not that interesting! [laughs] You're sitting on a computer, painting your toenails, waiting for a random man to say come over. You go over. You maybe have a glass of wine. You go home. It's not that exciting. *That's* why.

In their right to reply to *Gal Dem,* the BBC claimed there were a number of inaccuracies in Wilson's account, and said: 'The welfare and views of our contributors are always part of the process and it was our genuine view that [her] concerns had been resolved'. They defended their right to broadcast based on the principles of editorial independence, stating: 'The final edit does lie in the control of the BBC', and said the result of their 'investigation concluded that there was insufficient evidence to support any allegations of misconduct'. The language of editorial control draws upon longstanding journalistic norms, which resonate with democratic values of integrity and freedom of speech. However, it is questionable whether an oblique sense of public interest in Wilson's story should outweigh the very real harm she suffered as a consequence of her participation. There are a number of entangled issues within Wilson's account of these events, but what it illuminates perhaps most clearly are the many possible ways in which production practices can have a disproportionately negative impact upon people from marginalised and underrepresented communities – whose needs are misapprehended, whose lives are misunderstood, and whose wellbeing is often considered secondary to lofty or impersonal ideals.

Conclusion

By exploring the different meanings of consent in documentary production, I have shown how a principle which purports to protect contributors' rights can also be used as a means of disempowering them. While the legal force of release forms might be questionable, the power they hold in terms of establishing a false perception of the limitations upon contributors' agency is hard to dispute.

Although informed consent is an imperfect concept, the ways in which it could be made more robust are, in fact, well established, and indeed, are an existing component of many documentary-makers' practice. The fact that using measures such as rolling consent, or allowing participants to view their documentaries prior to broadcast, are not universally employed demonstrates a conflict between commercial risks and contributor care, in which the former often takes precedence over the latter.

Norms of editorial independence, free speech, and public interest are often used to justify instances when an individual's right to consent is overridden, but these norms are not unassailable, and the underlying interests they are used to protect should always be subject to scrutiny. When media organisations wield the principles of journalistic integrity as a means of disarming the relatively powerless or vulnerable, their claims to moral authority become fundamentally compromised.

Notes

1. *BBC Editorial Guidelines*. 2019. [Online]. [Accessed 04/07/2024]. Available from: https://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/guidance/consent.
2. The press team at St George's Hospital confirmed to me that attempts would be made to discuss the filming and obtain consent in-person as soon as patients were judged competent to decide. In cases where consent was taken retrospectively, the cameras would focus primarily on the work of the staff rather than the patients.
3. *BBC Editorial Guidelines*. 2019. [Online]. [Accessed 04/07/2024]. Available from: https://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/guidance/consent.
4. Belcher, D. 2008. An act of northern self-exposure. *The Herald*, 21/05/2008.
5. Belcher, D. 2008. An act of northern self-exposure. *The Herald*, 21/05/2008.
6. Lucy Wilson is a pseudonym, used at the interviewee's request.
7. Singh, A. 2020. Louis Theroux: Selling sex, review: this tired film taught us nothing new about the sex industry. *The Telegraph*. 12/01/2020.
8. Cumming, E. 2020. True or false?; A Work of fiction with as much if not more intensity than so many recent crime dramatisations arrives on Channel 4. Meanwhile, Louis Theroux re-examines sex work, but, asks Ed Cumming, to what extent should we trust his lens? *The Independent* 13/01/2020.
9. Williams, A. 2020. The BBC said they cared about sex workers, so why was I mistreated on Louis Theroux's set? *Gal Dem*.

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5 Relationships

For documentary-makers, building relationships with contributors is a fundamental part of their job. The ability to engender trust and intimacy is a prerequisite for creating a successful documentary, yet the skills of relationship-building are undervalued by production companies and broadcasters – often taking place without pay or recognition, at the margins of the more tangible tasks of shooting and editing.

The nature of the actual work involved in crafting documentary relationships has been similarly overlooked by the scholarship. While the dynamic between filmmakers and participants has been insightfully analysed in terms of their unequal power relations (Nash, 2010; Nichols, 1991); by drawing upon the social interactionism of Goffman (Ellis, 2011); or with recourse to the psychoanalytic concepts of Freud and Lacan (Piotrowska, 2013), there remain significant gaps in our knowledge about what it means when a job entails the production of this kind of intimacy, which feels 'real' to the people involved, but is also instrumentalised and frequently compromised by commercial constraints.

Research into creative labour practices has shown how organisational conditions of chronic precarity and insecurity are embodied in the lives of creative workers (Banks, 2007; Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011; Ursell, 2000), but less is understood about how they are manifested in the interpersonal relationships between these workers and their subjects – the ordinary people, without whom their documentaries could not be made. In much of the existing research, the power of individual producers in undifferentiated from the power of the media organisations they work for, but the two are not synonymous. Creative workers are not simply agents of media power. They are not only part of, but also subject to, the systems they represent. Behind the lens stands not only an individual filmmaker but also a commercial, structural, and economic context that merits greater scrutiny.

In this chapter, I explore some of the frameworks for understanding documentary relationships which have been employed by previous researchers, arguing that Arlie Hochschild's (1983) concept of emotional labour offers a particularly useful tool for analysing the implications that permeable boundaries between work-life and intimacy can have for documentary-makers and

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contributors alike. In order to explore some of the different dimensions of documentary relationships, I have organised my research findings under three levels of analysis. First of all, I want to talk about their interpersonal characteristics, and what is distinctive about them in comparison to the relationships that underpin other forms of media work. I will then move onto considering the practices and procedures through which documentary relationships are forged and maintained – or in some cases, resisted and challenged – and what the experience of performing them entails for both documentary-makers and contributors. Finally, I discuss how documentary relationships are organised by the cultural industries, considering issues such as pay, training, regulation, and duty of care.

Documentary-making and emotional labour

Although she wrote about the work of flight attendants rather than creative workers, Arlie Hochschild's concept of emotional labour has been particularly useful for scholars exploring the affective work of media production, including Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011), Laura Grindstaff (2002), and Kym Melzer (2019). Hochschild defines emotional labour as a type of work which 'requires one to induce or suppress feelings in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others' (1983, p. 7). Hochschild's seminal research explores what is taken from people when their feelings are displaced from the private domain and assimilated within labour processes. By foregrounding the ways our inner lives can be appropriated and utilised for the benefit of the corporate workplace, this framework enables us to understand how the political-economic organisation of the media is registered in the subjective experiences of creative workers (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011) – and, I would argue, the ordinary people who participate in the media as well. For Hochschild, it is not so much our strategic management of emotions which is troubling – as this is a necessary part of everyday life – but its link to an underlying exploitative system of recompense. The penetration of the corporate world into our heads and hearts, our private selves, amounts to a mass 'surveillance of feelings' and raises deep concerns about the reach of capitalist power into the lives of individual subjects (1983, p. 218).

Grindstaff notes that both media workers and contributors are required to perform different kinds of emotional labour. While producers expend their energies behind the scenes, cajoling, encouraging, and sympathising, their subjects are required to deliver convincing emotional performances, which will be read by the audience as authentic and heartfelt. The purpose of the producers' emotional labour is to create the conditions which enable participants to perform theirs.

Because documentary relationships are inherently instrumental, there is a lingering sense that they are also manufactured and false. Hochschild, however, makes the distinction between 'surface acting' and 'deep acting' (p. 35). In surface acting, the gesture or expression is superficial or uncommitted and is easily detected as false. In daily life, when our instinctive emotional reaction does not fit the social situation, we instead employ deep acting, exhorting the requisite feeling or retraining our imaginations to match the appropriate response. Because the kind of close attachments involved in documentary relationships cannot be easily faked, they have to be internalised and truly felt; pretence is simply not convincing. For the relationship to be successful, it has to be genuine. Executive producer Peter A. Gordon agreed: ‘It is a real relationship even if it starts off formal or contrived’. Scholars have tended to characterise the filmmaker-subject dynamic as manipulative and exploitative, but if we consider they might be genuine *as well as* instrumental, the dilemmas documentary-makers face become more ethically complex.

For Hochschild, one of the core features of emotional labour is that the actual labour involved is hidden, and therefore devalued. Its success is premised upon an appearance of effortlessness, which means it remains an assumed and largely unsupported part of the job. While this research project was underway, a number of reports were published drawing attention to dysfunctional working conditions, occupational distress, and mental health concerns in TV.[1] An investigation by the Dart Centre was highly critical of the industry’s failure to properly equip production teams for aspects of their work which involve ‘extensive engagement with vulnerable, often traumatised sources’ or prepare them for ‘the profound challenges to ethics, craft, and emotional capacities’ that it entails.[2]

Hesmondhalgh and Baker (2011, p. 162) point out that Hochschild has been criticised for neglecting the potential for emotional labour to give rise to genuinely positive feelings – and it was certainly clear from my research that relationships with contributors are not only a cause of stress but also a source of pleasure for those involved, in many cases outlasting the productions which initiated them, and continuing for months or even years afterwards. ‘I’ve gained more than it’s cost me’, director Daisy Asquith said. ‘I’ve gained understanding, knowledge of people, and love from people – relationships with people I wouldn’t have met otherwise’. But despite the apparent mutuality and voluntarism with which these relationships are conducted, it’s important to recognise that they are not incidental to the project of making the documentary. Several producers told me that relationship-building is the most fundamental skill of their job, which can only be achieved through a huge investment of off-camera time. As Claire Lewis put it: ‘Getting stories, getting people to talk…that’s about making a relationship and spending time with people. If you cut those corners, you’ll never make a good film’. In order to challenge the invisibility of relationship-work in documentary-making, first we must understand more about the ways it is performed, and how it affects the people involved.

Interpersonal characteristics

The relationship between filmmakers and their contributors is an important theme within the study of documentaries, with the relative powerlessness of the participant generally perceived to be problematic (Canet, 2022; Nichols, 1991; Winston, 1988). From the inmates of the Bridgewater State Hospital for the criminally insane, who Frederick Wiseman filmed being stripped naked and force-fed without obtaining their formal consent; to Claude Lanzmann's 'sadistic' interrogation of the barber of Treblinka who evaded the Nazi gas chambers; to the Thai prostitute Dennis O'Rourke hired for sex then made a film about, scholars have found ample evidence which appears to substantiate these claim (Anderson and Benson, 1991; LaCapra, 1997; Williams, 1999). Bill Nichols argues that the asymmetric organisation of relationships in documentary-making is such that contributors experience a displacement, divested of the authority to represent themselves. The invisibility of the documentary-maker is evidence of their power, he claims, their specificity effectively concealed, presented as omniscient and objective rather than situated and subjective. 'The "I" who speaks…dissolves itself into a disembodied, depersonalised, institutional discourse of power and knowledge' (1993, p. 181).

Although power critiques have been the dominant theme of the scholarship, they are not necessarily the only – or even the most useful framework for analysing the interpersonal dynamics of the relationship. The work of Agnieszka Piotrowska (2013) and Patricia Aufderheide et al. (2009) emphasises different aspects of documentary relationships, including their emotional, psychosocial, creative, and collaborative underpinnings. Drawing upon psychoanalytical concepts, Agnieszka Piotrowska (2013) argues the documentary encounter is governed by unconscious mechanisms – the key one being transference. Within clinical psychoanalysis, transference is a term used to describe the attachment between analyst and analysand, which enables therapeutic work to take place, but may involve a transfer of misplaced or archaic emotions from past encounters, frequently presenting itself as feelings of desire or even love. Piotrowska believes the type of self-exploration and intimate disclosures which are encouraged in documentary-making mean that contributors can come to look upon the people filming them as 'the perfect canvases on which to draw one's emotions' (p. 48). The difficulty of this type of projection within the context of documentary production is that it remains unnamed, and therefore hidden, creating confusion and sometimes hurt feelings. Aufderheide et al. (2009) describe the relationship in more pragmatic terms, as 'less than a friendship and more than a professional relationship', but they acknowledge the distorting impact of institutional, professional, and commercial pressures, exploring the in-built conflict of interest experienced by filmmakers who are 'trying to behave conscientiously within a ruthlessly bottom-line business environment' (pp. 6; 20).

My research suggests a striking feature of documentary relationships is the degree of intensity involved. Whereas a journalist might typically share a fleeting phone call with the people they write about (Palmer, 2017), and the producers of talent shows and talk-shows' interactions are largely confined to studio days (Hesmondhalgh and Baker, 2011), the process of making a documentary tends to be more protracted. Several of my interviewees described enduring relationships, lasting longer than many marriages – 10, 20, or even 40 years and counting. Emily Speirs, for example, has grown up on camera, and regards the production team of *Born to be Different* (2003–2020) as part of her extended family. 'It's something so special to be involved with that it's hard not to be close with everybody who is involved', she told me. 'We just trust each other totally'. Yet this intensity cannot be attributed to longevity alone. Documentary-makers film in people's homes and personal spaces. They witness the major events of people's lives, asking searching questions, inviting their subjects to explore their inner selves. Even within briefer encounters, the act of filming itself engenders close emotional connections by creating a discursive space for self-examination and reflection, which is uncommon in everyday life. Undeniably, there is an instrumental element to filmmaker/subject relationships. They are formed under a contrived set of circumstances, and geared towards the achievement of a particular outcome. Yet the data I gathered overwhelmingly describes a connection that can be intimate and complex – not only for contributors but for documentary-makers too. Director Daisy Asquith is a godmother to two of the children of one of her subjects. Claire Lewis said of the *Seven Up* (1964–present) participants, who she has filmed for over 40 years: 'They are like family members'.

Because the boundaries of documentary relationships are inherently slippery, they are difficult to manage. Many documentary-makers told me they found it difficult to know what limits can reasonably be placed upon their obligations to contributors. They described fielding phone calls at 3 am, performing a role that can feel more like being a social worker or a counsellor than a producer or director. 'The problem is you start allowing people to get away with treating you badly in your life', one director told me. 'You're so used to like, "You do your worst, I will remain calm, accept everything you chuck at me." It's your job. And then you realise you're doing it in your life as well. That's not very healthy'.

But there is more to documentary relationships than an interpersonal exchange. Intimacy is not merely a side-effect of the filmmaking process, produced unintentionally alongside the making of the documentary. It is an essential part of the craft, used to collapse the distance between the private life of the subject and the mass anonymity of the audience, and as such, it is deliberately cultivated and managed. Therefore, in order to build an understanding of documentary relationships, they need to be theorised as a practice of creative labour, performed within the context of the media industries.

The practices and procedures of relationship-work

Having described some of the interpersonal characteristics of documentary relationships, in this next section, I want to consider how they are put into effect as a component of the creative process – what are the procedures that make and maintain these relationships, and in what ways do they impact upon the people involved?

To perform the kind of emotional labour involved in documentary-making ‘requires one to induce or suppress feelings in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others’ (Hochschild, 1983, p. 7). Documentary-makers must manage their emotional responses to situations and limit their self-expression: ‘either pretending to care…or trying not to care too much’ (Grindstaff, 2002, p. 132). Daisy Asquith described herself as ‘an emotional service’ for her contributors. When I asked her to clarify what being an emotional service meant, she told me: ‘Your emotions are not important, is how I think of it’.

The management of inconvenient emotions is harder to accomplish when producers’ feelings towards their contributors are ambiguous, or even negative. Many shared stories about people they found difficult to work with. One director described the people she had to work with on a documentary about the real stories behind tabloid kiss and tell: ‘They were making money out of selling stories’, she said. ‘I didn’t trust any of them’. Another director lobbied for years to make a film about gay parenting, after being repeatedly told by commissioners that ‘gay doesn’t rate’. When she finally convinced a broadcaster to finance the film, the contributors who were cast were people whose views about women, childbirth, and motherhood she found ‘appalling and offensive’. She worried that using controversial figures as representatives of queer parenting would provoke an illiberal backlash and found it difficult to connect with them, telling me: ‘I’ve always found it hard to make a film about someone I didn’t like, or even love’. The director described the resulting internal conflict she experienced between what she views as her ‘responsibility to let people be the real extent of themselves’ and ‘giving them a free reign on misogyny’. A tense shoot culminated in a huge row, which jeopardised the whole production.

> There was too much time together, too much proximity, and we got quite fed up with each other…I thought I’m not doing this. It’s a nightmare. We probably had radio silence for a month, then I wrote to him and said this is what I think happened. I just backed down because it’s my job…I wanted to finish the film.

In circumstances such as this, filmmakers are required to self-edit, suppressing aspects of their own identities in order to get the job done. Ultimately, Hochschild claims, performing this kind of affective work can result in the estrangement of the self from one’s own authentic feelings. Our emotions are a form of ‘pre-action’, which helps us to orientate ourselves within the world. Without emotional authenticity, our autonomy and capacity to act is fundamentally undermined.

One of the main purposes of the emotional labour of documentary-makers is to elicit emotional performances from their participants, who are often required to give access to their inner lives, making intimate disclosures, sharing revelations and self-discoveries in ways that can make them feel exposed and vulnerable. As one interviewee described it: 'I'm putting my whole life out there; literally, my whole life is out there'. Such performances can be moving and powerful for the audience, but they also carry a risk for the participant's wellbeing. Contributors have tended to be portrayed as the passive partners within documentary relationships, but my research suggests that when such tensions arise, their agency finds expression in acts of resistance and ruptures, which documentary-makers must then manage and appease.

Jo Lockwood was filmed for more than two years as she changed her gender identity. She described how her attitude to the relationship she built with the producers started from a place of straightforward trust and acquiescence: 'In the early stages, it was like…whatever you want to do, whatever you ask, we answer'. As the shoot progressed, her compliance became gradually replaced with a more complex appreciation of the documentary relationship and her position within the production:

> I learned over the course of the two of three years: it was their job. They weren't my friends – well, they were my friends, but they were my friends doing a job. And I had to remember that they were manipulating me.

Part of this shift in attitude was motivated by a growing awareness of the power she had to set boundaries and exert control over how she was represented:

> *They* needed *me* more. I started to realise that – I wouldn't say play them, but I kind of knew the rules of the game…When they were talking to me and buttering me up and being nice and persuasive, I could tell they were doing it. I would go, "Do I want to do this or don't I?...No [I'm] not going to do that". Even sometimes in the middle of filming…I would say, "I'm not answering that question. No"…[I] got braver at not being sucked into it…[I] got wise to it. The crew are still our friends. They weren't superficial and shallow. They were genuinely lovely, nice people who [I] loved working with, but [I] realised it was all a job at the end of the day.

In this example, a firmer grasp of the dynamics gave the contributor a sense of empowerment and allowed her to start calling the shots. In other cases, ruptures in the relationship are manifested not so much through out-and-out refusals but through minor acts of resistance. Jenny Smith from *Educating the East End* (2014) told me how she and her colleagues began to use the knowledge they had gleaned through the course of the production to assert themselves:

> We'd put things into the conversation we knew they couldn't put on TV to try to stop them using that footage…a lot of the time we would go

> other places for meetings and take the mics off, because there are some things you don't want people listening to.

In contrast to the perception of contributors as powerless partners in the documentary relationship, my data found ample evidence of them learning how to effectively express their agency and leverage control. Power has often been characterised as a force of domination, weighted heavily in the favour of filmmakers, but my research suggests a more complex and fluctuating balance, which tips in different directions at different stages of the production process. As contributors learn how to express their agency, documentary-makers can find themselves in a tight corner, caught between increasingly assertive or uncooperative contributors, the perceived needs of the audience, and the demands of funders and broadcasters. My data suggests their ability to prioritise their contributors above other considerations, and the scope of their possible responses to minor rebellions in very much dictated by the commercial context. Director Jerry Rothwell told me:

> The more gear you have, the more the daily cost of the shoot, the more uncompromising you can be about those things. If someone rings up and says: "I'm a bit ill. I've got a headache" – and you're thinking *shit, I've spent £5,000 in air fares to get here to do this.* That's one response, or the other is: "Well, I'm just here so I can wait a few days"…My experience is that the bigger the film has become, the more my relationship with the contributor has become less personal…I think the more money there is in a production, the more the thing becomes contractual.

Documentary-makers' loyalties are divided between their contributors, their employers, their audiences, and a fidelity to the truth. This alignment can shift in sudden and unexpected ways. Executive producer Peter A. Gordon told me about a documentary he made in the 1990s with West Midlands Police for the ITV current affairs series, *First Tuesday* (1983–1993). Gordon was granted access to film in a police station and was monitoring the output of a remote camera when he heard a detective threatening a man in custody. 'He was being picked up by the mic in the custody area', he told me. 'You couldn't see it, but you could hear him in the cell saying, "Well, we can do this he hard way or the easy way, mate"'.

The production company decided there was a clear public interest in broadcasting the footage, but they had contractually agreed to show the film to the police force prior to transmission. Gordon described an excruciating viewing, sitting right next to the people he had implicated: 'We turned the lights on. They were just white. They were incredulous'. The police force tried to get an injunction to stop the broadcast going ahead but were unsuccessful. When a developing narrative is being followed, unforeseen events can cause the agendas of documentary-makers and subjects to diverge unpredictably. Although this situation was awkward on an interpersonal level, Gordon could not withhold the footage without becoming complicit in the wrongdoing he had uncovered.

He told me: 'It wasn't easy but I didn't lay awake at night thinking, "Oh my god what a terrible person I am", and "I've betrayed these people", because they'd broken the law and they're policemen'.

Gordon's story is an extreme example of a dynamic which more often plays out in less dramatic fashion, but it demonstrates how unanticipated developments can make the mutuality of both parties slip out of sync, bringing their agendas into conflict. The work of documentary relationships requires filmmakers not only to build close bonds with their subjects but also, in some cases, to sever those connections and break that trust.

Having described the kind of affective work involved for individual people in forging and maintaining documentary relationships, I now wish to bring the organisational context back into focus and consider how this challenging aspect of the job is supported or complicated by media employers and institutions.

The industrial organisation of relationship-work

While some support for participants from external psychologists has been formalised and funded by the UK television industry after a highly-publicised policy review, the emotional labour of documentary-makers continues to go largely unacknowledged and unrewarded.[3] As Daisy Asquith puts it: 'Any meaningful responsibility assumed by documentary filmmakers is overwhelmingly a personal undertaking' (2019, p. 15). A striking example from my research is the producer Claire Lewis, who has made the highly acclaimed *Seven Up* (1964–present) series since the early 1980s. It is Lewis's job to stay in regular touch with the cast, to maintain productive relationships and to keep them on board. The series could not be made without this continual labour, but as a freelancer, Lewis told me she can only invoice for her work when the series is in active production, once every seven years: 'I'm there – day or night. That's what it involves', she told me. 'And I've never been paid for that. Never'.

Along with a lack of pay and recognition comes a lack of structure and support. Research suggests there is a high possibility that filmmakers will encounter trauma throughout the whole scope of factual production, including seemingly 'lighter' programmes with apparently innocuous subject-matter. For filmmakers who specialise in more challenging documentaries, 'the terrain of suffering may be their primary area of work'.[4] Of course, documentary-makers are far from unique in that their job brings them into close contact with other people's trauma, but unlike therapists, teachers, nurses, or other caring professions, there is a lack of appropriate training and professional guidance as to how they should conduct themselves. The media industries are only just beginning to recognise that performing such labour might have an effect on their workforce at all.

Vicarious trauma is a known risk for journalists who witness acts of violence and suffering, but less attention has been paid to the effects upon workers in the broadcasting industry. During the making of her doctoral documentary project, Kym Melzer describes 'sobbing uncontrollably' in her car after interviewing veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and their carers, the effort to supress her emotions in order to maintain a 'veneer of professionalism' leaving her feeling 'exhausted and dejected', and overwhelmed by 'intense feelings of guilt, sadness, powerlessness and helplessness' (2019, p. 44).

Director Sue Bourne told me that during the making of *A Time to Live* (2017) – a documentary which followed the stories of 12 people with terminal illnesses – she had to pressurise the broadcaster to provide support for the production team:

> I said, "Well actually, you've got a duty of care to *us*"…We were on the road together…going in and out of dying people's houses for four months. Our best contributor died the weekend before we got there… We had to put our emotions in a box and get through it.

It was clear from my research that becoming so closely entangled with human suffering, trauma and distress is a great responsibility which can take a heavy toll. Documentary-makers feel if they do not provide unpaid emotional support, the people they work with will suffer. One director told me: 'I am the duty of care!' I asked if they found it emotionally stressful or draining. They replied: 'Well, I got cancer. Of course it is. No seriously, it is – it's exhausting'.

Over the course of a career, the burden becomes hard to sustain. My sample included some of Britain's top documentary-makers, yet there was a palpable sense of disillusionment in many of my interviews. 'I'm just tired of fighting for everything', one told me. 'I can't go on getting treated like this. You get no support at all'.

There is a human cost for creative workers who perform this distinctive type of emotional labour, but the people who are most at risk are the participants themselves. The disparity between what they need and what the industry provides them is often particularly pronounced around the time of transmission. For contributors, this can be a life-changing event, when they are exposed to very public representations of themselves, and along with it, the reactions of family, friends, the press, and judgemental strangers on social media. By contrast, documentary-makers are rarely kept on the payroll to oversee transmission. As such, any ongoing support they offer to their former contributors will be a matter for their individual consciences. When documentary-makers withdraw from the relationship as the project comes to its conclusion, their participants must come to terms with a variety of different losses – not only the loss of control over how their material will be edited and received but also the loss of a confidante, whose attention is closely focussed upon them. One of my interviewees described her ambivalence as a filming process she had found intrusive and challenging came to an end. 'It was a relief, but it was also very final', she told me. 'In a way, it was hard to adjust…I just felt deflated. Weird…You get used to people being around and then they're not there'. The confusing mixture of personal and professional means the end of filming can feel like being 'abandoned', the abrupt cessation of the relationship casting new light on the nature of the intimacy that was shared. 'I felt used', she told me. 'You spend a lot of time with these people. I might think we could be friends, we've got friendly, maybe she genuinely cares, then suddenly – film's out. Bye!...Part of you is like, was I only ever just a documentary to you?'

Agnieszka Piotrowska claims the presence of transference-love is one of the reasons why people feel aggrieved at its loss, but there is also a sense of guilt and shame about its transience. The instrumental nature of the relationship becomes uncomfortably exposed by the way it is shrugged aside. What was happening was something 'slightly inappropriate and yet necessary, in order to make an "intimate" film' (2013, p. 75). 'The producer just disappeared', another interviewee told me. 'In hindsight, it feels like they were being quite fake…they were really chatty…then it just stopped. I guess that's the nature of their work, but it makes you feels like you've been played'.

The absence of after-thought about what happens to participants once filming has wrapped is a failure of duty of care, which, in itself, has the potential to cause distress. Daisy Asquith claims: 'It is possible that the damage done to those filmed is done when the filming stops, when the attention is withdrawn and life returns to banal ordinariness' (2019, p. 15). Without proper training, regulation, and support systems in place, contributors are being asked to put their emotional wellbeing in the hands of people who may not have the time or skills to care for them responsibly.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that the interrelationship between documentary-makers and their subjects should be analysed as a practice of creative labour, which can be understood as operating on a number of levels – including the interpersonal, the procedural, and the organisational. By paying closer attention to the context through which these relationships are enacted, my research adds to a growing debate that positions the 'care' contributors receive as a core concern for the cultural industries (Wood, 2021).

Within the media, the duty of care conversation has tended to focus on participants, but the care that the creative workforce both gives and receives, and how it impacts upon them, remains largely unacknowledged. My research uncovered examples of documentary-makers working in truly harrowing situations, filming with people who are terminally ill, living with devastating grief, or coping with life-limiting mental disorders. The potential to unintentionally compound their distress, or to suffer vicarious trauma themselves, is high. These factors, in combination with a dysfunctional working environment, can lead to burn-out and disillusionment. There is a distinctive form of emotional labour at play in documentary production, which not only requires documentary-makers to behave empathetically, building trust and maintaining goodwill, but also, in some cases, to detach and make difficult decisions, which might be in the best interests of the documentary, but not necessarily their contributors. Performing this type of emotional labour is a significant occupational risk, which must be better understood in order to consider how the wellbeing of both documentary-makers and their subjects could be more effectively protected.

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6 Wellbeing

The wellbeing of contributors has become a topic of great public interest in the media industries around the world. In countries as diverse as Japan, Australia, India, America, and France, there have been reports of suffering and distress, and a tragic spate of suicides, prompting a parliamentary select committee inquiry in the UK, and changes to the Broadcasting Code. A new, stricter duty of care protocol emphasises the need for production companies to individually risk-assess potential contributors, take 'due care' to mitigate any potential harm, and provide people considered 'vulnerable' with extra psychological support. Although the controversy has centred on reality TV, policy changes recognise the mutable nature of genre categories and have been applied across the whole scope of factual television production. Consequently, some of the documentary contributors I interviewed were among the first people to receive this support.

In the debates surrounding duty of care, attention has tended to focus upon the destabilising impact of media exposure upon ordinary members of the public; the negative effects of trolling on their mental health; and the pressures created by the performative expectations of formatted content, which which tend to foreground displays of intense emotion, jeopardy, and conflict. However, the lack of existing scholarship means the industry's response to these tragedies has largely been driven by criticism rather than empirical research. The impact that taking part in media productions can have upon contributors' physical and emotional wellbeing remains underexamined, and the mechanisms through which they can be subjected to harm are often assumed or inexplicit.

In this chapter, I firstly examine the benefits and risks of participation, before considering the policy changes that have been implemented in more detail. I then reflect on how these issues connect with broader concerns about the nature of creative work in the cultural industries, demonstrating that the wellbeing of contributors is inextricably linked to both the wellbeing of producers and the political economy of media production.

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Risks and benefits

Since the duty of care crisis became headline news, there has been sustained criticism of broadcasters for failing to protect their contributors, the general consensus being that their wellbeing has ranked as too low a priority. Reality TV has been singled out as particularly culpable. An article in *The Scotsman* likened the genre to a 'Victorian freakshow', a 'human zoo…rooted in the distress of others'.[1] The *i-newspaper* ran an interview with TV psychologist Dr Arthur Cassidy who claimed: 'There's an obsessional lust after profits and ratings and…it's at the expense of these people and their mental health'.[2] The implication is that wellbeing is an inevitable casualty of a way of working in which market forces are increasingly decoupled from notions of fair treatment or the common good, and any ethical or social purpose will ultimately be subsumed to commercial demands. Mark Banks describes this negative spiral as 'neo-liberalism's characteristic demoralization of economic relations', where rampant individualism, a culture of self-interest, and market rationality are perceived to combine to create an economy which is unethical and immoral (2006, p. 455).

While these claims ring true to a certain degree, Banks goes on to argue against this totalising perspective, demonstrating that non-instrumental motives can also shape cultural practices. Andrew Sayer similarly notes that the tendency of capitalism to displace moral values is only ever partially realised. Alongside this displacement run 'countervailing forces as societies attempt to protect themselves from their destructive effects' (2004, p. 3). The public backlash which followed the duty of care controversy is perhaps one example of this kind of resistance, with the weight of popular opinion creating a pressure to increase regulation, but furthermore, it would be a simplification to suggest that commercialisation leads to a disregard for contributor welfare, because the ongoing co-operation of the general public is indispensable for factual programme makers. Safeguarding contributors' wellbeing is not only an ethical position but also a practical necessity. The context of commercial production, therefore, informs their experiences in varied and contradictory ways, which are often more nuanced than debates might suggest.

To explore this complexity, it's important to examine the benefits as well as the risks. Much has been claimed about the pitfalls of media participation, but less about its pleasures, and yet it was clear from my research that these experiences have the potential to make a positive impact upon people's lives. Many of my interviewees took part in documentaries about challenging life experiences, including medical emergencies, personal tragedies, and devastating historical events such as the Holocaust. While they might not say that taking part was fun in an obvious sense, the majority nonetheless claimed it was a valuable experience for them, and something they would do again. Wellbeing is therefore not only premised upon the satisfaction of an individual's desires, or even the absence of harmful conditions, but is also about the potential it gives them to flourish (Hesmondhalgh, 2017; Sen, 1999; Nussbaum, 2006). Being seen and heard has a huge social value, and the media can offer a form of civic participation in a political landscape where other means of self-expression are often understood as limited or futile. Having already discussed the political benefits of participation in earlier chapters, I want to use this space to focus more specifically on the psychological impact of the production process.

For many contributors, making a documentary involves a series of lengthy, intimate interviews, in which they are invited to explore and reflect upon their feelings. 'It helps you to come to terms with it', said Vicki Beckett, who took part in a documentary about stillbirth. 'It's naturally therapeutic to talk…Every step was another opportunity to process it'. The intense focus that documentary-making brings to people's stories creates a space for self-exploration – 'like a conversation with myself', said Sheona Beaumont, who was filmed giving birth for Channel 4's *One Born Every Minute* (2010–2018). 'I could verbalise and hear reflected back to me the kinds of things I was experiencing…The recognition that emotions you're having are valid and have a legitimate platform for expression'. It wasn't only the opportunity to talk at length which felt distinctive compared to the typical conversations of everyday life, but also the quality of attention paid to them by the documentary-makers. Beckett explained: 'They remembered everything you said. They were listening. It really felt like they cared'.

It might seem counter-intuitive that a conversation conducted on-camera could contain this level of unguarded intimacy, but some people claimed to forget the cameras were even there. Others told me the presence of the camera itself was part of the therapeutic effect. Director Daisy Asquith told me:

> I have some of the best conversations ever if there's a camera there. People, in normal life [find] the emotional intensity socially unacceptable… I really like it when people actually focus and go right down the mine shaft with you. The camera makes them feel like they should do that, or can do that.

Jerry Rothwell gave me an example from one of his films, *Deep Water* (2006), which was about the mysterious disappearance of Donald Crowhurst during his attempt to sail around the world in 1969:

> It'd become a thing [the family] hadn't talked about. I think Simon, the son, hadn't really known that his father hadn't just died during the course of the journey…It was clearly uneasy territory, and all of them had lived their lives in a way that it had massive consequences for them. The making of the film was a point at which they all started to tell their stories…and at the end they said, "That was a really valuable process for us."

By creating this discursive space for self-examination and reflection, a context is established where people feel enabled to confide. Jenny Smith from *Educating the East End* (2014) told me a story about a member of staff at the school who opened up on camera and spoke about her teenage son, who died after falling from a balcony:

> Hazel had never talked to anyone about that…To get her to open up on camera the way they did was incredible…It was all with her permission. And that was a very powerful episode for the staff, because a lot of them didn't know about that at all. Everyone was a bit teary-eyed the next day.

Scholars from a range of disciplinary perspectives have compared the experience of participating in documentaries to having therapy. Psychologist Emmanuel Berman writes:

> I think that there are some similarities between the two processes… Like analytic or psychotherapy patients, [documentary contributors] come to a place where there will be a lot of attention to their story, hopefully in an empathetic, sympathetic, interested, respectful way, and some wish for the other, the director or the therapist, to be the spokesperson, to be the one who will help crystalize one's story, will help one understand and see things.
>
> (2005, p. 221)

But however much the filming process might feel like a counselling session, in many ways, it is in fact the opposite. The definition of therapy offered by the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy is that it provides a 'safe and confidential space…to talk to a trained professional about your issues and concerns'.[3] One of Paddy Scannell's characteristics of broadcast talk is what he calls its 'double articulation' (1991, p. 1). Participants are communicating to both the filmmaker who is present and to the audience who are absent – and in this second articulation, they may not find a similarly sympathetic or respectful listening space. Their words are spoken in one context, but heard in an entirely different one. As one of my interviewees put it: 'It's like counselling in front of five million people'.

By definition, being in a documentary is exposing, but communicating to a large audience can also be a powerful antidote to feelings of stigmatisation and shame. Omari Eccleston-Brown told me that claiming ownership of his mental health struggles has not only helped him to raise public awareness about body dysmorphia but has also been part of an ongoing process of self-acceptance: 'I'm not trying to hide it away', he said. 'It's part of my story'.

Yet these potential benefits cannot be disentangled from inherent risks. Participating in documentaries can cause significant physical, reputational, and psychological harm. A surprisingly high number of the people I interviewed were filmed in physically dangerous situations – such as Paul Dilley, who almost died in the back of an ambulance, or Janet Morsy who was stabbed in a random attack. The drama and jeopardy of physical threat can make compelling documentaries, but in most cases, this danger has not been generated by the production itself, and the documentary-makers are observing rather than instigating risk.

However, in some circumstances, participating in a documentary can be highly dangerous. In 1991, Peter A. Gordon travelled to East Timor (now Timor-Leste) – a former Portuguese colony struggling to gain independence from a brutal Indonesian dictatorship – to make a documentary for *First Tuesday* (1983–1993). One of his interviewees was a man who was assisting the guerrilla fighters. In a volatile situation, where civilians were being arrested and murdered, it was clear that broadcasting his image on TV could identify him as a potential target. Before the interview, they discussed the possible repercussions and asked if he wanted his face to be obscured, but he refused. 'He said, "You must help us. The world must come to help us."', Gordon told me. 'It was such an emotional, powerful thing'.

After the shoot, the debate continued in the edit suite, with the production team conflicted over whether their greater obligation was to enable their contributor to speak out, or to protect him from harm. In the end, they decided he should be given the ability to make this choice, and that anonymising his identity detracted from the impact of his message. 'He had an amazing face and his testimony was really strong', Gordon said. 'As a filmmaker, I knew it'd be more powerful to do it to camera'.

In Gordon's view, the crucial point here is that contributors who are taking risks must have agency in their decision, which assumes a full understanding of the potential implications. In the making of this documentary, risks were not only taken by the East Timorese contributors but also by the British production team, who filmed undercover footage of a massacre of hundreds of unarmed civilians, then smuggled the rushes out of the country, prompting an international diplomatic response after the film was broadcast.[4]

This type of danger might not be a concern in many productions, but risk is certainly not confined to documentaries about conflict. Journalism scholar Ruth Palmer finds that media appearances can confer status or stigma with 'alarming efficiency', having substantial effects upon their subjects' reputations which are often then internalised, impacting upon their self-esteem (2017, p. 150). Her research describes the stories of people who lost their jobs, had to move their kids to a new school, were ostracised by family members, or were left feeling suicidal after unfavourable stories were published in the newspapers. A number of my interviewees shared the perception that appearing in a documentary put their wellbeing at risk. Emily Ingold, who took part in Channel 4's *Shut Ins: Britain's Fattest People* (2014–2021), told me she was concerned that taking part would lead to her being fat-shamed and ridiculed. 'I care too much about what other people think', she told me. Anita Biressi (2004) describes how television has developed a distinctive aesthetic through which it represents personal concerns in the public sphere, shaping an entire culture of confession, witnessing, exposure and self-exposure, integrating, and assimilating these modes of experience into the broader psychic economy. There was a confessional quality to many of my interviewees' appearances, requiring them to make revelations about deeply private aspects of their lives. Omari Eccleston-Brown told me he worried that talking about his mental health could negatively impact upon his professional reputation as a tutor, should any of his clients see the documentary: 'Do I want them to know this about me? There was a lot of vulnerability coming up. How would that affect the way they see me?...Would they lose trust in me?'

When the documentary's topic is a sensitive subject, the potential psychological or reputational risks are more apparent to contributors, and therefore perhaps easier for them to evaluate. For many of the people I spoke to, anticipated harm played a role in their decision-making at the outset, but ultimately, their concerns did not materialise. Yet, in other cases, my interviewees had considered the subject-matter of their documentaries to be innocuous and were therefore unprepared for the negative impact it had upon their wellbeing. Jenna Presley and Gemma Rawnsley both participated in a documentary about home-schooling which turned out to be far more controversial than they'd expected, putting them at the centre of a social media storm and exposing them to significant public criticism. Presley told me the experience had a considerable negative effect upon her and her family, straining relationships with her parents, making her son a target for bullies, and finally leading to her ostracisation from the home-school community, who blamed her for the unflattering representation. 'It caused me so much grief afterwards', she told me. 'They're humiliating people…They're actually playing with people's lives'. Gemma Rawnsley described a steep decline in her wellbeing in the aftermath of the documentary's broadcast, which led to her being prescribed anti-anxiety medication, developing a stress-related chronic illness, and eventually having to leave a job that she loved. 'I felt so saddened. I felt like I wanted to be beamed up into space', she told me. 'I get this pang of anxiety in my heart… when I think about [it]…I did really psychologically struggle with it'.

The contrast between two of the documentaries I've described here – one on home-schooling and the other about the military occupation of East Timor – demonstrates that risk isn't only connected to heavier subject-matter. A report on the drivers of occupational distress in factual TV found the possibility of coming face to face with human suffering is very real throughout the entire breadth of factual production.[5] Even in lighter formats, the chance of being voted off, rebuffed, or having business pitches turned down could be crushing for participants. Vulnerable contributors can turn up in any genre, making sudden disclosures about their personal histories or mental health, sometimes leaving junior members of the production team blindsided by stories which initially seem to be about one thing, then quickly morph into something entirely different.

Duty of care regulations

In April 2021, while this research was still in progress, new regulations came into the force in the UK, designed to protect the wellbeing of contributors and formalise the industry's duty of care responsibilities. Although there have been rapid developments in how the industry has responded to this crisis both during and since my interviews took place, many of the people I spoke to were among the first to receive this kind of support, and were able to give insights into how the new measures have been effected, and how appropriately they responded to their needs.

The two major changes in Ofcom's revised guidance require broadcasters to conduct more rigorous screening and provide due care to vulnerable people. Participants must now go through a risk assessment process designed to identify any risk of significant harm.[6] A report by the Dart Centre describes how this has typically been put into practice: 'A junior producer may do a pre-sort at the casting stage of a production and then only if there are doubts, will the question of whether a candidate needs to be "psyched" be referred up'. Contributors who are flagged as potentially vulnerable at this stage will go on to be assessed by a qualified psychologist to ascertain if they are 'mentally robust enough to weather the pressures of being on TV and being exposed to public scrutiny'.[7] However, there are currently no industry-wide guidelines about how and when psych-testing should be carried out, what the tests should consist of, or what kind of background and experience the psychologist should have. The people I interviewed typically reported that the process involved a questionnaire conducted over the phone. Jo Lockwood, who was filmed during her gender transition, described this to me as 'definitely box-ticking…I didn't think they were doing it out of the kindness of their heart…They wanted to assess me mentally'. Heather Ward, who took part in a documentary about hoarding, summarised the kinds of questions she was asked: 'Was there anything we didn't want to mention? Had we been depressed?...Have you ever felt suicidal?' As the screening is reliant upon self-declaration, it is relatively easy for contributors to lie or omit information which they feel might compromise their chances of being cast. The Dart Centre's research found that psych-screening is often focussed on generic mental health and doesn't always include in-depth discussion about the potential downsides of participation. Arguably then, the purpose of the test is less about equipping contributors to cope with the challenges of media exposure, and more about creating a paper trail so that broadcasters can provide evidence that due process has been followed. With an emphasis on evaluation rather than assistance, psych-screening protects the interests of broadcasters but does less to safeguard the wellbeing of participants.

Furthermore, in some situations, my research indicates that psych-screening can actually be counter-productive or detrimental for contributors, who perceive it as scrutiny instead of support. Julian Dismore told me the involvement of psychologists had been a source of anxiety for some of the people he had filmed with – particularly those who were socially excluded. 'The prospect of speaking to a counsellor…that's traumatising potentially, and terrifying…because they associate that kind of conversation with welfare and social workers and having their kids taken away from them', he told me. 'There has to be a duty of care to your contributors, but there is a massive danger to it, and it's not achieving what you want anyway'. Lucy Wilson[8] was also mistrustful of the motivations and independence of the psychological support she was offered. 'I wouldn't trust her,' she told me. 'At the end of the day, she works for the BBC'. Furthermore, the Dart Centre's report claims the screening process is open to abuse and can be used as a 'fig-leaf' to mask a lack of appropriate contributor care.[9] Their research uncovered instances where producers used the tests as a tool to select the contributors who were most likely to generate drama and conflict on-screen, choosing the very people the psychologists had advised them to avoid.

The second major change to Ofcom's regulations states that broadcasters should take due care to safeguard the welfare of people who are at risk of significant harm as a result of taking part in the programme. Ofcom connects this risk to a number of factors, including the contributor's personal history, the type of production they're participating in, and the performative expectations it entails. Their guidance gives a non-exhaustive list of people it defines as 'vulnerable', including those with learning difficulties or mental health problems, the bereaved and traumatised, people with brain damage or forms of dementia, and the sick or terminally ill.[10] The people I interviewed who were considered to be at risk were offered psychological support, either during the production, or more commonly, in the form of 'aftercare' once filming had wrapped. Some were simply given a number they could call if they felt they needed help. Others were told the production company would pay for a fixed number of face-to-face sessions with a psychologist.

My data suggests this kind of psychological support tends to be focussed on main contributors, often excluding members of the cast who are deemed to be playing supporting roles – even when their involvement in the production was substantial. '[My wife] felt like she was the contributor's assistant', Jo Lockwood told me. 'When you look at the final story, she was an equal contributor…but she was always treated as if she was an extra…They never bothered getting her in contact with [the psychologist]…She was left on her own.'

As Lockwood's comments suggest, the division between major and minor contributors can be arbitrary. However, one of the surprising findings of my research is that many of the people who were offered aftercare did not take it up. One contributor told me: 'Aftercare-wise, they did pay for…three more sessions. I went to one…I felt like I was being judged…so I didn't go after that'.

The lack of enthusiasm for aftercare suggests that the type of support on offer might not be the kind of help people are looking for. By contrast, the aftercare many of my respondents told me they truly valued came from their production teams. After filming her documentary on stillbirth, the relationship she built with the producers was something that actively helped Vicki Beckett cope with the trauma she went through. 'They didn't just speak to us when filming was happening', she told me. 'They kept a dialogue going. They checked in on us. How are you getting on? It felt very genuine'. Jo Lockwood was sceptical about the role played by the psychologists, but felt very differently about the connections she built with the documentary-makers. 'I was always talking to them on them on the phone', she told me. 'Every time [my wife] and I had an argument, I'd end up having an hour's conversation with [the producer], pouring my heart out to her…We still keep in touch'. While formal psychological support has been funded by the industry, much of this informal support given to contributors from the production team remains unacknowledged, taking place outside the margins of their contracted jobs, without pay or recognition, sometimes continuing long after the production has wrapped (Coleman, 2023).

Vulnerable contributors

A number of my interviewees would be defined by Ofcom as vulnerable, so I was particularly keen to hear about their experiences of contributor care, and the extent to which it met their needs. Liane Piper and Omari Eccleston-Brown both suffer from body dysmorphic disorder (BDD) – a debilitating anxiety disorder which is characterised by a preoccupation with an imagined defect, causing significant distress and impaired social functioning (Veale, 1996). They took part in a BBC documentary called *Ugly Me* (2018). Although they felt there was much to be gained from taking part in the documentary – from getting access to professional help, to the opportunity to raise public awareness and challenge social stigma – they equally recognised the intense scrutiny had the potential to trigger their anxieties. Eccleston-Brown told me: 'When you have BDD, you don't want to draw attention to yourself'. He described the intense discomfort he felt when he saw himself on screen for the first time: 'I had all sorts of butterflies, feeling a bit sick and really disliking how I looked. That's something to deal with. Oh my God, I put myself out there. What was I thinking?'

Many of the vulnerable contributors I spoke to were at pains to praise the caring and well-intentioned documentary-makers they worked with. However, typically the production teams lacked any specialist skills or knowledge about the conditions they were documenting and how they might affect their contributors. Nikita Roberts, who took part in *My Extreme OCD Life* (2017), told me: 'I think they'd done their research…but I can't say they understood it'. Omari Eccleston-Brown has made several media appearances on behalf of a BDD charity, but it was only during our conversation that he began to perceive that further accommodations could've been made to help him. 'Nobody has ever said anything like, for instance, "I know this might be difficult for you, so we'll go at your pace, if you need anything just tell me, if you're feeling uncomfortable at any moment and you want to take five" – or whatever', he told me. 'Nobody's ever said anything like that to put my mind at ease'. Very few of the vulnerable contributors I spoke to reported that consultants were used to give advice to the production. The Dart Centre highlights the lack of appropriate training producers have in working with the vulnerable, understanding the impact of trauma, and developing appropriately boundaried relationships, describing them as being 'thrown in at the deep end and left to work things out for themselves'.[11] To blunder into such territory armed with little more than good intentions can pose an unacceptable risk to the wellbeing of both parties. Liane Piper, for example, described the production team of *Ugly Me* (2018) as 'empathetic and understanding' but told me they would try to film her in triggering situations to catch her reactions on camera:

> One of my biggest fears was going swimming. I have an eating disorder and body dysmorphia at the same time. I was probably the heaviest I've ever been in that documentary. They were saying, "Let's go swimming." I said, "I really don't want to do that." They were saying, "It's good for you. It's good therapy." And I was in such a panicked state in the swimming pool, we just had to cut it. I was just like, "I don't want to do this."

Even medical professionals, who work with mental health conditions on a daily basis, are cautious about the use of exposure therapy to treat anxiety disorders, many believing it carries an unacceptably high risk of harm, is intolerable for patients, and poses ethical quandaries (Farrell et al., 2013). To confront a vulnerable person with their worst fears using the justification that it's 'good therapy' poses an unacceptable risk to their wellbeing, and is indicative that editorial decisions are not consistently anchored by appropriate professional guidance.

Piper's story may sound extreme, but it wasn't the only example of inappropriate treatment from my research. Heather Ward's father is a hoarder. Together, they appeared on Channel 5's *Can't Stop Won't Stop Hoarding* (2014), hoping it would enable them to access help after his hoarding problems spiralled beyond their control. Clinical psychiatrists advise against dismantling a hoard without tackling the underlying psychological disorder, but such documentaries tend to treat the problem as primarily a sanitation issue. 'There was no kind of psychological help', Ward told me. Her father's possessions were loaded into a lorry off-camera to effect a televisual transformation, then simply returned to their original place after filming had wrapped. I asked her if the documentary had any meaningful impact on his hoarding. 'Not an ounce', she told me. 'Nothing at all'. In an article about TV depictions of hoarding, Communications scholars Shannon Evans and Kristin Barton are critical of the 'superficial and insensitive' portrayals of the condition, claiming: 'the quick fix solutions and pseudo-medical treatments exhibited may have serious negative consequences for participants' (2014, p. 41).

As for Liane Piper, she told me that despite receiving a year-long course of therapy during the making of her documentary, by the time they wrapped, her BDD had actually deteriorated:

> I was having therapy, the practical CBT, and everything I was getting to combat anxiety. I understood it, and I was putting it into practice, but the filming, the constant challenges were setting me back so I couldn't utilise the techniques as fully. It might be a psychological thing, but because I was being pushed for these reactions, it felt like…it was getting worse.

Piper felt the efficacy of her treatment was compromised because nearly every one of the 20 NHS-funded sessions she had with her psychiatrist was filmed, giving little opportunity for privacy. 'I didn't think I got the best out of the therapy, because I was too preoccupied with being filmed', she told me. 'I was really drained. At that point, I wished I'd never done it'.

Piper's experiences vividly illustrate why the offer of a few counselling sessions by way of aftercare is likely to have limited remedial effect. It simply isn't acceptable to cause people harm, then patch them up again afterwards. The new regulations lean heavily upon the support of psychologists, but fail to address the harm that can be caused by the process of filming itself. Without appropriate training in working with vulnerable people, there is a danger that documentary-makers may not only be failing to protect their contributors' wellbeing, but could be actively endangering it.

Wellbeing and working practices

In many countries, the regulatory structure of the broadcasting industries tends to focus on the audience's experience of the material that is broadcast, rather than production methods or the treatment of participants themselves. In Australia, for example, the impetus to make policy changes has come in response to feedback and complaints from viewers and their expectations for content safeguards. In 2021, the Australian Communications & Media Authority conducted research which indicated widespread community concern about reality TV participants, despite a general understanding of this style of programming as heavily manipulated.[12] While policy is evolving to recognise a greater need to safeguard participants, their experiences are only dealt with second-hand.

Similarly in the UK, as a post-broadcast regulator, Ofcom has limited powers to involve itself with working practices in the cultural industries. However, there is mounting evidence that the workplace culture of the media has a significant connection to the industry's duty of care crisis. In their submission to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport inquiry into reality TV, the Film & TV Charity urged the Committee to 'look not just at those in the spotlight, but also those just *outside* the spotlight':

> We hear stories every day of the strain, stress and toll work can take on bright and brilliant people. These are the stories the industry at large doesn't hear, because in a predominantly freelance industry people often feel they can't speak up.[13]

Their submission shared the case of Michael Harm, a location manager who killed himself in 2017, described by friends as 'the most delightful, handsome, decent, creative person…[with] a wicked sense of humour'.[14] Shortly before he died, Harm had complained about the pressures of working in the industry, and the loneliness and lack of support he had experienced. The Charity's report goes on to describe the detrimental human impact of precarious employment and abuses of power, which are endemic within media working environments. The suicide of Steve Dymond, whose fiancé ended their relationship after he failed a lie detector test on *The Jeremy Kyle Show* (2005–2019), was widely reported in the media, but less coverage was devoted to the death of Natasha Reddican, a 31-year-old producer on the show, who took her own life shortly after the programme was axed. At the inquest, her mother described her as 'an amazing, bubbly personality', who had become depressed as a result of the loss of a job which was 'everything to her'.[15]

The deterioration in working practices in the cultural industries has been extensively documented in the scholarship, but the connection between a challenging working environment and the crisis in duty of care often goes unelaborated. A collapse in ratings and increased competition for advertising revenues are among the factors which have led to dwindling budgets and schedules, which pile pressure on producers to meet higher expectations with fewer resources (Hesmondhalgh, 2018; Ursell, 2000). Despite the success of the two preceding series, headteacher Jenny Smith told me that Channel 4's *Educating the East End* (2014) was made against a commercial backdrop of cost cutting: 'It was done on a much shorter timescale and a tighter budget… it was filmed in about half the time'. As a result, the production team were 'exhausted…getting about three hours sleep a night', and having to conduct interviews long after the school day had finished, 'at 8 or 9 o'clock at night'. If production teams are overworked, their contributors will be too, both parties having to deliver to the same unrealistic deadlines.

While digital technology has encouraged the development of so-called 'slash jobs', where a single person will take on several roles – such as producer/director/camera/sound – at the same time, a countervailing emphasis on specialisation has led to jobs also becoming more fragmented. The functions of casting, shooting, and editing are now often separated out and divided between different workers, enabling processes to take place concurrently and schedules to shrink. These producers have lost a degree of their autonomy and are overseen by several managerial layers, including series producers, executive producers, and commissioning editors (Born, 2011). This managerialism, which has underwritten the reorganisation of jobs in factual production, has decoupled power from responsibility when it comes to the treatment of contributors. The final say in how participants are represented will routinely be made by executives or commissioners who have no direct relationship with them, and no direct accountability. Director Jerry Rothwell told me that the relationship between a filmmaker and their subject is fundamentally compromised when they don't have editorial control. 'Do you have the authority to have that relationship in an honest way', he questioned, 'or actually, is there someone lurking behind you…who's going to push it in a different direction?'

While making documentaries has never been a straightforward enterprise, its stresses can, to some extent, be cushioned by a supportive working environment, or exacerbated by a dysfunctional one. Peter A. Gordon told me how much easier it was to be 'magnanimous and mature' in dealings with contributors and co-workers when the economic pressures on productions were less acute. Gordon made high-risk undercover films – not only in East Timor but also apartheid-era South Africa – but was enabled to do this work by trusting and supportive employers. 'When I went to Timor', he told me, 'the last thing [my boss] said was… "The most important thing is that you come back safely." It wasn't, "Well, what's the film going to be about? Where's the jeopardy?"'

Sue Bourne also described the immense pressures borne by younger members of the production team, caused by a toxic mix of long working hours, unrealistic expectations, and condensed schedules.

> They get sent out on their own, they have to drive everywhere, they stay in shit accommodation. They've got no back up. [Broadcasters are] banging on all the time about duty of care, but…there's no duty of care to *them*.

In order to be able to support their contributors, documentary-makers must themselves be supported, but the new policy guidance does little to recognise their needs, or to safeguard them from a working environment which incurs a substantial human cost, where bullying, nepotism, discrimination, and sexual harrassment are putting the wellbeing of all involved at risk.[16]

Many possible solutions to the duty of care crisis have been suggested: from hiring psychologists, to setting up a mental health pension scheme for former contributors, or even contracting participants as a workforce and enabling them to unionise. However, when we give greater consideration to the workplace context, the shortcomings of these solutions is brought into clearer focus. While these types of measures might help to ameliorate the damage, they fail to address the actual causes of distress, or to stop people from being harmed in the first place, the ambition to retrospectively repair rather than to prevent indicating a tacit acceptance of risk as somehow unpreventable.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown that media participation poses a significant risk to the wellbeing of ordinary people, alongside the potential for pleasurable or beneficial experiences. Because of these risks, there is an imperative that duty of care is appropriately prioritised, but historically this care has been lacking, with tragic consequences for the people involved. In the UK, the amendments to the Broadcasting Code are an important milestone in bringing recognition to the problem, but they fail to prescribe the kinds of care contributors truly value; to extend to everyone who is at risk of harm; or to address deeper maladies connected with working practices and the organisation of the industry.

Although there has never been a greater awareness that contributors should be safeguarded, the media industries must develop a broader repertoire of support, more attuned to their needs; geared towards redressing underlying problems rather than offering quick fixes. My research demonstrates how the wellbeing of producers, participants, and the working environment are intrinsically linked, and therefore, why the kind of external psychological support prioritised by recent policy amendments is likely to be of limited effectiveness. Ultimately, poor contributor care is an expression of poor working conditions, and the experiences of ordinary participants are a barometer for dysfunction in the media. These fundamental issues need to be tackled to create fundamental change. The questions we need to ask next are about how the occupational health of the entire workforce – including people both in front of and behind the camera – can be sustained within a deregulated industry.

Notes

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8 Lucy Wilson is a pseudonym, used at the interviewee's request.

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7 Presence and absence

John B. Thompson describes how the media has brought about a different kind of visibility, giving us access to hitherto restricted spaces, making hidden practices visible, and enabling new forms of interaction. ‘In this new form of mediated visibility’, he writes, ‘the field of vision is no longer constrained by the spatial and temporal properties of the here and now but is shaped, instead, by the distinctive properties of communication media’ (2005, p. 35). The concept of mediated visibility is often used to describe the way that audiences relate to public figures or witness world events that are relayed to them through the media, the exposure to which has become a defining characteristic of modernity – but as the subjects of mediation, documentary contributors are able to offer a different kind of insight. Their unique perspective – as ‘outsiders’ who are temporarily granted access to the ‘inside’ – means they are perfectly positioned to comment upon the processes of selection and omission through which documentaries are constructed, and why certain elements of their stories were emphasised while others went untold.

Focusing on patterns of presence and absence in the mediated visibility of documentary contributors shows us the kinds of experiences that are rendered more or less visible by the production process and offers us a way of reconsidering the disparity between real and representation. Stella Bruzzi argues that all too often, documentary’s significance has been evaluated as though it were contingent upon its ability to offer viewers ‘an undistorted pure reality’ (2006, p. 9). Instead, my aim here is to examine why and how presences and absences develop, and how the relationship between the two is manifested in documentary films.

Absences, omissions, censorship, and self-censorship

Documentary-making is essentially a process of distillation, where events, which take place over several days, months, or years, are condensed into a shorter timeframe. I want to begin the discussion by thinking more closely about the omissions this process inevitably creates: what is being left out of the story, and what do these absences tell us about the working methods and values of the media?

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Contributors often think about their on-screen persona as a simplified version of who they are. With limited time in which to represent each character, documentary-makers tend to favour coherence over contradiction, and several of my interviewees told me that facets of their personalities were glossed over or concealed. In her appearance in *One Born Every Minute* (2010–2018), for example, Sheona Beaumont was presented as a Vicar's wife, but her own substantial and impressive personal achievements – as an artist, photographer, and academic – went unmentioned. Lucy Wilson[1] told me the makers of *Louis Theroux: Selling Sex* (2020) were keen to portray her as a victim of abuse, but reluctant to identify her as autistic. 'Many aspects of my identity were not respected by the documentary makers', she claimed.[2]

Significant events which take place during the production will often find no place in the narrative. Vicki Beckett, who took part in *Child of Mine* (2018) – a Channel 4 documentary about stillbirth – told me about a scandal which erupted in the national press concerning its filming techniques. During the production, an article was published in *The Daily Mail* describing the documentary as 'morally repugnant', quoting a doula who worked at the hospital where it was set as saying: 'Women are being exploited for profit'.[3] The controversy surrounded the use of an unmonitored fixed-camera rigged in a private clinic room which was used by staff to break bad news to their patients. With the approval of the hospital trust, the documentary-makers had set up the recording device in an attempt to capture on tape the moment when pregnant women were told their unborn babies had died. The agreement was that all footage would be destroyed without being watched unless the patient's consent was secured retrospectively. I contacted the doula who spoke out in the *Daily Mail* article (who requested that I did not republish her name in my research). She told me that the documentary-makers had said to hospital staff they wanted to film 'the primal scream of a woman being told her baby had died…which in my opinion is so fucked up and twisted, I can't comprehend how anybody could be so voyeuristic'. Numerous complaints were reportedly made to management, who stood by their decision, saying it was important to raise awareness. Midwives were advised not to talk to the press, leaving the doula feeling that she – as someone employed directly by patients rather than the hospital – was one of the only people who was free to register their disapproval. However, when she tried to use the media as an alternative recourse for complaint, she was misquoted and her comments were taken out of context. The *Daily Mail* article falsely claimed she had suffered a miscarriage herself, and she spent the day of publication fielding distressed phone calls from her family and friends. When the documentary finally transmitted a year after the controversy, it was lauded by viewers and critics. The *Daily Mail* – the same paper that had previously led the criticism – now celebrated its 'incredibly sensitive' handling of the subject of baby loss.[4] In the rush of praise following the broadcast, a conversation was forgotten about whether the ends justified the means. The views of those who had previously dissented were excluded from both the documentary and from the debate surrounding it. Documentaries are always an incomplete record of events, but this example illuminates facets of the story which the film itself obscures, extending voice to some while simultaneously denying it to others, breaking taboos on an issue of great public interest, but doing so while maintaining its right to exclude any objections.

Documentary-makers self-censor their work – not only to conceal criticism of their methods and protect their reputations – but also with an eye to how their productions are likely to be received by the public. Peter A. Gordon told me he once spent three months in Bradford developing a programme idea about the large immigrant community who live there, working with a 'brilliant Muslim woman researcher [who] opened all these doors for me'. Despite his evident interest, he ultimately decided not to go ahead with the film, worried it wouldn't 'portray the Muslim community in a very good way, and it might be used by racists to back to their cause'. Gordon explained: 'There were [people] dealing drugs…Women never leaving the house…There was racism from the Asian community towards the white community…You could either make a film that would whitewash it…or you can tell the truth'.

Putting aside for a moment the argument about whether this stance is justifiable, it is interesting to reflect upon the organisational context underpinning Gordon's professional autonomy, authorising him to make such decisions based primarily upon ethical judgements rather than commercial concerns. Since the advent of an increasingly managerial culture in UK mainstream television production throughout the 90s and 2000s, the creative control of producers has been substantially dismantled in favour of a different set of corporate values, where ratings and reaction are the most meaningful metrics of impact (Born, 2004; Saha, 2012). 'Nobody said to me you've spent three months on it, and we need a return', Gordon told me. 'It was easy then. I'd had a really interesting time in Bradford. I was under no commercial pressure to make the film, and nobody thought the worse of me professionally'.

The issue of how a predominantly white media should portray immigrant communities to their majority white audiences recurred several years later, when another Yorkshire-based filmmaker Anna Hall made *Edge of the City* (2004) for Channel 4, which followed the work of social services in Bradford. Its depiction of white working-class teenage girls being groomed by Asian men was seized upon by the British National Party – as Gordon might've foreseen – who 'hijacked the programme's content as propaganda' in the run up to a local election.[5] On the day of transmission, West Yorkshire Police's Chief Constable asked Channel 4 to pull the documentary from their schedules, citing a risk of community unrest and public disorder. Yet by exposing an unpalatable truth, the documentary arguably played a part in the hardening of public attitudes against the sexual exploitation of young girls. In the years that followed came further documentaries, a TV drama series, a string of convictions, and a condemnation of the culture of silence throughout public institutions and the media which had enabled such abuse to flourish.

On the most immediate level, this debate seems to boil down to whether it is preferable to tell the truth at whatever cost or to self-censor, but perhaps it's also enlightening to peel back a further layer and observe how acts of self-censorship and disclosure are not only informed by ethical judgement but also by the political economy of television. The experiences Peter A. Gordon shared with me depict an era of TV production characterised by an extreme lack of diversity behind the camera, where white liberal values were in ascendancy, and betray a desire to present ethnic minorities in a way which conforms to these standards. When limited representational space is made available to tell stories about immigrant life, the conflicting pressures to portray it both honestly and benignly creates irreconcilable tensions. Anamik Saha has argued that the increased quantity of British Asians making and appearing on TV in recent years has failed to increase the quality of their representations, because of the underlying commercial imperatives which place the highest priority on 'generating noise' (2012, p. 434). In many cases, the 'noise' which is so valued by commissioners is merely negative feedback – an overblown reaction to the recycling of stereotypical tropes: 'beards, scarves, halal meat, terrorists, forced marriage' (2012, p. 424). Both examples give us an insight into the different ways that production practices have contributed towards problematic representations of race – either through their sensationalised presence or selective absence.

Absences and omissions are not only created at the behest of producers. Contributors also self-censor, negotiating boundaries around which elements of their lives they're willing to share, and which remain private. In allowing the cameras to follow her first years of living as a trans-woman, Jo Lockwood gave documentary-makers access to some of the most intimate and challenging aspects of her private life and marriage; but while some truths were revealed, others were concealed. Lockwood told me she agreed to take part under the condition that her children would not be mentioned in the film:

> We were very adamant they weren't to be part of it. The relationship with my son is only recently OK…My daughter is a different kettle of fish. She's…completely rejected me, banned me from her wedding, told me I'm dead to her. It's been a struggle. That causes its own tension between [my wife] and I as well. It's like a family with a broken arm… I won't be at my daughter's wedding, I won't be on the top table, I won't be giving her away. And [my wife] has to live with that pain as much as I do.

The ongoing suffering and distress Lockwood experiences as a result of this estrangement is unarguably one of the greatest consequences of her transition, but it plays no part in its on-screen portrayal. My research, however, suggests this kind of selective omission is ubiquitous enough to be regarded as a prerequisite of disclosure. For most people, in order to feel secure in permitting access to deeply private aspects of their lives, limitations need to be established. Absence and revelation, therefore, are two sides of the same coin, and even the documentaries which appear to be the most confessional are often carefully constructed to elide what is undisclosed.

If absences are intrinsic to documentary-making, they are also interesting from an analytical perspective. Absences are inevitably linked to a certain kind of presence, because the void they leave behind must be filled with something else. As the French film theorist and director Jean-Louis Comolli writes: 'In [documentary] cinema, presence and absence fold back upon one another…To avoid presence is to conceal absence' (1999, p. 38). An example of this type of substitution takes place in *The Real Death in* Paradise (2022), a documentary which Kate Warrender and Steve Plaskitt participated in about the death of their son, Charlie, who was killed following a night out while serving with the Royal Navy in the Seychelles. After Charlie's death, the family struggled to find answers about what had happened to him. Neither the Seychelles Police Force nor the Royal Navy launched an investigation. The British Police said they were unable to intervene unless they were formally requested to do so by the Seychelles Authorities. No witnesses came forward, and every CCTV camera along the route of his final taxi journey, until the point where his body was discovered the next morning, had apparently ceased recording. Plaskitt told me: 'It's like when Charlie left that bar, nobody ever saw anything; that's where the story ends. They walked out of that bar, and the rest is history, and nobody's ever bothered to do anything'.

The makers of the documentary approached the family with a pledge that they would try to discover the truth of what happened to Charlie, and hold the Royal Navy and the UK Government to account, but as filming got underway, they were unable to get access to any of the key organisations. Warrender also began to get the impression that the production company – whose specialism was in entertainment rather than current affairs – were unwilling to criticise these powerful institutions, with legal teams and PR departments ready to defend their reputations. Their reluctance to discuss the role they played in Charlie's death had a significant impact upon the story that was told. As Warrender said: 'There was a huge amount missed out – a huge amount of information, and mainly the information that puts criticism on the Ministry of Defence, or criticises the Foreign Office'.

Instead of interrogating the authorities – who firstly failed in their duties to keep Charlie safe, and then after his death, failed to help bring him justice – the documentary turned its scrutiny towards Charlie's own behaviour. At several points in the documentary, the commentary states that Charlie had broken a Navy protocol known as 'shark-watch' – where sailors are instructed to stick together and travel in groups – and had therefore 'put himself in danger'. However, this claim was inaccurate. The sailors on Charlie's ship were in fact advised that the Seychelles was 'safe' and 'low risk'. The ship's log shows that several other men arrived back at the ship alone on the night of his death, and the Navy confirmed to the family that

Charlie had not broken any rules. Warrender told me: 'The "shark-watch" thing was wrong. It was absolutely wrong. It wasn't that he disobeyed and put himself in danger'.

Warrender and Plaskitt believe that Charlie's death was neither random nor accidental. The documentary allowed them to voice these claims, but not to elaborate on the reasons why they had reached this conclusion, including the fact that the UK Commander of the anti-drug smuggling operation which Charlie was working on happened to be in the Seychelles at a high-profile event to celebrate the Queen's official birthday, and he shared the same relatively unusual surname, Warrender. Following the celebrations, the British High Commissioner and a group of senior naval officers visited the same bar where Charlie was drinking and sat at the table next to him and his friends. Forensic testing of Charlie's blood revealed it contained enough heroin to kill four men, and that the purity of the substance was a much higher grade than is typically available on the streets. Pure white heroin tends to be confiscated from smugglers who are higher up the supply-chain than users or dealers, whose product is typically cut with other substances, and is generally coloured off-white or brown. The same pure-grade heroin was also thrown over Charlie's body after it was dumped in a local park, within sight of HMS Richmond. After he was killed, Charlie's ship was held in dock for several days, unable to resume its mission, disrupting a major drug-smuggling route through the Indian Ocean. There was ample motivation for the highly-organised criminal gangs who run such operations to target sailors and cause them harm, but these elements of the story were not examined by the documentary. 'We realise they have constraints', Warrender told me. 'They've got one hour, and they have to choose the bits that they want to put in. But they... came from a particular angle that we knew nothing about.'

Rather than fulfilling its 'fourth-estate' role, and advocating in the interests of the public, the documentary chose to blame the victim and circulate misinformation about his death. As this example shows, when the full story cannot be told, documentary-makers must look for other ways to fill the gaps. Absences can, therefore, play a significant role in shaping how people's lives are represented.

Constructing and reconstructing presence

Rather than presenting an incomplete story, documentary-makers must fill the inevitable holes in their narratives by recreating events, or in some cases, filming scenes which have been entirely constructed. This type of divergence from actual events is interesting theoretically speaking, because – to borrow a phrase from John Ellis – these moments are the 'practical renegotiations of documentary's epistemological status' (2005, no pagination). What I mean by this is that the various methods documentary-makers use to simulate the presence of a missing component are not simply technical solutions but also reveal something about the epistemological inconsistencies posed by the documentary genre – and therefore, demonstrate why a degree of construction has proved impossible for filmmakers to do without.

Despite its associations with truth and real life, Bill Nichols (2008) makes the point that documentaries have always relied upon staging and re-enactment. Conventional accounts of documentary history tell a story of progression, enabled by technological advance, towards greater and greater authenticity of representation – but the argument I want to make here is that the appearance of seamless truthfulness can only be sustained with a degree of artifice. It is this artifice which lends documentaries a veneer of realism, yet, at the same time, undermines the genre's reliability.

The effected forms of presence which Nichols and other scholars have tended to focus upon often involve whole constructed scenarios – such as the epic walrus hunt in Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), or the overnight journey of the Postal Express in the Grierson documentary classic *Night Mail* (1936), which was recreated on a sound stage. However, at the smaller end of the scale is a style of reconstruction central to single-camera documentary directing, where certain shots are repeated and filmed in a range of sizes or angles in order to make naturalistic editing possible. Many of my interviewees spoke about being asked to walk in and out of buildings over and over again, filming close-up shots of door handles being turned, cutaways of hands and feet, and shooting 'noddies' (the industry phrase used to describe listening shots). Frequently, there will also be technical retakes, where action is repeated because the lighting was wrong, or there was a sound interruption. Jo Lockwood described her frustrations as the process wore on:

> So you want me to walk through the door, grab the handle, walk four paces and smile…"Can you do that again? Which hand are you using? Which door are you opening?" A plane would fly over. A car would drive past. "Can you do that again?"

These types of interruptions were typically characterised by my interviewees as a minor annoyance or inevitable inconvenience. Cutaways and retakes have also, for the most part, escaped theoretical attention, but perhaps have an underappreciated significance in normalising a degree of intervention, both for crew and contributors, establishing the concept that direction is required to simulate realism. However, as Paul Frosh claims: 'Every technique designed to bring viewers closer to the event…becomes conspicuous *as* a mediation, as a sign of our irreducible distance and separation from it' (2006, p. 268).

The next progression along the scale of constructed presence is when something contributors would regularly do in their everyday lives is re-enacted for the benefit of the cameras. It might be entirely routine for the person being filmed to take their dog for a walk, or cook spaghetti for dinner, for example, but the documentary-makers will ask them to repeat these tasks according to their own schedules to give them enough footage to work with in the edit. Bill Nichols claims that in the process of re-enactment, the indexical link to the original event is forfeited. ‘A shift in signification changes the name of the game’, he argues. ‘The re-enacted event introduces a fantasmatic element that an initial representation of the same event lacks. Put simply, history does not repeat itself, except in mediated transformations such as memory, representation, re-enactment, fantasy – categories that coil around each other in complex patterns’ (2008, p. 73).

My research suggests the attitude documentary-makers have towards this type of re-enactment varies. Although she drew the line at out-at-out reconstruction (‘completely immoral – I would never do that’), Claire Lewis told me that *Seven Up’s* (1964–present) director Michael Apted would often ask the contributors to repeat a regular activity for the purposes of filming. Even within such a prestigious production, constraints of budget and the availability of cast and crew mean that actuality often needs to be condensed into the shortest amount of time possible. On the other hand, Daisy Asquith said:

> I only want to film what you would be doing anyway, so therefore, I’m going to wait wait wait, for hours and hours, fit around you, and never ask you to be in a certain place at a certain time. I come to you, and I wait. Do it when you do it…Otherwise, you get people performing a banal version of their reality. You have to wait and try to still be there when something interesting comes up. It takes so much time.

Asquith told me she has often come under pressure from production companies to shortcut the waiting by asking contributors to re-enact. Her solution has been to take the fee for her time that is written into the budget, but invest extra hours unpaid. The rationale she gave me was as much about creative goals as ethical ones: ‘I just like it when I see things that are clearly filmed spontaneously. It looks totally different’. Jerry Rothwell expressed a similar preference for his documentaries, telling me: ‘If you’ve scripted it before you go out, you’re creating dead films’. There is a mismatch here between organisational efficiency and the pursuit of an observational aesthetic, the tensions between the two reflecting a conflict between competing professional values. If minor re-enactments normalise a degree of construction, then it isn’t a huge imaginative journey for contributors to be asked to perform scenes which have been suggested by the documentary-makers, rather than inspired by their real lives. On-screen, the constructed sequences my interviewees spoke about would probably appear inconsequential to viewers, but in some instances, were filmed under duress or at personal cost. Jo Lockwood told me one of the lowest points of documenting her gender transition was when she was asked to film a series of seemingly innocuous shots of walking around a garden centre:

> They tried to make it sound like they were very early on in the filming, but they were actually some of the last shots they took. It was two years later. They made me take my earrings out. They paid for me to have my nails taken off. They bought me this silly hat – this baseball hat – they had all my hair tied up under the hat, trying to pretend that it was two years ago…It was completely fake. They persuaded me to put my old self on camera at a point in my life when I hadn't been that old person for 18 months. It was quite an uncomfortable situation. I remember saying to [the crew], "I don't want to do this. I really don't want to do this."

In this example, re-staging an everyday event in a different temporality meant collapsing the psychic distance between Lockwood's former male identity and her current female identity – something which wasn't simply a matter of donning a different outfit, but reversing a hard-fought and sometimes painful transition, evoking understandable resistance and intense discomfort. It is both ironic and disappointing that this landmark documentary series, made with the explicit intention of educating and informing the public about trans rights, would not choose to honour them within their own production practices, demoting their importance if they conflicted with their editorial requirements.

In a technologically sophisticated era, we might presume the kind of out-and-out construction that was necessary in necessary in early documentaries would no longer be a feature of contemporary productions. However, many of the contributors I interviewed shared their experiences of being coaxed into filming staged sequences which were entirely concocted by the documentary-makers. One contributor told me: 'To be honest, most of it was constructed'. Another claimed: 'We were manipulated into doing something that was basically scripted'.

According to Emily Ingold, the majority of filming for *Shut Ins: Britain's Fattest People* (2014–2021) was set up for the cameras. Each episode contains similar heavily formatted sequences showing people clearing out cupboards full of unhealthy food and throwing them in the bin, gratuitous shots of eating and nudity, and weight loss surgery resulting in a radical physical transformation. The sequence, however, which caused Ingold the most distress was when she was asked to take part in a 5 km running event. She said: 'They sprung it on me literally three weeks prior. I hadn't done any training. My fitness wasn't great. I'd only been out of surgery for a couple of months…I wasn't ready'. Ingold reluctantly agreed to film the scene, but ultimately resented putting on a performance which didn't reflect her real life. Although she told me her physical and mental health benefitted enormously from having the surgery, the sequence designed to convey this to the audience was actually detrimental to her wellbeing: ‘They asked me multiple times, “Are you happy to do it?” Well, yeah, because…there isn’t an alternative…I couldn’t walk for three days afterwards. I was just in agony. It was awful’. The final scenes of the documentary were entirely fabricated, but the producers judged this artifice was necessary to make Ingold’s transformation believable to viewers. In these examples, where reconstruction tips into construction, contributors seem to bear a psychological cost, performing a version of self which lacks their own authority, being made complicit in their own misrepresentation.

The imperative to convince viewers of the truth by showing them something constructed was also in evidence in another example from my research. Kulvinder Lall is one of the UK’s top heart surgeons, who took part in Channel 5’s *Operation Live* (2018). This ground-breaking documentary promised to give viewers unprecedented access to operating theatres by broadcasting an operation live and in real time. However, much of the action needed to be re-imagined in order for the televised event to seem ‘real’. Under normal circumstances, Lall’s team would operate during daytime hours, but in order to broadcast graphic images, the programme had to be transmitted after the primetime watershed, and they had to schedule the surgery for 10 o’clock at night. Because the producers wanted to focus on a single protagonist, Lall had to conduct the operation single-handed, opening and closing his patient’s chest for the first time in years. ‘To be quite honest, 60% of the operation is done by my juniors’, he told me. ‘I just come in and stand opposite them’.

As well as having to narrate what he was doing for the benefit of the viewers, the typically relaxed atmosphere in the operating theatre was substantially altered. On an average day, the radio would be switched on, people would be coming in and out, taking phone calls, chatting casually to one another. Surgery is often depicted in the media as tense and dramatic, but Lall told me the reality is different: ‘It’s quite boring really. There’s no excitement. Just people getting on with their jobs’. In order to keep viewers watching, the producers wanted every part of the documentary to contain a dramatic event. Lall told me he was asked to manipulate the timings of the operation, making sure the most visually exciting stages – such as clamping the aorta, fitting the replacement valve, and removing the clamps – happened according to the script: ‘If they were on an ad-break and I was about to take the clamp off, they would say “Can you wait 30 seconds?”’

In Lall’s view, the reasons for any changes to the surgical team’s normal activities were technical rather than editorial, but from an analytical perspective, it is important to consider the impact as well as the intent. Perhaps one effect of this mediation is that a representation of surgery is created which conforms more closely to audience expectations than the actual truth. Mark Andrejevic claims the ‘appeal of the real’ speaks to a waning sense of reality symptomatic of the postmodern era, and a consequent longing for a taste of something authentic (2004, p. 18). Paddy Scannell describes how ‘liveness’ has historically been utilised by the TV industry to create an impression of immediacy and impetus which is often illusory (1991, pp. 183–184). In the case of *Operation Live* (2018), the innovation of filming in real time appears to lift a curtain, allowing us a glimpse into an intriguing space from which the public is normally excluded – yet while some inner mechanisms are revealed, others are substantially altered, or even concealed. It is important to recognise the positive impact such programmes can have, which Lall told me was something he noticed afterwards. In consultations, the knowledge-levels of his patients increased dramatically. The morale of his co-workers was boosted by the new appreciation their friends and families had gained of the highly-skilled jobs they perform. Although I was not convinced by the documentary's social media critics, who argued patient safety was put at risk, a greater public awareness of the production methods would enable a more open debate about the terms under which it is acceptable or desirable to allow the media to refashion such crucial public services to their own requirements.

Fixed-rig documentaries

The gap between representation and reality tends to be conceptualised as a primarily technical challenge. The presence of cameras and crews is inescapably invasive, and their frustrating inability to be everywhere at all times renders the process inherently selective and incomplete. This argument has echoes throughout documentary history, with long succession of technical advances such as sync sound, or handheld digital cameras, being proclaimed as the game-changing innovation with the potential to eradicate problematic absences and artificial presences (Ellis, 2011). The most recent technology to excite these claims is the fixed rig, heralded as 'television's holy grail' by documentary-makers who claimed it would offer unmediated access to real life (Littleboy, 2013, p. 134). A number of my interviewees took part in documentaries filmed using a fixed rig, including *Educating Yorkshire* (2013), *Educating the East End* (2014), *One Born Every Minute* (2010–2018), and *24 Hours in A&E* (2011–present). Their accounts offer an opportunity to challenge these claims and reflect upon the reasons why problems of presence and absence are more epistemological than technological, and better conceived as an intractable tension in documentary production.

Fixed-rig documentaries became popular in the 2010s, when the surveillance-style filming associated with reality TV and *Big Brother* (2000–present) was transposed to various documentary precincts – typically public institutions such as schools and hospitals. Instead of using a filming crew, fixed-rig documentaries are shot using dozens of robotic cameras which are embedded into the physical building then connected with several miles of cabling. The production team sets up a temporary on-site gallery – perhaps in a disused office, or a portacabin in the car park – where thousands of hours of footage can be monitored and recorded. Despite their shared heritage, fixed-rig documentary producers were keen to distance themselves from reality TV, strategically positioning their productions as traditional documentaries in the minds of viewers and participants alike (Littleboy, 2013). Whereas *Big Brother* (2000–present) made a feature of its innovative production methods, using cutaways of remote cameras panning and whirring as a visual motif, fixed-rig documentaries usually made no on-screen reference to the way they were shot (2013, p. 130). Although the techniques were new, the aspiration tapped into a longstanding ambition of documentary-makers, more traditionally associated with the direct cinema and cinéma vérité movements in the 1960s: to capture real life as it is lived. By ostensibly removing the problematic presence of camera crews and their obtrusive equipment, the rig appears to offer a tantalising opportunity to close the gap between real life and representation. By filming people without the visible trappings of documentary production – in some cases, without them even knowing they were being filmed – would the rig facilitate a way to go beyond performance, allowing viewers to see their true and authentic selves?

Headteachers Jenny Smith and Jonny Mitchell both agreed to allow their schools to be rigged for Channel 4's phenomenally successful *Educating…* (2013; 2014) series. The filming was the outcome of months of negotiations between the production company, broadcaster, staff, governors, local authorities, parents, and pupils. Having appeased the objectors, the production company embarked upon a programme of building works, fitting out classrooms, offices, corridors, and communal spaces with over 70 remote cameras and microphones, capable of recording thousands of hours of footage from multiple locations simultaneously. The headache-inducing complexity of the logistical set-up was designed so that the filming itself could be minimally invasive – a technical accomplishment of the documentary ideal of the 'fly on the wall'. Yet because of their pivotal roles in the project, both Smith and Mitchell told me their personal experiences of the filming period were far from business-as-usual. Trying to run a school while meeting the needs of a major production meant performing a role within a role, and inhabiting multiple personas at once. Smith told me she was consciously 'self-filtering' all the time. 'You don't ever become yourself completely', she said. 'You always know the cameras are there. You always know you're wearing a mic'.

In other examples, interactions between contributors and the crew were genuinely minimal. Sheona Beaumont agreed to be filmed giving birth to her second child for Channel 4's *One Born Every Minute* (2010–2018). Arriving at the hospital car park at 3 am, she saw two technicians who gave her a radio mic, then had no further contact with the production team until after she'd had her baby. Afterwards, she wasn't even certain that she'd been filmed. The intensity of giving birth meant Beaumont's awareness of the cameras was minimal: 'My level of self-consciousness…was low. I was preoccupied with other things going on: the immediacy of feeling and the immediacy of emotion'.

The use of remotely-operated cameras in documentary production creates the possibility that people can be filmed without their knowledge. When

Janet Morsy was rushed to St George's Hospital by ambulance after being stabbed, she had no idea her treatment was being recorded for *24 Hours in A&E* (2011–present). 'I wasn't acting up for the camera', she told me. 'I didn't know it was being filmed'. However, it is not the technology itself which facilitates naturalistic actuality, but the agreement between the producers and the hospital that consent could be sought retrospectively, after the moment of emergency has passed. In most cases, therefore, it isn't the rig itself which encourages disinhibited performances, so much as the nature of the circumstances in which the contributor is participating.

The minimal interaction between the crew and contributors transforms their relationships, positioning documentary-makers as voyeurs rather than collaborators. While the producers of fixed-rig documentaries have not concealed their production methods, their reluctance to draw attention to them within the documentary itself has stymied criticism about the ethics of rigging state institutions with cameras, and what could be inferred from these developments about a societal shift towards surveillance culture (Palmer, 2002). Closing the representation gap tends to be conceptualised as a positive aspiration, but there is a flip side to removing mediation if it equates to the jettisoning of an assumed right to personal privacy. The potential for exploitation and disinhibited behaviour is particularly problematic when it is the sick, injured, young, or vulnerable who are drawn into focus. The pertinent issue is therefore not so much how the rig transforms the technology of filming, but how it reshapes its dynamics.

Media contributors are often accused of acting up to the cameras, performing an exaggerated version of the self, but less attention is paid to the performance of institutions and how they respond to the pressures of being filmed. Several of my interviewees reported that filming had an impact before the crew had even set foot through the door. Jenny Smith told me:

> [The PFI company] who own the building did a spring clean. They put some plaques up, trying to get them on camera…A lot more people wanted to come in during the filming, in the hope they might get on TV.[6]

Most of us would want to tidy the house before a film crew arrived, but played out on an institutional scale, the prospect of filming raises largely unanswered questions about how public institutions manage their time and resources. I spoke to a midwife who took part in *One Born Every Minute* (2010–2018), who asked to remain anonymous. She told me the hospital where she used to work had been chronically understaffed for many years, but was suddenly flooded with so many new recruits that there weren't enough mugs or chairs to accommodate them in the staff room. One of her duties was to monitor dashboard statistics, which compare how the department was operating against national averages on a number of key procedures such as C-sections and third-degree tears. Usually, they were amber or red, but suddenly they had all turned green. *One Born Every Minute* (2010–2018) makes no claim to expose or investigate the human cost of systematic underinvestment in the NHS – but by presenting best practice as though it were the norm, there is a danger they are giving a false impression of the realities. Scholar-filmmaker Helen Littleboy argues the level of mutual dependency between such productions and public institutions encourages 'sanitised accounts' of public services, and 'delivers rosy pictures from the frontline' (2013, pp. 141–142). Even more worryingly, the midwife I spoke to reported feeling pressurised to give the best rooms (the ones which had been rigged with cameras) to the patients who were being filmed and allocate them the staff members who had given their consent to appear on camera. Sometimes, this meant the most experienced midwives were not assigned to women with higher risk pregnancies, who needed them the most. On one occasion, a pair of premature twins, who might normally have been transferred to a different hospital for specialist care, were instead treated within the department where they could continue to be filmed. Medical decisions were influenced, not because of any direct input from the producers, but merely in response to their presence.

The inability of the rig to move with a story, or to venture beyond the limits of the precinct where it's fixed, brings us to another contradiction about the technology. The rig set-up is essentially static. When the action inevitably spills beyond its physical boundaries, its capacity to follow the actual events stops, creating insurmountable problems of presence and absence. The account of Janet Morsy's attack in *24 Hours in A&E* (2011–present), for example, was highly partial. Four women were injured, but the most seriously wounded – a woman with learning disabilities who was stabbed 13 times – was taken by helicopter to a different hospital, and was barely mentioned in the documentary. Before the ambulance arrived, an onlooker saved Morsy's life by giving her first aid. As there was no footage, her rescuer didn't feature in the story. After leaving A&E, there is no record of Morsy's stay in intensive care, or later, on the recovery ward, nor of the court case, where she mustered the courage to look her attacker in the eye as he was sentenced to 20 years in prison. So many aspects of the story which are meaningful to Morsy barely featured in the televised account, because the content is fundamentally shaped by the constricts of the technology.

But crucially, these limitations are not purely geographical or temporal. Even within the scope of the rig's coverage, many events which take place cannot be shown, and often for good reasons. Jenny Smith told me there were continually incidences at the school where the version of the story presented to the cameras diverged from what was actually happening, because they involved children who were in witness protection programmes, who were subject to violence and abuse at home, who were implicated in criminal activity, or going through the court systems. After one episode broadcast, Smith was criticised on social media and in the press for her 'soft' handling of a boy who was misbehaving. 'Normally, you'd just exclude him, but

I couldn't exclude him because there was nowhere safe for him to go', she told me. 'The school was the only stability the kid had at that time…[The viewers] can't see the full picture of what was going on'.

These omissions in the story had to be papered over with re-stagings of key moments, contrived conversations, and constructed presences which were sometimes bolted together in ways which were highly misleading, creating an inaccurate impression of what actually happened. There is a paradox at play, where the reach of the rig is so pervasive, but within such a confined space, and editorially-speaking, so beholden to the institutions it is embedded within. Ultimately, despite its popularity, it is a technology which shares many of the same inevitable flaws as the representational tools which precede it, along with a few new ones of its own. The example of the rig is a reminder of the necessary distance between reality and representation, which can be reduced by technological advances, but never resolved.

Representational limits and narrative norms

While the actual events of real life are often random, contradictory, confusing, and illogical, documentaries follow a story structure and adhere to the norms of narrative. There is a long tradition of scholarship devoted to dissecting the internal structure or schema of stories. Over 2,000 years ago, Aristotle wrote that every story, at its basic level, must have a beginning, middle, and end. In the 1940s, Joseph Campbell wrote about the 'monomyth', recurring in a myriad of different iterations through diverse cultures and times, where the 'hero with a thousand faces' must venture into the world, overcome obstacles, and return to teach what he has learned (1949, p. 29). John Ellis describes narrative as a 'structuring of events towards a conclusion' (2011, p. 70). There is, therefore, a fundamental clash between the ever-evolving nature of lived experience and the expository, consequential structure of the stories we use to represent it.

For documentary-makers, this clash is not just a theoretical construct, but a practical challenge. They must approach every situation they shoot with an eye to how it can be ordered, explained, and mapped onto a narrative framework. Jerry Rothwell told me: 'You're storifying out of this set of amorphous experiences…You're trying to isolate a shape out of a particular moment in time…You're constantly projecting…You've got a shape that you're shooting towards'.

Ellis (2011) claims a separation must occur in order for documentary-makers to be able to develop this sense of a coherent narrative, while their subjects remain immersed in the ongoing events. Contributors can experience a loss of control as their story slips away from them. During the making of *Ugly Me* (2018), Liane Piper told me she increasingly felt the producers were looking for some kind of explanation – or an 'inciting incident' to use the terminology of storytelling – which they could offer viewers to explain what had triggered her body dysmorphia. 'Everybody wants to know the root cause, and genuinely, there might not be a root cause', she told me. 'The more it was "Let's find out what it could be", the more I found it uncomfortable', Piper described how the filming process started to feel like a 'whodunnit', where the documentary-makers would speculate about her past, initiating storylines involving her family and childhood with the hope of prompting some kind of a dramatic revelation. Newly diagnosed with BDD, and only just beginning to grapple with the dynamics of her disorder, this kind of insight was impossible for her to provide. 'I feel like – you're pushing me to reveal something that potentially isn't there'.

Sociologist Arthur Frank claims that when a person's experiences are relayed to use 'without sequence or discernible causality', the story becomes hard for the listener to hear, because chaos is inherently threatening to notions of consequence, justice, and stability (1995, pp. 97–98). To turn chaos into a story requires a reflexive grasp of events, which means it can only be told at a stage of remove. Vicki Beckett took part in *Child of Mine* (2018) during a tumultuous period of her life, following the death of her unborn daughter, Ruby. Through a series of visual sequences – such as the birth itself, Ruby's funeral, and grief counselling sessions – a storyline was created for viewers with a sense of narrative progression, but Beckett told me these moments did not necessarily have the same meanings for her as for the audience. Speaking about the birth, she told me:

> That was a hard day, but it was by no means the hardest…As much as it was the worst of times, it was the best of times. I loved meeting [Ruby]. I loved holding her. I loved being in that room with her – so a lot of those feelings I remember that day are really strong feelings of love.

The documentary appeared to offer a portrait of grief in its most raw and visceral form, but Beckett told me her most profound grieving took place in other, more solitary moments, away from the cameras: 'There were so many times when the camera wasn't there that were way more awful…The bits in between, when you're on your own with your thoughts…You don't want to get out of bed, and you cannot stop crying'. Beckett's deepest grief was overwhelming, embodied, and intense, but it was not a visual spectacle, nor something which could be fully captured within a documentary. 'The reality is, when you're sobbing in your bed and struggling to do anything, and you're in a vacant state, you'd never be able to text the producer and say "Come and film me"', she told me. 'I don't know how you'd capture that… It's all happening inside…You never really get a full idea of time either, of how long those feelings last…You never feel the true weight of it'.

Anita Biressi describes how documentary-makers utilise discourses of truth-telling, revelation, and self-exposure in their attempts to render 'private traumas knowable via public narratives' (2004, p.405). She claims:

> In their drive to represent and explore personal trauma and sometimes shocking psychological damage, they adopt modes of interrogation and

> an aesthetics of representation that attempt to span the divide between presence and absence, history and memory, the fact of the trauma and its lack of fixed origins.
>
> (2004, p. 401)

Documentary attempts to construct a 'topography of unrepresentable elements', such as memory, trauma, and fear, giving an approximation of intimacy, but it is only able to communicate in a limited register, and so a deceptive sense of knowing is created for the audience: a temporary empathy (2004, p.405). Beckett recognised this effect herself, telling me: 'I think it gives you a short-term false feeling of "Oh my God", because you're there while you're watching it, but you're not living it. You wake up the next day and that emotion's gone'.

The pressure to conform to a narrative arc, however, is often most apparent and pronounced when it comes to endings. Beckett told me her on-screen ending was very different to her lived experience. In the documentary, Beckett and her partner Bruce are shown scattering Ruby's ashes, expressing optimism about the future, and the possibility they might one day have another child – and since our interview, Beckett has indeed given birth to another daughter, Lily, and a son, Henry – but as she explained, the sense of consolation depicted in the film wasn't something she felt in real life:

> Having another baby…it doesn't replace your lost child…Don't get me wrong, I get on with my life, I do normal things, I've definitely come through the worst of it. But…you don't ever get over your child dying. You're never going to be one day, like "I've made my peace with that now." You're never going to be happy with the outcome…I don't think there ever is a resolution. It's just something you learn to carry a bit better.

Beckett's ultimate goal in taking part in the documentary was to raise awareness about stillbirth, and so she supported the producers' decision to portray her ending in the way they did, telling me:

> If you're invested in the characters in that documentary, you want to know that people are OK at the end of it. You want to know that, because it's too horrible to think that people are still suffering…People want a closing. They want an ending – but there isn't really one… I don't think there's an end to grief.

While Beckett was able to rationalise and endorse the way her story was told, for others, the false sense of closure felt jarring and contrived. When Liane Piper's therapy sessions were coming to an end, the production was scheduled to finish, but her problems had not disappeared. Nevertheless, the story had to have a conclusion. 'I had to film a sort of "ending"', she told me. 'I didn't want to, but they said we should end it on a high…I wasn't better…but they said it's good for people to see there's a light at the end of the tunnel'.

My research suggests that having their life experiences distorted to conform with the shape of a story can be problematic for contributors, leaving them with a discomforting sense of complicity in creating something dishonest or misleading. However, the significance of narrative conventions goes beyond the personal, becoming historical, collective, and normative. Holocaust scholar Lawrence Langer studied hundreds of oral histories and literary representations before arriving at the conclusion that it was an event which defies storytelling. Langer observed a trend for interviewers to push survivors towards tales of heroism, resilience, and resistance - 'groping for ways to change them into limited versions of success. The result is a persisting myth about the triumph of the spirit that colour the disaster with a rosy tinge and helps us to manage the unimaginable without having to look at its naked and ugly face (1996, p .3).'

When Peter A. Gordon directed *Children of the Holocaust* (1995) for ITV, he made a difficult editorial decision to cut an interview with one of the Romanian survivors he interviewed. Before being shipped off to a concentration camp, she was imprisoned on a farm with her family, where they were forced to live in a pigsty. She told Gordon that a Nazi soldier shot her mother in the head, then ordered her to clean the remnants of her brains from his boots. Gordon said: 'This woman's testimony was so terrible – and she had a look about her as well. She was quite blank, almost. I thought the audience would say, "This is too much" and turn it off'.

Gordon and I discussed his decision in more depth, and how it was informed by his understanding of ITV's audience – 'not an academic audience, not a Jewish audience, but a very broad audience' – and his desire to 'get through to as many people as possible'. The rationale for the documentary's commissions was a piece of research he came across which found that 40% of children growing up in the 90s knew nothing about the Holocaust. The imperative to reach a large audience was not only commercially driven but had an ethical dimension as well. An aspect which is underexplored in Langer's account of narrative preference is the systematic structural forces underpinning these individual creative decisions – the mediating influence of the platforms themselves, and the motivations of those who make and commissions cultural products. Ultimately, these factors are of competing importance to historical veracity. Daisy Asquith shared a similar story about her documentary, *After the Holocaust* (2012). The commissioning editor told her: 'Make it cheerful otherwise people will switch off'. The task of making genocide seem 'cheerful' might sound like a tall order, but in fact, Langer claims few accounts of the Holocaust have been able to resist this 'culture of consolation' (1996, p. 9). In rendering events palatable for a mass audience, something important is lost. However, Langer argues approaching such horrors with open eyes is both necessary and dangerous. Failing to respond to 'the challenge of imagining mass murder without flinching' leads to a diminished sense of our collective selves, yet to not do so is 'to build a society on the fragile foundations of naïve idealism and self-delusion' (1996, pp. 4–5).

If the gulf between experience and representation means we fail to see ourselves clear-sightedly, for the individuals involved, their consequent incomprehensibility to others can be deeply isolating. As a survivor of Auschwitz, Lydia Tischler told me about the difficulties she faced in her earlier life of relating her experiences in a way which others could accept. She developed a reliance on distancing tactics such as gallows humour and sarcasm, her true feelings being filtered through multiple levels of individual and cultural denial:

> So much of what happened was beyond imagination. You couldn't actually allow yourself to believe that it could've happened…One denies the evidence of one's own eyes…How does one grasp that one human being can behave to another human being in this way?

Once again, it is the story's ending which marks the point of greatest tension, where the distorting influence of narrative imperatives are most identifiable and pronounced. While popular culture seeks consolation in tales of individual heroism and limited success, Tischler told me that for survivors, there simply was no ending: 'It lives with some people until they die, and in some cases, they even transmit it to the next generation'. This kind of enduring trauma, without resolution or learning, refuses to be bent into the arc of a story, and therefore lies beyond the limits of conventional representation. As Langer concludes: 'If there is a history of remembering, there is also a politics of forgetting' (1996, p. 14).

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have examined the patterns of presence and absence which are the hallmarks of media representation. My research suggests there are a multitude of potential causes for divergence between events and their depiction – but crucially, any individual subjective or creative preferences are underpinned by a political-economic context, a commercial orientation, and culturally-embedded norms, which manage narrative conventions and are strengthened with each retelling. Any assumed responsibility the media has to represent everyday life authentically, or to circulate accurate testimony about the past, is fundamentally compromised by its overriding obligation to create stories which are deemed acceptable to a mass audience. These pressures conspire to produce 'representations that are more than imperfect and less than deceptive, representations that can't quite tame the world' (Comolli, 1999, p. 42).

Repeats and re-stagings are normalised through the established techniques of documentary production, but even the kind of out-and-out re-enactment which was typical of the early twentieth century is not so far removed from the experiences of contemporary contributors. On an individual level, the consequences of the media's failure to represent ordinary people with sufficient depth or accuracy can be a sense of mute isolation and disconnection, when experiences which are profoundly felt are incommunicable to others. On a broader level, there is a warping of our collective memory, a reduction in our capacity to understand, and a magnification of our willingness to seek consolation in ignorance and denial. Frosh argues the unbridgeable 'chasm between experience and discourse' is an epistemological disjunction rather than a communicative one, and my findings add weight to this claim' (2006, p.276). An illusion of verisimilitude is created when absence is concealed with simulated presence, but in effecting this appearance of seamless realism, a distance is created from the objects being represented. Inevitable presences and absences mean that documentaries can only allude to real life rather than capture its totality: 'The world would be glimpsed in those representations that fail in their effects and miss their object. The real as error, approximation, groping, transition' (Comolli, 1999, p. 42).

Notes

1. Lucy Wilson is a pseudonym, used at the interviewee's request.
2. Williams, A. 2020. The BBC said they cared about sex workers, so why was I mistreated on Louis Theroux's set? *Gal Dem.*
3. Joseph, A. 2017. Mothers accuse Channel 4's 'morally repugnant' stillbirth documentary of 'preying on people's grief' by covertly filming couples in hospital at moment they are told their babies have died *The Daily Mail*. 29/11/2017.
4. Corner, N. 2018. Emotional viewers heap praise on 'heartbreaking' stillbirth documentary Child of Mine for its 'incredibly sensitive' handling of the stories of couples who tragically lost babies *The Daily Mail.*
5. Jackson, J. 2004. Edge of the city is bleak but important television. *The Times*. 21/08/2004.
6. PFI or private finance initiative was a UK government procurement policy which used private investment to fund public sector infrastructure, such as schools.

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8 The final cut

The end of filming marks an important phase in the production cycle, when the interests and ambitions of documentary-makers and their subjects begin to diverge. Agnieszka Piotrowska describes this stage as a slow and inevitable process of 'falling out of love' (2013a, p. 305). The foundation of intimacy and trust – which, up until now, has underpinned the creative relationship – can become an obstacle to developing the clear-headed objectivity required to make the final cut. During the editing process, documentary-makers must negotiate other – often conflicting – sets of imperatives, balancing various responsibilities to their employers, broadcasters, and audiences. Their perspectives and priorities start to shift as they begin to consider 'the film as material rather than an ongoing experience' (Ellis, 2011, p. 67).

At the same time, another transition takes place. As the documentary is created, its subjects are transformed into representational objects, 'viewable from the outside by the individuals themselves...interpreted and appropriated by others…annihilated and preserved at the same time' (Palmer, 2017, pp. 128; 130). This chapter is about what happens when contributors get the chance to watch the final cut of their documentaries, exploring how they feel about their mediated selves, and the ways they have been depicted and consumed by the audience.

Watching the final cut of a documentary is sometimes characterised as the televisual equivalent of the hangover of the morning after, where poor decisions meet their consequences, and contributors learn their 'hard lesson' (Malcolm, 1990, p. 3). But what complicity do they share in the representations that are made of them? How do they feel about the ways they are edited and presented to the public? And is being a media participant ultimately validating, democratic, and empowering – or merely painful and humiliating?

The mediated self

In *Camera Lucida* (1981), Roland Barthes writes about the transformation from subject into object, sharing the story of what has become known as the 'Winter Garden' photograph of his mother. While searching through boxes

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of old photos after her death, Barthes found that most were only 'partially true, and therefore totally false' (1981, p. 66). A single picture of her – as a five-year old girl, standing in a conservatory alongside her brother – was the only one which accorded with his memory, containing an essence of her ineffable realness, a quality he claims is deceptively elusive in recorded imagery. For Barthes, photography is associated not only with nostalgia and memory but also, more unsettlingly, with a loss of control, a sense of imposture, and a foreshadowing of mortality. In the transformation from living subject to inanimate object, the person in the image experiences a 'micro-version of death… comparable to certain nightmares' (1981, pp. 14; 13).

Susan Sontag develops Barthes' argument, claiming: 'To photograph people is to violate them, by seeing them as they never see themselves, by having knowledge of them they can never have; it turns people into objects that can be symbolically possessed' (2001, p. 14). There is something extractive about these acts of representation, and the possibility of harm is implicit. 'To photograph someone is a sublimated murder', she goes on to say, 'a soft murder, appropriate to a sad, frightened time' (p. 17). Although Sontag differentiates between photographs and moving images – one isolating 'a neat slice of time' while the other presents 'a flow' (2001, p. 17) – her argument positions contributors as the recipients of this distinctive form of representational violence, but how do they respond to being objectified and consumed in this way, and how is their resistance or complicity manifested to this process, which promises so much yet poses so much risk?

Under normal circumstances, contributors only get the chance to watch their documentaries at the same time as the rest of the audience, when it is broadcast. In this first viewing, they often find the experience of seeing themselves on screen deeply unsettling – an unexpected, and perhaps disproportionately adverse reaction, which Piotrowska (2013a) argues is suggestive of more complex underlying psychological processes. For many of the people I interviewed, their instinctive first reaction was to focus negatively on their physical appearance. The first time she saw herself on TV, Heather Ward told me she was thinking: 'Oh my God, is my chin that big?...Is my nose that big? I wish I'd done my hair that morning, my roots are showing'. Jenna Presley had a similar reaction: 'Oh no, I look fat…I wish I'd worn some makeup! Vanity takes over first. The first time I watched it, I was just thinking *oh God, look at me'*. Even Julian Dismore, who had worked behind the scenes in TV for many years before appearing on the other side of the camera, was surprised by what he saw. 'I always imagine myself in my mind's eye at 21 years old, with a full head of hair, looking bushy-tailed and full of life', he told me. 'I just find it hard not to stare at my bald head and terribly aged appearance. It's hypnotic, to be honest'.

These comments might seem throwaway, but are worthy of greater attention. Although usually spoken in jest, it was striking how frequently the people I interviewed expressed similar sentiments – people who, after all, see themselves in the mirror every day, and are entirely familiar with the way they look. Most of us are photographed, recorded, and videoed relentlessly in our daily lives, and yet the palpable sense of shock that many participants experience upon being confronted with their mediated selves highlights something distinctive about being represented in a documentary. Becoming objectified – in its most literal sense – involves a degree of emotional detachment from the representational object. Changes to Jo Lockwood's gender identity were documented over the course of several years, but encapsulated visually in a single sequence filmed in a TV studio and used in the programme titles. She told me:

> That took…half a day, standing on this rotating podium in different poses. They were taking head shots, waist shots, feet shots, zoom in zoom out, rotating 35 degrees – taking all these shots and they'd spin me around. We had an outfit change. Back out, do it again. They were trying to capture how I'd changed. They had a make-up artist, a hair stylist, a dresser there to deal with the clothing…I felt objectified…I felt like a piece of meat.

In feminist accounts, objectification is often associated with a kind of passivity that is imposed from the outside; a result of being viewed through an external (often male) gaze (Mulvey, 1975). Becoming an object entails a fixity which signifies a loss of possibility and control. In *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2009), Judith Butler describes the inevitable inadequacy of all attempts at representation – including self-representation. She writes: 'The account of myself that I give in discourse never fully expresses or carries this living self. My words are taken away as I give them' (2009, p. 36). There is a necessary dispossession of narrative authority, where the 'I' gives way to something more provisional, shared, and contested. In committing to a version of oneself, ambivalence, contradiction, and complexity are disowned. For some contributors, this is experienced as a sense of unreality, or a rupture. A double has been created, who may look the same, but feels fundamentally different. A psychic distance between the self and the representation opens up. My research suggests that a common response to the creation of this double is to dissociate. Jenna Presley described her reaction to watching herself on the screen: 'It was my face but everything else was unrelated to me – as if I was an actress rather than it being a documentary'. Emily Ingold said: 'I don't even refer to it as me. I always say "her" when I talk about it'. For Liane Piper, the dissociation between herself and her screen-self was partial, and therefore even more confusing. 'It didn't feel like I was watching me', she told me. 'The emotions? 100%. But some of the things I was watching and some of the things I was saying, I was thinking, that's not me!'

Both Ruth Palmer (2017) and Agnieszka Piotrowska (2013a) have analysed this sense of dislocation by drawing upon Freud's essay *Das Unheimliche* (1990 [1919]) – usually translated from German into English as 'the uncanny'. The uncanny describes a feeling when something familiar becomes strange, and therefore threatening – a feeling that contributors can encounter when they see themselves in the place which is usually occupied by the Other (Palmer, 2017, p. 135). Piotrowska links the 'horror' contributors feel at the creation of this 'doppelganger' with the re-emergence of repressed desires, and a loss of personal autonomy:

> The realisation that "the double" created by the film is neither a "true" representation of the contributor as imagined by that person, nor is it in any way controlled and controllable by him or her, can feel temporarily unbearable. "The double" created by the filmmaker and the broadcaster, like a Frankenstein's monster, has a life of its own, independent from the film's contributor's actual fluctuating ideas of who he or she might be.
>
> (2013a, p.304)

While these studies examine the individual psychology of screen representation, there is also something systemic and routinised about the dissociation between contributors and their representations, which has so far been underexplored. I wondered, first of all, how documentary-makers account for the discomfort their participants experience upon watching their films? Most accepted the phenomenon, but claimed that what the camera revealed was beyond their control. 'Not my fault', one director told me. 'That's who they are'. In Stella Bruzzi's book about *Seven Up* (1964–present), producer Claire Lewis is quoted as saying: 'The problem we have is when the camera perceives people maybe accurately, but doesn't match people's perceptions of themselves' (2007, p. 14). There is an implicit suggestion here that the camera has a kind of epistemological privilege and is able to access a deeper level of insight than the people who operate it. The filmmaker and anthropologist Jean Rouch claims the camera is a provocation which reveals the truest self (Barnouw, 1983, p. 253). However, this rhetorical transfer of agency from the filmmaker to their tool effaces the unequal resources, the asymmetries of power, and the entire institutional framework underpinning the reauthored identity. The presumed objectivity of the representation makes it all the more convincing for audiences. The evidential quality of the image, coupled with the reach and reputation of the broadcasting platform, lends the representation an authority which is hard to dispute. Ruth Palmer found the plausibility of her news subjects' representations appeared so undeniable, it sometimes led them to doubt themselves: 'In extreme cases, interviewees felt like their representation in the news actually had more credibility than *they* did, which was uncanny indeed' (2017, p. 145).

As Palmer suggests, documentary representations are not only convincing to audiences but also to the people who take part in them, potentially destabilising their internal perceptions of self. Liane Piper told me that she watched her documentary expecting she would, in some way, be revealed to herself.

'How do I *actually* look? How do I come across?' she wondered. 'I watched it with my hands in front of my face. I had to fast forward some parts of it'. The anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1972) claimed that social performance is directed inwardly as much as outwardly – through performance, we tell a story *about* ourselves *to* ourselves. The discomfort of confronting oneself on screen, therefore, is not so much a clash between the real and the representation, but a misalignment between socially constructed selves, where the replica is invested with the power to supplant the original.

The edited documentary

While contributors are active participants in the filming phase, they are not usually privy to the decisions-making process which guides the edit. Any surprises will generally come, not from the actual material that has been shot, but from how it has been edited together. One aspect of the edited documentary which is immediately striking to contributors is its distinctive temporality – its relationship with time and place. Many of my interviewees commented upon the dramatic condensing of time, with action which took place over hours, days, or years collapsed into mere minutes. Paul Dilley's near-death experience looms much larger in his consciousness than the truncated account given in *Emergency Helicopter Medics* (2019). 'It felt short', he told me. 'The fight to keep me alive was much longer than that'. Sheona Beaumont had a similar reaction when she recently rewatched her episode of *One Born Every Minute* (2010–2018). 'It doesn't have the same resonance I carry in my memory', she told me. 'Everything about my memory and experience of it is broader than that'. It isn't simply that time is shrunk, but also that its weighting is rebalanced. John Corner (2012) uses the term 'durational time' to describe the way that some shots are expanded and held on the screen, while others are contracted.

> The kind of "seeing" we are offered by documentary, the way in which the world is rendered for our gaze, our understanding and our feeling, turns extensively on the amount of time allocated to the various elements of the portrayal.
>
> (p. 21)

Watching the edited film offers contributors a way of reconstructing their past, unearthing moments which might've been entirely forgotten or unobserved at the time, centring certain actions while simultaneously displacing others. Beaumont explained how her son's birth was reorganised in a way which emphasised the geographical locations which had been rigged with cameras: 'It's not just physically that they missed bits of that twelve hours, but there was more of the event that wasn't about the hospital'. For Beaumont, memories of the birth included summoning her husband and arranging childcare for her daughter, several hours of labouring at home, and a journey to the hospital, all of which took place beyond the scope of the static cameras – but even within the rigged delivery room, significant events were effaced from the narrative.

As an academic herself, Beaumont was familiar with the scholarly debates surrounding the politics of televised childbirth, sending me a copy of an article by Sara De Benedictis et al. (2019) before our meeting. De Benedictis's research found that TV portrayals tend to focus on medicalised birth, with clinical interventions routinised, and decisions shown to be taken by medical staff rather than mothers. In light of this knowledge, Beaumont told the documentary-makers she wanted her labour to be televised 'warts and all'. She was therefore disappointed to see that a significant moment was edited out of the final cut, when she insisted the midwife give her an episiotomy: 'I thought, well hang on, in my mind, that's a big wart that they didn't show… In my head, that's a politicised thing'.[1]

Beaumont and I discussed the apparent editorial inconsistency in the fact that graphic footage of injuries and body parts will be shown in documentaries such as *24 Hours in A&E* (2011–present) and *Embarrassing Bodies* (2007–present), not to mention *Naked Attraction* (2016–present) – which features full-frontal nudity – yet in representations of childbirth, a squeamishness persists. Removed from their usual representational context of sex and violence, depictions of the female body are markedly less acceptable. 'Maybe there's a sense in which childbirth has a different filter', Beaumont said. 'Is that a cultural shaping of the way we represent birth to ourselves? Probably. Probably there is a bit of that'.

For contributors, watching their documentary is like entering a time machine where they meet an earlier version of themselves. Viewing the film isn't simply a retrieval of images and events, but will always be understood within the context of the specific moment from which it is viewed. Corner calls this alignment of time on screen with the time of watching 'phenomenological time' (2012, p. 2). To share a temporal co-presence with their past selves can have ambivalent meanings for participants. A central storyline of *Ugly Me* (2018) concerned the relationship between Liane Piper and her boyfriend Mitch, who broke up acrimoniously shortly after filming finished. 'It has framed a moment in time that's going to be there forever', she told me. 'I don't want it to be there forever with me and him, but that's something I can't change'.

Editing techniques such as intercutting, the use of interstitial music, and commentary can have a huge impact upon the way footage is received and interpreted. John Ellis (2011) describes editing as a process of attributing meaning to events using hindsight: a method of developing a sequential, consequential structure from disconnected moments to give them narrative force, 'a structuring of events towards a conclusion' (p. 69). In this way, 'editing creates a frame of meaning around the material' (p. 71). The birth of Sheona Beaumont's son – with her cast in the role of the Vicar's wife – was intercut with the story of a teenage mum, riffing on themes of morality and respectability. The positive account Lucy Wilson[2] gave of her job as a sex worker was contradicted by the minor-key music playing in the background as she spoke. 'I'm gassed because I'm going home with £200 in my pocket', she told me. 'I say I had a great time, and then the sad music and the darkness comes…It's like, she needs help. She can't see the truth'. But perhaps the most striking example I came across of the power of the editing process to recontextualise actual events was the CBBC programme which Julian Dismore participated in, *Danny the Bravest Boy in the World* (2020). The documentary about his 13-year-old disabled son reflected luminously on the care he receives from a dedicated team of nurses, doctors, and therapists, but withheld details of the errors made during an operation which led to him being paralysed in the first place. Dismore told me:

> It could've easily gone into a *Dispatches* or a *Panorama*, or a hard-hitting documentary about poor medical care within the NHS…The care Danny received at numerous points was atrocious…and that's one of the reasons – well it is *the* reason – why we are where we are today. But none of that was appropriate for children's TV.

The expectations of channel and audience place limits upon a documentary's capacity to tell the full story. In this example, editing techniques in combination with the positioning of the programme on a particular platform, the branding, and title were able to turn a tragedy into a heart-warming tale. Yet Dismore maintains the documentary is still 'real'. 'We told part of the story', he told me. 'Those are all realities'.

A caveat to add is that editing is neither inevitably nor simplistically reductive. On occasions, the final cut can become more expansive than the raw material it is constructed from, making connections and drawing together ideas. After giving birth, Sheona Beaumont asked the hospital chaplain to give a blessing and recite a favourite bible reading – Psalm 62 Verse 11 – which had taken on an important meaning for her during pregnancy, becoming 'like a mantra' which she drew resilience from. When she watched the finished documentary, Beaumont was astonished to see what the producers had done with the scene, using the chaplain's words over images which brought together all of the different protagonists from the programme, commemorating the miraculous experiences they had been through in bringing new life to the world. 'Having someone…speak the words that I had been holding onto [was] a way of capturing the acceptance that I feel as a Christian, and a universal way of declaring that for others too', she told me. 'For me, watching that bit evokes and holds the whole thing…It has that unifying quality'.

Mediated representation has the potential to transcend the individual and build connections with others. To be seen and heard is a powerful, life-affirming experience – and therefore, it is understandable that one of the most damaging outcomes is when contributors make the decision to participate, only to be edited out. Holocaust survivor Lydia Tischler invested a substantial amount of her time in filming BBC2's BAFTA-winning documentary *The Last Survivors* (2019). Several sequences were shot, including Tischler giving a seminar at the British Psychotherapy Foundation (where despite being in her 90s, she continues to teach every week), travelling up to Leeds to speak at her granddaughter's school, and an extended interview at a studio in East London. However, when she first watched the final cut, she found most of the material had been edited out, and rather than telling her own story, clips from her interview were used to make general points about the impact of the Holocaust. 'I must say my first reaction when I saw the preview was one of anger, because there was so little of me', she said. 'But then I realised what they actually did was they used me as a reflective commentator on people's stories…Having got over the initial [laughs] narcissistic wound! Why so little of me, and all these other people! I realised it plays quite an important role in the film'.

In his account of the making of the landmark 1970s documentary series *An American Family* (1973), producer Craig Gilbert acknowledges how hurtful contributors can find being instrumentalised in this way, to serve the broader purposes of the production. 'Human beings do not like being treated like guinea pigs', he says.

> If you tell the subjects of a documentary their behaviour and lives are being used to make a larger statement about human behaviour and human lives in general, they are more than likely to be highly insulted… The bottom line, as they say in television, is that we *are using human beings* to make a point.
>
> (1982, p. 44)

Martha Nussbaum claims that instrumentality is a core feature of objectification, defining it as 'the treatment of a person as a tool for the objectifier's purposes' (1995, p. 257). The context, however, is crucial in determining whether the act of objectification is benign or damaging, as is the recognition of a person's autonomy. We all routinely use one another as a means to achieve our own goals, but instrumentalisation becomes problematic when it involves treating people as a means to an end rather than an end in themselves.

Georgina Tyson agreed to take part in *Louis Theroux: Selling Sex* (2020), alongside her friend Lucy Wilson, because she wanted to speak out about sex workers' rights. Initially, the producers professed a shared concern with this topic, but Tyson felt her attempts to discuss the legalities and politics of sex work were repeatedly ignored. As the shoot went on, she found herself sidelined, seated on the periphery of scenes so she could be cropped out of the frame. When the two women voiced their concerns, the documentary-makers assured them they were both valued and important contributors.

With hindsight, however, Tyson feels they decided not to be upfront about their intention to drop her, because they didn't want to risk losing access to her friend. After the shoot wrapped, their attitude towards her changed. Wilson was invited to a preview, but Tyson was told she could not attend because it was only for contributors. They asked her to sign a contributor's release form, then disputed she had this status. When she pushed back, they agreed to let her watch the documentary, but she found her role had largely been cut.

> They kept saying, "Do you want to be in it more?" I was like, "No! I want you to take me out. If you're going to "out" me as a sex worker but I'm not offering anything valuable to the conversation, then you should take me out."

The documentary shows artwork that Tyson and Wilson co-produced, but attributes the authorship solely to Wilson. The filming takes place in Tyson's home, with her social circle, but she is largely missing, excised from her own life. In an open letter of complaint to the BBC, she writes: 'At the end of it all I felt silenced, and I am questioning my worth and how my "lack of charisma", accent, looks and sex work are always affecting how people want to platform my voice'.

Broadcasters and production companies are under no obligation to broadcast the material they have shot, but the experience of participating only to be dropped can be devastating for contributors. While duty of care tends to be focussed on major participants who are prominently featured in the final cut, these findings indicate their responsibilities should extend much further.

The broadcast documentary

Having discussed a range of individual responses to watching the mediated self and the final cut, I now want to consider the audience, the process of transmission, and the afterlife of the documentary. One of the distinctive features of the participation experience is the very public nature of how contributors are represented, before audiences of hundreds of thousands or even millions. In this section, I examine how marketing and promotion figured in my discussions with contributors, and how their perceptions shifted as their documentaries broadcast and found their place within a wider mediated culture.

One of the first indicators of how a documentary will be presented to an audience is the title. Broadcasters are frequently criticised for giving their programmes salacious or offensive titles to attract viewers, with notable examples including *The Undateables* (2012–2020), *F*** Off I'm Fat* (2006), and *Me and My Man Breasts* (2007).[3] Sometimes, the contributors I interviewed were told about their programme's sensational title upfront, and this information shaped their expectations about what they were getting themselves into. Jeff White is an anti-abortion activist in California who agreed to host BBC presenter Stacey Dooley at his summer camp for teenagers. ‘We did know the title was *Brainwashing Stacey* (2016)’, he told me, ‘Which is, you know, kind of tipping the hand a little [laughs]! I was shocked they gave it that title. So we knew going in…this was not going to be a puff piece for us’.

Unlike White, however, many contributors are not told about their programme’s title until shortly before transmission. Whether this information is genuinely undecided during the production phase or deliberately withheld from them is hard to ascertain, but the disincentivising effect on potential contributors means there is reason to be sceptical. Emily Ingold told me:

> I knew it was going to be called *Shut Ins,* but I didn’t know it was going to be subtitled *Britain’s Fattest People*…When I saw the first edit – I was like, oh…. That was hard. But it’d already gone past the part when I’d signed a contract so I couldn’t say anything.

For some of my interviewees, the revelation of the title wasn’t just a signal of how their documentary was going to be marketed, but the moment they discovered what the programme they had taken part in was actually going to be about. Jenna Presley and Gemma Rawnsley both agreed to be filmed for a documentary on home-schooling. Rawnsley told me: ‘We never got given a working title. It was just, “Oh, we don’t know what we’re going to call it yet”’. On Channel 4’s website, the programme description makes no mention at all of home-schooling, but instead claims the documentary is about ‘families who are raising their children under the off-grid parenting philosophy’. It poses the question: ‘Does a lack of rules make the children healthier and happier, or lead to behaviour issues?’[4] Rawnsley recounted the conversation she had with the documentary-makers when they told her what they intended to call the programme:

> They said to us, “We need a title for the show. How about *Feral Families?”* I was absolutely disgusted…I just said, “We’re not feral, you what?” And he said, “We need a catchy title.” I said, “You’re not calling it that.” So he went away and came back and said, “What about *The Bad Parent’s Handbook* or *The Guide to Bad Parenting,* something like that. I said, “Are you joking? We’re not bad parents. We’re really good parents.”

For Rawnsley, to be publicly shamed in this way and labelled as a ‘feral family’ or a ‘bad parent’ was particularly hurtful. Over a long conversation, she told me how surviving a difficult childhood herself – being raised in a household with a violent father, and leaving home as a vulnerable teenager – giving her own children a happier upbringing was her first priority.

> If there’s one thing on this earth that I strive to be, above all, it’s a good mum. To know that I’ve worked *really* hard at being a good mum…putting deep thought into every decision that I make with regard to the kids,

she told me. 'To have that tarnished and perverted for the sake of entertainment was *really* upsetting'.

The documentary emphasised the permissive aspects of Rawnsley's parenting – such as letting her kids cut their own hair, help themselves to food, and setting their own bedtimes – but in other respects, Rawnsley explained to me that she is 'actually very strict' – keeping her kids at home rather than letting them hang out on street corners, as many of the other children in her neighbourhood do, teaching them to be aware of their impact upon other people and the environment. The dictionary definition of 'feral' notes its derogatory associations, offering synonyms such as 'undomesticated', 'unused to humans', and 'threatening'.[5] By using the title *Feral Families,* the documentary-makers established a particular mode of reception for the audience. As Jenna Presley, who appeared separately in the same programme, told me: 'They set us up to be judged'.

Hate-watching is a term which first appeared in the TV column of the *New Yorker* in 2012 and has now entered the Oxford English Dictionary, which defines it as watching a programme or performer 'in a spirit of mockery, as a form of entertainment'.[6] The term might be relatively new, but the phenomenon it describes has long been associated with Bourdieu (1987), who claimed the cultural products we consume are a way of distinguishing social status and values. The critical gaze with which we regard certain cultural objects emphasises aesthetic discernment and authority, and offers an oppositional means to generate markers of identity. A foundational text in the scholarship of 'anti-fandom' was Ien Ang's (2013 [1985]) study of the audience's emotional attachments to the American soap, *Dallas* (1978–1991), which described a diversity of viewing practices, including ironic distancing and parodic interpretation. Other significant research includes Joshua Gamson's (1998) work on trash TV, and how lines of what is normal and what is deviant are drawn up around these programmes; and Skeggs, Thumim, and Wood's (2008) paper on how the self is performed through reflexive retelling, immanent positioning, and affective responses to reality TV. What is distinctive about the idea of a hate-watch is the way that the 'scopic pleasures of moral judgement' are being commercially exploited as part of what De Benedictis et al. (2017) call: 'The development of a parasitical media economy, whereby an increasing range of media agents are able to accumulate capital as the 'media storm' transfers from one field of production to another' (pp. 4; 20).

In an attention economy, confected outrage generates Tweets, clicks, and momentum as the story travels through the tabloid press and social media, fuelling ratings and becoming a viable strategic basis for success. There is, therefore, a natural synchronicity between the hate-watch, social media, and sensationalised television. The parallel economic agendas which intersect different media fields mean that broadcasters and producers are heavily incentivised to offer up protagonists and scenarios to be pilloried by a judgemental audience. Now, everyone is a critic.

In *Anti-fandom: Dislike and Hate in the Digital Age* (2019), Melissa Click provides a framework for the study of hate, emphasising the importance of focussing not only on the technology, but also emotion and affect. Click draws upon Sara Ahmed's (2013) cultural approach to the study of emotion, which recognises that emotions have a significance in excess of the individual or the internal, acting as a form of social capital and circulating cultural value. Emotions such as hate and disgust are crucial to the formation of collective identities, Ahmed claims, coalescing around the identification of a vilified Other by a community of witnesses.

While scholars have analysed the divisive societal consequences of hate-watching, less has been said about how it feels for the contributors themselves to be offered up as critical fodder to an unsympathetic audience. Emma A. Jane (2014) criticises the tendency of the scholarship to lose touch with the human subjects who are the targets of what she calls 'e-bile', conflating them with the programmes which represent them. Anti-fan activity is usually regarded as part and parcel of 'being in the fame game', Jane argues, but the dynamic is complicated when the targets are ordinary participants, whose background and circumstances have not prepared them for such criticism. 'Directing invective at these sorts of "amateur" or "accidental" celebrities raises different ethical issues because it is likely that such people are more psychologically, physically, and financially vulnerable to anti-fan campaigns than seasoned celebrities' (p. 184). The implication that some targets should be considered worthier, or at least better equipped to soak up audience hatred is problematic, but one of the more surprising findings of my research is that not all contributors object to being used as a hate-watch. Some, in fact, recognised that they too could harness the exposure it brought them to achieve their own communicative goals.

As an anti-abortion activist, Jeff White has featured in many documentaries and media productions over the past 30 years. White told me he expects the media will be hostile both to him personally and to his cause: 'I've never known it to be other than that', he explained. 'I just haven't'. Nevertheless, he has a policy of saying yes to every request he receives. 'I don't expect to be treated nicely', he told me. 'That's the nature of confronting someone's beliefs or lifestyle. I think it's my low expectations that stop me from being disappointed, and the absolute confidence in the truth of what I'm saying'. Pragmatically, White accepts that his views are likely to be challenged and even mocked by the media, but calculates that the risk of being distorted is a price worth paying to gain access to their platforms. 'I'm not looking for a positive piece *per se*', he said. 'What I am hoping for is a moment when I can say something that is thought-changing for somebody hearing it… I'm quite content to try and get a statement out there that causes people to think…You have to be thick-skinned'. White named his organisation 'Survivors of the Abortion Holocaust' knowing the more contentiously he presented himself, the more likely he would be to gain publicity. He was once told by a reporter: 'The story is not interesting if there's isn't something controversial'. White's account challenges the preconception that contributors are passive or naïve partners in the hate-watch dynamic. His approach is adaptive and strategic, harnessing both the media's interest in conflict and a broader awareness that being revered or reviled has an equal value in terms of exposure.

When contributors' views challenge social norms, liberal values of free speech are tested. Free speech is often debated in terms of legalities and principles, but White's comments also bring to mind the lived experiences of those who are trying to communicate opinions which others might not want to hear, and how the media environment shapes their approaches. Philipp Tanzer took part in a BBC documentary called *I Am a Men's Rights Activist* (2020). Tanzer told me there are few opportunities beyond the internet's 'manosphere' to engage with issues such as custody rights and domestic violence from a male perspective. 'We are not invited to debates', he said. 'Our voices are being silenced'. Tanzer told me the director he worked with was scrupulously fair and honest, but also acknowledged the drawbacks to this measured and thoughtful approach, given the small amount of mainstream coverage devoted to the men's rights movement, and the subsequent pressure he felt to make his message punch through:

> Even in this documentary, I would say…there's very, very little time spent on men's issues. I was being heard and I'm grateful for that. I was being treated very fairly, but if I could, if I had the choice between being treated very fairly and sympathetically but little time spent on men's issues, or me being portrayed as a weirdo and a lot of time being spent on men's issues, I would go for the latter.

This was not the only example from my research of contributors being disappointed when the documentary they had imagined was going to be contentious did *not* turn out to be a hate-watch. Jo Lockwood told me:

> If you look at *Genderquake* or *My Transsexual Summer*, they had a lot more pushback and reaction…[but] this was like – shrug your shoulders, it was lovely. And that disappointed me…It was such an anti-climax…Once it polarises people, you get discussion. It didn't polarise enough negativity. It never got any pushback. There was never any defence of it.

My research therefore suggests a degree of collusion which complicates simplistic notions of contributor exploitation, but also demonstrates how the public expression of ordinary people is distorted by the limited forms of agency the media affords them.

Navigating the difficulties of representing contentious subjects and controversial views is also a challenge for producers, and my research revealed differing approaches. Claire Lewis described how she would go about making a documentary with people she disagreed with:

> What you learn is to be completely objective in terms of your questioning. You have to be as honest as you can. If I was making a film about [far right activist] Tommy Robinson and the EDL [English Defence League], I would go to him and say, "I'd like to make a warts and all film about you, what you believe and why you believe it, and I'll be asking you some very difficult questions. Are you up for it?"…If it's a contentious subject, you have to go in there completely neutral…What *I* think is immaterial…You don't ever let them know what you believe.

These norms might serve print journalists well but are inevitably harder to sustain over a prolonged documentary encounter, with its characteristic intensity. Daisy Asquith described a different set of guiding ethical principles, speaking about the importance of confronting contributors on camera to give them the opportunity to explain themselves. 'As a filmmaker, I think if someone's not aware of how people might view them, you have to tell them. It's part of your job', she told me. 'They should be aware of how you feel about their behaviour and what you think the world will think'.

These approaches may appear diametrically opposite, yet both have a principle of fairness at their centre – a principle which unfortunately was not experienced by some of the contributors in my sample, who felt their participation in a hate-watch was secured by means of duplicity or misrepresentation. When their home-schooling documentary turned out to be 'mostly constructed', Jenna Presley felt personally let down by the production team, whom she had come to regard as friends. 'They didn't do what they said they were going to do', she told me. 'I wanted to show the positives, but they made it look negative…It really felt like they had an agenda'.

Research by the Centre for Countering Digital Hate found that 75% of contentious online discussion threads are about women, and of these, 10% accuse the women of being bad parents.[7] In other words, the topic chosen by the makers of *Feral Families* (2017) aligns neatly with the repetitious themes of online hate. For Gemma Rawnsley, the most negative part of the experience happened when her story was picked up and amplified by secondary media. She told me about a visit from a newspaper reporter, who 'did an interview with me and went away and wrote *the most* [sighs]…I sent her a text message saying I think you would've been better off in fiction-writing'. The resulting *Sunday Mirror* article claimed Rawnsley let her young children get tattoos, play with axes, and swear.[8] A version of the story, including the out-and-out lie about the tattoos, was reprinted in other tabloids, including *The Sun, The Daily Mail*, and *The Express*. 'It really *really* upset me that people thought that', Rawnsley told me. 'I couldn't even look at a newspaper. I got rid of all the newspapers that we'd read'.

Once their stories were out in the public domain, contributors found they could be the subject of tabloid news features without giving their consent, and that any boundaries or sensitivities which might have been negotiated with the documentary-makers were no longer heeded. Liane Piper mentioned an upsetting article where the headline claimed she considered herself 'too ugly to have sex'.[9] 'My parents read that', she told me. 'I was so upset. Everybody saw it'.

One director told me about the time one of her contributors woke up to find over a hundred journalists camped out on their front lawn. Instead of helping them, the broadcaster's press office instructed her to have no further contact with the family, saying she could be sued if she gave them bad advice. 'It was shocking. So shocking', she told me. 'The didn't care that the family had been thrown to the lions'. *Educating Yorkshire* (2013) headteacher Jonny Mitchell told me that cruel memes were made of his teenage pupils, making unflattering personal remarks about their looks or their weight. 'The comments were just horrendous', he said. 'It does have an effect on your mental health, certainly in the short term'. Although contributors expect their share of negative comments, many were nonetheless shocked at both the toxicity of social media reactions and their distressing impact.

Production companies routinely instruct their contributors not to look at social media, but understandably, most people said it was hard to resist. Emily Ingold told me: 'The night it went out, I went to bed, but I couldn't sleep. I was like, I've got to look, I've got to. I promised myself I wouldn't, but I was like, no, I've got to look. So I did'. Liane Piper, who as a body dysmorphic would be considered to be at particular risk, was simply instructed to 'turn off' all of her social media accounts, and not look at any comments. 'I was really anxious when it went out', she told me. 'Obviously, people were going to watch it, and I was just scared of what would happen. I couldn't help myself. I did read the comments'. Ignoring social media is not a realistic solution. It offers little more than a way to avoid engaging with the problem. Producers may not be able to control how a documentary will be received by audiences and the broader media ecology, but in truth, their approach to social media favours maximisation rather than containment, and furthermore, a lack of control does not necessarily equate to a lack of responsibility. 'I think in the end, you're responsible for everything that's a consequence of the film', Jerry Rothwell told me. 'So yeah, you are responsible'.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have analysed the subjective responses that contributors have to the final cuts of their documentaries, their mediated selves, and the audience. My research emphasises the complicated agency of contributors, who are active and complicit in their representations – sometimes, even the negative ones – yet paradoxically lack control over the way their documentaries will be edited, marketed, recycled through the media, and consumed by the public. There is a lack of oversight from broadcasters and production companies, who frequently fail to take responsibility for what happens to their contributors beyond transmission. Before moving onto my overall conclusions, I want to devote a little space to allow my interviewees to offer some conclusions of their own and reflect upon what the experience of contributing to a documentary meant to them.

Whether they have positive or negative experiences of participating, contributors often feel a profound sense of loss when the documentary comes to an end. This loss is partly related to the temporary nature of the position they occupy in the public eye. 'At one stage I was in the papers, in the *Sunday Times,* the *Daily Mail.* I was in *RT* in Russia, *Christian Today* in America', Jo Lockwood told me: 'Then suddenly, a day later, it's like boom. Tumbleweed. That's it. That's my stardom'. The sense of loss can also relate to the ending of their personal relationships with the production team. Receiving this kind of intense, focussed attention can disturb a person's equilibrium, but losing it again can be even more disorientating. Piotrowska writes: 'Sometimes people are not ever happy again with their ordinary lives: they want the excitement, the *jouissance,* of somebody making the film about them to continue' (2013b, p. 76). Jo Lockwood described her ambivalent feelings once the documentary had wrapped, her intense relief at the ending of the sometimes-gruelling filming process tempered with a kind of grief. 'After the filming was finished, we missed someone asking us how we feel all the time!', she told me. 'We missed having these other people interested in our lives'.

The withdrawal is often sudden and unmanaged, happening without proper acknowledgement from the production team. For some contributors, the difficult psychological readjustment to normal life is somewhat eased if the documentary accomplishes what they set out to achieve. Although most people imagine the documentary as a means of communicating with a mass audience of millions, my research found the impact tends to be greatest closer to home. Omari Eccleston-Brown told me how his relationship with his mother changed dramatically as a result of his media appearances. 'My mum and I had a lot of fraught years', he told me. 'When she [watched the documentary], it clicked for her suddenly. She got that [body dysmorphia] was a real thing. Hearing my words [being broadcast]…made the difference'. Heather Ward grew up with a father who was a hoarder, but it was only when her friends and neighbours saw the inside of his house on television that they grasped the extent of the problem and were able to properly empathise with how his mental illness had affected her childhood. Similarly, after watching *Great Ormond Street* (2010–2015), Luisa Hammett's' friends and family understood the trauma she and her husband had been through when their toddler needed brain surgery. 'Other people just didn't realise how serious it was until that programme came out, which was quite a long time after', she told me. 'Everybody was crying'.

In some cases, participation delivered tangible benefits. Emily Ingold received weight-loss surgery and lost ten stone. 'This experience has had such a positive impact upon my life', she told me. 'Yes, there's been lows as well, but…I feel like they've saved me, as cheesy as that may sound, that's honestly how I feel'. However, the televised transformations depicted on screen were often very different to the actual changes which took place behind the scenes. Nikita Roberts was filmed clearing out her hoarded belongings on Channel 5's *My Extreme OCD Life* (2017). 'I just made out, yep, I'm going to get rid of this, I'll keep that – but the bag was still there a year later', she told me. 'Anyone watching probably thought she's done really well getting rid of all that, but it was still there'. Heather Ward had a similar experience when her father's hoard was dismantled to create the impression of a before and after. 'He just carries on, straight after they'd been, and he's carried on since', she told me. 'It's back to how it was now'.

Beyond superficial makeovers and material perks, documentary participation offered many of my interviewees meaningful opportunities to be seen, to be heard, and to be validated. 'The documentary has given me permission to have an opinion and be me', Jo Lockwood told me. 'I've shared me with five million plus people, and I'm proud of that. It's a public record. Anyone who's been in the public eye…that's part of who you are now'. For Emily Speirs, being in a documentary enabled her to develop an attitude of self-acceptance towards her disability. 'When you're young and you're disabled, you think… there's nobody like me. You never meet people with similar conditions', she told me. 'But through *Born to be Different* (2003–2020), I've met a lot of people…It's definitely been really positive'.

The contributors who saw documentary participation as a form of activism were not disappointed by the lack of overnight impact. Many of them had a sophisticated understanding about the incremental nature of social change, and the small but important role their contributions could potentially play. 'There was never going to be change the following week', Vicki Beckett told me, reflecting on the documentary she made about stillbirth. 'I knew that wasn't going to happen…It takes hundreds and hundreds of events, people working at things, doing different campaigns. It was the first of its kind as a documentary, and it didn't do any harm to the plight'.

However, some changes were dramatic rather than gradual. The transformative potential of documentaries can light a fuse in people's lives. Among my sample are a notable number of divorces, family feuds, and fall-outs, relationships which have broken down in the aftermath, and lives which have spun in completely new directions – both good and bad. Daisy Asquith was disowned by members of her family for making *After the Dance* (2015), about her mother's adoption in Ireland. 'Telling my story has had huge consequences for me', she told me. 'There are people who probably won't speak to me again in my family…I thought they might be cross. I had no idea of the extent of their rage. So no, that's a worse consequence than anyone I've made a film about has had'. For many contributors, the enormity of the experience and all of its potential outcomes could only be fully comprehended long after the event. Jonny Mitchell told me: 'It was difficult. It was a journey. It was a proper adventure'. Jenny Smith agreed: 'I would never *ever* do it again. It was unique and it was special, and it was great fun. It was exhausting. It could've gone horribly, horribly, horribly wrong'.

The diverse, contradictory, and unpredictable stories my interviewees shared about participating in documentaries suggest that all kinds of experiences are possible, but the strongest point of consensus is the immense potential of the medium to change people's lives. Omari Eccleston-Brown perhaps summarised this best: 'I think it's powerful. I think TV holds a lot of power for people as a cultural authority. People believe what they see on TV, right?'

Notes

1. An episiotomy is a surgical incision made between the vagina and perineum to aid the baby's delivery.
2. Lucy Wilson is a pseudonym, used at the interviewee's request.
3. McGeorge, A. 2015. The Undateables branded 'offensive' and exploitative by doctors criticising the Channel 4 reality show. *Irish Mirror*, 24/6/2015. Singh, A. 2008. BBC Launch First Multi-Channel Platform. *Press Association Media Point*, 22/1/2008.
4. Channel 4. 2017. *Feral Families* [Online]. www.channel4.com. [Accessed 07/11/2022]. Available: https://www.channel4.com/programmes/feral-families.
5. OED 2022. OED. *Oxford English Dictionary*.
6. OED 2022. OED. *Oxford English Dictionary*.
7. Kale, S. 2021. 'People are nasty as hell on there': The battle to close Tattle – the most hate-filled corner of the web. *The Guardian*. 25/11/2021.
8. Paget, A. 2017. 'Go ahead, play with an axe': Parents explain why their 'feral' kids are allowed to swear and shun school. *Sunday Mirror*. 21/10/2017.
9. Griffiths, J. 2018. Ugly Me: Woman battling body dysmorphia thinks she's too ugly to have sex and wants to 'scratch off' her 'fat' face. *The Sun*. 5/6/2018.

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9 Documentary contributors and what their experiences tell us about the cultural industries

This book has offered an account of the experiences of the ordinary people who participate in the media, and how they are informed by its changing political-economic context. I want to conclude by summarising the ten key findings of this research, then offering some thoughts about how duty of care practices have developed since this project began, and how they could be improved.

1. Care in an uncaring industry

The experiences of media contributors, producers, and working conditions are all inextricably linked, and have been fundamentally reshaped by the neo-liberal working practices which have taken root in the industry since the launch of the independent TV production sector in the 1980s. The transition towards a more managerial style of working has created an organisational structure where editorial control has been largely taken out of the hand of the people who work directly with contributors, resulting in a lack of accountability for decisions which can have a significant impact upon their wellbeing.

The long-hours working culture of the creative industries places immense strain upon contributors as well as production crews. The pressure to work to ever-tighter schedules makes it increasingly difficult for documentary-makers to shoot footage observationally, yet the more they construct and intervene, the greater the risk that contributors are divested of their ability to represent themselves authentically. Certain aspects of the reorganisation of labour in factual production – such as the transition to freelancing, the fragmentation of creative roles, and the loss of producer autonomy – have led to an inconsistency in contributor care, which jeopardises the crucial relationship of trust between producers and their subjects which underpins documentary-making.

Media research to date has tended to focus upon the experiences of workers in the cultural industries, but the effects of a dysfunctional working environment ripple out far beyond the paid workforce, to everyone who participates. Ordinary people and their wellbeing are major casualties of deregulation, yet their plight has largely escaped critical attention – in part, because they themselves are not aware that things were once done differently, and

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that many of the practices which impact negatively upon them have been ushered in alongside a process of political-economic restructuring. Instead, their distress is expressed through a tragic picture of psychological harm and multiple suicides.

What this tells us about the politics of production is that the organisational efficiencies that have been gained from the neo-liberalisation of the media have come at a human cost, resulting in the creation of a workplace which is fraught with risks for everyone who participates.

2. Victims and dupes

Media contributors have all too often been dismissed as victims, dupes, and narcissists, but these lazy characterisations vastly underestimate the complexities of their motivations, and the diversity of their experiences of participation. Contributors have an active involvement in the creation of media content, and their bids to occupy these platforms are inherently political acts. Whether documentary contributors seek out opportunities to take part, or do so reluctantly, they are invariably people who have *something to say,* and who want *to be heard.* At a time when many of us regard mainstream politics with apathy, cynicism, or distrust, media participation can offer ordinary people a form of democratic self-representation, and an effective way of making social impact.

My research complicates the perception of contributors as exploited victims of the media – a stereotype which fails to engage with their own perspectives, their pleasures, and their ambitions. The decision to participate is often characterised as a kind of Faustian pact, or an act of desperation – but speaking out in such a public forum is also a powerful form of self-expression, which can have positive outcomes as well as negative ones. However, the nature of their mediated agency is far from straightforward, and the messages they wish to convey are frequently distorted in ways which can frustrate them, or even compromise their welfare. The ability of ordinary people to use the media to play a role in public life is limited by a common misconception which positions them as deserving victims and curtails public sympathy for them when the outcomes are not as they expected.

3. Systematic bias

The default outcome of many routinised factual production processes is to perpetuate stereotypes and amplify existing patterns of visibility and marginalisation. This is evident in many of the practices detailed in this book, such as wish-list casting – where contributors are recruited to exemplify different archetypes – and the intercutting of different stories during the edit, to create points of comparison, over which the contributors have little control.

Media participation has the potential to forge bonds between people, enabling them to share information and experiences, and build connections in fragmented societies. But the people who have historically lacked visibility – the people who, in theory, should have the most to gain from speaking out on a media platform – are often the same ones who find their communicative bids are thwarted by the production process. Many of the people I interviewed – from female-leaders, to sex workers, to the disabled, and the neurodivergent – found that their stories were taken from them and reshaped according to somebody else's preconceived notions of who they were. The attempts they made to challenge these entrenched stereotypes went unheard. Despite the conscious intentions they set out with when they agreed to participate, the very misrepresentations and misinformation they sought to correct were often simply repeated and reinforced.

This suggests that media participation has an inherent conservatism in its orientation, reflective of the wider norms of the societies that the media forms part of. An unintentional bias is imbricated within conventions, routines, and procedures, which has the effect of reinforcing dominant values and obscuring the marginalised. These tendencies must be acknowledged, understood, and actively resisted by documentary-makers if they wish to avoid unintentionally reproducing systematic bias and inequalities in their films.

4. Public institutions and the media

The relationship between the state and the media is usually conceived of in terms of parliamentary politics and the news, but the public's perception of state institutions and the way they operate is very much informed by their portrayals in film and TV. There is an in-built synchronicity between factual formats – which require a churn of predictable drama – and public institutions such as hospitals, the police force, and the emergency services, who deal with accidents, emergencies, and various crises on a daily basis. Consequently, viewers have become used to seeing a proliferation of 'blue light' documentaries on our screens, which purport to give their viewers an understanding of their inner workings. However, being beholden to institutions for access means that editorial independence is compromised, leading to a tendency for such programming to create uncritical representations in order to maintain the mutually-beneficial relationships that these productions depend upon.

For their part, the institutions that host documentary crews have come to rely upon the publicity they generate to inform and educate the general public about their work. Naturally, they want to show themselves in the best possible light, but this can mean that best practice is presented as the norm, giving the public a misleading impression of what is really happening in the services their taxes fund. Before the documentary-makers even set a foot through the door, the way that public institutions operate is altered – with their presence sometimes having an influence over important strategic or clinical decisions.

There is a lack of transparency and public awareness about what goes into making these films, their impact upon time and resources, and the rationales which underpin decisions to permit or refuse access. Despite the legitimate public interest in televising the functioning of state institutions, the production of these documentaries also represents an unscrutinised conversion of public resources into the profits of private media organisations, where the time and efforts of public servants is diverted away from their usual activities and directed towards helping to create a commercial product instead. The mutual co-dependency between state institutions and documentary-makers can undermine the integrity of both parties, and merits a much greater level of examination.

5. Commercial vs ethical

Documentary-making is marked by irreconcilable tensions between the commercial and the ethical. Commercial concerns play an important role in dictating the status that contributors are accorded. This is evident in the casting process, for example, where the relative supply and demand of potential contributors determines their value within a production. Rather than any moral sense of participants' worth as human subjects, it is often economic or organisational imperatives which establish these dynamics. My research found an attitude of flexibility towards ethical norms, which can be applied to in a self-serving and inconsistent manner, ceding priority to commercial goals. This is evident in the marketing practices of broadcasters, which lean heavily upon the power of sensationalism, offering up contributors as targets for a confected outrage, which powers the circulation of documentaries through an interconnected digital ecosystem. Hate-watching has become a viable commercial strategy in the era of social media, and the ways that some of the people I interviewed were presented were purposefully designed to generate critical audience commentary. Although, in some cases, contributors can be complicit in making these controversial representations, at other times, they are 'thrown to the lions' – as one director puts it – with little apparent care about the consequences.

Broadcasters and production companies are reluctant to pay contributors, but their insistence that ordinary people's involvement should be uninfluenced by commercial interests can seem hypocritical, when their own motivations are so clearly geared towards profit-generation. Matters of money are also withheld from the documentary-makers, who rarely know the details of, or share in the financial success of their productions. Regardless of how much income they make, production staff are generally only paid a weekly rate for their work. Who makes money, and who has knowledge of financial affairs, tells us something about where power lies in the media. The obscuration of the financial fine-print from content creators perpetuates the idea that creative impulses are antithetical to money, while the media corporations continue to quietly profit from their endeavours.

However, the commercial values which guide documentary production are not unrestrained, and my data found many examples of ethical behaviour and resistance – perhaps most clearly, in the relationships between documentary-makers and their subjects, which are often genuinely meaningful for both parties. These contradictions can make media careers unsustainable, resulting in disillusionment and burn-out in the longer term.

6. Invisible emotional labour

Some of the most challenging aspects of media work are invisible and under-recognised by the industry. This is particularly true of the relationship-work, which documentary-makers often identify as the single most important skill of their job, but which takes place on the peripheries of their working lives, unpaid and without meaningful support from their employers.

Creative workers have been overlooked in much of the public debate surrounding duty of care, and yet mounting evidence points to a mental health crisis in the cultural industries. The Film & TV Charity's Looking Glass survey found that nine out of ten creative workers had recently experienced a mental health problem, as opposed to 65% of the general population – and even more worryingly, half of them had considered taking their own life. Their report cites 'bullying, harassment, discrimination and extreme working conditions' creating a 'perfect storm over the wellbeing of our workforce' and shows that people who identify as black, global majority, LGBTQ+, and disabled are at greater risk.[1]

Because the wellbeing of creative workers and participants is intrinsically linked, improvements cannot be made for one half of the partnership while the other remains neglected. Contributors are unlikely to receive good care if the people who they are working with continue to labour in a challenging environment without the necessary support. In the past, documentary-makers may have been able to rely upon the mentorship of senior colleagues, but now often find themselves unable to voice their concerns for fear of damaging their professional reputations or hampering their chances of securing future work. Along with the more obvious employment changes that went along with the restructuring of the creative industries – such as the loss of job security and benefits – the foregoing systems of emotional support have been unintentionally dismantled, and as yet, have not been replaced with an adequate substitute.

7. Problems with policy

Because many countries have a post-broadcast regulatory structure, the needs of contributors have often been addressed indirectly, through audience feedback and responses to broadcasts. In countries such as Australia and France, there have been attempts to use working regulations to give contributors greater protection, but such rules are designed with different workplace dynamics in mind, and do not translate easily to media productions. In the UK, changes to the Broadcasting Code have enabled production companies to evidence that a process of due care has been followed, but have failed to encourage the provision of the type of meaningful duty of care that contributors deserve. The process of psychological screening, for example, benefits production companies by allowing them to demonstrate they have taken the necessary steps to ensure that contributors have been risk-assessed, but once the decision to proceed has been approved, the filming process continues as usual. Contributors report that screening questions can feel intrusive, and as the tests rely upon self-declaration, it is relatively easy for them to give the answers they feel the producers want to hear.

The UK's newly amended regulations make special provision for vulnerable contributors, but at the same time, their wellbeing is being jeopardised by working practices which have a detrimental effect on their ability to participate, and puts their welfare at risk. My research found examples of dangerous filming techniques, including confronting people with anxiety disorders with their worst fears, provoking them into having extreme reactions on camera, with little consideration for how these experiences might exacerbate their problems.

Further consideration needs to be given to deciding who can rightfully claim the status of being a contributor, and how far the circle of care should extend. Minor contributors are often excluded from existing support, along with people whose role in the production changes as the story develops. There is no straightforward correlation between the amount of filming time contributors are involved in, the amount of screen time they occupy, and the level of care they receive. A clearer rationale needs to be developed about where the limits of producers' responsibilities lie.

8. Narrative norms

Documentaries are fundamentally shaped by narrative norms, and the necessity to effect an appearance of cohesion in order for them to be accepted by viewers as 'real'. The distinctive temporality of documentaries – where time is condensed, and the importance of events retrospectively rebalanced – is made possible by a process of omitting information and then constructing something else to fill in the gaps, creating an irreconcilable dysfluency in the language of visual representation. The necessity for all stories to have a beginning, middle, and – in particular – an ending establishes a reliance upon artifice, which has been a characteristic of documentaries since their inception over a century ago.

The perspective of contributors is particularly illuminating when it comes to issues of reality and representation, because ultimately, it is their realities which are being represented. My research demonstrates how the need for narratives to have a causal drive, and lead towards a satisfactory conclusion can have the effect of detaching people from their own life stories. In her open letter of complaint to the BBC, after feeling they had misled and misrepresented her, Lucy Wilson[2] wrote: 'Being edited to be the person they wanted me to be left me feeling hollow'.[3] As Jean-Louis Comolli argues, in this scenario, both the participant and the audience pay 'a certain price of reality' (1999, p. 39).

The narratives which documentaries create feed into our collective identities, creating a method of interpreting the past which is ultimately flawed – compromised by cultural preferences, which include selective ignorance, consolation, and denial. The media are a resource for shared remembering, but their values are also imbricated with a politics of forgetting, which compromises their ability to objectively record events.

9. Technology and realism

A persistent idea suggests that technological advances offer the possibility to bridge what John Durham Peters calls 'the difficult juncture between experience and discourse' (2001, p. 710). However, the example of fixed-rig documentaries, explored in this book, demonstrates why technology is not capable of 'solving' the problems of representation. Despite offering complete audio-visual coverage of the rigged spaces, discrepancies between the actual events and their representation nevertheless persisted for a huge range of perfectly legitimate reasons, including consent, safeguarding, and editorial judgement. The gaps between experience and signification should not be considered as individual lapses, or even systematic failure, but rather an irreducible distance between the two.

The idea that documentary realism can be facilitated by technological innovation has had a long history, with overblown claims of greater access, greater intimacy, and greater authenticity accompanying the arrival of advances including sync-sound, handheld cameras, and digital editing. Each of these technologies succeeded in changing the ways that documentaries were made, yet failed to bring about an end to the representation gap. On the near-horizon, similar discussions are underway about how emerging technologies such as virtual reality and AI will change production techniques, but the findings of my research suggest that there are reasons to be sceptical that this pattern will not persist.

Rather than critiquing the existence of a representation gap, my research suggests that scholarly efforts should be aimed at educating audiences, exposing and interrogating the mechanics of representation, and developing more sophisticated ways of understanding the material we are presented by the media.

10. The life-changing impact of documentaries

And finally, perhaps the idea which comes across most strongly at the end of this research project is the sheer impact of documentary participation: the enormous potential it has to transform ordinary people's lives, both for better and for worse. Documentaries are made through the forging of intense relationships, which in some cases have a longevity outlasting many marriages, developing a pseudo-therapeutic dynamic as the basis for self-exploration and discovery. Contributors who consent to taking part imagine themselves communicating with an anonymous mass audience, but often find their participation has a greater impact on those who are closest to them, transforming familial relationships, leading to rifts and reconciliations they may not have anticipated. During my interviews, I heard many stories of divorces and family feuds, as well as new understandings and acceptances that have been made.

In an interconnected media landscape, documentaries can have unexpected, uncontrollable afterlives as the content that has been created begins to travel through social and secondary media. Once contributors' stories are out in the public domain, they create an indelible digital footprint, framing phases in their lives forever, and giving an effect of permanence to temporary happenings. The creation of a televisual 'doppelganger', which in some cases, can appear to have more authority than the original version, can have a deep psychological impact, disrupting performances of self (Piotrowska, 2013). Documentary participation offers ordinary people the ability to contribute to public conversation and effect social change, albeit often incrementally. Recognition of these facts helps us to grasp the high stakes involved in this huge intervention in people's lives. Although the majority of my interviewees reported that their experiences were positive overall, it is indisputably true that others have suffered. Lives have been upended, and even lost, and changes need to be made.

Research implications

Over the last few years, duty of care has evolved rapidly, and contributors now have a greater level of access to psychological support than ever before. In the UK television industry, many productions now employ welfare teams, and the involvement of independent psychologists in screening and aftercare has become routine. Although these developments are undoubtedly encouraging, they represent a step in the right direction rather than an answer to the problems that this research has highlighted.

Documentaries which engage with sensitive subject matter may have a small percentage of their budget set aside to pay for a welfare producer who will oversee duty of care protocols. However, the people who are performing these roles usually have a background in documentary-making rather than mental health, and they are rarely given adequate training. According to the Film & TV Charity's latest statistics, only 14% of producers who had recently worked with vulnerable contributors felt there was enough support was available, and only 11% thought the industry was a mentally healthy place to work.[4] A lack of training is also an issue at senior levels. In the same survey, creative workers identified better line-management as the single most effective way to improve wellbeing, yet this crucial system of support is undermined by precarious working methods. Workers who are constantly seeking employment, who feel their reputations are only ever as good as their last job, are disincentivised to confide their anxieties and insecurities to the same people they wish to impress. Rather than equip managers with the skills they need to enable their teams to flourish, the industry is now attempting to compensate for this deficit by drafting in external psychological support.

My research, however, also casts doubt over the way that TV psychologists are being used by the industry, and whether their investment in this type of care is meeting contributors' needs. There is currently no consensus about what kinds of credentials or qualifications media psychologists should have, and there is a lack of regulation about who can adopt this title. The fact that media psychologists are paid by one party to ostensibly serve the needs of the other creates an inherent conflict of interest, and this dilemma was not lost upon my research participants, many of whom were ambivalent or even suspicious about the professional support they were offered. The TV psychologists I spoke to during the course of this research suggested they could play a more effective role at a deeper level, by – for example – having an input in the development of new formats to assess how they might impact upon participants, being involved at the level of training for production staff, in mediating conflicts between producers and contributors, and in providing support and advice for people working in trauma-risk situations. It is crucial, however, that mental health training must be underpinned by appropriate resources and institutional back-up; otherwise, there is a risk that it merely shifts the responsibility of care onto the shoulders of individual workers, who are already carrying heavy burdens.

But perhaps the biggest problem with the emerging model of psychological intervention is that it offers the cultural industries a way of being seen to take action without taking more fundamental steps to improve dysfunctional working environments, which have the potential to cause people harm. Caring is not a function which can simply be outsourced to other people. Effective care has to be integral to the practice. It is more than just a line in the budget, or an extra service that can be bought-in and added-on.

Although the principle of care sits uneasily within the neo-liberal workplace, the same is not true of documentary-making itself. Many of the successful and well-respected documentary-makers I spoke to are already putting duty of care at the heart of their creative practice and understand that it has the capacity to improve their work, rather than constrain it. When contributors are able to retain a degree of control over the ways they are represented, they are empowered to share more of themselves. Establishing an equitable framework for participation, therefore, enables them to engage more openly and honestly. The current moment of reckoning in the film & TV industries offers us an opportunity to think more carefully about their organisational culture, and how these structures could be reimagined for the benefit of people on both sides of the camera, and for the documentaries they make.

Notes

1. Film & TV Charity. 2022. Looking Glass.
2. Lucy Wilson is a pseudonym, used at the interviewee's request.
3. Tyson, G and Willams, A. 2019. *Open letter to the BBC* [Online]. Twitter. [Accessed 11/11/2021]. Available from: https://twitter.com/ggeorginattyson/status/1159413590329348097.
4. Film & TV Charity. 2022. Looking Glass.

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Appendix 1

Interviewee biographies

	Name[1]	*Production*	*Details*
1	Claire Lewis	Credits include: *Seven Up* (1984–present) *The End of the Line* (2009) *Jimmy's Farm* (2004)	Lewis is an award-winning producer who is best known for her work on the *Seven Up* series over the last 40 years. She is now a freelancer but began her TV career as a staff member at Granada, having previously worked as a school-teacher and a journalist. Lewis has made documentaries about sensitive subjects, including autism and children in social care, and has also produced cinema features.
2	Daisy Asquith	Credits include: *Queerama* (2017) *After the Dance* (2015) *15: This is Me* (2000)	Asquith has directed more than 25 films for the BBC, Channel 4, Irish Film Board, and the BFI. She's won or been nominated for a number of awards, including a Grierson, an RTS, and a BAFTA. She's a senior lecturer in creative video and screen documentary at Goldsmiths, University of London and has a PhD from the University of Sussex – see www.daisyasquith.co.uk.
3	Emily Ingold	*Shut Ins: Britain's Fattest People* Channel 4 (2019)	Ingold is a young mother of two from Northamptonshire who was filmed undergoing weight-loss surgery for a Channel 4 documentary series, which reviewers described as 'exploitative and troubling'.[2] I interviewed her to find out more about her motivations to take part.
4	Emily Speirs	*Born to be Different* Channel 4 (2003-present)	Speirs has spina bifida and has been filmed throughout her entire life – since being an unborn baby in utero – for a long-running Channel 4 series which chronicles the ups and downs of family life for disabled children and their parents. I interviewed her to examine the dynamics of longitudinal filming.

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	Name[1]	*Production*	*Details*
5	Gemma Rawnsley	*Feral Families* Channel 4 (2017)	Rawnsley is a mother of seven who lives in Hebden Bridge, who took part in *Feral Families:* a documentary about 'no-rules parenting' which generated a substantial backlash on social media and in the press. I interviewed Rawnsley to explore how it feels to be at the centre of a social media storm.
6	Georgina Tyson	*Louis Theroux: Selling Sex* BBC2 (2020)	Georgina Tyson had a small on-screen role in *Louis Theroux: Selling Sex*. She spoke to me about how she felt about being largely edited out from the final cut, highlighting issues about the discrepancies in duty of care that is provided for major and minor contributors.
7	Heather Ward	*Can't Stop Won't Stop Hoarding* Channel Five (2014)	Heather Ward took part in a Channel Five documentary about her elderly father, who is a hoarder, and has since participated in a further programme made by the same production company called *Hoarders: Landfill in My Living Room* (2019). I interviewed Ward to learn about how the process of making the documentary impacted upon their complex family dynamic, and how their wellbeing was safeguarded during the production.
8	Janet Morsy	*24 Hours in A&E* Channel 4 (2018)	Morsy took part in *24 Hours in A&E,* after she was stabbed by a stranger in a random attack in a supermarket carpark. She was unaware that she'd been filmed via remote cameras until she was approached to give retrospective consent several days later. I was keen to speak to her about fixed-rig production techniques, and how they impact upon ideas about documentary realism.
9	Jeff White	*Brainwashing Stacey: Anti-abortion Camp* BBC Three (2017)	Jeff White is an anti-abortion activist based in Southern California, who runs an organisation called Survivors of the Abortion Holocaust. He has taken part in numerous media productions over the past 30 years.

(*Continued*)

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	Name[1]	*Production*	*Details*
10	Jenna Presley	*Feral Families* Channel 4 (2017)	Jenna Presley home-schools her three children, one of whom has dyslexia, and became the target of widespread tabloid media criticism after taking part in a Channel 4 documentary. I interviewed her about the issues which arose regarding children and consent.
11	Jenny Smith	*Educating the East End* Channel 4 (2014)	Jenny Smith is the headteacher of Frederick Bremer school in East London, which was featured in the high-profile Channel 4 documentary series, *Educating the East End*. I spoke to her to explore the politics of filming in public institutions, and the use of fixed-rig technology.
12	Jerry Rothwell	Credits include *The Reason I Jump* (2020) *How to Save the World* (2015) *Heavy Load* (2008)	Jerry Rothwell is one of the UK's most successful documentary directors. He has won numerous accolades, including three Grierson Awards, a Sundance Audience Award and Special Jury Prize, and two British Independent Film Awards.
13	Jo Lockwood	*The Making of Me* Channel 4 (2019)	Jo Lockwood is a keynote speaker and business consultant who was filmed for more than two years as she underwent a gender transition. She has been married for over 35 years, and the documentary largely focussed on the impact of her transition upon her relationship with her wife.
14	Jonny Mitchell	*Educating Yorkshire* Channel 4 (2013)	After participating in *Educating Yorkshire*, Mitchell briefly became a TV celebrity and was offered lucrative roles on other high-profile shows including *Strictly Come Dancing* and *I'm a Celebrity Get Me Out of Here*. I interviewed him about the experience of overnight fame and the impact it had upon his everyday life.
15	Julian Dismore	*My Life: Danny the Bravest Boy in the World* CBBC (2020)	Julian Dismore is a highly experienced series producer/director, who has made more than 40 primetime shows for various broadcasters, including ITV, Channel 4, Five, Discovery, and Sky. He recently took part as a contributor in a documentary for children's TV about his disabled son, Danny.

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	Name[1]	*Production*	*Details*
16	Kate Warrender	*The Real Death in Paradise* Discovery (2022)	Kate Warrender took part in a documentary about the death of her 23-year-old son, Charlie, who was killed under suspicious circumstances while serving with the Royal Navy in the Seychelles.
17	Kulvinder Lall	*Operation Live* Channel Five (2018)	Kulvinder Lall is one of the UK's top cardiothoracic surgeons, who works at Bart's Hospital in London. He was filmed performing open-heart surgery on live TV for the BAFTA-nominated documentary series, *Operation Live*. I spoke to Lall about risk, consent, and filming in public institutions.
18	Liane Piper	*Ugly Me: My Life with Body Dysmorphia* BBC Three (2018)	Piper was filmed for a BBC documentary about body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), during her diagnosis and then undergoing a year-long course of therapy at the Maudsley Hospital.
19	Lucy Wilson[3]	*Louis Theroux: Selling Sex* BBC2 (2020)	Wilson is a sex worker and artist in her 20s, who describes herself as working class, gay, bi-racial, autistic, and a survivor of sexual abuse.[4] After taking part in a *Louis Theroux* documentary, she wrote an open letter of complaint to the BBC about her treatment and the way she was represented. I interviewed Wilson alongside her friend and co-contributor, Georgina Tyson.
20	Luisa Hammett	*Great Ormond Street* BBC2 (2015)	Luisa Hammett was filmed at Great Ormond Street Hospital while her 17-month-old son, Cody, underwent life-or-death brain surgery. I interviewed her about the ethics of filming people during extreme or distressing events, and why she decided to allow the cameras to film her son's operation.
21	Lydia Tischler	*The Last Survivors* BBC One (2019)	Lydia Tischler is a Holocaust survivor who spent her teenage years interned in Terezin and Auschwitz, where her mother was murdered by the Nazis.[4] Tischler has worked as a child psychologist for over 70 years and continues to teach in her 90s.

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	Name[1]	*Production*	*Details*
22	Nikita Roberts	*My Extreme OCD Life* Channel Five (2017)	Nikita Roberts was diagnosed with obsessive compulsive disorder at the age of 18. Having blogged about her condition anonymously, she went public about her experiences by taking part in a Channel 5 documentary, *My Extreme OCD Life*.
23	Omari Eccleston-Brown	*Ugly Me: My Life with Body Dysmorphia* BBC Three (2018)	Omari Eccleston-Brown is an author, educator, and mental health campaigner who has made a number of media appearances to talk about his experiences of BDD.
24	Paul Dilley	*Emergency Helicopter Medics* Channel 4 (2019)	Paul Dilley is a Chief Insurance Underwriter and father of three, who suffered a rare 'widow-maker' heart attack after playing a round of golf, and was filmed by a TV crew following the work of the Thames Valley Air Ambulance. On the way to hospital, he stopped breathing for 46 minutes and his heart had to be restarted 18 times. I interviewed Dilley about informed consent in evolving, unpredictable, and high-stakes situations.
25	Peter A. Gordon	Credits include *The Man Who Shared His Liver* (2009) *Children of the Holocaust* (1994) *First Tuesday: Cold Blood: The Massacre of East Timor (1992)*	Peter A. Gordon is a multi-award-winning producer/director and executive producer, who has worked in television for over 30 years. His documentary about the 1991 massacre of over 250 people by Indonesian soldiers in East Timor provoked a global reaction and played a pivotal role in the country's fight for independence.
26	Philipp Tanzer	*I Am a Men's Rights Activist* BBC Three (2020)	Tanzer is a former gay porn star and Mr Leather, who is now a political activist. He has made a number of media appearances and was the subject of a BBC Three documentary on men's rights.
27	Rich Willis	*Living Differently: My Dad the Powerlifting Champion* BBC3 (2017)	Rich Willis is a world champion powerlifter with diastrophic dwarfism who has taken part in several media productions. He shared his insights about the representation of people with disabilities.

(*Continued*)

(Continued)

	Name[1]	*Production*	*Details*
28	Sheona Beaumont	*One Born Every Minute* Channel 4 (2014)	Sheona Beaumont is an artist and academic, who gave birth to her second child on *One Born Every Minute,* which is filmed using a fixed-rig of remotely operated cameras embedded into an NHS labour ward.
29	Steve Plaskitt	*The Real Death in Paradise* Discovery (2022)	Steve Plaskitt took part in *The Real Death in Paradise,* which investigated the death of his son, Charlie, while serving with the Royal Navy in the Seychelles.
30	Sue Bourne	Credits include: *A Time to Live* (2017) *Mum and Me* (2008) *My Street* (2008)	Sue Bourne is renowned documentary-maker who runs an independent production company based in London, which is known for finding the 'extraordinary in the apparently ordinary'. Her credits include *My Street*, where she knocked on every door of the street where she lives to find out what happens behind closed doors; and *Mum and Me,* about her relationship with her elderly mother who was suffering from Alzheimer's disease (see www.wellparkproductions.com).
31	Vicki Beckett	*Child of Mine* Channel 4 (2018)	Vicki Beckett agreed to be filmed for a Channel 4 documentary shortly after being told that her unborn daughter would be stillborn at 26 weeks. I interviewed Beckett about her decision to challenge the taboos around baby loss.

Notes

1. Documentary-makers are shaded grey.
2. Smith, P. 2017. Shut Ins: Britain's Fattest Woman – another exploitative and troubling Channel 4 documentary, review. *The Daily Telegraph*. 18/05/2017.
3. Lucy Wilson is a pseudonym, used at the interviewee's request.
4. Tischler, L. 2018. Reflections of a holocaust survivor. *Journal of Child Psychotherapy*. **44**(3), pp. 304–314.

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