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STEPS IN PRODUCING A DOCUMENTARY

In the previous chapters it has been convenient to assume that we all know, in general, how a documentary film or videotape gets made. There have been references to the film idea, to shooting, to editing, and to showing the final print to an audience.

But a lot happens in between coming up with an idea for a documentary and the day you wait in a darkened room while an audience views your finished product. With current technology, the entire process could take just a few days. Or with a documentary such as *Hoop Dreams*, it could take several years. It can cost a few hundred dollars or hundreds of thousands. It can be a wonderful experience or a terrible one—and you never know in advance which it will be.

So let's see what has to be done to make a documentary happen.

PREPRODUCTION

The preproduction period is crucial to the success of a documentary. Failure here sends you out on the wide ocean in a leaky boat with no charts and few provisions.

Concept

The *concept* is the documentary idea. It tells why you want to make the documentary, what it will be about, and what effect you hope it will have on an audience. In general, you should be able to state the concept in not more than a hundred words. Be specific, but don't get bogged down in details. These belong in the treatment or script.

More on the documentary idea in chapter nine.

Treatment and Script Preparation and Approval

The *treatment* for a film is often called an outline, but it really should be thought of as an explanation of the documentary you intend to make. It tells what is to be shot and why, and how the documentary will be organized to make a statement to an audience. Because it sets the visual approach to the documentary, the treatment should be written by a film- or videomaker or by a writer with a good film sense.

The problems with the Midway documentary began with the lack of a proper treatment. All that existed were several pages of the hopes and dreams of the producers—who were not filmmakers. Approval of the treatment is approval of the concept and approach set forth in the treatment.

For many documentaries, the treatment is the basic shooting document. For some, a *script* will also be written. The script is a blueprint of the documentary, as detailed as possible, for shooting and editing. For each scene it tells what is shot, how it is shot, who is in the scene, and what is said. You would have a script for a historical documentary or a re-creation, while you would expect to go with a treatment for a documentary of a unique event or a behavioral documentary.

A good script may seem a little thin on paper. That's because, as my son Greg has said, the scriptwriter should tell what goes into the documentary, not write "a manual on how to make my movie." It's the director's job to bring the script to life and the editor's job

to organize the footage into a film. The director and editor should be allowed some leeway in shooting and editing the film, if for no other reason than because an idea that reads well on paper may not work on the screen.

More on writing the documentary in chapter ten.

Budget

The budget details the cost of the documentary and is usually developed along with the treatment. Sometimes the budget will have a strong influence on the treatment, for instance when there is a specific amount of money available to produce the documentary. Then, unfortunately, you have to tailor the treatment to the budget.

There is no truth whatever to the notion that a film or video should cost so many dollars per minute. The cost of a documentary depends entirely on what is to be shot, how many days it will take to shoot it, how large a crew is required, the equipment that will be used, and all the other things that may go into a production, such as the cost of actors, props, makeup, special effects, and special items such as original music. Only the cost of film printing is related to the running length of the finished print.

It's a good idea to develop a budgeting checklist to be sure all costs are accounted for. And once you've developed a budget, be sure to allow 10 to 15 percent extra for unforeseen contingencies. More on budgeting a documentary in chapter fifteen.

Scouting and Preproduction Planning

With the script and budget approved, the real work begins—getting ready to shoot.

Scouting. Scouting is necessary if the documentary is to be shot on location. The director and camera operator need to know about the places they'll be shooting in—what they look like, what the

light and sound levels will be, and whether there are going to be any constraints on shooting.

More on scouting in chapter eleven.

Casting. If actors will be used, the director needs to audition them. Similarly, the director may need to meet and talk with any people who are not actors who will be appearing in the documentary, to select those who will look and sound good on camera and who won't freeze up when the lights come on.

More on working with people who are not actors in chapter nineteen and on casting in chapter twenty.

Scheduling. A production schedule has to be worked out, which will make the most efficient and effective use of time, money, people, and equipment.

Scheduling is covered in chapter fourteen.

Crew. A production crew has to be selected. While it is possible to shoot a documentary with just a camera operator and sound recordist, the normal minimum crew for a nonfiction film will also include a director and a production assistant or camera assistant. More complex films will require additional people.

More on crew selection in chapter twelve.

Film or Video? The decision as to whether you will be recording on film or videotape has to be made. In general, film gives better quality, but video offers greater economy. Film should probably be used if you have any idea of releasing the documentary to theaters. For all other uses, video will probably suffice.

Equipment and Supplies. The appropriate equipment has to be chosen and reserved or rented. The appropriate film stock or videotape has to be ordered. If the documentary is to be shot on film, arrangements need to be made with a processing lab. More on equipment and supplies in chapter thirteen.

PRODUCTION

Then the documentary goes into production.

Filming and Recording

There can be no documentary until footage has been recorded. Shooting film or recording videotape for your documentary can occur in quite limited time and space or may require months or years in many different locations.

Shooting Ratio. Normally, far more footage is shot than can be used in the final version. This allows for retakes, changes in camera angle or position, and some risk taking—filming of scenes or events that could be great if they work out, or could be nothing. The relationship of the amount of footage shot to that used in the final print is the shooting ratio. Most documentaries will require a shooting ratio of at least 10:1. Others may go 20:1, or even 50:1 or 100:1. It all depends on what is being shot. Recording video permits a much higher shooting ratio than using film, since videotape is much cheaper to buy than film and requires no processing.

Film Processing and Sound Transfer

If your documentary is being shot on film, the film is sent off to a processing laboratory to be developed. At the same time, the sound that has been recorded on audiotape is transferred at a sound laboratory to magnetic film. This is a film stock base that has been coated with a magnetic emulsion for recording. The *mag film* is used in editing and postproduction.

The camera original is carefully stored until it is needed to make the final print of the film—either at the vault at the lab or in a safe place where you are—and a copy is made for you to work with. Until recently, this would have been a film work print, which is a low-cost print from the original for use in editing. Today, however,

the film will most likely be transferred to videotape for viewing and editing on a video editing system.

Viewing Videotape Footage

If you have been shooting on videotape, you don't have to deal with laboratory processing and sound transfer since videotape is ready for playback immediately after recording. But even though videotape can tolerate much more handling than film original, most documentarians will make copies of all the camera tapes to work with. The originals go in the vault for protection until the last step in video postproduction—on-line editing.

POSTPRODUCTION

Postproduction is full of hopes and dreams. Production is all potential. But it is in postproduction that you have to deal with reality. This is where you discover what you really have in the footage as opposed to what you think you shot. Editing is the heart of the documentary process. This is where you shape the material you've recorded into a coherent visual statement for presentation to an audience.

Look and Log

The first thing to do is to find out what you've got. Everything that was shot must be viewed and logged for later reference. A written log is essential, because as the footage piles up—and in a documentary this can mean hours and hours of film or tape—it's impossible to remember what reel each shot is on. Both film and video come with reference numbers which can be used in preparing the log.

More on this in chapter twenty-three.

Editing

Rough Cut. The good takes are organized into a rough cut, which is the first edited version of the documentary. The rough cut is edited to see how things go together. Since the editing may not be much more than splicing the takes together, the rough cut will usually be longer than the intended final length of the print. Such refinements as music, narration, titles, and optical effects may only be suggested.

Fine Cut. In essence, the rough cut teaches you what your footage is like, while editing to fine cut may be a slow process of seeing what scenes go together in what order to make the documentary statement. Getting to a fine cut usually involves a series of successive approximations, each of which gets closer to the documentary lurking in your imagination. This may be a long, slow process.

Titles, Music, and Narration. These visual and sound elements are added during postproduction. Music, if it is to be used, is composed or selected and scored to the fine cut. If there is to be a narration, it should be written (or rewritten), recorded, and transferred at this point.

More on editing in chapter twenty-four.

Review and Approval of Off-line or Interlock

When the fine cut is completed, there is usually a formal step at which the documentary is reviewed in its current state and approved for completion. If it has been edited on film, this step requires an *interlock*, which is the showing of the fine cut with all the picture and sound in its proper place. This is a critical formal step in film production, because following approval at interlock, the filmmaker will cut the original, mix the sound, and have a print made—all of which are expensive. Interlock is, therefore, the last point at which changes can be made inexpensively.

If the fine cut has been done on videotape, this stage simply

involves viewing the video off-line edit. And, again, approval moves the production to on-line editing, which can be expensive.

Finishing on Film

The process of completing the documentary is different with film than it is with video.

The Sound Mix. The filmmaker takes the edited work print and all the various edited sound tracks (there may be several) to a sound lab for a sound mix. The tracks are skillfully blended into a single composite sound track in perfect sync with the picture.

Conforming the Camera Original. The camera original is taken out of the vault and sent with the edited work print to a conforming editor. This is the most critical technical step in post-production, since it involves cutting and splicing the original to match the work print frame for frame.

Laboratory Printing of an Answer Print. Next the preprint materials—the conformed original, the composite sound track, the edited work print, and a scene-by-scene log of the work print—go to the processing laboratory. The original is timed, which means estimating the correct printing exposure for each scene, and color-corrected, which means determining the color composition of the light on the printer to give each scene the best color.

Timing and color correction are estimates, although pretty accurate ones at most labs. The real test lies in the first print made: the *answer print*, which answers the question "How close did we get?" The answer print is also sometimes called a check print. It is for internal use for checking and correcting. It is not a print to be shown to the public.

Corrections and Printing of the Release Print. The filmmaker checks the timing and color correction of the answer print and the synchronization of the sound track with the picture, and necessary

corrections are noted. The answer print is returned to the lab, the changes are made, and a *release print* is struck. This should be the first perfect print of the film, and is the one shown to the public.

Manufacture of a Printing Negative. A *printing negative* is usually made to protect the conformed original. This is a single strand of negative from which prints in quantity can be struck. An internegative is made from reversal (positive) film. In making the printing negative, the film can be blown up from 16mm to 35mm for theater use.

Film-to-Tape Transfer. If the film is to be released on videotape or videocassette, a video master will be made from a clean release print, which may be interlocked with the composite magnetic track for the best possible sound.

Finishing on Videotape

Video is edited by rerecording rather than splicing. Therefore each approximation—or edited version—is, in a sense, a finished product. The video equivalent to cutting and splicing the film work print is the off-line edit. This is done in a small—and usually inexpensive—editing suite that can handle the normal editing functions but may lack effects, graphics, and other expensive support found in an on-line editing studio.

Sound Sweetening. Videotape offers only two to four sound tracks on the tape itself. Therefore, in order to have the kind of sound complexity in video production that film editors have long taken for granted, video editors have developed the process of *sound sweetening*. Once the video is frozen, either as an off-line template for on-line editing or as a completed on-line, it is taken into a sound studio, where multiple tracks are synchronized with the picture and layers of sound can be added as needed.

On-line Editing. The final editing stage is the on-line edit, in which the edited master tape for the finished documentary is created with all of its components—picture, graphics, narration, titles, and sweetened sound—in place.

Duplicate Master. A duplicate video master may be made from the edited master videotape if copies in quantity are desired. Its purpose is the same as that of the printing negative with film: to protect the original from being worn out by repeatedly passing through the equipment as copies are made.

Tape-to-Film Transfer. It is possible to do a tape-to-film transfer from videotape, resulting in a printing negative and sound track from which prints on motion picture film can be made. This is an expensive process and the quality of the film print made from videotape will usually not be as good as a print made from original film stock.

More on finishing the documentary in chapter twenty-five.

Distribution

This is the last step in the process—getting a usable print of the film or copy of the videotape in the hands of the intended audience.

And that's the process—all the steps that have to be gone through to take a film or tape from idea to audience. Some of the steps are more fun, more interesting, or just plain more like filmmaking than others. Some involve a great deal of skill and creativity. Some are more or less mechanical. And some are mainly administrative. But each step is important to the full realization of the finished documentary.

THE DOCUMENTARY IDEA

Planning a documentary begins with the documentary idea. And the documentary idea may begin with nothing more than a vague urge in some direction. For instance, I've noticed that some of the pedestrian walk lights in my city are on for no longer than four seconds. The other day, as I tried to walk across a seven-lane boulevard on a four-second light, three cars—one right after the other—made a right turn on red without stopping, keeping me from even trying to cross while I had that oh-so-brief walk light. And the thought flashed across my mind, "I wish I had that on videotape. I'd like to show it to the county council."

Maybe that urge will grow until it becomes forceful enough to result in a documentary on pedestrian safety, or dumb traffic engineering, or bad driving. And maybe it won't. Making a documentary requires time, energy, and money. So the documentary idea has to be important enough to you for you to put in the time and energy to gather the money and do the work.

WHAT IS THE CONCEPT?

A documentary idea is some sort of notion of what the film will be about. As the idea evolves, it will come to determine, more and more, what will be shown on the screen in the final print of the film.

My idea about videotaping what happens at a traffic light could result in several different documentaries. Because I'm interested in behavior, I'd probably state the idea initially in terms of filming the behavior of pedestrians and motorists at traffic lights. But then there's the business of that four-second WALK light. I'd want to find out why that was permitted—it's too short to do any good—and what the rationale was.

It might turn out that the people responsible don't even realize that the WALK light is on for so short a time. They may be working from some formula that says the steady, red DON'T WALK light must be on for so many seconds for each lane of traffic, and before that the Flashing, red DON'T WALK light must be on for a specified period of time, and all that is left is four seconds of WALK time. If that were the case, then the documentary idea and the resulting film might lurch in the direction of exploring bureaucratic rules that don't accomplish their purpose.

It might be that in the course of researching and filming the traffic light idea, a community group—senior citizens, perhaps—would try to call this to the attention of responsible lawmakers in order to have the situation corrected. In my experience, calling government's attention to something silly that it is doing rarely results in immediate rectification of the error. So the documentary might look at the process of trying to get a stupid situation corrected when government agencies are involved.

At this point, what started as a random thought about documenting a stupid situation has begun to evolve into the kind of film I like—a documentary of human behavior with the outcome in doubt.

Why Do You Want to Make This Documentary?

At the International Documentary Association Documentary Workshop in late 1994, Mitchell Block, a University of Southern California professor and head of Direct Cinema, Ltd., spoke about the documentary idea. "I submit that all works," he said, "whether they are fiction or nonfiction, are made for one of two reasons—either to do good or to make money."

What is your reason?

The best documentaries are undoubtedly made because the documentarian had a driving desire to deal with the topic. Still, there's nothing wrong with making money. It's just that if you approach making your documentary primarily from the point of view of making money, you're faced with one set of questions:

- What is the market for this kind of documentary?
- What is this market buying?
- How can I make my project attractive to this market?

Whereas if you approach your documentary with a burning desire to get it made, the important questions are somewhat different:

- What do I want to show?
- What do I need to show?
- What will it cost to do this?
- How can I raise enough money to get this documentary made?

The Things We Do for Love

My own bias is always to go for the documentary you burn to make. There are plenty of good reasons, and the first is that those projects I have taken on just for the money have never been satisfactory, either artistically or financially. But those I have done because I really wanted to do them have paid off in many unexpected ways.

It takes an enormous amount of time and a substantial amount of money to make any film or video—even a very bad one. So why invest your creative force in something you're not in love with? The annals of filmmaking are stuffed with examples of projects no one wanted except the filmmaker—until they were finished. But nobody either counts or reports on the dull, mediocre, and sometimes unfinished projects that were taken on to make a buck.

I'm distinguishing here between serious documentaries and commercial videos. I write, and sometimes produce and direct, sales and corporate videos as my day job. And I invest very little of myself in these other than my demonstrated *skill* at getting such

projects made. If the client wants changes, I don't argue; I make them. Unless, of course, they are absolutely stupid. In which case I point out that these changes will be bad for the final product. Even so, if the client insists, I make the stupid changes, because this is not my project, it's the client's.

But when I'm making a documentary, I'm in charge, and it has to be done my way. And no one brings that kind of passion to a project undertaken just to make money. The story is that *Woodstock*, the movie—which was a tour de force documentary project about Woodstock, the event—almost didn't get made. With time running out before the concert, negotiations almost broke down between the promoters and Michael Wadleigh, who directed the film. At the last moment, the filmmakers managed to explain that Wadleigh wasn't asking for a bigger piece or more money. "He just wants creative control." With that agreed to, the film was made, and it became a part of documentary history.

At the IDA Documentary Workshop, the experts kept repeating that it's going to take three years to get funding. Who wants to spend that kind of time and money for anything less than a project you believe in?

Building a Body of Work

Mitchell Block went on to say at the workshop that he thought it was important to design a work "that you can build on. So if you want to make films dealing with women's issues, make sure your first work is dealing with women." In other words, your body of work begins with your first project.

Like it or not, to the outside world—especially sponsors, underwriters, and funding agencies—you are what you do. And each documentary is a learning experience. So it's important to be learning the things that let you demonstrate that you are able to do the kind of work you want to do.

Can You State the Concept in a Few Words?

Sol Worth would ask his film students to begin the process of planning their documentaries by writing a short statement that began, "I want to make a film about . . ." Sol always asked for it in a hundred words or less. That was good discipline, especially for graduate students who were more accustomed to writing several pages than one paragraph. But it's also realistic. You should be able to describe the bones of a workable documentary idea in two or three sentences—something a little longer than the blurb in *TV Guide* but somewhat shorter than a letter to a friend.

Try it. If you have an idea for a documentary, see if you can state it in a hundred words or less.

Here's mine: I want to do a documentary about . . .

. . . why my town has four-second walk lights when it takes twenty seconds to cross the street. Public figures are alarmed by a rise in pedestrian fatalities, which wouldn't happen, they say, if people would use the WALK lights. We'll show that WALK lights on many wide avenues are on for just four seconds! We'll show that drivers making turns often don't check for pedestrians, so intersections may be the most dangerous place to cross. Then we'll explore who knew about the short walk lights, why the situation has persisted, and whether government helps or resists common sense change.

That's ninety-nine words. The statement tells what I am thinking about and what the thrust of the documentary will be. Each sentence evokes additional ideas for amplification and suggests images that could be recorded to make up the visual evidence of the documentary. But it's only a first draft. As the concept evolves through research, thought, discussion, and the process of getting it down on paper, it is bound to change.

Here's another. My documentary *A Young Child Is . . .* was to be a film about learning in children too young to go to school. I

had absolutely no idea how the final film would begin or end, or what it would look like. But I had a statement of what the film was about, and what it was supposed to do:

The film will show the tremendous amount of learning that children do on their own, long before they ever get near a school. It will demonstrate to teachers and school administrators (the intended audience) that children are not born on the steps of the kindergarten at the age of five.

Note that these short statements are for the documentarian's use. They are the concept from which everything else that goes into the documentary will eventually flow. They are not what you would write for a fund-raising proposal. That might begin with the details of one of the pedestrian fatalities or with an example of out-of-school learning in small children. Nor are they treatments—although they might be the start of a treatment. The actual treatment for *A Young Child Is . . .* is included in chapter ten.

Does the Concept Lead to Concrete Images That Can Be Recorded on Video or Film?

The documentary idea should help you to develop a shot list for your documentary. It should suggest where you have to go and who and what you need to shoot to record the visual evidence you need. This should lead you to imagine the kinds of concrete images that would serve as evidence of what you want to show.

When I was teaching documentary filmmaking with Sol Worth, this was the point at which the students would normally ask, "How can I do that? It will all depend on what happens when I get there."

That's when Sol would say, "Make it up. Make up a list of ideal scenes that would show exactly what you want." This is, of course, actually a process of fine-tuning yourself as an observing and decision-making instrument. It is not that you will try to shoot the

scenes that you have made up. But the exercise of listing possible scenes will help you be ready to recognize the kinds of images you should be looking for when they happen.

If you can't make up a complete hypothetical shot list based on your documentary idea, the idea isn't good enough.

CONVENTIONAL CONCEPTS

I think there's a Hollywood way of looking at documentary, which often is to see it as a stepping stone to doing feature films. Which means making a documentary with big-screen production values. Certainly, having a big-screen look was a consideration for Theodore Thomas in making *Frank and Ollie*, about two of Disney's foremost animators. Because he wanted to use clips from the Disney library as part of the documentary, he felt any new documentary footage he would shoot had to be done with enough production value to be able to intercut with the Disney animation without jarring the viewer.

There has certainly been a PBS way, which is to deal with certain themes and ignore others, to concentrate heavily on interviews, and to mix in a little academic art or humanity to improve funding.

I'm sure there's a cable TV way, as seen on The Discovery Channel, A & E, The History Channel, The Learning Channel, and so on. Their documentaries tend to deal with biographical figures, historical events, and gadgets—including the weapons of war and Hollywood special effects—possibly just because there's interesting footage available of gadgets at work.

Then there are reality videos—made by putting a camera crew in the back of a cop car or in an emergency room or anywhere else that interesting and exploitable footage may be recorded.

Documentary Categories

In the worlds of network and cable TV, where the way you describe an "original" idea is to name the other films it is like, and where

you can't get a script read unless you are willing to sign a release which acknowledges that there are no new ideas, you are going to be asked to fit your documentary into a precast set of categories—historical, biographical, social commentary, unusual events, travel, nature, or behind-the-scenes, for example. At the IDA Documentary Workshop, Mitchell Block suggested that all documentaries fit into one of the four Ps: *portrait, performance, place, and poetry*. To which I would add *process*, to include the documentary of a unique event with the end in doubt, although I think Block might include that under his category of performance.

But I'm also convinced that in documentary—just as in feature films, book writing, painting, music, and drama—there are the exciting and unexpected results that come from dedicated artists immersed in impossible projects that seem totally reasonable to them. And these aren't easy to categorize.

One of the reasons that a series like *FDR* is able to raise over two million dollars in funding is that it's easy to categorize. That makes it easy for underwriters to know what they are putting money into and what they can expect to see when it's done.

It certainly took a lot more courage for the Michigan Council for the Arts to put money into *Roger & Me* than for any funder to give money to *FDR*.

Terry Zwiggoff had great difficulty in raising money from conventional sources for his offbeat documentary *Crumb*. He said every now and then he'd put together a short sample tape and travel from San Francisco to L.A. looking for money. And it was available—if he were willing to change the concept to a more conventional portrait of an unconventional artist. Which he wouldn't do.

Overdone Ideas

In spite of the voracious appetite of cable TV and the willingness of PBS to fund bad documentaries, it is very hard to get funding for, or to license the distribution of, a documentary on a subject that has already been covered. At least not until a lot of years have passed since the first film was made.

AIDS awareness, problems of the homeless, environmental pollution, and many other subjects are certainly worthwhile, and a righteous way for a documentarian to spend his or her time, except . . . they've already been done! And done to death!

If your documentary idea is about a hot topic that is getting a lot of coverage in the newspapers and popular magazines, you're too late. You can be sure there are documentaries—or proposals for documentaries—on that topic already in the works. And if the topic is so hot that you saw something about it on TV, forget it; it's already old and done.

On the other hand, if you have a truly original slant on an old topic, then it becomes new again, and you may be able to get both funding and distribution.

The point is that for conventional support, your idea has to be conventional enough to be understood but different enough that it hasn't been done before.

Unconventional Concepts

Crumb got made and has enjoyed decent success in theatrical release. It's a dark, moody, revealing story of three brothers from a very strange family. Zwiggoff's concept for the film is so much stronger than any conventional biography would be that he was right to wait it out, even though it took seven years to complete the film.

Roger & Me is a brilliant satire on corporate public relations and municipal mismanagement.

Woodstock became a legend in its own time.

If you want it badly enough, you'll find a way to get it made. And if your documentary idea is good, your filming is honest and effective, and the editing skillfully organizes your footage to present the idea clearly to an audience, you'll have a documentary you can be proud of. And if you've gone that far, then either this documentary—or the next one—will make you some money.

PLANNING

With a good documentary idea, you should have a lot of confidence that you will be able to find good images—good visual evidence—with which to tell your story. But it still requires planning to be in the right place at the right time with the camera on and in focus. Look, if it were easy, everyone could do it.

You have to plan:

- what kinds of events will be shot
- where you'll go to shoot them
- who—or what types of people—will be included
- what sort of behavior you are looking for
- what you need for background or for establishing shots
- what kinds of statements—either from behavioral footage or from interviews—will help you present the documentary idea

A Planless Documentary

Without a good documentary idea and the requisite planning step, you're just like the cops and robbers in a bad TV show—going out and shooting all over the place without hitting anything. Sad to say, a lot of documentaries get made that way.

Much of the next chapter, *Writing a Documentary*, is adapted from my book *Video Scriptwriting*. Here is a story I tell in that book about a documentary that lost its way:

I got a call from a good friend, a producer-director, who said his company had shot a lot of video documenting a unique event. A chain of restaurants had opened several new locations and had added some new items to their menu. They decided to make a special day out of officially opening, or reopening, five of their restaurants. They had the restaurants blessed by a minister—which is a tradition in Hawaii—and they offered live music, balloons, prizes, and freebies at each of the five locations. Customers were encouraged to visit all five restaurants that day and get a special "passport" stamped to win a prize.

Members of the company's executive staff traveled from location to location accompanied by a Dixieland band and my client's video crew. My friend (and client) told me that the public relations firm which handled the restaurants was originally going to write the script, but now they wanted him to bring in a writer.

I found out why as soon as I got a look at the footage. In spite of the fact that there were two camera crews in operation all the time, and that the same procedure was gone through at each of the five restaurants, the footage was woefully incomplete. For instance, it didn't contain a complete sequence of a blessing, a complete statement of the purpose of the event by someone from management, or even a complete song from the Dixieland band. It just showed the same set of mistakes being made five times.

Along with the footage, I got some written information about what this special day was supposed to be, including the PR firm's own game plan for the event. So I had a pretty good idea of what was missing. These are excerpts from a letter I sent to my client about the footage:

There are no shots whatsoever of the special passports (500 to be given out at each restaurant). No shots of anyone receiving a passport. No shots of anyone explaining the passport. No shots of a passport getting stamped at a store.

Although six different radio stations participated, there is only limited footage of two radio DJs, and no radio broadcast audio.

There is only one shot of a drawing for a door prize (which is also one of the two shots of the DJs).

Too much camera time is spent on people from the PR firm riding the bus.

No close-up of an employee wearing the Celebration Day button.

I don't see in the footage any evidence that "each restaurant will be decorated professionally" as indicated in the game plan.

There is . . . no systematic coverage of the new menu items. There is one shot of the menu, close-up of the word *NEW*, and no return to what is *NEW*.

There is no complete coverage—establishing shot, MS, CU while the sound continues—of the country and western band at Westridge Shopping Center or the Hawaiian music group at Windward City Shopping Center.

No footage of the 20 x 30 posters announcing Celebration Day.

We have no interviews or statements from (company executives) such as:

“This is an important marketing test for use on the mainland.”

“We’re introducing a new image, brighter more complete restaurants, rather than takeout places, and a new menu.”

“This is going to be great for business.”

I want to stress that this footage was not shot by a bunch of amateur wannabes who went out with their camcorders and got into trouble. The work was done by a highly regarded film and video production company in Honolulu. The production involved a director and a cameraman who had created many award-winning commercials, but who had no experience with unscripted productions, especially a documentary of a unique event. They obviously had gone off to shoot an actuality situation with little or no planning in the belief that all they had to do was be there and reality would jump right into their cameras.

They had never developed a clear documentary idea, and therefore had not made a plan, a shot list, or even a guess list of what to shoot.

Focus on Showing, Not Shooting

It is almost impossible to go into production without a plan when the documentarian is focused on the film or video that will be *shown* rather than the one that will be *shot*. There are documentarians who can see the final print in their mind's eye long before they have exposed a single frame. And there are those who have no idea what the final print will look like when they start out, but who know what they want the documentary to communicate, and who have a strong notion of what they are trying to get as raw material from which to edit the program.

DOCUMENTING BEHAVIOR OR A UNIQUE EVENT

A documentary idea—especially one that involves filming human behavior or documenting a unique event—is a plan. It can never be a script. The script for a documentary of a unique event, if there is one, will be written in the editing room.

Overplanning

A friend of mine was hired as a sound recordist for a documentary about auto racing at Daytona. Even though a race is a unique event with the end in doubt, the director, who was also the camera operator, had carefully worked out every shot, down to the camera angle, time of day, and height of the sun.

For one of the scenes, the camera was carefully placed to aim up the track and catch the cars coming out of a turn. Suddenly, behind the camera, there was a multicar accident, with lots of crunching, grinding, flames, and smoke. My friend heard it on his earphones and turned to look.

“Quick! Turn the camera!” he shouted. “There’s a hell of an accident just behind us. We’ll get everything.”

“I don’t plan to shoot an accident,” said the filmmaker, and he went on shooting race cars coming out of the corner and speeding past the camera.

Maybe he was right.

And maybe the cameraman in Rome in the story in chapter two was right, also.

Obviously, you'll never get a film made if your camera is at the mercy of every stray event that blows in on the breeze.

But I think they were overzealous.

In Rome, an inflexible attitude toward film technology prevented the filming of a unique event. At Daytona, although there were no technical reasons not to shoot, rigid adherence to the script took control, and a unique opportunity was lost.

Planning for A Young Child Is . . .

Based on the documentary idea, and my research, I had some rough ideas about the kinds of learning that might be demonstrated at various ages. I wanted to show on film that young children learn from their direct experience with the world around them, and that verbal interaction plays a relatively small part in their learning. I believed that small children actually learn from failure, without being defeated by it. I wanted to show that they can fail at what they are trying to do without getting a sense of failure. That they are self-correcting.

I wanted to use normal, healthy children from babies up to kids about four and a half years old. I wanted a mixture of boys and girls, white and black. I knew that I wanted a child who was young enough to be completely dependent on others, another who was learning to walk and talk, a "body bright" child who was gaining experience from direct physical contact with the world, another child gaining experience with language, and so on.

In short, I had a strong notion of the kind of behavior I was looking for and how to recognize it when it happened. And I had a pretty good idea of what the finished film should do, even though I had not the least idea of the images that would eventually be included.

Partly in preparation for this film, I had screened a large number of films on early childhood. Virtually all of them suffered from the

same flaw: a script had been written that told some expert's opinion of what children should be like at various ages. Then children had been filmed doing whatever the expert said they would do, to illustrate the script.

I wanted to start with the real behavior of some normal children and then put a film together that would let an audience observe that behavior.

Accepting What Is There

In this way we captured on film some truly unique elements of early learning in children. For instance, we found a thirteen-month-old boy who was just starting to walk and just beginning to experiment with making sounds in the pattern of English sentences. Since these were both things that I wanted for the film, we went to his house and filmed him playing on the floor.

At one point he was playing alone with some toys—occasionally taking a drink from his bottle. It seemed like a good establishing shot, even though I couldn't see that anything we were looking for was happening. But behavior is behavior, and besides, I thought that at any moment he might start to do something important, like talk. So we kept the camera on him and running. In a couple of minutes he crawled over to his mother, then stood up and tried to walk. Great! Just what we'd come for!

Much later, I began trying to edit this sequence. On about the fifth or sixth time through the footage, I began to realize that something truly important was going on in that "establishing shot." The child was engaged in behavior that I was convinced—from watching my own kids—was the key to learning in young children, but had never before been able to prove.

Here's what he was doing:

While he was playing alone, he kept rubbing a wet spot on the rug. Then he picked up his bottle, lying near the spot, and sucked on it. He put the bottle down and touched the wet spot. Then he picked up the bottle and shook it until some drops fell out onto the rug. Finally, he rubbed the spot he had just made.

As far as I was concerned, that thirteen-month-old baby had formed a hypothesis about how the wet spot got on the rug, had tested it empirically with his bottle, and had satisfied himself as to the results of his experiment. And when he was done, he crawled off to play with his mom.

This became the opening of the film. I had the original footage duplicated so I could run it twice. The first time, I said to the audience in narration, "Here's a baby playing on the floor. What do you see?" The second time, I explained my interpretation, step by step, as we watched the child's behavior.

In effect, this scene became the topic sentence for the rest of the film. An audience could disagree with my interpretation. What they couldn't do was ignore the behavior that they had seen.

That behavior came from the child, spontaneously.

But the conceptual framework, and the preparedness to recognize what was happening in a simple establishing scene, came from the film idea.

WRITING A DOCUMENTARY

The modern documentary quite often will run from beginning to end without a word of narration or dialogue and without anyone acting out a written scenario. And so it should. A large part of the fascination of doing documentary is this: What happens in the real world is often far more interesting—and usually more exciting and astonishing—than anything that could be made up by a scriptwriter.

So what's to write?

Quite a bit. The writing phase may extend from preproduction all the way to the final stages of postproduction. The writing may be done by the producer, the director—sometimes even the editor—or by a designated scriptwriter. It expands the documentary idea into a plan for shooting and, at the very least, a theory for editing.

WHAT DOES THE WRITER DO?

So what does a screenwriter do in documentary?

The answer depends on the kind of documentary. If it's a historical documentary, a biography, or a re-creation or reenactment of some event, the writer's work will be very similar to writing a feature film. The writer must gather and organize the information and

RECORDING HUMAN BEHAVIOR

When my oldest son, Jeffrey, was about six years old, I took him to the TV studio at The Annenberg School of Communications, where graduate students were prepping a project in which several artists would demonstrate their work.

We arrived before taping began. In the center of the studio a sculptor had set up an armature loaded with wet clay which he was smoothing with a curved tool. Jeff was enthusiastic about anything to do with art, and he was fascinated by the sculptor. He stopped to watch, while I wandered off to talk with some friends.

The next time I noticed my son, he was standing on an apple box with a wire tool in his hand, reaching up over his head to smooth the clay just as the sculptor had been doing. He appeared to be totally absorbed in the work and made such an interesting picture that the students moved in video cameras to photograph him.

I went to master control to watch on the monitors there. You could see his intense concentration as he carefully worked the clay, and the students working as control room crew were ecstatic. "Look how natural he is!" they said. "How unselfconscious! He's not even paying any attention to the cameras."

In a little while I went back down to the studio. Jeff had been working with the clay for at least fifteen minutes.

RECORDING HUMAN BEHAVIOR

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"How's it going?" I asked him.

"My arms are killing me," he said without looking up, barely moving his lips.

"Then quit," I said, "and we'll go up to my office and get a Coke."

"I can't," he said.

"Why not?"

"The cameras are still on."

It makes you wonder what the truth is about recording behavior. Does it require a hidden camera to get real behavior? Or can we go into a situation with camera running and expect to record behavior that not only looks genuine but has the ring of truth to it?

Good documentary images don't just happen. You have to plan for them. You have to hunt them out. You have to be disciplined when you are shooting. And you have to come to grips with the tremendous power you exercise just because you and your crew have come onto the scene.

WHAT IT TAKES

Recording human behavior requires sufficient mastery of the recording technology—whether video or motion picture—to allow you to concentrate on the people being filmed.

It requires a contract—not only unwritten, but perhaps never spoken—with these people that you will be a professional and will not abuse their amateur standing. You will let them do whatever they are doing without bothering them with your production problems.

It requires a separate contract with the audience that you will show them the truth as you know it to be, and will not knowingly fool them.

It requires the ability to plan for the unexpected and the ability to discard preconceptions when they don't fit what people are doing in front of the camera.

It requires a high tolerance for uncertainty—a willingness to

turn the camera on and let videotape or film run through it with the clock running and production costs mounting in the optimistic belief that something interesting will happen.

It requires an understanding of what is happening in the filming situation, and how that relates to the edited film that will be shown to an audience.

HOW NOT TO RECORD BEHAVIOR

I was shooting a simple interview with a police captain in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania. I had hired a highly professional film crew that had shot many industrial films. But we had never worked together. The camera operator turned out to be the best I've ever worked with at getting clean, well-exposed, nicely composed footage. The camera assistant was an obsessive about keeping the slates and camera log in order, and a tyrant about cleanliness. The sound recordist could get a useable sound bite inside a cement mixer.

The film was focused on community reaction to a plan to provide care and treatment for mental patients in their home communities rather than in large, state-operated institutions. We had picked Wilkes-Barre because this subject had already evoked strong feelings there. I was after community reaction, and I wanted people to be as spontaneous as possible on camera. In briefing the crew, I had told them I wanted an invisible wall between us and anyone we were filming, so that the subjects would not try to be actors.

On that first day, we went to the center square of Wilkes-Barre to interview the police captain. He was a man in his late forties, responsible for police-community relations and also a member of the board of directors of the local mental health organization. I was after his comments on reports that former mental patients had been gathering in the square and annoying other residents.

A Crack in the Invisible Wall

Because I hoped to use his answers to my questions as a kind of running narrative, I was not in the picture. The captain wore a wireless microphone, but I didn't. As we got ready to shoot, the sound recordist said, "Captain, would you repeat the question before you start to answer, so I'll get it on tape?"

That's not my style, because it's a crack in the invisible wall, but it didn't seem too much to ask, so I let it pass. I certainly wasn't going to *prompt* him to repeat the questions, but if he could remember to do it, editing the film might be a little easier.

We slated the first take and began walking and talking. After I had gotten his name and occupation, I asked, "Captain, what about the reports of former mental patients hanging out in the square? Has this been much of a problem?"

"Well, it really hasn't been a problem," he started.

"Repeat the question!" yelled the sound recordist.

"Oh, right," said the captain. "Well, let's see. Has there been much of a problem . . ."

"Could you walk a little faster?" asked the camera operator.

At that point, with the invisible wall crumbling, I yelled, "Cut!"

"It looks terrible," the camera operator said. "You're hardly walking."

"And try to remember to repeat the question," the sound recordist added.

We started again, got through the next couple of questions, and were in the middle of the third when the camera operator took the camera down from his shoulder.

"The film ran out," he said.

Although the film camera was an Eclair NPR, which boasted a five-second magazine change, we stood around for about two minutes while the camera assistant pulled the lens, checked the gate for cleanliness, changed magazines, and set a new slate.

"The walking just doesn't look good," the camera operator told me.

"Okay," I said, "let's pick a spot and stand there and talk."

Death of an Interview

We found a good spot in front of some old people sunning themselves on a bench and started again.

"What was I saying?" the captain asked.

"You were answering the question about police training," the sound recordist told him.

"Better start again," the camera operator said. "It's a new location."

CAPTAIN: Well, the officers . . .

SOUND: Repeat the question!

CAMERA: Could you cheat this way a little more?

CAPTAIN: How's this?

CAMERA: That's good.

SOUND: Remember to repeat the question.

CAPTAIN: What was I saying?

SOUND: Police training.

CAPTAIN: The Wilkes-Barre Police Department has implemented a comprehensive, communitywide, innovative program of . . .

We got through it with several more interruptions. The tape ran out and we had to wait while the sound recordist put in a new reel. A noisy truck went by and we had to repeat a question and answer. But by then it didn't matter. I was no longer interviewing a police captain who knew a great deal about the problem we had come to film. I was playing a bad scene with an amateur actor who was trying to please my crew. In the rushes, the picture was sharp and well composed and the sound was clear. But the captain had been reduced to a boring bureaucrat, spouting officialese and qualifying every statement. His film debut had to be postponed indefinitely.

A SET OF IDEAS ABOUT DOCUMENTING BEHAVIOR

In directing and editing my own documentaries, in viewing hundreds of videos and films made by others, and in teaching documentary production in both video and film, I've come up with a set of ideas about documenting behavior. Let's look at these one at a time.

When We Photograph People, It Is Behavior That We Record on Videotape or Film, and Nothing Else

We don't record personality, or the way people are, or what they believe, or what they think. Those things must be *inferred* from the behavior we observe. We see physical behavior, including the way in which a person dresses and grooms himself. We hear verbal behavior; not just the words themselves, but the way in which the words are spoken. And that is all. In documentary, as in life, this is the evidence from which we infer the essence of a person's character.

People Behave Differently in Different Situations

How people act, their body posture, facial expression, tone of voice—even the way they dress and the language they use—are situation-specific in accordance with social rules. We expect people to act differently in different situations—so much so that when people do not alter their behavior to fit the situation, we say, "They don't know how to behave." So it is not surprising if people alter their behavior in front of a documentary crew and camera. As we'll see, this is not really a problem.

People's Behavior Will Remain Consistent with Their Beliefs about Themselves and Their Place in the World

While we can expect situation-specific variations in behavior, it is the overall pattern that counts. If we have had a chance to observe

someone's behavior in one situation fairly carefully, we should be able to make pretty good inferences about that person's beliefs about himself and his world. Therefore, we should be able to make fairly strong predictions about how he will behave in other situations. Naturally, the more we can see someone in different situations, the more powerful are the inferences about him that we can make.

Most People Are Unable to Maintain a Pose or Act Out a Role for Any Length of Time

Most people just aren't very good actors. In fact, many people may not have much of an idea of what their normal behavior is. They never see themselves as others see them, so they have no authentic baseline from which to alter their behavior.

Try to role-play a personality different from your own for an hour or so. To do so with any credibility—and without a script—without going out of character even once, requires intense concentration. Much more than people are willing to give just to fool a camera. And that is the point to this section: People's behavior in front of a camera will be consistent with their behavior elsewhere. Even if they start out playing a role, they'll soon fall back on their normal pattern of behavior.

It Is Hard for People to Be Themselves When They Have Nothing to Do

You can't just plop people down in front of a camera, tell them to be themselves, and start recording. What you'll get is people trying to remember how they act when they are being themselves.

The Presence of a Video or Film Crew Becomes a Factor in the Documentary Situation

The pretense that the camera is not there, which was so much a part of the traditional documentary, simply distorts the evidence

that is recorded in a behavioral documentary. That's why I often include in a documentary at least one shot of the crew at work. It reminds the audience that what they are seeing took place in front of a camera and microphone, under lights, with one or more strangers tiptoeing around behind the scene.

If the people in the scene are busy doing familiar things, they'll get interested in what they are doing and let the camera take care of itself. Even in an interview, where people are essentially talking for the camera, most are able to overcome their camera-consciousness and talk directly to the interviewer. Certainly they are aware of the camera, but this awareness becomes a part of their behavior.

When I was shooting an interview with a self-described "mentally ill" patient, the first thing he asked after the camera rolled was, "Are we being on 'TV now?'" In editing the film, I left in that statement. It showed he was aware not only of the fact that he was being filmed, but also of the intended use of the footage. It made his statements about himself which followed, even more powerful and credible.

But sometimes the camera gets in the way. For *Schools for Children* I wanted an interview with the principal of one of the schools in which we were filming. I hoped to use it as a narrative to tie the scenes in the school together. What he had told me in the preinterview was so in keeping with the philosophy underlying the film, and so well said, that I just knew he'd be great. Unfortunately, he wasn't. When the lights came on, he began talking for the record. His informal statements of the day before were transposed into the safe, polysyllabic jargon of an education text, and nothing I did as the interviewer could make him change.

The Behavior of the Production Crew Can and Will Affect the Behavior of the People in the Shooting Situation

This is most dramatically shown with the police captain in Wilkes-Barre. What you must strive for is to create an invisible wall between the production crew and the people in the scene. Hubert Smith, who shot 160,000 feet of film documenting the behavior of

Mayans in the Yucatan Peninsula, said that one of the hardest things he had to do was to convince his subjects that he and his crew were not guests in their homes, but were working.

It took incredible patience, he said, just to sit in a room and keep insisting, "whatever you do is interesting," without yielding to the temptation to suggest some activity. But that's what they did. They also refused all offers of refreshment during the shooting period, promising to come back later—after all the shooting was finished—to eat with the family. Eventually this would pay off, and the family would be able to go about its business in the presence of the film crew without attempting to include the documentarians in its activities.

In Order to Avoid Controlling the Behavior of the People in the Documentary, You Must Control Yourself and Your Production Crew

A good model for shooting a behavioral documentary is the live television coverage of a football game. The program documents an event in progress with the outcome in doubt. Shooting concentrates on the behavior of the subjects in the scene with a heavy emphasis—instant playback, isolated cameras, slow motion—on presenting evidence of that behavior.

There is a well-defined line of demarcation between the production crew and the subjects in the shooting situation. For instance, the camera operator cannot go out onto the playing field to get a better shot. Nor can the director ask the quarterback to run the play that resulted in a touchdown again—but this time at the other end of the field where the light is better, and with a three-beat pause before the pass is thrown.

All the director can do is prepare carefully, select the crew and equipment that will do the best job, give each person a specific assignment, try to be ready for anything, strive for excellence, and above all, forget a poor shot or missed opportunity as soon as the moment has passed.

Making a documentary is very much like that. You have to do

your homework. You have to know why you are going to this location to shoot. And you should have a good idea of the kind of visual evidence you are looking for. You have to make sure your equipment is in good working order and is appropriate to the job at hand. You have to brief the crew on what you expect from them—not just on what you want them to do. You also have to make clear precisely what you *don't* want them to do. You have to make certain that cameras and recorders are loaded appropriately. There's nothing worse than running out of tape or film right at the height of the action.

You Can't Worry About Behavior that Happens Off-camera

You have to be willing to shrug off a missed shot or the fact that an interesting piece of business happened off-camera, out of the lights, or while you were reloading. The best you can do is note it, remember it, and try to be ready if it happens again. Every documentarian knows that interesting behavior always seems to happen immediately after the camera has been turned off. I expect that I'll see something that I'm going to wish I had shot. That way I don't get depressed when it happens and begin to wonder if, just this once, I should intervene and try to get the people to re-create the scene. As the producer I say to myself, as the director, "If you don't have the footage, then as far as this documentary is concerned, it never happened. Don't worry about it. Work with the visual evidence you do have."

What Is Actually Recorded Comes as the Result of a Combination of Preparation and Luck

You have to know what you eventually want to show to an audience. This defines the purpose of the documentary. It may be quite vague, such as, "I want to show evidence of early learning in young children." Or it could be quite specific, for example, "I want

to show the different ways in which husbands and wives talk to each other when they are angry.”

Careful preparation should lead you and your crew to a location where you have a high probability of observing the behavior you want to record. And a sensitivity to the material you're looking for will increase the probability that you'll have the camera turned on when it does happen. But since you don't have control over what happens in front of the camera, there always remains an element of luck.

Maybe nothing interesting happens the day you're there. That's bad luck. Preparation, planning, and control of yourself and your crew can hold this to a minimum, but there will be times when you use up videotape or film with no apparent results. That's why the shooting ratio for a behavioral documentary is high. You just keep shooting and smiling, never letting the subjects know that you're not getting it.

There's also good luck. Sometimes you'll get a piece of behavior that is so much better than anything you could have dreamed up that you can hardly believe it happened. For instance, when I was shooting *A Young Child Is . . .*, I went to the home of a friend to record his thirteen-month-old son who was just beginning to walk and talk. For half a magazine of film, the kid just sat on a rug playing with his bottle. Then he did do some walking—which we shot—but no talking. It wasn't until weeks later, in the editing room, that I discovered a sequence of incredibly powerful learning going on while the baby was sitting on the rug doing nothing.

Shooting a Behavioral Documentary Is an Active Process of Selection and Decision Making

Cameras don't make movies—people do. There is absolutely nothing of the “passive observer” in the efforts of a behavioral documentarian. There is no way to avoid the responsibility for what is shot. Everything that is recorded is the result of a deliberate series of decisions:

- To go here, and not there.
- To take a camera along.
- To load it.
- To point it at something—this, and not that.
- To shoot at eye level, floor level, or standing on a ladder.
- To bring in lights, which may be distracting, or to shoot with available light.
- To frame a medium shot rather than a close-up or long shot.
- To turn the camera on.
- To turn the camera off.

Even when the camera is locked off and you stand frozen, holding your breath to keep from intruding even minutely into the scene, there is an active, totally engaged, decision-making process going on below the surface. It began with the decision to make this documentary, and not some other. Then there were the decisions to be in this location at this time, to shoot this scene, and to do it with a locked-off camera rather than handheld and moving about, to turn the camera on at a certain time, and either to turn it off at some point or to let it go until you run out of videotape or film.

As the complexity of the shooting situation increases, the number of decisions to be made increases. Some of the things the documentarian must continually keep in mind are:

- the purpose of the film
- the kind of behavior he or she is trying to capture
- what is happening in the scene being shot
- the fact that the footage will be edited for presentation to an audience
- how what is being shot in this scene might go with what has been shot before and what is to follow
- how to get the best possible images and sound as visual evidence of the event being shot
- how far the crew can go with all this and still remain on their own side of the invisible wall

The process of editing the footage you've shot is, if anything, even more deliberate than shooting the documentary.

You start with an empty reel and fill it with images and sounds selected from the raw footage, choosing and organizing what the audience will see from what has been recorded.

In the end, there is nothing in the final version of your documentary that was not put there deliberately.

VISUAL EVIDENCE

There is no substitute for good footage.

Advances in film and video technology have given us the ability to record images from reality that would have been impossible just a few years ago.

Cameras attached to telescopes and cameras mounted on satellites look outward into space.

Cameras using fiber optics, cameras mounted on microscopes, and cameras and video repeaters hooked up to electron microscopes, fluoroscopes, and God knows what else, are examining inner space.

Cameras take pictures in the dark using infrared film or light-gathering lenses.

Cameras operating at high speed slow down events that occur too quickly for the eye to follow.

Time-lapse photography speeds up action that occurs over too long a time for the process of change to be noticeable.

In the area of re-creation, models and miniatures are used to abstract significant details from events that are too complex to be observed in full.

Computer animation systems create three-dimensional pictures as if a camera were moving around—inside or outside—structures that do not exist, presenting images of events that never happened.

against the table and the low murmur of voices in the background increase the believability of the scene. It becomes much more than a visual. It comes to life. Verisimilitude!

VERISIMILITUDE AND EDITING

Using verisimilitude in editing can mean trying to get into the heads of your audience to see how a sequence will appear to them. Here's where a knowledge of film conventions, and of human belief systems, can help you. It's not only important to communicate the message that you intend, it is equally important *not* to communicate a message that you *don't* intend. What is selected in editing to be shown to the audience is usually a small segment of a much larger hunk of footage. It is abstracted from the event that was recorded and is edited to suggest as much as possible about all that happened in the event itself.

You were there. Your audience wasn't. As you look at the footage, you might recall everything that happened. But your audience knows nothing about the event except what you select to show them from all the footage and sound available. It, alone, has to communicate to the audience what you consider to be important. And it is not enough that it was shot in a real situation. It has to be presented to your audience with the ring of truth. And that means paying attention to verisimilitude.

ETHICS IN MAKING A DOCUMENTARY

Who owns my image? That, in brief, is a question you should give some thought to as you set about the business of producing a documentary.

If (you might ask) this documentary were being produced by strangers—people about whom I knew little or nothing at all—and if I were a subject in it, just how much freedom would I give them to use the images of me that they record?

Never mind about what you plan to do with, for, and to the subjects of *your* documentary. Naturally, you are honest, honorable, benevolent, a seeker after truth, and one who intends harm to no one. But how much slack would you allow the other guys to use your image in any way they please if *they* were documenting *you*?

Today, anyone with access to a little bit of video equipment can make a "documentary" of virtually anything he decides to point a camera at. The documentary of behavior poses new ethical problems simply because it is *the people themselves* who are the subjects of the documentary. Unlike other artists and communicators, behavioral documentarians *require* the spontaneous and personal behavior of their subjects in order to do their work.

Therefore, what is—or should be—the relationship of the documentarian to the people whose behavior is being recorded? What is—or should be—the responsibility of the documentarian to these people?

Frankly, until I met Cal Pryluck at a conference of the Society for the Anthropology of Visual Communication some time ago, I felt it was enough to get a release in advance and to tell the truth as I understood it. Professor Calvin Pryluck is one of a handful of documentarians and communications scholars concerned with questions of image ethics.

THE QUESTION OF RELEASES

Until now, the question of the rights of the people who appear in a documentary has been resolved through the expedient of getting a signed release from the subjects that grants all rights—or limited rights—to all recordings of the image and voice of the subject either to the documentarian or to the sponsor of the documentary.

As far as I know, the legality of such a release has never been fully tested. Television news crews, and even some television documentary crews, often don't bother to obtain releases on the grounds that they are reporting newsworthy events and are therefore protected under the First Amendment right to a free press. In ambush situations, like some of those on "60 Minutes," the probability of getting signed releases is remote.

Producers who hope to earn money from a documentary in theatrical release usually get signed release forms from everyone who is recognizable in the footage. But this is usually a matter of economics, not ethics. The people in a theatrical documentary are the talent in the film, and as such are entitled to compensation. In the absence of a signed release form, a court would probably award compensation not lower than minimum scale for the Screen Actors Guild or the Screen Extras Guild. Not only will few documentary budgets tolerate that rate of pay, but the time and expense involved in a court case would usually be prohibitive. I doubt, however, that for Roger & Me, Michael Moore even tried to get releases for his ambush interviews at the offices and plants of General Motors. His closing credits list nine names under the heading *Legal*. As for the remainder of documentarians—those making films on videotapes with neither television backing nor the hope of theatrical

cal profits—the signed release is their insurance policy. It protects them from nuisance suits by people appearing in the film who either hope for additional compensation or who decide, after the fact, that their privacy has been invaded.

If You Don't Want to Be Filmed, Leave

In lieu of releases, some documentarians record the subject's verbal consent at the start of shooting. With the camera running, they briefly explain the purpose of the production and ask the subjects if they are willing to be recorded. Or, at the start of a meeting or other group event, the documentarian will record himself announcing to the audience that the meeting is being recorded for use in a documentary. He briefly explains the purpose of the documentary, and then states, "Your continued presence here indicates your consent and willingness to be recorded as part of the documentary."

In essence, under this system, the only way an individual can guarantee the protection of his or her rights is to refuse to appear in the documentary. If people don't want to give someone else control over the use of their images, they can refuse to have them recorded. They can refuse to sign a release. They can refuse, on camera, to give their consent. They can get up and leave a meeting or other event—even though they may sincerely want to attend—if to remain is to give implied consent to be a part of the documentary being made. They need not complain that their privacy has been invaded if they have refused to participate. And that, in general, is the answer to the legal question of the rights of subjects.

But it doesn't come close to resolving any of the ethical questions. Nor does it absolve us as documentarians of our responsibility toward the subjects who appear in our productions.

THE NEED FOR A DOCUMENTARY ETHIC

While people who are potential documentary subjects may protect themselves from unwarranted invasion of privacy by refusing to appear on camera, few of them actually do so. The only refusals I

have ever had come from people who had a vested interest in one side of a conflict and who, I think, felt there was a chance that their position might not be presented fairly. In other words, they were people with a fairly sophisticated awareness of the risks of giving up control of their images to an outsider.

Most people, however, are not nearly so sophisticated. Or perhaps they just don't care. The question most often heard by a documentary producer is not "How will you use the footage?" but rather "When will this be on TV?" Many people seem to be more than willing to trade their dignity for their fifteen minutes of celebrity—at least before the fact. Again, most documentarians report that the people in the documentary love it when they see it—until the reviews come in.

My own experience is that most people will do almost anything to *appear* on camera. Some examples:

A production company was shooting a commercial for a bank, which centered on a young couple having their first baby. And they needed a baby. They were shooting in a hospital, and it took less than ten minutes to convince the parents of a newborn infant, just six hours old, to permit their baby to be taken from the newborn nursery to a nearby room to appear on camera. Yes, the filmmakers kept the baby in a newborn isolette except for the few seconds it was on camera in each take. And yes, they had a nurse in full-time attendance. And yes, they explained all this to the parents. But the parents gave their consent without any hesitation and with only minimal consideration for any potential risks.

A friend of mine had no problem finding couples willing to appear in a medical school-sponsored behavioral documentary entitled *Sexual Intercourse*. The behavior to be filmed, of course, was sexual intercourse.

When such is the situation, one is tempted to question whether documentarians have any ethical responsibility at all toward the subjects who appear in their films. But the fact is that most people who agree to appear in a documentary are not involved in anything nearly so dramatic as the examples above. And few people who give their consent to appear on camera have any notion of the potential that exists for a damaging portrayal.

In chapter four I gave some examples of potential image victims: the policeman in Wilkes-Barre whose interview went badly, the school principal who babbled bureaucratic about his program, and the Good Mother and Bad Mother in *A Young Child Is . . .* They willingly consented to my use of images of themselves that could have proven highly unfavorable and not at all what they had expected. And those were all situations in which I was operating with the best of intentions.

In an article entitled "Ultimately We Are All Outsiders: The Ethics of Documentary Filming," which first appeared in the *Journal of the University Film Association* (Winter 1976) and is reprinted in *New Challenges to Documentary* edited by Alan Rosenthal, Calvin Pryluck cites several examples from the literature of documentary in which the intentions of the documentarian may have been less than 100 percent aboveboard. He quotes Marcel Ophuls (*The Sorrow and the Pity*): "If you have moderate gifts as a fast talker or a diplomat or if you appear moderately sincere, you should be able to get cooperation. . . . It's a con game to a certain extent."

Pryluck continues:

Regardless of whether consent is flawed on such grounds as intimidation or deceit, a fundamental ethical difficulty in direct cinema is that when we use people in a sequence we put them at risk without sufficiently informing them of potential hazards. We may not even know the hazards ourselves. Filmmakers cannot know which of their actions are apt to hurt other people: it is presumptuous of them to act as if they do. (p. 23)

What Is a Documentarian to Do?

What, then, is the documentarian to do? Part of the documentarian's responsibility, as I see it, is to do *no one harm unintentionally*. I state the case that way because, clearly, there are times when the very purpose of the documentary under production is to get the

goods on some person, organization, or institution with malice aforethought.

But most of the time, especially in the behavioral documentary, the purpose is to show real people as they are, not as someone or other might think they should be.

In the same article, Pryluck writes:

In one important respect the ethical problems of actuality filmmakers are identical to those faced by research physicians, sociologists, psychologists, and so on: scientific experiments and direct cinema depend for their success on subjects who have little or nothing to gain from participation. The use of people for our advantage is an ethically questionable undertaking; in its extreme it is exploitation in the literal sense. (p. 24)

In effect, the documentary of behavior has moved away from journalistic protection under the First Amendment and placed itself within the canons of social science and medical research. These documentaries carry with them a potential for the abuse and exploitation of the people who appear in them for which few ethical models exist. Even in the social documentaries of the recent past, the people shown were there less as individuals than as representations of the effects of social problems on specific human beings.

There is a distinct difference between the migrant workers who permitted themselves to be interviewed about working conditions for the Murrow-Friendly documentary *Harvest of Shame* and the members of the Loud family as they consented to be filmed for *American Family*. The migrants knew the risks they were running. They knew that in telling about their plight as migrant workers they risked the possibility of brutal retaliation, and that the loss of their jobs might be the least of their worries. But they went ahead in full knowledge of the potential consequences.

The Loud family, on the other hand, had no idea what they were getting into, clearly did not understand the process as they were being filmed, and were unprepared for the impact the documentary had on their lives when it was released.

It would probably be fair to say that the producers of *Harvest of Shame* were well aware of the risks they were asking the subjects of their documentary to assume. The same cannot necessarily be said of the producer of a behavioral documentary. Quite often he or she has no way of foreseeing the way the film will come out, let alone what the risks to the participants might be. How, then, does the documentarian go about seeking consent from people he or she would like to have appear in the documentary?

INFORMED CONSENT

Informed consent in scientific and medical research depends on at least three elements:

- the absence of coercion and deception
- thorough explanation of the procedure and its anticipated effects
- competence of the subject to give consent

In the quest for consent, should the producer detail all of the horrible possibilities, from obscene phone calls to public ridicule, that might conceivably occur, and take a chance that the potential participant will say no?

Or is that more than is required? In order to get a signed release, should the documentarian downplay the possible risks to the participant in order to go ahead and make the movie? And if he does, is that really informed consent? In research, consent is flawed when it is obtained through the omission of any fact that might influence the giving or withholding of permission.

That sounds clear-cut, but it isn't. What is a fact that might influence the giving or withholding of permission? Do you have to tell every potential participant that "Some people have found that their neighbors laughed at them after they appeared in a documentary"?

At the other extreme, isn't requiring someone either to give implied consent or to leave a public meeting a form of coercion?

THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER

One year my friend Chris Speeth and I both made sponsored documentaries about two different educational programs in two different cities for two different clients. Each documentary featured an administrator who was responsible for the educational programs shown in the film.

What I remember about Chris's film is that his man was always on the go. Chris showed him riding in every available type of transportation. When he was afoot, he walked briskly. And as he traveled around, he talked about his hopes and plans for the educational programs of his city. He often used the language of overstatement common to people who operate in a political arena. At one point he expressed the belief that his city's tax-supported college could become "the Sorbonne of the Midwest."

The educator in my film operated in a smaller arena, administering several grant-supported programs within a single high school. In style he was solemn and super sincere. His commentary on the program was an uncomfortable mixture of student slang and pedagogues, with an overlay of the mechanistic psychobabble of special education.

When film students at The Annenberg School of Communications saw these documentaries, they found it hard to believe that Chris and I had been able to "get away with showing" the administrators as we did. To them, the educators came across as pompous bureaucrats talking nonsense, and the students interpreted each film as a put-down of the man in charge. They couldn't believe that we had gotten approval from our clients for films such as those.

But—and this is the important part—in each case, the administrator was quite pleased with the way he was shown in the film. The man in Chris's film saw himself as a forceful, active person getting the job done. The one in mine thought he came across as a well-informed expert who cared about young people. Remember, these were sponsored films, which had been reviewed by the clients, including these administrators, before they were completed.

I don't know how Chris felt about the administrator in his film. I didn't much care for the man in mine. But I would argue that the behavior shown in each film was an accurate and honest analog of the everyday behavior of those two men in similar situations.

Proof within the Frame

That a segment of the audience finds the way an individual is presented within a documentary unflattering may indicate that the documentarian is not a Pollyanna, finding the best in every situation. But it is certainly not proof of unethical conduct. There is usually no evidence within a documentary to prove whatever a critic may think reflects an ethical problem.

Suppose I had left the Good Mother and Bad Mother sequences as they were originally edited, with the Bad Mother neutralized but the Good Mother looking pretty bad. In my opinion it would have made the film dishonest, a less-than-accurate analog. *But no audience would have known that.*

On the other hand, suppose that I had concentrated on the neurotic behavior and negative attitude of the Bad Mother toward her son. The film was a documentary about the way children learn. And, certainly, the relationship between mother and child is a factor in early learning in young children. In my opinion, to have done so would not have made the film dishonest—it would have been showing the mother as she was—but it *would* have been unethical. It would have been changing the intent of the film as I had originally conceived it—and, more important, as I had explained it to the parents in seeking their permission to film them and their children—in order to take a cheap shot at a target of opportunity. The film was not a psychological study of the interactions between mothers and their children. Since it wasn't, the behavior of the mother had, in a limited sense, come under my protection. But, again, no audience would know any of this from watching the film.

AREAS OF CONFUSION

I suspect that much of the criticism on ethical grounds of the behavioral documentary comes from a confusion over such concepts as *objectivity*, *reality*, and *truth*. To be fair, this confusion isn't at all limited to critics. There are a lot of documentarians who are equally confused about how these concepts relate to the films and videotapes they shoot and eventually show.

Confusion about Objectivity

The very notion of objectivity in documentary is a fairly recent development in the history of the genre. It is an outgrowth of the peculiar rules governing American network television and a basic misunderstanding of both the requirements of journalistic objectivity and of the nature of scientific objectivity.

Certainly the pioneers of documentary made no pretense of using a journalistic approach in their films, and would have found any discussion of journalistic "objectivity" totally irrelevant. They unashamedly used the documentary to make as powerful a statement as they could manage about something they considered important. And this continues among contemporary documentarians who take up a specific social or political point of view. They are not objective; they are advocates. But so long as their work adequately documents their position, they remain documentarians.

Scientific Objectivity. Objectivity in science means that a scientific investigation can be verified independently. If it is an experiment, the results can be replicated by another scientist using the same procedures and materials.

Journalistic Objectivity. Objectivity in journalism came about as a reaction to the highly opinionated, politically positional press of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It seeks to separate fact from opinion, assumption, and evaluation, and to make clear which is which. News reports are expected to be founded in fact and capable of independent verification. Opinion, conclusion, evalua-

tion, interpretation, speculation, and so on are dealt with in editorials, signed opinion columns, and bylined feature stories. In areas of controversy, TV journalists try to present "both sides of the story" and attempt to give equal weight to each. The television documentary evolved within this tradition.

Cinema vérité and direct cinema are, if anything, a reaction to the journalistically objective television documentary.

Confusion of Actuality with Reality

A behavioral documentary is shot in an actual situation, not on a staged set, with actual people, not actors, doing whatever it is that they actually do, not acting out a script. The resulting documentary can have such immediacy that both documentarians and the audiences who view their work have often made the erroneous assumption that the documentary showed reality.

This assumption is simply not valid. The best you get is bits and pieces of whatever happened, filtered through the eyes, ears, and minds of a documentary crew and the recording capabilities of their equipment. When we are present, and everything is right, we can record the image and sound of the behavior that takes place in front of the camera. We do not penetrate to the thoughts, instincts, history, social conditioning, and all the other complex elements that underlie behavior. We do not even record the taste, feel, or smell of the situation. At best we try to imply these. Often we ignore them.

Imagine, for example, a documentary interview in which

- the person being interviewed is from a culture that prefers a fairly close social distance for conversation and
- has incredibly bad breath, while
- the interviewer prefers a wider social distance and
- has an extremely sensitive nose.

Such a situation might well produce visual images of a dance of approach-avoidance on the part of the interviewee and interviewer

quite unrelated to the subject matter of the interview. How do you handle that? That's actuality, but are the images that result *reality*?

Confusion about Truth and Honesty

Such a scene would certainly be an interesting—and true—piece of behavior. But the next bothersome question is: Does it belong in the documentary? If the implication of the scene is that the interviewer does not care for the person being interviewed when in fact the interviewer simply doesn't want to stand as close as the interviewee prefers, what is the honest thing for the documentarian to do? Probably the director has to find some solution that won't give the wrong impression—either a fix in editing, such as use of the interview as voice-over, leaving out pictures of the interview altogether, or, if it is crucial to the documentary, shooting it again in a way that avoids the problem.

MAKING OUR OWN ETHICAL JUDGMENTS

In other words, resolution of the ethical questions, like that of all the other questions pertaining to the production of a documentary, lies with the documentarian.

There can be no help for it. The documentarian must take the responsibility for that which is shown. The ethical milieu surrounding the production of a documentary of human behavior is the product of the integrity of the person or persons responsible for the production.

There will be abuses, as there have been in the past. And there will be brilliant documentaries made by thoroughly honorable people. Sometimes subjects will become collaborators in the organization and editing of the material, and sometimes they'll be locked out of the editing room.

Ultimately the responsibility for the accuracy, validity, honesty, and truth of the analog that is a documentary, and for the ethical milieu in which it is produced, rests solely with the documentarian in charge of the production.

What I hope is that, as you go about the planning, production, editing, and presentation of any documentary, you will do so with a heightened awareness that your actions have ethical implications. In the last analysis, you will have to make your own ethical judgments.

There is no other way to practice our craft.