

MANY WITH A MOBILE CAMERAPHONE: THE DEMOCRATIZATION OF DOCUMENTARY?

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The author is developing a new interactive documentary project entitled 24-hours.in (www.24-hours.in), exploring opportunities for participation and collaboration. The project is currently at the proof of concept stage, and is being discussed as a work in progress, exploring the impact of mobile phones and the potential that these devices, the web and social media may offer for the democratization of documentary production.

24 HOURS IN TAMPERE, FINLAND

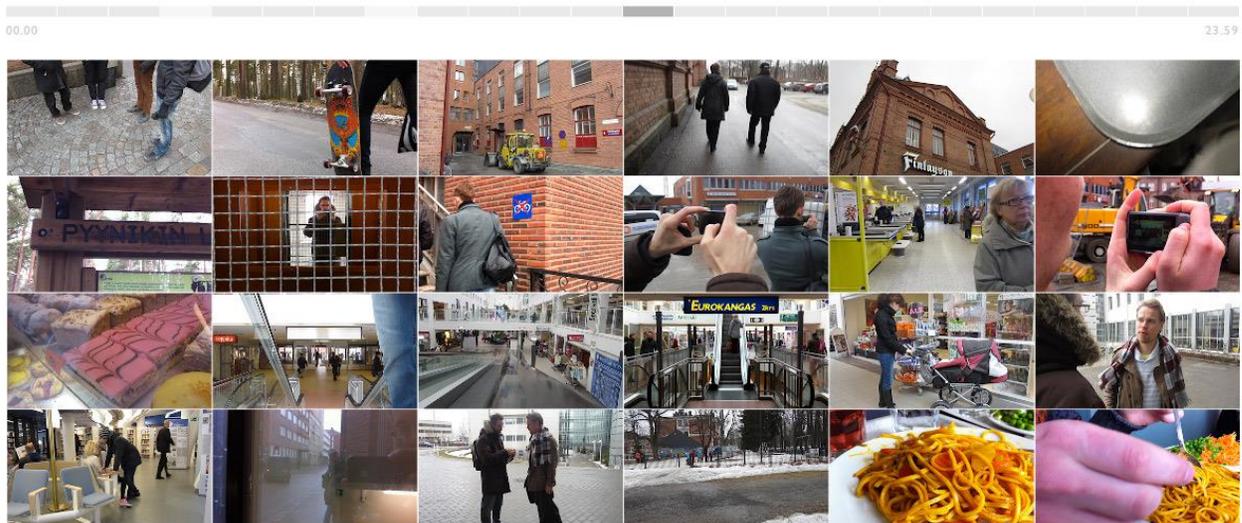


Fig 1. 24-hours.in Tampere main interface, 2011, Richard Vickers & James Field.



13:43 by GUANJUN LIU

Fig 2. 24-hours.in Tampere video content, 2011, Richard Vickers & James Field.

Looking back – defining documentary

Since the invention of photography and consequently cinema, the camera has been used to capture or document reality; actual events that happened at that moment in time, however banal. Nicéphore Niépce, one of the pioneers of photography, pointed his camera out of the window in 1826 to capture what is now the earliest surviving photograph, 'View from the Window at Le Gras.' In 1888 Louis Le Prince captured some brief (2 seconds) but extraordinary footage, 'The Roundhay Garden Scene.' Perhaps the most famous early film, and often mistakenly cited as the first ever motion picture made, is the Lumière brothers 'Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory', 1895.

John Grierson is attributed with coining the term documentary in 1926, when he reviewed Robert Flaherty's film 'Moana.' In 1929 Grierson produced 'Drifters', a silent documentary that tells the story of Britain's herring fishing industry, filming real fishermen out at sea and capturing the reality of the experience. The film contains many of the characteristics that define documentary, particularly the observational style. Drifters was an attempt to create an 'imagist' film in response to the avant-grade 'city symphony' films and to reintroduce socially directed commentary into formalist film (Barson, 2006). Grierson believed that documentary film could change the world, that by increasing social awareness it would contribute to the development of society.

In the same year, Dziga Vertov produced 'Man With a Movie Camera', an outstanding example of avant-garde documentary filmmaking that still resonates today, perhaps even more so than it did at the time. The British Film Institute description of the film says, "Man With a Movie Camera is an extraordinary piece of film-making, a montage of urban Russian life showing the people of the city at work and at play,

and the machines that keep the city going. [...] a work that is exhilarating and intellectually brilliant” (BFI, 2000). The film represents ‘a day in the life’ of the recently established Soviet Union, capturing ‘life caught unawares’, with the filmmaking process transparent and evident throughout.

Prior to making *Man With a Movie camera*, Vertov had worked on the ‘kino–pravda’ newsreel series, a film version of the Pravda newspaper. He believed that the ‘kino–eye’ or camera ‘eye’ could not only capture life ‘as is’, but reveal a deeper level of truth than was normally perceived by the imperfect human eye (Cousins & Macdonald, 2006). With the kino-eye movement Vertov explored a participatory model aiming to move away from the authorship of a single person to mass authorship and a montage vision. Vertov’s aspirations for the movement encompassed the democratization not just of technology but also of creativity (Hicks, 2007). *Man With a Movie Camera* is often cited as the first example of database cinema, long before the database as we understand it today existed. Lev Manovich states that; “*Man With a Movie Camera* is perhaps the most important example of a database imagination in modern media art” (Manovich, 2001). Drawing a comparison between Vertov’s film and the contemporary experience of the web, Seth Feldman suggests:

...the prototype of the net surfer downloading the bits and pieces of fragmented information. Vertov the filmmaker and advocate of mass filmmaking could well be thought of as a pioneer in the building of a system in which millions of people reconstruct fragments. (Feldman, 1999)

1960 was a paradigm-shifting year for documentary, the French anthropologist and filmmaker Jean Rouch, and sociologist Edgar Morin, had access to a prototype Éclair camera that was both highly portable and quiet. They utilized this new technology in the production of the experimental documentary film, ‘*Chronique d’un été*’, exploring the lives of ordinary Parisians, ‘the strange tribe that lives in Paris’, over the summer of 1960. This was the birth of ‘cinéma vérité’, Brian Winston identifies *Chronique d’un été* as the key film of the movement, saying:

They tried in some way to guarantee the ‘truth’ of their own observation because we, the audience, could observe them apparently in the act of observing. (Winston, 2008)

Cinéma vérité had direct lineage to Vertov, the name being a French translation of ‘kino-pravda’ or cinema-truth. The film that defined the beginning of the movement, *Chronique d’un été*, can be described as ‘life caught unawares’ and Jean Rouch said that the film was a homage to Vertov (Roberts, 2001). The new portable cameras gave the filmmakers unprecedented freedom of movement that allowed them to shoot real life and capture reality as never before possible. Intimate and immediate, it was like actually being there, documentary would never be the same again.

Being participatory

The internet, or more specifically the web, has changed the media landscape exponentially over the last decade. The online video sharing platform YouTube, launched in 2005, has fundamentally changed the consumption of media in the 21st century. YouTube established a media environment that not only enabled users to share videos; it also offered an opportunity, in their own words, to “Broadcast Yourself” to a worldwide audience. It is a phenomenal success, the web information company Alexa Internet (www.alexa.com) currently ranks YouTube as the 3rd most visited website in the world, with social network Facebook in 2nd place and search engine Google (who also own YouTube) in 1st place. But the platform for self-expression is not without its critics, Alexandra Juhasz comments:

YouTube allows everyone and anyone (with access to the technologies) to speak about everything and anything they please. I speak, you watch. But without context or community, who cares, and more critically, then what?(Juhasz, 2008)

Interactive documentary is a rapidly evolving field, with participatory projects embracing the opportunities that the internet and social media platforms offer. YouTube's 'Life in a Day' project (<http://www.youtube.com/user/lifeinaday>) was developed to document a single day, the 24th July 2010, on planet earth. Contributors from around the world were encouraged to capture a glimpse of their life on that day and then upload their video to YouTube for consideration to be included in the final film. YouTube received over 80,000 video clips and some 4,500 hours of footage. Sifting through all the footage and dealing with the multitude of formats, resolutions etc. was a formidable undertaking. The final 95-minute film directed by Kevin Macdonald and produced by Ridley Scott, went on general cinema release earlier this year.

'Man with a Movie: Camera the Global Remake', (<http://dziga.perrybard.net/>) is an online participatory video project that launched in 2007. Participants around the world were invited to record images interpreting the original script of Vertov's *Man With A Movie Camera* and then upload them to the website. Software developed specifically for the project archives sequences and streams the submissions as a film. Anyone could contribute footage to become part of a worldwide montage, in Vertov's terms the "decoding of life as it is." Sandra Gaudenzi suggests that:

The participative options of digital media enhance our acting role and therefore allow us to mediate reality in a shape that is more attuned with our way of being in the world. (Gaudenzi, 2011)

Online and social media platforms offer a means for participation, collaboration and distribution or dissemination that was unimaginable even a decade ago. The ubiquitous mobile phone offers the means of production. The first cameraphones were developed in 1997, however resolution and image quality remained fairly low until recently. Improvements in imaging sensors has resulted in a new breed of cameraphone that can record HD (High Definition) Video at 1280 x 780 resolution. Video captured on these devices is impressively good considering the small size of the lens. The mobile phone has become part of the social fabric of 21st century life, nearly everyone will have one with them at all times in a pocket or bag.

The author and Lincoln School of Media colleague James Field are developing a new interactive documentary project entitled 24-hours.in (www.24-hours.in), exploring new opportunities for participation, collaboration and the potential democratization of documentary production. Utilizing user-generated video captured on mobile phones and available devices, the project is participatory whereby the audience contribute documentary videos, around the theme of 24 hours in a city or location; for example 24-hours.in Istanbul or 24-hours.in Tampere.

With reference to Dziga Vertov's 'Man with a Movie Camera' and the concept of capturing life 'as is', the aim is for the user-generated videos to document the cities, the people that live there and their daily lives. Building on Vertovian concepts, the project explores the potential that the ubiquitous camera-phone 'eye' may offer for a unique and cumulative vision of truth to emerge. Moving beyond the participation model, the project will build up a database of location specific documentary material and aim to create a new system for collaborative documentary production and user-curated content.

Proof of concept:

24-HOURS.IN TAMPERE – AN INTERACTIVE DOCUMENTARY

In April 2011, the author attended the Tampere Art Factory International Week, hosted by TAMK School of Arts & Media, Tampere University of Applied Sciences, Tampere, Finland. During the international week he ran an interactive documentary workshop, working with students from TAMK to produce a prototype 'proof of concept', a collaborative, participatory, experimental documentary project centered on 24-hours in Tampere. The aim was to document the city of Tampere, with reference to (but not recreating) Vertov's 'Man with a Movie Camera'. The workshop participants were encouraged to embrace Vertov's pioneering avant-garde approach to filmmaking, using cameraphones to capture 'life caught un-awares.'

The workshop began with a briefing on the technologies that would be utilized, a discussion on good practice and principles of using mobile devices for filming, screenings of interactive documentaries and Vertov's *Man With a Movie Camera*. Interestingly the students were aware of the film but hadn't actually seen it, they found the film striking and it is testament to the outstanding qualities of the film that it still resonates today. An important consideration was file size and bandwidth, video = data, 1 second of iPhone HD (1280x720) video = 1.3MB, so there was a requirement to keep the video clips relatively short. The participants were therefore encouraged to keep individual shots or scenes short, with the proviso that they could add lots to the database, one shot per minute over 24 hours would equate to 1440 shots. Adobe Flash Media Encoder was used to compress and encode the videos for online delivery in the FLV/F4V format.

For the prototype developed in Tampere the process of encoding and adding to the online database was laborious and time consuming. Using Adobe Media Encoder, each individual video clip was encoded and optimized for delivery over the internet, also for each clip a JPG image file was created for display in the main interface. All clips were uploaded via FTP to the project directory and a database entry made detailing the author of the video and importantly the time using the 24-hour clock. The process is best summarized with the mantra: Edit > Encode > Upload > Add to Database, seemingly ad infinitum.

The project is available online at <http://www.24-hours.in>, using Adobe Flash as the delivery platform. The main interface is a grid of 24 images, each one representing an individual video clip for that time within the 24-hour clock. Visible above the grid of still images (Figure 1) is a line of 24 blocks each giving the user a shortcut navigation to the 24 individual hours in the 24-hour period. Clicking on one of the images plays the linked video clip, there is a simple transition between the grid display and the video playing, the author of the video and the time are displayed in the lower left hand corner below the video clip. Clicking on the video as it plays will close that clip and return to the main interface, the still image from the video that was playing forms the first image of the 24 displayed. If the user does not close the video, the next clip chronologically plays and will continue playing through all the clips.

Once a video is selected and plays, the timeline visible above the video alters from the 24 block system to a more representational timeline (Figure 2), indicating where video content is available during the timeframe. Bunching of content is apparent at key times. The user can use the timeline to navigate between clips and time in a non-linear fashion.

Capturing scenes of life as the city awoke from the long Finnish winter; the cleaning of the streets, the simple pleasure of going for lunch, the political elections: 24–hours in Tampere offers a fascinating insight into everyday life in the city. One of the contributors to 24–hours.in Tampere commented: “After the first few shooting hours it became like an addiction. You begin to see everything not with your eyes, but with the video camera lens. Every minute scanning through buildings, people, events to find some perfect shots that could be interesting for the person sitting at the other side of the screen somewhere far away...”

The project is in further development to automate the process of encoding the video clips and currently focused on the implementation of FFmpeg on the server to convert and encode video on the fly. HTML 5 video will be utilized to offer a full cross-platform experience without the need for plugins. Other features that are being explored are key word searching and sorting for the clips and attempts to exploit geolocation data. It is intended that the project will roll out on an international basis later this year, adding 24-hours.in locations to offer a fascinating insight into 21st century life around the world.

Conclusion

During the past year we have seen mobile phones, the internet and social media platforms contribute to revolutions for social and political change in the Arab world, known as the ‘Arab Spring.’ Mobile phones were used to capture events as they happened and the power of the internet and social networks harnessed to circumvent the traditional media platforms that were controlled and censored by the state. The collective use of technology empowered the people to progress an agenda for democratic reform, in some instances accomplishing complete regime change that many had only dreamt of years.

Armed with our ubiquitous mobile devices and cameraphones we all have the potential to document everyday reality and ordinary life as we wander the city. We can capture the nuances of the vernacular, regardless of how banal or seemingly unimportant they may seem at the time, for posterity and digital eternity. Used collaboratively to capture unique moments, cameraphones can give us a window on the world, and as time goes by, a window on the past. Pervasive mobile phones and smart devices offer an unprecedented opportunity for the democratization of documentary production. These devices are in the hands of the many, with the potential for a collaborative and cumulative vision of truth about humanity and life in the 21st century to emerge.

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