
Open Video Documentary

By Patricia Aufderheide

The advent of open video—web-native video that creates opportunities for interactivity, layering, tagging, optional subtitles and more—poses challenges to traditional understandings of the documentary form. This is a format whose experience depends upon the viewer, that might morph and grow with viewer contributions, and that might act as much as archive or raw material as it does as final product. Is this still documentary?

That question is puzzling scholars, at the same time that trying to execute open video is puzzling makers. There are few examples of successful open video, either measured by participation or profit, but many people are developing projects on the bleeding edge of innovation, all of which will provide useful feedback for those to come. [The Living Docs project](#) brings together five partner organizations in the U.S., all differently working on creating open video; in Canada, the [National Film Board](#) is taking a lead in sponsoring such work; and organizations that host events and activities on new media, for instance IDFA's [DocLab](#) and the European Union-funded [Crossover Labs](#) have this emergent form on the agenda.

Examples of open video include:

- Chris Milk's [The Wilderness Downtown](#), a music video in which your home town's streets (thanks to Google Street View) will merge with an ambiguous runner's journey;
- Kat Cizek's [One Millionth Tower](#), a combination of website, blog and documentary on the challenges and possibilities of high-rise culture;
- Jeremy Mendes and Leanne Allison's [Bear 71](#), a poignant portrayal of wildlife experience in an increasingly complex space;
- Yasmin Elayat and Jigar Mehta's [18 Days in Egypt](#), a video, a collaboratively produced set of narratives and a website combining social media records of the Egyptian Spring;
- Steve James' *Interrupt Violence* platform based on the film [The Interrupters](#), featuring interactive stories, virtual shrines to the dead, and short videos drawn from the film.

Whatever documentary filmmakers think of the web or technology or interactivity, they all will be wrestling with how these new opportunities change their aesthetic challenges. This is because, first, their users are

increasingly living in the user-centric, interactive ecology of the web in which such options are normal (as advertisers now recognize and exploit). Second, the features provided by open video match deliciously the goals of many documentary filmmakers: to reach users, influence them, and motivate them to act.

This is an emergent moment, with very little established. At the South by Southwest 2012 [conference](#), panelists posited that this was open video's "montage moment," when the basic language of the form was still being experimented with. As an example, they showcased a scene from *18 Days in Egypt*. An interview taken after the fact with a woman who was at a demonstration was shown in a box in the forefront. In the background ran video taken at the time of the same protest. The interview was 5 minutes long, the background video only 15 seconds. Designers looped the background video and used it as wallpaper behind the woman's remarks, and tagged both pieces with identifying chronological information. "Someday this will all seem like, 'Oh, of course,'" said developer Brian Chirls, "but we're still figuring it out."

Jigar Mehta, one of the creators of *18 Days in Egypt*, noted that the project is grounded in the notion of accessing and recombining authentic social media and citizen journalist records, but that this then requires reliable information on both what is being shown and when it was uploaded. He noted that video is often uploaded some undetermined time after the fact, and that tweets might not be written at the time that they are uploaded, or even by the people who are purportedly writing them.

Like makers, documentary film scholars will similarly be exploring the evolution, impact and implications of this emergent form. This moment provides a rare opportunity to study in real time the evolution of expression that both draws upon different aesthetic sources—including narrative film, documentary film, journalism, gaming, software design, and graphic design—and also is becoming a distinctive form of its own.

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