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Abstract

Documentary film is over 100 years old and includes subgenres such as ethnography, historical film, docu-drama, propaganda, and advocacy videos. With numerous film archives, film festivals, special DVD issues of journals, inexpensive video recording and editing equipment, Internet distribution, and the phenomenal growth of archival Internet sites such as YouTube and Vimeo, there are now hundreds of millions of documentary films and videos available to the interested researcher. The author argues that the macromarketing field has greatly underutilized this vast resource and suggests examples of sources and uses for such material. The author also suggests some aids for acquiring critical visual literacy skills to inform such analyses. Just as we rely on our libraries and online access for books and print journals, we can readily do the same with documentary films. Such analytical projects can be presented as either video documentaries themselves, as text-based articles and books, or as multimedia combinations. Film, video, Internet, and television images arguably do more to influence public perceptions of marketing, consumption, and life than any other medium. There is thus a great opportunity to understand society through this window on the world.

Keywords

documentary, film, society, markets, marketing, consumption, research

The genre of documentary film has existed for nearly 100 years and has recently been enhanced by inexpensive video capture and editing hardware and software, the explosion of the content-hungry Internet, the proliferation of film festivals, and the rapid growth of online video archiving sites like YouTube and Vimeo. The thesis of this article is that documentary film represents an untapped boon for macromarketing scholars in several different ways. The author points out some of the wealth of resources available and outline some of the types of potential macromarketing uses of this treasure trove. The author also suggests that we need to develop critical visual literacy skills in order to use this content well.

Documentary film began with Robert Flaherty's (1922) film *Nanook of the North*. It is a harsh portrait of Inuit life near Hudson's Bay. Flaherty was previously a prospector in the area and knew it well. He took along a video camera on a 1913–1915 expedition at the suggestion of his boss, William Mackenzie. He returned to Toronto with 30,000 feet of film that he intended to edit into a film, but accidentally set fire to the nitrate film negative with his cigarette and had to gather funds to reshoot the film (Rabiger 1987; Saunders 2010). Flaherty's friend Nanook and a group of others cast as his family were the subjects of the film and Flaherty had them construct an igloo, hunt seals with a spear, and enact other elements of Inuit life that had been replaced by newer technologies in the preceding decade. Although the film is controversial because of this staging, it found a popular audience and started the field of documentary

film (Nichols 2001). A second early influence on the documentary film is the Russian filmmaker Dziga Vertov. His film *Man with a Camera* (Vertov 1929) portraying daily urban life in the Soviet Union experimented with creative filming and editing techniques and created the *cinéma-vérité* style of depicting life without imposing judgments on it. A quite different style showing the potential power of documentary films involves employing a strong point of view, such as Luis Bruñuel's (1932) *Land Without Bread* and Leni Riefenstahl's (1937) *Triumph of the Will*. While Bruñuel's surrealist film was intended to evoke audience sadness and anger at bureaucratic inaction to help starving and poverty stricken Spanish villagers of the Las Hurdes region, Riefenstahl's film was an attempt to celebrate Hitler and show the supposed superiority of the Aryan race. Riefenstahl used thirty-six cameras to film the cinematically scripted 1934 Nazi Party Congress and used Wagnerian background music as Hitler spoke and reviewed thousands of spectacularly arrayed Nazi soldiers. When the filmmaker wishes to move the audience emotionally, documentaries of this type have proved very effective.

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Anthropological filmmaking got its start with extensive work in Bali and Papua New Guinea by Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead in the 1930s. They also wrote and published some of the 25,000 photos they took in their research, but the six films that they made were not released until the 1950s (Heider 1976). This was the period when many ethnographic films began to emerge, typically showing the lives and societies of people who were remote from everyday North American and European lives. These films focused on people of the Asia Pacific, Africa, and Asia, as well as Native Americans. Good accounts of this work can be found in Banks (2001), Heider (1976, 1997), Taylor (1994), and Worth (1981). There is also an excellent reflexive documentary about film ethnography in Papua New Guinea (Stiven and McLaren 2001) that can be found at Alexander Street Press's *Ethnographic Video Online* (<http://anth.alexanderstreet.com/>). Besides the Stiven and McLaren film, for a treatment of the moral issues of ethnographic film, such as who is empowered to represent whom, see Burnett (1990).

Although anthropology has been a long-standing contributor of ethnographic films, other disciplines have also become involved in documentary filmmaking. There is a field of filmmaking in folklore studies that is described by Sherman (1998). Although visual sociology has focused more on photography than film, there are also filmmakers within sociology (Shrum, Duque, and Brown 2005). History is among the other disciplines interested in filmmaking and films as resources for analysis and teaching (Raack 1972). Even computer science and design have begun to utilize videography (Crabtree et al. 2001). Filmmaking in consumer research started in the mid-1980s (Wallendorf and Belk 1987), but marketing, business, and consumption have attracted the attention of filmmakers from a variety of fields.

Documentary, Videography, Visual Educational Media

To document something is to factually record it, in words, still photographs, sound, moving images, or some combination of these modes of representation. This includes nonfiction film, video, and documentary photography. While documentary film or video is sometimes regarded as a journalistic activity, Barbash and Taylor (1997) regard the documentary as a broader category of film that includes both journalism and ethnographic film. Film is now giving way to video and the term videography (Belk 2006; Belk and Kozinets 2005a, 2005b; Kozinets and Belk 2006) is a combination of ethnography and video. Ethnography is a qualitative research method that typically involves participant observation as well as interviews conducted over a period of time. Thus, a videography normally involves both depth interviews about a behavior and visual images and sound depicting the behavior itself. Although both documentaries and videographies are used in the classroom, they are primarily reports of research and neither is primarily conducted for instructional purposes. Visual educational media, by contrast, are intended to be didactic. Educational films and videos also

fall within the broader category of documentary but are not intended as vehicles to present research findings in the way that most other forms of documentaries do.

The genres of documentary, videography, and educational films and videos have all evolved over time. All have subgenres, and they sometimes blend into one another. Recent developments like reality television, docu-dramas, corporate public relations films, disguised and undisguised corporate attempts to create online videos that the firms hope will "go viral," and "docuganda films" by governments and various other organizations, further problematize sharp distinctions (Saunders 2010). Aufderheide (2007) suggests six subgenres of documentary film, which may still overlap: public affairs, government propaganda, advocacy, historical, and ethnographic. Film festivals with documentary categories like the Park City, Utah's Sundance Film Festival as well as strictly documentary festivals like Hot Docs in Toronto, must make decisions of whether or not a particular film is a documentary (Godmilow 1997; Hampe 1997), but for present purposes the author tries to be inclusive. In the following discussion the author uses the terms documentary and videography interchangeably. Both should be of greater interest to macromarketing scholars than educational films and videos.

The documentaries of interest to macromarketers include both those made by others within the marketing, macromarketing, and consumer research disciplines, as well as those made by those others in a variety of fields including communications, sociology, anthropology, history, cultural studies, media studies, journalism, news, entertainment, and industry. Those with an interest in macromarketing may want to consider making their own videographies as an outlet for their work. However, the author primarily concentrates on using documentaries as secondary data or "texts" for analysis. This does not preclude using video to present analyses of such secondary materials (e.g., Stiven and McLaren 2001), but the author's emphasis will be on sources and uses rather than videography as a data collection and presentation vehicle. The author simply notes that most social science and business academic conferences now accept videographic work, several marketing and consumer behavior journals have published DVD editions (e.g., Belk and Kozinets 2005a, 2007; Caldwell 2011; Caldwell and Henry 2010), Internet distribution is increasingly easy, and the Association for Consumer Research has had film festivals at its North American and non-North American conferences since 2001 (see Belk and Kozinets 2010). Recent Academy of Management meetings have included a "Visual Village," but it consists primarily of photography.

Why Use Visual Documentary for Research?

One underutilized use of visual documentaries is as resources for research, both contemporary and historic. There have been a number of consumption-related documentary films in recent years that have received wide public attention. They include Michael Moore's films (e.g., *Bowling for Columbine*, Moore 2002), Morgan Spurlock's films (e.g., *Supersize Me*, Spurlock

2004), Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* (Gugenheim 2006), PBS films (e.g., *Merchants of Cool*, PBS 2004), and the Academy Award-winning French Animation, *Logorama* (Alaux, de Crécy, and Houplain 2010). This is just the more visible tip of a very large and rapidly growing body of work. Such finished work, ranging from shorts to feature length films, should be seen as scholarly resources in the same way that books and journal articles are resources that we routinely draw upon in writing up our research and theorizing. Yet they are more commonly used in the classroom than they are in our articles, papers, and books. One reason for this is that they seem more ephemeral. A book or journal article has a more tangible presence on a library shelf, but a film or video is generally not as readily accessible. We may acquire a DVD copy or perhaps find an online copy for viewing, but if we cite such work there is no assurance that readers in the future will be able to access it. However, the same may be said of content on the Internet, and yet Internet sources are increasingly being cited within our written textual work. A second reason for the relative neglect of visual documentary resources is that some of this work, including the examples cited above, is produced by nonacademics—filmmakers and journalists rather than those within the academy. Because of their nonacademic credentials and the emotional power of their films, they may be seen as less “scientific” than dry academic papers. This perception may even taint documentaries made by academics. The use of music, humor, and drama in documentaries is something that most traditional academics are not used to seeing in research. Although we should always assess the quality and biases of a particular source as well as be alert to what Keen (2007) calls the cult of the amateur, the presence of nonacademic filmmakers is hardly a sufficient reason for ignoring visual material. A third reason for overlooking visual documentaries is that some of them, also like the examples cited above, have a particular point of view; we know that Michael Moore is going to be attacking gun laws and that Morgan Spurlock is going to be attacking McDonald's menu. But this advocacy is not a hidden agenda. It is also found in some macromarketing papers and is not a sufficient reason to ignore such material. If we are so politically correct that everything must be a fully balanced treatment, we are likely never to be able to make an important argument. And a fourth reason that visual documentaries are underrepresented in our research is simply our textual bias and the habits we have developed of relying only on written text-based material.

Because the author thinks this fourth reason for visual neglect—that of impetus and old habits—is the most common reason for neglecting documentaries, it is useful to highlight a few examples of potentially valuable work in visual documentaries as well as in dramatized or fictionalized films. This includes some studies that have been published within the *Journal of Macromarketing*. Holbrook (2005) studied the art versus commerce dialectic in dramatized films about jazz musicians, prompting a debate with Bradshaw, McDonagh, and Marshall (2006) about whether a more ethnographic approach might not yield better insights into the plight of musicians and the focal concern with the trade-offs between art and commercialization

(Holbrook 2006). Most macromarketing analyses based on films have examined fictional, dramatized, or fictionalized films in preference to “straight” ethnographic documentaries. This includes Branchik's (2002) analysis of films about gays, Holbrook and Hirschman's analyses of films touching on various aspects of business and consumption (Hirschman 1988, 1990; Holbrook and Grayson 1986; Holbrook and Hirschman 1993), and McDonagh and Brereton's (2010) analyses of depictions of business in film. In other journals, there have been analyses of alternative documentary formats, such as Orvell's (1994–1995) comparison of Barbara Kopple's (1991) Academy Award winning *American Dream* versus Michael Moore's (1989) *Roger and Me*, both of which are about the plight of workers whose jobs are being outsourced to cheaper overseas labor. Dorst (1999) analyzes, in part, *Ad Week's* compendium of the year's best television commercials. And Kates (2000) analyzes the changing roles of gays in films from the 1970s through the 1990s.

While these examples are a hint of what might be done with documentaries and related film forms, these analyses just begin to explore the wealth of material available for analysis. Jones and Shaw (2006) reviewed seventy-five historical research papers that appeared in the *Journal of Macromarketing* between 1981 and 2005, and none of them made use of documentary film sources. As the preceding discussion suggests, this is not because of a dearth of relevant documentaries. Because such films document the past 100 years of production, consumption, and marketing, this seems to be a considerable oversight. In the following section, the author briefly outlines some of the sources for such films and how they might be used in macromarketing research and scholarship.

Locating and Utilizing Documentaries for Macromarketing Analysis

There is an embarrassment of riches in documentary film resources. Most of the public and academic libraries have DVD or Video Home System (VHS) copies of important documentary films and an increasing number also have some or all of these films available online. The same is true of a number of film archives. One that was mentioned earlier is Alexander Street Press's *Ethnographic Video Online* (<http://anth.alexanderstreet.com/>) which contains approximately 1000 ethnographic films. There is no charge for accessing these films. Another source that does charge for buying or renting its films is Documentary Educational Resources (<http://www.der.org/>). DER also has some of its films distributed online and in other formats by the Tribeca Film Institute's Reframe Collection (<http://www.tribecafilm.institute.org/filmmakers/reframe/>). Government-supported film archives like the National Film Board of Canada (<http://www.nfb.ca/>), the Hong Kong Film Archive (<http://www.lcsd.gov.hk/CE/CulturalService/HKFA/en/index.php>), and the CBC Digital Archives (http://archives.cbc.ca/info/archives/archives_en_08.asp) are other valuable sites devoted to archiving videos. Among other relevant archives is one by Rick Prelinger containing his collection of 60,000 advertising,

educational, industrial, and amateur films, which are particularly relevant to researching business through documents designed for either public or internal (e.g., stockholder) viewing. During the CD-ROM era, many of these films were available in compact disc format through Voyager (e.g., Belk 1998; Prelinger 1996). Approximately 2500 of these films are available for free viewing, downloading, and reuse through the Prelinger library (<http://www.archive.org/details/prelinger>). And in 2002, the U.S. Library of Congress acquired all of the films Prelinger had acquired. The Library of Congress also has a large number of pre-1915 historical films available for downloading with no restrictions through its American Memory Project (<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html>). And the British Broadcasting Corporation has more than forty long interviews with pioneering digital researchers online and freely available for incorporation into other videos and research (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/virtualrevolution/interviews.shtml>).

As Prelinger (2010) and Kessler and Schäfer (2010) note, since its founding in 2005, YouTube (<http://www.youtube.com>) has quickly become a de facto archive with over 150 million videos. Vimeo (<http://www.vimeo.com>) reports 16,000 uploads to its site daily and more than 3 million registered users. There is no charge to those who upload or view videos in these archives, although a paid premium membership is available on Vimeo, which allows uploading more material each month. The explosive growth and inclusive nature of these sites makes the future of other video archives uncertain. Nevertheless there are still hundreds of other video archives, both public and private, with specializations by topic, period, nationality, region, filmmaker, and other criteria that can help in locating relevant material.

Many of the films on YouTube and Vimeo will be of no interest, but those publicly available can be searched and someone interested in a topic like Christmas or birthday celebrations can instantly find thousands of “home videos” depicting these celebrations. This is considerably more efficient than Dennis Rook’s (1985) one-time project to collect such material on 8 mm film and VHS tapes. The ideal material for someone interested in how families celebrate such occasions would be videos done as straight captures of naturally occurring activity as opposed to those made and edited to attract a wide YouTube viewership. So some judicious screening (in the senses of both viewing and filtering) is needed. Choosing appropriate channels or categories at these sites is a beginning, but some search will be required to locate all of the relevant material available. It may well be necessary to sample rather than try to be exhaustive.

Once a research question has been formulated and appropriate documentary source material has been located and downloaded, acquired, or tagged, analysis can begin. Techniques for analysis range from content analysis and semiotics to proxemics and narrative analysis. These techniques and the theories behind them are discussed in a number of helpful sources (e.g., Burgess and Green 2009; Emmison and Smith 2000; Evans and Hall 1999; Gardner and Östör 2001; Heath, Hindmarsh, and Luff 2010; Messaris 1997; Pink 2001; Rose 2001; Schirato and

Webb 2004; Schroeder 2002; van Leeuwen and Jewitt 2001). These sources can also be valuable in sensitizing researchers to special visual and digital issues that constitute a needed “visual literacy” and “digital literacy” in approaching visual material (Hartley 2009).

With hundreds of millions of documentaries and films for potential source material, the possible research projects are almost equally large. A few examples of promising sets of material will have to suffice here. One possibility would be to focus on the visual representations of a particular corporation with a public consumption-focused face like McDonalds, Apple, or Nike. In the case of Wal-Mart, a number of specific film treatments portray different takes on the giant corporation (e.g., Greenwald 2005; Hawes-Davis 2002; Kirby 2006; Young 2004). Another option is to look at a particular consumption phenomenon like international tourism (e.g., Gordon 2005; O’Rourke 1987), global meanings of clothing (e.g., Bloemen 2001; De Longeville and Leone 2005), global meanings of food (e.g., McLaughlin 2005; Thompson 1999; Varda 2000), global markets in images (e.g., Barbash and Taylor 1993; Leslie 2004; MacDougal and MacDougal 1996; Spurlock 2004), consumption communities and fandom (e.g., Belk and Tumbat 2005; Kobi and Kobi 2009; Nygard 1999, 2004; Przywara 2001), or any of a number of other macro issues involving the social implications of consumption and marketing (e.g., Achbar and Abbott 2005; Annau 2004; Black 2001; Boihem 1997; De Graaf and Boe 1997; Eckhardt, Devinney, and Belk 2006; Ellwood 2005; Fox 2010; Ferguson 2010; Gandini 2003; Goodman and Rushkoff 2004; Greene 2004; Hanson 2011; Jhally 2010; Klein 2003; Leonard 2009; Maysles, Maysles, and Zwerin 1968).

Conclusion

The time is ripe for incorporating documentaries into macro-marketing scholarship both as research sources and as rich multisensory material for analysis. This is only a limited introduction to the possibilities, but hopefully it will whet the appetite. The range of documentary films is growing at such a rate that no matter how many macromarketing scholars take up the challenge, it will not be possible to even come close to exhausting all the possibilities for utilizing documentaries in our research.

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