

Blurring the Lines: Feature News Videos and Documentaries in a New Digital Age

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Abstract: Historically, feature stories in the news have been characterized by their timely and episodic coverage of current events. In comparison, documentaries have been known to be in-depth, thematic explorations of social, political, or cultural issues. As news organizations expand their multimedia offerings and documentary filmmakers are increasingly driven towards creating interactive content, the boundaries between these forms of storytelling have become increasingly unclear. Through a comparative analysis and literature reviews, this paper investigates the creative elements such as narrative structure, visual style, and authorial voice in feature news videos and documentaries have changed within the contemporary media ecosystem, and examines the evolution of non-fictional storytelling. The study situates this inquiry within the broader context of disruption and reimagination in journalism and non-fictional storytelling within our digital landscape. Ultimately, by examining the blurring of the lines between feature news videos and documentaries, this paper provides insight into the changing dynamics of truth-telling and meaning-making in the new media landscape.

Keywords: News features, Documentary, Storytelling, Digital age, Non-fiction.

1. Introduction

The rise of new media platforms has changed the entertainment habits of audiences while providing society with new and unique technology, also it has blurred the traditional distinctions between videos in feature news stories and documentary films [1]. Historically, feature news videos and documentaries have been distinct, independent forms of media. Feature news videos aim to convey information in a shorter amount of time and focus on the most important details of each story. Documentaries, on the other hand, dive deeper into the social, cultural, and political perspectives within each story through unique and compelling audiovisual experiences. In recent years, with the rapid development of new media platforms, the traditional business and distribution model for feature news videos and documentaries has evolved. One of the driving forces of this evolution is the influence of our digital landscape on audiences' aesthetic preferences. In this era of rapid transformation, these two fundamentally different media forms have shown significant convergence in their presentation styles. This article explores the increasing prevalence of commonalities between the narrative structure, visual styles, and authorial voice in news features and documentaries. By reviewing the historical characteristics of these two media forms and examining how they have intersected in the current media landscape. This research aims to illustrate the significance of the evolving relationship between these distinct yet interdependent styles and its implications for the

future of non-fictional media. ultimately providing valuable theoretical insights and support in both academia and the industry.

2. Review the Feature News Videos, Documentaries, Their Historical Context and Differences

2.1. Feature News Videos

Feature news videos offer journalists an essential medium to provide context and authenticity to reports. Unlike breaking news, feature news reports provide in-depth coverage of trends, events, and issues, going beyond just the basic facts [2]. Specifically, the feature news videos provide background information on current events and characters' stories, connecting audiences to broader social issues through compelling human interest stories. Moreover, they highlight the social significance and human values behind news events, thereby educating the public and encouraging them to pay further attention to the issues at hand [2].

In addition to their informative role, feature news videos also explore and analyze the details of each topic in greater depth. They often combine factual reporting with narrative storytelling to provide viewers with a more profound understanding, enabling them to have a more comprehensive understanding of the complex motivations and social impacts of the event, which can help audiences build a more integrated and three-dimensional cognition[2]. Feature news videos play a unique and important role in disseminating news, balancing news reporting and social education, and cultivating a more empathetic and informed public [3]. They help promote broad public discussion and in-depth thinking on social issues.

2.2. Documentaries

Documentary filmmaking represents a distinctive form of artistic expression within cinema and television. With real stories as the object of expression, and artistic processing and presentation, the filmmaker is able to express the essence of reality [4]. Unlike feature news stories, documentaries rely less on scripted and often biased narratives and characterizations. Rather, they use footage, interviews, and narrative techniques to construct comprehensive works that delve into more complex ideas and issues. This 'reality' based approach not only captures the essence of reality but also challenges viewers to think about profound societal issues on a deeper level. For example, the work of filmmakers such as Michael Moore and Ken Burns utilizes documentaries to investigate historical events, political controversies, and social issues blending artistic expression with journalistic [5].

Furthermore, documentaries offer producers and filmmakers greater artistic freedom and control. Documentaries often incorporate unique creative strategies that infuse the filmmaker's subjective perspective, opinions, and attitudes into their narrative framework. This approach showcases under-represented stories and encourages audiences to take a critical view of the documentary's themes, fostering independent reflection and a more nuanced understanding of the complexities inherent in real-world issues [4].

2.3. Historical Context and Distinctions

Historically, feature news videos and documentaries have served distinct roles in media. Feature news videos typically focus on specific events or topics within a constrained time frame, aiming to deliver stories to their intended audience through journalistic rigor and immediacy. Journalists aim to provide clear, concise, and detailed information on current events. In contrast, documentaries are feature-length investigations into cultural, social, and political issues through a cinematic lens [4]. Unlike feature news videos, documentaries leverage artistic and creative audiovisual expressions to narrate

and illuminate themes. For example, compared to the single objective reporting style in feature news videos, documentary directors often incorporate more personal perspectives and individual visual styles in their films. Close-ups, slow-motion shots, symbolic shots, and other techniques are commonly used in documentary filming. These camera languages help to enhance the storytelling and evoke deeper emotional and aesthetic responses from audiences. While documentaries are rooted in factual storytelling, they transcend the mere dissemination of information and can convey more sophisticated and interpretive views of stories. Through their depth and the filmmaker's vision, they invite viewers to contemplate these underlying themes, encouraging independent reflection rather than passive reception of facts. These differences have defined the respective contributions of feature news videos and documentaries within the media landscape, each offering unique value in communication and storytelling.

3. Literature Review

With the development of new media technologies, the boundaries between documentaries and feature news videos are becoming increasingly blurred, with a trend towards the convergence of the two media forms. A review of the existing literature reveals a growing number of studies that have explored this convergence.

3.1. The Factor of Convergence: The Advances in Digital Platforms and Media Technologies

Ulin offers a comprehensive analysis of media communication with particular focus on the impact of digital platforms in the evolving digital landscape, and emphasizes that new digital platforms and technological advances have and will continue to disrupt traditional forms of media, while technological factors have led to the convergence of news features and documentaries [6]. Dowling claims that digital interactive platforms are essential because they cater to audiences' preferences, thus enabling immersive, participatory, and interactive narrative techniques to engage audiences more deeply [5]. Traditional feature news videos focused on conveying information and news events, with relatively monotonous content, lacking in visual appeal and interactivity, which limited their appeal to viewers. The advancement of digital platforms and media technologies has revolutionized feature news videos by incorporating multimedia elements into audio, video, and interactive elements. The use of multimedia not only enhances the depth and richness of content in feature news videos, but also transforms their presentation into a more immersive and documentary-like experience. Correspondingly, with the rapid development of digital platforms, traditional documentaries that are longer in length are not able to hold the attention of some audiences the same way feature news stories can. In contemporary media landscapes, there is a noticeable rise in the market share of short documentaries, which appear to be adopting formats reminiscent of news updates. They are released in quick succession on online platforms to cater to the fast-paced nature of today's digital media environment, which has shown to be effective in maintaining audience engagement.

Moreover, interactive and immersive techniques are becoming increasingly prevalent in both news features and documentaries [5]. Major news organizations such as The New York Times and the BBC have integrated news documentary content seamlessly into their online platforms, actively interacting with readers and tailoring their offerings to meet audience preferences. Meanwhile, documentary filmmakers such as Katerina Cizek, Florian Thalhofer, and Jeff Soyk are utilizing digital platforms such as social media and websites to cater to audience preferences, expand their viewer base, and enhance viewer engagement, thereby creating new and more immersive forms of audience engagement experience.

3.2. The Factor of Convergence: The Changes in Business Models and Financing Channels

Ulin points out economic factors as significant contributors to the convergence and reshaping of the landscape for news features and documentaries, primarily due to shifts in business models and financing channels sources that have increasingly blurred the distinction between news features and documentaries [6]. The traditional reliance of news features on advertising revenue from television stations has been upended, while documentaries, once dependent on cinema or TV distribution for profitability, have undergone a similar transformation. Both news organizations and documentary producers are now exploring alternative revenue streams such as sponsorships, membership subscriptions, and streaming platforms to improve their financial flexibility. This diversification of revenue streams has not only reduced their dependence on a single business model, but has also allowed both to be more accessible in their content choices and expressions. News features now incorporate more subjective perspectives from reporters with more of a focus on storytelling as a way to better engage viewers.

On the other hand, documentaries provide creators with more independent and free creative space without having to consider the traditional distribution and profit model, enabling them to better align with contemporary audience preferences. This shift has led documentaries to converge closely with feature news videos in terms of storytelling structure and topic selections. Concurrently, as traditional broadcasting and profit models for both feature news videos and documentaries become less popular, new audience bases and revenue streams have opened up, fostering increased collaboration between documentary producers and news organizations. This collaboration has further blurred the lines between these media forms in terms of topic selection, narrative structure, and presentation format.

3.3. The Factor of Convergence: The Evolving Audience Preferences

Besides technological and economic factors, this convergence is driven by changing audience preferences. Today's viewers are increasingly drawn to more interactive narratives that provide information as well as insights into social issues [7]. This has prompted feature news videos to adopt more artistic visual styles and narrative structures to create an immersive experience for viewers, which used to be used primarily in documentaries. At the same time, audiences' preferences for shorter film has led to the replacement of lengths have steered away from lengthy documentaries towards more concise content, a format that creates a more interactive experience. It can be seen that the rise of social media and streaming services has dramatically altered how audiences are engaged, and this continues to facilitate real-time feedback and interaction [7]. As audience preferences continue to evolve in this direction, the convergence between documentaries and feature news videos is expected to continue. This shift in audience preferences compels content creators to combine factual representations with compelling narratives to improve the overall viewer experience.

3.4. Summary

These perspectives show us that the convergence of documentary and feature news videos represents a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by advancements in technology, shifts in economic models, and evolving audience preferences. This continued convergence not only challenges traditional distinctions but also opens up new opportunities and possibilities for non-fiction storytelling in the digital age. As creators and platforms adapt to these changes, they are increasingly blending elements of factual reporting with narrative techniques to create more engaging content that resonates with new audiences on digital platforms. The evolving landscape of media is driven by a shared objective to effectively communicate real-world events and narratives in more compelling ways.

4. The Similarities between Feature News Videos and Documentaries

4.1. Examples of the Similarities between Feature News Video and Documentary

Conducting a comparative analysis of specific documentaries and feature news videos is crucial for illustrating their increasing convergence. BBC often blends high-quality video production within-depth reporting akin to documentaries. For example, *'Sarah's Story: The death of seven-year-olds Seeking Asylum in the UK'* tells the story of the tragic deaths of five people, including Sarah, a seven-year-old who was attempting to sneak into the UK. This feature news video contains vivid imagery, emotive voice-overs, detailed background information, and interviews, making it very similar to a documentary film. Over the actual footage of Sarah resting on her father's shoulders moments before her passing is accompanied by a voice-over describing where the smuggler is found by the police (0:31-0:39 minutes) (0:41-0:52 minutes). Furthermore, the narrative introduction to Sarah's background and her family is complemented by photographs that personalize the story (0:53-1:22 minutes). The feature news video also includes an interview with a teacher who shares that the whole school observed a moment of silence in Sarah's memory (4:33-4:55 minutes) further underscoring the emotional and intense response from her community. Moreover, the video captures Sarah's father grieving with regret (3:09-3:19 minutes), adding another layer of emotional depth. The reporter proceeds with an in-depth investigation into the incident, probing Sarah's father with questions about their smuggling attempt. Through this interview, the viewer also learns that Sarah's family has sought asylum in Europe many times but with no success, they chose to sneak across the border when they faced deportation. By exploring these personal and societal dimensions, the feature news video not only informs but also prompts viewers to contemplate broader social issues. This approach, incorporating video interviews and interactive visuals, enriches the factual representation of current events, blurring the distinction between traditional news reporting and documentary film-making.

On the other hand, classic documentaries with a solid social focus, such as *Keif Davidson's Meltdown: Three Mile Island*, are about the events, controversies, and continuing effects of the accident at the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant in Pennsylvania. In its depiction of the accident at the nuclear power plant, the movie uses many approaches that typically appear in feature news videos, such as journalistic investigation, reconstruction of the events, interviews with the people involved, and an introduction to the principles of nuclear power leakage. The film is divided into four sections presenting its findings in a narrative style, with each section of moderate length, making it easy for the audience to digest.

At the beginning, the documentary provides comprehensive background information about the incident to establish context and educate the audience on the dangers of the leak (part one). As the narrative progresses, it delves into the controversies surrounding the accident, addressing public skepticism and suspicions of an official cover-up. The film reconstructs how the disaster unfolded and details how the residents rebelled against the development of the nuclear power generation industry (part two). Through step-by-step investigations and expert interviews, the film reveals broader implications and risks associated with the nuclear power industry (part three). Finally, through extensive, enlightening, and detailed investigations and analyses, the documentary uncovers hidden truths and sheds light on the darker aspects of the incident (part four). In addition to its narrative structure, the documentary incorporates extensive field footage and personal narratives to enhance emotional resonance, in a way similar to the human interest approach often seen in feature news videos. The documentary's thematic focus on a significant societal event further blurs the boundaries between documentary filmmaking and feature news reporting, emphasizing the shared objective of educating the public and provoking critical reflection on complex issues. *"Meltdown: Three Mile Island"* illustrates how documentaries can adopt storytelling techniques that align closely with feature news videos.

4.2. Similarities in Narrative Structure

Beyond the merging of feature news videos and documentaries exemplified in the previous examples, there are other notable similarities between these formats regarding narrative structure, visual presentation, and authorial voice. In terms of narrative structure, documentaries have favored a more extended narrative structure in order to provide a more comprehensive understanding of issues. Feature news videos, although also in-depth on a topic, have favored immediate coverage of events in a clear and concise narrative in a limited amount of time. Today, however, the narrative structures of the two have become increasingly similar. Both feature news videos and documentaries now incorporate evidence, background information, interviews, and footage to provide additional context for a more comprehensive and cohesive viewing experience. In addition, feature news videos and documentaries are both more focused on their emotional appeal, utilizing voice-overs or video footage to evoke empathy and encourage the audience to reflect on the issues.

4.3. Similarities in Visual Style

In terms of visual style, there are inherently different visual styles between feature news videos and documentaries. For example, feature news videos generally only use footage of events to convey information and present facts making them easy to understand [2], while documentaries make use of artistic and cinematic language, such as symbolic imagery, techniques in cinematography, and so on. However, the visual styles of feature news videos and documentaries have become more and more alike in recent years. In order to increase the audience's emotional involvement and give the audience a richer visual experience, feature news videos have begun to use more artistic and cinematic techniques, focusing on the aesthetics of filming and capturing some dramatic key shots. At the same time, documentaries have begun to use more on-site footage, graphics, and interviews to bolster factual accuracy and coherence throughout their storytelling [8]. Text, still and moving images are also combined into multimedia documentaries for distribution to a wider audience via compact disc, CD-ROMs, DVDs, and the Internet [9]. This evolution reflects a shared goal of both formats to engage audiences emotionally while maintaining factual integrity. By adopting similar visual approaches, feature news videos and documentaries are expanding their storytelling capabilities and broadening their appeal across audience demographics.

4.4. Similarities in Authorial Voice

In terms of authorial voice, traditional feature news videos paid close attention to the neutrality and objectivity of the journalists' position in order to comply with existing standards of journalistic impartiality and neutrality [2]. Both journalists and editors aimed to provide unbiased information, allowing the audience to form their own opinions based on the facts presented. In contrast, producers of documentaries would often try to add a personal touch to their films in order to express their individual points of view. However, recent trends indicate a merging of approaches between feature news videos and documentaries. While feature news videos continue to uphold journalistic principles of neutrality, journalists and writers now have far greater freedom to provide personal insights and perspectives. This shift grants greater editorial freedom for journalists to ask probing questions and offer their own analyses, enhancing the depth and relevance of news reports. At the same time, some documentaries that focus on social and current affairs also choose to shoot in an objective and neutral way, like a feature news video, to show the audience a comprehensive and profound overview of what has happened and what the truth is.

Moreover, the new media landscape has also dramatically changed the dynamics of truth-telling and meaning-making, combining a traditional journalistic emphasis on factual presentation with the more interpretive nature of documentary filmmaking. As Dowling explains, digital technology has

enabled interactive and immersive narratives, allowing documentary filmmakers and journalists to engage more deeply with their audiences [5]. This dynamic has led to a shift towards improved presentation of facts through rich narratives that provide an emotional tone and a more universally appealing media piece. The emergence of these new media platforms has significantly disrupted traditional practices. By actively encouraging participatory storytelling and user-generated content, these platforms challenge traditional media's top-down, unidirectional flow of information. This shift towards engagement with a wider audience has far-reaching implications. Instead of passive consumption of news and information, these platforms enable a more dynamic and collaborative truth-telling process. Audiences are now active participants in creating and disseminating meaning, and the significance and understanding of events and issues are determined by the different perspectives and interpretations offered by a broader range of participants, not just professional journalists, editors, or documentary filmmakers.

4.5. Reflection

The normalization of news on digital platforms highlights truth's inherently fluid and evolving nature. In our current era of technological developments, truth is no longer seen as a fixed, objective fact but as a dynamic, collaborative process shaped by multiple perspectives and interpretations. In order to capture this complexity, it is increasingly necessary to adopt diverse, complex, and non-linear approaches to understanding and presenting reality. The rise of these emerging media platforms, therefore, also represents a profound shift in the way people perceive and engage with information and how individuals construct meaning [10]. The traditional model of feature news videos and documentaries and the linear, top-down mode of communication no longer adequately meet the needs and expectations of today's audiences, which require more participatory and immersive experiences. This evolution of media forms highlights the importance of understanding the evolving nature of truth and the collaborative, multifaceted approaches shaping the understanding and representation of reality in the digital age.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, even though historically there are many differences between feature news videos and documentaries, the development of new media and digital technology has created profound transformations in both forms of non-fictional storytelling. Influenced by technological advancement, economic shifts, and evolving audience preferences, these formats have adapted by incorporating each other's strengths and meeting current audiences' demands. Today, they share striking similarities in narrative structure, visual style, and authorial voice. This convergence not only reflects the evolving landscape of non-fiction storytelling but also emphasizes the importance of truth-telling and meaning-making in an era where audience engagement and immersion are pivotal. Understanding these changes provides critical insights into the future of non-fiction media, reflecting a responsive and dynamic field that continues to evolve alongside technological advancements and shifts in ideology. However, the paper only considers the impact of technological advancement, economic transformation and changing audience preferences on the integration of feature news videos and documentaries in the digital age. It is undeniable that more factors may affect their convergence that need to be further explored. Additionally, the paper only focuses on comparing and contrasting the two forms of media in terms of narrative structure, visual style, and authorial voice, and the similarities between them should be expanded and analyzed in other related studies. Therefore, the author will continue to collect information related to this study and analyze it more comprehensively and systematically in the future.

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