

Broadcast Journalism **A critical introduction**

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Interviewing for documentary

Documentary-making does not mean putting words into the interviewee's mouth. The best parts of an interview are when clear truths emerge spontaneously. However, an interview may be an intrusion into old wounds and tragic memories: 'In the name of the public good we delve into people's lives, invade their privacy, and expose their souls' (Rosenthal, 1996: 152). The dilemma is that the interviewer will want emotions and drama, anecdotes and colourful stories, as well as facts. Facts can be presented with television graphics or by voice-over narration in radio and TV, but there is no substitute for individual human feeling.

The more a documentary-maker knows about the subject involved, the easier it becomes to conduct successful interviews because the questions will be more focused. Although the interviewer should run through the topics to be covered (if this is a formal interview situation), there is always a danger of over-rehearsal so that the participant burns out in advance. Nevertheless, the interviewer must make the person feel at ease and less suspicious of the process; the eventual performance will benefit from any empathy that has been created. Sometimes, though, interviewers should not be too deferential, because this may inhibit them from asking tough questions, especially if the documentary is an investigative or current affairs adversarial style. In more formal situations, the interviewees sometimes ask to see the questions in advance and may want to adhere only to those questions. However, prepared answers will destroy a normally spontaneous, natural, conversational style. The interviewee may also want to hear or view the recording. This is fine as long as participants do not demand a veto over the final edit.

I only ever ask one question at a time, and it will contain only a single point. If the question consists of several parts, the interviewee will inevitably forget or ignore one of the elements. The 'tell me' gambit ensures usable, self-contained statements. The documentary-maker may have to ask the same question again at the end of the interview, if the first answer needs amplification: 'Tell me again about how you . . .' will result in a more succinct, relaxed, usable answer the second time round, especially if the point is important but the interviewee stumbled during the first take.

Alternatively, there may be a two-way conversation featuring the presenter or reporter as well: this is necessary for a confrontational dialogue. Walking interviews are a good idea if using an on-screen television presenter – they provide both movement and the impression of a natural conversation. Radio mikes will be required. An on-screen presenter (often scripted by the director/producer if they are not a journalist or subject specialist) can personalise the experience, enabling a dialogue with participants. However, with film, international sales distributors prefer documentaries without an on-screen presence as this reduces the need for dubbing or subtitles.

Operating video solo on location

A 'one-person band' video operator who directs, shoots and records will have less time to think about situations on location than a crew will. This means that more, not less, preparation will be required. A solo director can take his or her camera to a recce and shoot preparatory shots as a record, and will find that access is easier.

Being unobtrusive is useful in documentary situations where only one person can get inside the action: several people may stand out and move around more slowly. Certain styles of documentary – such as video diaries, investigative journalism pieces, low budget projects, wildlife programmes that may take a long time to capture subjects, fly-on-the-wall sequences shot in confined spaces like inside cars – lend themselves to one-person recording.

Yet there are practical disadvantages to going solo with video: very few people are equally good at all of the skills required. Experienced specialists work faster, more efficiently and usually produce a higher-quality result. Sound may suffer and it is difficult to do other basics such as changing the focal length of a zoom lens while holding a mike and watching the levels. It can also be useful to have others to carry equipment, park cars or watch out for intrusions while shooting. Equipment can easily be stolen on location.

Using sound and image archives

Documentary helps us to retain historical memory, but the role played by archives in documentary projects, and the way it is used, can vary greatly. It can be visual or sound illustration for the voice-over testimonials of the interviewees, where their comments are more generally relevant, or it can be used for one or more sequences with the original soundtrack. Music and sound archive are often used to create atmosphere and/or emotional impact. There are numerous film libraries, both general and specialist, which hold archives and stock shots. The way that a documentary-maker plans to integrate the selected archive material into the rest of the film may form part of the negotiations over copyright, so it is a critical determinant for the future creative direction of the project.

Edit structure and pace

With good editing, the flow that is created makes the audience unaware of the process of compilation, yet it allows them to interpret while actively viewing. Although some documentaries can be assembled in the order that they are shot, and the diary format tends to dictate this approach, each maker has their own idea of what structuring entails. The order in which information is communicated can be a difficult challenge because of the length of a long-form piece. The main criterion tends to be what works creatively with the available material, usually in the interests of achieving a logical narrative flow. The way subjects are positioned, how long they are allowed to talk and what about, the shots they are juxtaposed next to (in video), and the images their voices are laid over will all influence audience reception.

As the amount of raw material is so much more than in a news item, it will need to be reviewed and everything must be systematically logged and assessed while it is being loaded up for editing. Records are needed for all the raw material, particularly when it is derived from third-party sources, such as archive sound or film, newspapers and stills where copyright clearance will be needed. This exercise in taking stock also enables the maker to assess whether any additional recording will be needed to fill gaps ('pick-up shots' in documentary film parlance). Video must