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# UNDERSTANDING *COLLABORATIVE DOCUMENTARY* *FILMMAKING PRACTICE* AS A METHODOLOGY FOR EXPLORING PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVES OF PLACE IN AREAS OF LOW SOCIAL MOBILITY

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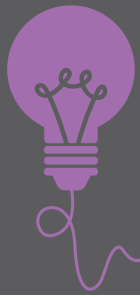
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## **ABSTRACT**

Documentary filmmaking practitioners have long engaged with socio-political narratives within a given society, and whether as a tool for creative exploration, aesthetic engagement, an ethnographic methodology or to greater understand the form of the medium itself, documentary filmmaking practice has demanded increased recognition from within the academy during the 21st century. It is, however, only in more recent developments of thought that serious consideration has been given to documentary's potential to engage collaboratively with participants in an active and meaningful manner. This paper aims to frame emerging trends in documentary filmmaking within the context of collaborative practice methods, establishing how such methods can be used to engage participants with creative explorations of the relationship between people, place and the socio-political. Taking the phenomena of low levels of social mobility in the North Midlands (Social Mobility Commission, 2017) as a case study, I have been engaging with my own practice as a documentary maker to produce original filmic work with the aim of contributing towards debates currently taking place within the academic study of the medium. My research over recent years has attempted to interrogate the creative, theoretical, practical, and ethical challenges faced by the socially engaged documentarian producing work within the contemporary context of the field. Through examining my own ongoing research alongside that of others in the field, I propose that documentary filmmaking practice could, and perhaps should, re-align the focus and consideration of its impact to include participants, not just audiences, by engaging with methods of co-production and active collaboration. In doing so, practitioners can begin to engage with, and challenge, the established notion of an inherent imbalance of power within the participant/practitioner relationship (Nash, 2012), with the aim of moving towards a more meaningful collaborative engagement.



## INTRODUCTION

Within the context of documentary filmmaking practice, 'collaboration', or, two parties working together towards some form of creative output, has in some sense featured in the production of documentaries since the medium's inception in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century; be this in the form of the working relationship which exists between practitioners during a production (found in both fiction and non-fiction filmmaking practice), or in the interactions which take place between the documentarian and the participant (or subject) of the documentary. Collaborative interactions have always been instrumental to the filmmaking process, and as such much attention has been given to the types of collaboration which can take within the context of film production; in particular, those which exist in 'fiction' filmmaking production environments. Both the collaborative interactions which take place between 'professional' filmmaking practitioners (i.e. directors, cinematographers, editors and other 'crew' working on production), and those which involve 'directors' and 'actors', are considered a norm of the filmmaking production process and have been explored, explained and evaluated extensively in print and other in forms of media.

With regards to non-fiction, or *documentary*, filmmaking practice, there exists considerable (if less expansive) evaluation of the collaborations which take place between filmmaking practitioners engaged in a production context, as in the fiction production model above (Chapman, 2007: 113:114; Reid and Sanders, 2021:55-61; Anderson and Lucas, 2016; Trump, 2018), and some exploration of working relationships between documentarians and topical experts (for example, social anthropologists or community activists) off-camera, often in an advisory capacity (Auferheide, 2007; MacDougall, 2022). These interactions are often considered to be collaborative ones, and are analysed, reflected upon, and ultimately understood as such. However, by comparison, when considering the relationship between documentarian and a participant, or more commonly the *subject*, who appears in front of camera, it is rarely within the context of a form of 'collaboration'.

A key element of many socially engaged documentarians is a thematic engagement with the socio-political through practice; documentary filmmaking often engages with a creative exploration of a socio-political event, or *moment*. This exploration is usually concerned with the *impact* or *aftermath* of a socio-political moment, as Chanan theorises in the concept of 'filming *the invisible*' (2008:121-132); documentarians are often inherently unable to film the socio-political '*moment*' as it happens for a variety of practical reasons, so instead they must engage with its aftermath, the residual atmosphere of the socio-political framed in moving image. The socio-political '*moment*' (which could be as brief as a few moments, a day, or which could last months or even years), an event or decision which has triggered a wave of impact within a community, has taken place, and the documentarian then frames the wake.



In order to do this, the documentarian relies on willing participants who have experience of the socio-political event, scenario or 'moment' to not only contribute to their understanding of the subject, but to help them produce a filmic exploration of it. This, inherently, requires collaboration to take place between the participant and the documentary practitioner.

This article aims to examine how collaboration is contextualised within the field of documentary filmmaking and seeks to re-frame the participant/practitioner relationship as one with the potential for meaningful and active collaborative interactions, exploring methodologies I am currently exploring and developing as part of an on-going research project. The project explores how creative, collaborative interactions which take place between participant and practitioner can be used to explore senses of place within the context of a case study focussed on areas of low social mobility in the post-industrial North Midlands of England. It is my hope that some of these methods can be applied by documentary practitioners more widely when seeking to explore localised socio-political issues with participants.

## CONTEXTUALISING COLLABORATION IN DOCUMENTARY

### PARTICIPANT OR SUBJECT?

There has been much consideration given by scholars to the inherent ethical complexities which exist within the relationship between documentarian and participant (Gross et. Al., 1991; Nash, 2011; Nash, 2012; Thomas, 2012; Hongisto, 2015; MacDougall, 2019), a relationship which has its foundation in what is now considered by many to be an exploitative approach to documentary processes and methods prevalent in the medium from its earliest incarnations. Interactions with participants in early documentary films were approached by documentarians in a manner informed by colonial perspectives on anthropology (Martinez, 2016), and though the most extreme examples of exploitative practices had been phased out by the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, for a large portion of the medium's short history, an unethical, and either non-existent, or at least flawed, collaborative approach to engaging with those who featured in documentaries was the norm. In recent years, however, this has been challenged by scholars and practitioners alike; contemporary documentary makers often favour the practice of *engaging* with a *participant*, rather than *capturing a subject*, the shift to language indicative of a more respectful, collaborative view of the relationship, and one which this article will adhere to.



## WHAT IS 'COLLABORATION' WHEN CONSIDERED WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKING PRACTICE?



**The author, filmed by a participant during an active collaborative exercise, 2022.**

When surveying foundational text-based sources concerned with documentary methodology, one is struck by how often there is a complete absence of any mention of collaboration, or collaborators, in any form, a surprising omission considering the how fundamental collaboration is to all documentary practice. When collaboration *is* mentioned, it is usually in relation to collaborative relationships which exist between filmmaking production crews working on documentaries (Chapman, 2007: 113:114; Reid and Sanders, 2021:55-61; Anderson and Lucas, 2016; Trump, 2018), or between documentarians and an 'expert' in the subject matter of which the film is concerned, for example; social anthropologists (Auferheide, 2007; MacDougall, 2022) or an external professional whose role is essentially that of a co-director, co-producer or a 'fixer' of sorts (Smaill, 2015:90). Where texts do mention collaborative interactions between the participant (usually still referred to as subject) and the documentary practitioner, it is only in so far as to suggest that their actual appearance on screen constitutes a collaboration in of itself, with no detail on the nature of the collaboration explored critically. Texts which do explore more creative, or *active* (as I will define in the next section) forms subject collaboration will often reference participants 'performing' on screen, and occasionally mention collaboration in the form of co-production taking place behind the

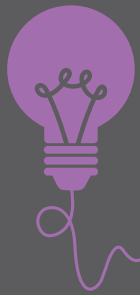


camera (de Jong et. Al., 2012; Waldron, 2018). Overwhelmingly however, detailed exploration, evaluation or critical analysis of collaborative methodologies are hardly, if ever, present; such description proves elusive in both introductory and specialist texts.

Despite the lack of considerable detailed exploration of collaborative methodologies in documentary practice, it is usually the case that when the collaboration involves interactions between practitioners and/or other 'professionals' or 'experts', it is considered instrumental in the creative direction of the filmmaking process, constituting a kind of 'co-production'. This, in most cases, does not appear to apply to collaboration which takes place between practitioner and participant. Though it is clearly recognised that the willing engagement of participants on-screen (in, for example, a talking head interview, or by leading the camera through a particular location of significance) can constitute a form of collaboration (Spence and Navarro, 2007:213), there appears to be significantly less recognition of *how* a participant's collaboration could be more *active* in its engagement with the creative decision-making process, rather than an engagement where the participants contribution is confined to what they choose to do or say in front of camera.

## MOVING TOWARDS *ACTIVE* COLLABORATION

I would suggest that there are clear differentiations in the nature of the collaborative interactions taking place between participant and practitioner, and that as such, it is useful when discussing participant/practitioner collaboration to assign separate prefixes to the different approaches. Therefore, when referring to collaborations in which the participant simply appears in front of the camera, either in an interview, or acting on instructions from the practitioner such as 'show me around the space' or 'walk me through what happened, and where', but is not invited to influence the filmmaking process in any way beyond this, I propose the term *basic collaboration*. Basic here implies that the collaboration is simple, perhaps limited in some way, whilst acknowledging there is still an interaction taking place which could be defined as collaborative. When considering collaborative activities which involve the participant not only appearing in front of camera, but also being invited to directly influence the aesthetic and/or creative decision making of the practitioner off-camera, whether in pre-production, production, or post-production, I propose the use of *active collaboration*. Though these are broad categorisations, I have found them to be useful in differentiating between collaborative interactions which are incidental, and those which are more direct in their impact on the documentary production itself. The methodologies I am seeking to develop through my current research would fall into the latter category, they are *active collaborations*.



Despite the positive contributions active collaborations can bring to a documentary production, some scholars suggest that endeavouring to engage with such methods of participant collaboration which I would consider to be active, can actually have a detrimental impact on the quality of filmic outcome of documentary project itself. MacDougall suggests that collaboration between participant and practitioner inevitably requires compromise, and that this:

'may result in a kind of double negation, so that the interests of neither are properly expressed, or else remain blurred. It may be impossible to know whose perspective the film finally represents. My experience of collaborating with film subjects, which initially I embraced, has convinced me that the resulting ambiguity often constrains both parties.' (2022:27)

Similarly, Chapman writes that efforts to 'empower the people that were to be featured in the film, by creating a democracy of production' constitutes a 'gamble with creative vision, especially if the production team moves dangerously near to a total abandonment of authorship and power' (2007:15). There is often an air of caution present when discussing participant collaboration, a concern that the intentions of the practitioner will be compromised by the desire to facilitate the influence of participants. I would suggest that this concern is not a binary condemnation of the outcomes of such methodologies, rather a critique which fails to acknowledge variations in the aims and objectives of different practitioners. If the practitioner's objective is to produce a film that, while inclusive of other's perspectives, primarily conveys their own ideas and understanding, then this concern is valid- though it is important to note that this is not the aim or the objective of all practitioners working in the documentary field.

While I would acknowledge the inevitable creative compromise which arises from participant/practitioner collaborations, and even of the constraints which may result from this, I would argue that introducing active collaboration also presents the opportunity both to understand (and present) the participants perspectives in different ways, and to enrich the experience the participant has of the filmmaking process itself. Other forms of socially engaged arts practice, often rooted in community participation, have long engaged with processes which would align with my definition of active collaboration (Purcell, 2007; Gilchrist et. Al., 2015), recognising the act of collaboration as holding equal, or even more, importance than the final output itself. Applying this idea to documentary practice simply requires a re-evaluation of the aims and intended outcomes of a particular documentary film project, recognising the reduction of overall influence the practitioner has on the creative direction and aesthetic outcome of the project is balanced by increased influence of the participant.





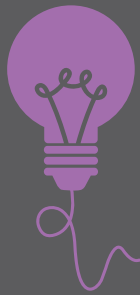
## DEVELOPING METHODOLOGIES OF ACTIVE COLLABORATION

### CONTEXTUALISING THE RESEARCH PROJECT



Still from short film 'The Chair' (2022).

The focus of my practice-based research since 2021 has been to attempt to develop a variety of active collaborative documentary filmmaking methodologies within the context of a case study I have chosen to engage with for this purpose; 'participant's relationship with place in an area of low social-mobility'. Many documentary practitioners, including myself, find themselves engaging with issues of the socio-political in their work, and so I intended to develop further understanding of how active collaboration with participants who have a close connection to a given socio-political issues might be used to explore their perspectives on such issues. In 2017, the majority of local authority areas in the North Midlands were identified as having amongst the lowest levels of Social Mobility in the U.K (Social Mobility Commission, 2017). I lived in the region until I moved away to study at 18, and still have close family connections to the area; as such, I have long been interested in exploring its socio-political landscape through my practice. Through the ongoing (2021-2024) production of a series of short documentary



films working with participants in the area, I am developing active collaborative methodologies which I hope could be adapted for use in a variety of documentary filmmaking projects. Below I will outline and reflect upon the methods developed for the first of these research films over the past two years.

## WORKING WITH INDIVIDUAL PARTICIPANTS

The purpose of the first research film was to engage individual participants, one-to-one, using four separate active collaborative methodologies, with an aim of developing a further understanding of how approaching this collaborative relationship in a considered and creative manner can inform a documentary filmmaking project concerned with a socio-political theme. Through the development of both process-based exercises, and creative activities involving both filmmaker and participant simultaneously, I intended to respond to some of the aforementioned challenges often associated with participant, or 'subject' collaboration, (MacDougall, 2022), and to explore if these methods can lead to a resolved collaborative output. The three participants were members of my own family, my sister, mother, and grandmother; three generations of women from the same family invited to explore their experiences growing up, living, and working in an area of low social mobility, and to collaborate in the production of a short, experimental documentary film exploring these themes. As the State of the Nation Report (Social Mobility Commission, 2017), which informed the development of the case study, gives such weight to variations in levels of social mobility as related to geographical area, the collaborative methodologies would aim to explore what impact social mobility has on a participants relationship to the 'place' where they live and work.



**Still from short film 'The Chair' (2022), showing the author and participant working together to reupholster a small chair during an active collaboration.**

The first active collaborative method developed was based upon the concept of skill-sharing; discussions between participant and practitioner would be prompted by activities based around some form of interest, hobby or vocation the participant has experience in; in this instance, these were furniture upholstery, maintaining an allotment and rock climbing, respectively. This process developed from the desire to address some of the inherent imbalances of power which are usually present in the participant/practitioner relationship; while it is not uncommon for the practitioner to attempt to explain the basics of their filmmaking process to practitioners as a means of demystifying the technology being used, making the participant more comfortable in a filmmaking environment, this still risks creating a situation whereby the practitioner is a gatekeeper of specialist knowledge, in control of technical equipment and practical experience. In constructing the first filmed interactions of the project around both me explaining my practice (inviting participants to adjust basic settings and decide compositions) *and* participants introducing to me a skill of which they have experience (and I do not), I hoped to build the foundation of a balanced participant/practitioner relationship informed by the positive experience of skill-sharing, with both myself as the practitioner sharing filmmaking skills with participants, and the participants sharing



their specialism or experience with me. This also served to create an environment in which to conduct conversations relating to the case study removed from the constraints of a formal interview environment, where participants could be introduced to socio-political topics in a less direct manner.

The second method involved asking participants to lead the practitioner on guided walking and/or driving exercise through locations which held personal significance to them within the area of the case study. This was initially prompted by the act of drawing these routes on a map; both the act of mapping and then walking or driving between mapped locations was intended to prompt conversations with participants relating to memory, identity, and recollection (Stehlíková, 2012). This also created a dynamic within the documentary filmmaking process whereby the participant decided the locations which would feature in the final film, thus constituting active collaboration, as the creative and aesthetic direction of the work has been directly informed by the participant.

The third method of active collaboration invited each participant to use a simple Super 8mm camera to film elements of their own participation, from their point of view. The only inputs I as the practitioner had on this process were providing the film cartridge and camera, ensuring the participant understood how to use them (each participant was gifted one 50ft roll of Super 8mm film, which will record just under three minutes of footage). I would also process and scan the footage after the participant has completed the roll, with the footage created by the participant ultimately being integrated into the final edit. The decision to use Super 8mm for the participants own documentation was partially determined by the practicalities of the medium; it's a simple process for participants to quickly engage with, and the physical nature of the analogue process involves giving each participant a film cartridge as both a gift and a task, a sort of diary to complete during the process. Though participants can be involved in some areas of creative decision making during the production of a documentary film, it is often the case that the technology used requires specialist knowledge to operate, and as such participants are often limited with regards to 'hands-on' practical input. With a simple 'point and shoot' Super 8mm camera, participants could operate the equipment with relative autonomy.

Finally, I planned for periods of footage and editing review with the participants, where they would be invited to reflect on the footage created collaboratively, advise on some of the editing decisions and inform the development of the final output. This final mode of active collaboration is arguably the least 'active' of the four methodologies explored in this project; the practitioner still exercises considerable control over the editing process as the complexity of the editing software, not to mention the time it takes to complete (participants can't be expected to give up days or weeks of their time to supervise an entire edit) means participants are often limited to comments of what they do or do not like, or shots which they would or would not like to be included. However, though potentially the form of active collaboration



with least direct impact on the filmic output of the four, I would still argue that creating an environment for the participant and practitioner to reflect on the filmmaking process does constitute a form of active collaboration, albeit a less creatively ambitious one.

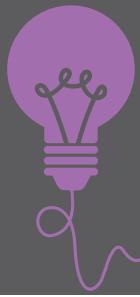
## **REFLECTIONS, AND LOOKING AHEAD TO MORE POSSIBILITIES IN ACTIVE COLLABORATION**

After undertaking the methodologies outlined above over the past 18 months, I feel able to reflect upon both the positive ethical dimensions and exciting creative possibilities afforded by active collaborative methodologies, as well as some of the logistical and creative limitations of such methods when used within the context of documentary filmmaking practice.

With regards to participant ethics, I would suggest active collaborative methods such as those outlined above constitute a more rigorous approach than that which is usually present in documentary filmmaking practice. Moving beyond (what should be) the standard ethical practice of ensuring consent is given and that the intentions of the work are made clear to the participant, active collaboration itself involves ceding much more control to participants with regards to the perspectives they choose to share, and how these are represented creatively, tonally, and aesthetically. Therefore, as a means for amplifying marginalised voices, and in the case of my research project, for exploring the perspectives of those who live in an area of low-social mobility, the fact that active collaboration seeks to transfer some of the decision-making power from practitioner to participant renders it a potentially effective tool for doing so.

I would also suggest these methods of working are particularly well suited to participants who are unfamiliar with appearing, and speaking, in front of camera (as might often be the case with participants from groups marginalised in society). None of the participants I collaborated with had previously been filmed for a documentary project (or any other type of creative project); two of participants I worked with spoke of an initial nervousness about being filmed for the project that quickly subsided during the first 'skill-sharing' session. Both reflected that for the rest of the collaboration they often 'forgot' they were being filmed and found it easy to speak openly. These methods not only remove some of the potentially intimidating elements of a more formal 'talking-head' interview setting, but also seek to create an environment in which the participant/practitioner relationship is more balanced and informal.

There are, of course, practical and creative limitations to the methodologies outlined above, some of which may render such methods inappropriate for certain documentary filmmaking settings. Firstly, these methods do not suit brief interactions; they require access to a participant for at least two full days of collaboration. Clearly, for some participants (and practitioners) this would not be possible logistically. The methods here are also designed to explore participants perspectives on their own interests and



life experience- thematically this would not be appropriate for all projects, or indeed all participants; therefore, I would not suggest such methods to be universally applicable within the field of documentary filmmaking. However, I would propose that within the right project context (such as the case study and research film I have outlined above), engaging with active collaboration not only leads to methodologies which are more ethically rigorous than is often the case in documentary filmmaking, but also offers an exciting and creative way of engaging participants more directly in the presentation of their own voices and perspectives.

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