

Participatory Documentary Then and Now: A Conversation about Practice and Pedagogy

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jesikah maria ross¹ and Vicky Funari²

Abstract

In this conversation, community media activist jesikah maria ross and filmmaker Vicky Funari talk about the work they have done together in alternative media since the 1990s. Their shared projects include *skin•es•the•si•a* (1994), an experimental video exploring the cultural codification of the female body; *Paulina* (1998), a feature-length documentary about a resilient Mexican woman whose parents traded her for land when she was a child; and *Maquilápolis [City of Factories]* (2006), a participatory documentary that tells the stories of women workers in Tijuana's multinational factories, and explores through their eyes the transformation of a city and its people by the forces of globalization. Set just after their last collaborative project, *Troubled Waters* (2014), their conversation addresses the issues of media pedagogy and aesthetics, technological affordances and limits, and the changing state of participatory media production in the United States.

Keywords

activism, alternative media, documentary, participatory media, pedagogy, digital humanities

In the following conversation, community media activist jesikah maria ross and filmmaker Vicky Funari talk about the work they have done together in alternative media since the 1990s. Their shared projects include the following: *skin•es•the•si•a* (Funari 1994), an experimental video exploring the cultural codification of the female body; *Paulina* (Funari 1998), a feature-length documentary about a resilient Mexican woman

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whose parents traded her for land when she was a child; and *Maquilápolis [City of Factories]* (Funari and de la Torre 2006), a participatory documentary that tells the stories of women workers in Tijuana's multinational factories and explores, through their eyes, the transformation of a city and its people by the forces of globalization. Set just after their last collaborative project, *Troubled Waters* (ross 2014), their conversation addresses the issues of media pedagogy and aesthetics, technological affordances and limits, and the changing state of participatory media production in the United States.

ross: As you know, I'm a documentary artist who collaborates with community groups to identify issues and advocate solutions for the places they live. I've known you since the early 1990s, when we worked together on a series of independent films, and I was thrilled to work with you again in 2014 on a Mellon Creative Residency.¹ This time, though, we did a web documentary with an interdisciplinary group of faculty, students, and community partners. The whole project got me thinking about the changing nature of participatory media in the age of the Internet. Let's talk more about that for the media studies community. To set up our conversation, can you describe our recent documentary project?

Funari: The project is called *Troubled Waters: Tracing Waste in the Delaware River*, and it brought together students, scholars, artists, and activists to examine pollution in the Delaware River, which supplies drinking water to about fifteen million people and also has active fisheries, oil refineries, and the largest freshwater port in the world. We involved about a hundred people in the project over the course of a year through different classes at Haverford and Bryn Mawr Colleges and community media workshops.² There were a lot of moving parts that you, as the lead artist, really orchestrated.

ross: That's because everyone involved explored the causes and impacts of waste polluting the Delaware River in different ways. Chemistry students collected water samples to determine the presence of chemicals from various waste products like oil, pesticides, and flame retardants. Political science students examined how that waste got into the river and its socioeconomic and ecological implications. Documentary students explored diverse ways of representing waste on screen. And Delaware Riverkeeper Network (DRN) activists collaborated with students to use mobile phones to share community stories on environmental justice, ecological restoration, land use, and stewardship.³ Can you describe the kinds of media pieces that were generated?

Funari: The chemistry students produced data visualizations of their findings, political science students generated interactive digital maps to document waste flows, and documentary students crafted short videos tackling different aspects of pollution and local responses. What made these productions different is how students worked in teams and across disciplines. Throughout the process, they shared their data, discoveries, and challenges. Then they posted their content to the project website that you built and curated, creating an interactive and multiauthored venue to share their findings with the DRN, the campus community, and the wider public.

ross: You're describing what makes *Troubled Waters* a good example of how to conduct cross-disciplinary research using the media arts. Our project shows how classroom studies can apply to civic life and the important role of community knowledge in local problem solving. Is that what you had in mind when you invited me to lead this pedagogical experiment in documentary production?

Funari: I want my students to be exposed to where documentary practice is heading. There are two things about what you do that I wanted to show my students. One of them is the way you approach mediamaking through the lens of community activism. That's a development that you and I have seen happen in documentary, and you were doing it way before it was considered acceptable documentary practice.

ross: Can you explain what documentary was to you then?

Funari: When we met in the early 1990s, you were a community media activist and I was a filmmaker who was using methods that in some ways fit into community media practices, but I didn't call what I did community media. I didn't know any better; I was just trying to make work that felt ethical. I wanted the people whose lives I was documenting to have some control over their own representation.

At the time, there was a wide divide between documentary practice and community media. Documentary was thought of either as an auteur form or a journalistic form, and was not supposed to be influenced by the voice of the subject. Community media was all about raising and honoring the voice of the subject. Now the two forms have converged to some extent, and to my mind, that's a very positive development, necessary to the continued validity of the documentary form. However, it's now become hard to even propose certain kinds of documentaries without including some community media or community engagement aspect, and it seems like they all need to include Internet elements. That's usually a good thing, but it isn't the right choice for every project.

ross: Why not?

Funari: It seems to me that the web-based work lets the mediamaker off the hook for creating a narrative and for making a clear, concise argument. People seem so excited about web-based narratives being able to be open-ended, multifaceted, with multiple routes through the material, but when I test-drive the work, I often find myself disappointed. A lot of this work seems to say to the viewer/user

I don't need to create a narrative for you because it's going to be an open narrative with lots of facets, and you the viewer will create the narrative as you experience the website or the locative media or whatever the platform happens to be. That seems to recast the artist as a curator of material rather than as a teller of stories. There's nothing wrong with that, but it doesn't get me excited in the way that a well-told story or well-argued filmic essay does. Narrative is just as important as ever, even if you're working with multiple strands, multiple voices, and different platforms. I'm fond of a carefully constructed single-channel narrative. It lets me focus and think through one thing rather than processing shards of infotainment.

ross: Or another alternative is thinking about what the web medium is good for and what it's not so good for. I've been thinking about the idea of opening up communications channels and creating ways for multiple people to voice their ideas and issues from their physical locations in very immediate ways—you create and upload and boom, it's all done. That kind of work seems really appropriate and powerful in a journalism space or an activist space. But I'm not sure it works in an arts space unless it has some careful framing and context. I don't know that I need narrative, especially in a traditional sense, but I do need some kind of conceptual framework.

The framework that I align with the most right now is open space documentary (De Michiel and Zimmerman 2013) in which you have hyperlocal, community-based storytelling activities that allow multiple authors to tell their stories in ways that express their diverse perspectives and goals. This is where the documentary mediamaker creates online and on-the-ground experiences where producers, subjects, audiences, and users can bump into new voices and views to discover something new, as well as use the stories to spark conversation or action in their areas of interest.

I see this framework in our *Troubled Waters* project with student producers, activist speakers, university and community audiences, and the Delaware Riverkeeper Network users, among others, all interacting through the project website as well as through field trips, site visits, and the public art event we orchestrated where different stakeholders copresented and discussed our research and creative production. Spelling out these different layers of our project reminds me of another tenet of open space documentary: that convening and collaboration are as important as the documentary artifact. To me this is key: that the dialogue and relationship building that happens during and as a result of the documentary is as powerful and transformational as the product itself.

That all said, I think that for a multiauthored website to really be engaging and compelling, it has to have an information architecture that is more streamlined than what we created via the Tumblr platform we used. I can imagine keeping the same approach of blending community activism and documentary arts. And I love creating a kaleidoscopic view into so many voices and places. But I'd want to rethink if and how what's called "user-generated content" can really powerfully contribute to a web-based documentary. Right now, I'm feeling like this is a design and curation challenge more than anything else.

Funari: Yes to everything you just said. Also, when you say that "creating ways for multiple people to voice their ideas is appropriate and powerful in a journalism space or an activist space," I'd add that I also think it's appropriate in a pedagogical space, which is the space in which we were creating *Troubled Waters*. Despite the students' valid critiques of the Tumblr site and the process overall, it still was a great way for them to experience what this kind of work entails and what it can and can't do.

ross: That's such a great point, especially because it reminds me how my creative work is grounded in dialogue as a form of learning and making meaning of shared experiences. I'm interested to hear—what kinds of questions or issues have come up for you through this *Troubled Waters* documentary media-making project?

Funari: When I browse around the *Troubled Waters* Tumblr site, I find myself wondering what holds it together conceptually, what story it tells. For me to want to move through the elements, I want a sense of the A to B to C logic of it all, why one bit might lead to another bit. If I can't see the logic, I get bored immediately.

I noticed that when we were doing a work-in-progress critique of *Troubled Waters*, students got bored within about thirty seconds. On any given click, the stories that were thirty, forty, fifty seconds long worked great. The two-minute stories, you could tell people were zoning out.

ross: Yep.

Funari: I guess the question I ask myself is,

What is the best use of a medium that by its very architecture seems to encourage people to disconnect and move away from whatever is in front of them? Is it built into the very idea of the website that you're going to leave quickly? I don't have an answer, but I know that when you sit down to watch a single-channel piece, it is built into the form that you're going to stay with it for a while—if it's worthy of your attention.

ross: The other complementary concern is that we have to edit people's ideas down into these very short bites that don't allow for nuance or give them time to arrive at their idea. There's no way to go on a journey with your character, to witness and move through their thinking process, like you would in a conversation. Your character—or participant—has to arrive at a well-articulated key point at warp speed.

Funari: In the case of the *Troubled Waters*, that problem was baked into our means of production. It wouldn't apply to all web projects, but it applied to ours, especially for the community workshop when we were limited to what we could do on-site that single day, with no editing. You organized student teams to collaborate with grassroots groups at various sites on the river and record mostly audio interviews with accompanying photos. The first thing I thought when I looked at all the pieces recorded that day was, "Gee, somebody could make a great documentary out of all of this," not, "This *is* a documentary."

As a culture, we have an expectation that verbal information (whether spoken or textual) and images (whether photographic or moving) will be married to each other and will also be highly processed, condensed, distilled. Undigested nuggets of information don't feel like art, they feel like, well, just stuff. Internet culture is full of undigested chunks of stuff, from cute kittens to police brutality. Those nuggets, however crucial to our lives, are not documentaries in and of themselves. To be what we would call an artwork or a documentary or an essay, the artifact has to have an authorial, edited presence, a voice, a concept. That does not in any way preclude multiple authorship or an activist approach; I'm just talking about structure and point of view.

ross: Reflecting on the student critiques of our project, it made me wonder if young people can stay engaged by documentary pieces where you just hear someone's voice and see their picture. In other words, "Can they stay engaged by mostly content?"—the way older audiences seem to be able to, judging from my previous web documentaries *Saving the Sierra* (ross and Stifter 2008) or *Restore/Restory* (ross 2012). Or if for younger audiences, you have to create a different kind of production, with fast-moving media images, voices, and a soundtrack, which requires a lot more resources.

This gets into questions of generational aesthetics as well as technologically determined aesthetics. Do contemporary audiences need more polished pieces, and if so, how does that work if you are including user-generated content or community storytelling that, by necessity, is on the quick and dirty end of the production values continuum? How does one create a multi-authored documentary that works for everyone involved? Is it possible or even desirable?

Funari: I think the more important criticism from the students had to do with the idea of coherence. The critiques were requests to understand what the project was, what we were doing there, who these groups are, where these places are. For example, if Tumblr pieces were organized with framing like "Here's this place called Cooper River," one line about what the place is, one line about this group of students and what they were doing at the river, or if I were looking at a map where I could see the locations, and then could click on photos and sound bites and pieces of video at the location of their creation, I think that kind of framing would stand in for editing.

ross: That gets into the issue of new media affordances. What you are saying is beyond what Tumblr can do in terms of the templates they provide. But it's probably something that can be solved by hiring a coder. That means additional funding, time, and a different sort of scope to the project, which might well make it a stronger, more coherent piece. But it means a trade-off in terms of extending the timeline to raise additional funds and to prolong the collaboration—which in this case would have been difficult with both the institutions and the students.⁴

I want to go back to something you referred to a couple of times earlier. Tell me more about why producing and distributing "nuggets" is a problem?

Funari: The nugget problem . . . okay. Typically what someone sees when they see a film is a distillation, where someone has gone out and recorded a ton of audio and video, with lots of research behind it. And then you get this distilled piece at the end where presumably everything the maker finds unnecessary has been removed, and instead, you have a layered combination of sound and picture. The work method in the mobile media workshop you led was "camera on/camera off," and whatever you shot or whatever audio you recorded is basically what you have to post. A nugget. All that you can do is trim the head and tail.

The method allowed us to upload nuggets with whatever minimal processing was available through the consumer tools that you taught us to use, like Snapseed, AudioCopy, SoundCloud, and YouTube, all of which is amazing. Who could've imagined this fifteen years ago? I don't think that's a bad thing. It's a new form, and it's an interesting form. It's just different. It'll work better for some people than it does for others.

ross: And it's going to work better for some projects than for other projects. So, for example, in my community media travels, I have come up against endless groups of people who want to have their story out there, but they don't want to do editing. And they don't even want to learn how to use the tool; they want someone else to do it. And that's always been the challenge in community media. There's lots of people who want to tell their story, but for all sorts of understandable reasons—their time, their inclinations, where they strategically want to put their energy—they're not going to learn the basic tools of television or radio production, let alone have access to it.

Funari: Right.

ross: Filmmakers always want to have deep access to their “subjects.” Well, the subjects themselves can now make and share their own stories, and they have access to the other people and places just by going to them with their phones. Making media with mobile phones in some ways addresses the access issue.

It also addresses the people who don't want to learn more than how to point-and-shoot, because that's all they really need. And I think if it's set up so that being rough around the edges is an acceptable aesthetic, which it is in activism certainly, or civic journalism, or even news, then the nugget approach can work really well.

In my recent newsroom experience at a public radio station, they don't make a lot of aesthetic choices; they make content choices. So access, portability, utility, and immediacy are more key than polished pieces. I'm starting to feel like smartphones are the new camcorders. Remember when you and I started using camcorders in the 1990s and professional journalists with their big Betacam rigs looked down at our low-brow technology with our shaky handheld footage and in-camera edits? We were like, “Yeah? Well watch me now, because I can go anywhere with this gear. I can tell my own story.” Camcorders generated a new class of reporters, a new documentary aesthetic, and reached new audiences through cable access channels, gallery exhibits, community meetings, and even mainstream news spots.

Smartphones are playing a similar, if not expanded, role today since we now have “free” online story sharing platforms like YouTube and SoundCloud, social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter, as well as plug-and-play web development platforms like Tumblr and Wix that enable people of all stripes to create online exhibitions, distribution channels, or activist story centers.

But again, just because we have access and ability to create and circulate stories quickly doesn't make the artifacts—stories or websites—compelling narratives or coherent projects. I guess I'm circling back to the question "Where does this smartphone medium work particularly well? And how do you organize civic storytelling projects comprised of many voices so that they are elegant conceptually?"

Funari: I think smartphones expand the possibilities. That's fantastic, because one of the biggest criticisms of documentary is how useless it is. And I say that as someone who has dedicated thirty years of my life to making these critters.

ross: That is so painful to even hear.

Funari: But it's true, and the reason it's important to admit is that then you can get at what documentary actually *is* doing, instead of thinking, "I am changing the world with my documentary!" No, you're not. You're just making a movie. So now, what can you do with that movie, and do effectively?

ross: You can recognize that the movie is not the point, it's the process of bringing people together to create it or to discuss it. That's where you build understanding, empathy, and solidarity—in the face-to-face interaction. It's the dialogue process that produces a deeper understanding of the problem and surfaces possible solutions, and that's what generates the transformation. Sometimes that's on an individual level, other times on a community or even policy level. But the movie gets people in the room. And documentaries, when they are skillfully crafted or just plain revelatory in terms of showing a place or perspective most people don't know about, are one of the best ways to spark that kind of transformational learning and relationship building.

Funari: The expansion that you're pointing towards is actually about the utility of the documentary in other contexts than the ones in which they have been present before. If we acknowledge that watching documentaries on TV or in a theater produces no useful change in the world, then we can get down to business expanding the contexts for that work.

However, I want to add an important point that follows from acknowledging how useless documentaries usually are in effecting change: this is an art form, and you cannot and should not expect all artworks to have tangible, measurable impacts in the world. Documentaries are so much more mysterious than that, and the space for documentaries to remain artworks must be maintained and protected or they will be nothing more than functional propaganda tools.

ross: I think it's worth considering how over our careers, we've watched this huge, gaping chasm between community activism and professional documentary media become narrow to the point where the two fields are now enmeshed. I've had plenty of U.S.-based filmmaker friends talk to me about how they can't put in a funding proposal without having a community engagement plan. Back in the day, it was considered tainted journalism to engage stakeholders or the "people formerly known as subjects" in framing the issues, telling their stories, or using the media pieces to spark conversation and action. Now it's almost *de rigueur*.

A case in point: I'm now working inside a public radio station news room where I bring stakeholders in at the beginning of a documentary project to shape and guide the effort. I form a coalition of community groups to cocreate digital stories and online community voice platforms as part of the documentary production, as well as public conversations using the media productions.

So that's the utility of collaborative documentaries. They generate street-level impact because they're designed around what people on the ground need and want. It's relevant. And the productions are effective because they're made with community input but produced by professionals with craft skills and a knowledge of high production values. As I'm talking about it, this process is similar to the one we pioneered with your film *Maquilápolis [City of Factories]* (Funari and de la Torre 2006). I wonder if we both have just deepened a practice that has finally come of age.

Funari: I think the practices that you've engaged in and the documentary methods that interest me have always shared certain parameters. We are both interested in the democratization of media. Who do we want to hear from? We don't want to hear from the people that have already had the mic since mics were invented. So the unifying thrust is making sure that people get heard. I want to be heard myself because I'm a woman, a bicultural person, a bisexual person, and I have stuff to say that I hadn't heard in any mass media representations when I started out as a filmmaker. More importantly, I want the people I'm representing through my work to be heard.

That impulse is much more overt in the work that you've done because you've been in community media developing practices that are about keeping media in the hands of the people. So even though our practices may be different, they're motivated by the same underlying ideology.

ross: I completely agree. And I hope we can continue to collaborate and develop these practices more.

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Notes

1. Supported by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, The Mellon Creative Residencies encouraged Bryn Mawr, Haverford, and Swarthmore college faculty to design arts residencies that combine pedagogy, public presentation, and informal exchange among artists, faculty, students, the wider campus, and area communities.
2. *Troubled Waters: Tracing Waste in the Delaware River* aimed to generate research and creative work that fosters dialogue across disciplines, colleges, and communities. We approached the project as pedagogical experiment, acknowledging up front the constraints that come with doing community-engaged documentary work on an academic timeline with student producers. The project focused more on the producers than the audience, but we tried to create work that would be useful to our community partner, the Delaware Riverkeeper Network (DRN), in their education and outreach efforts.
3. jesikah maria ross devised and implemented *Troubled Waters* in collaboration with Craig Borowiak, associate professor of political science at Haverford College; Vicky Funari, artist in residence at Haverford College and Bryn Mawr College; Fred Stine, community organizer with the DRN; Maya K. Van Rossum, the Delaware Riverkeeper; and Helen White, assistant professor of chemistry at Haverford College. To see a ten-minute project documentation video that visualizes the people and processes involved, visit <https://youtu.be/mLCETJzICFs>. To explore the multiauthored documentary website, visit <http://troubledwaters2014.tumblr.com>.
4. This is not to say that there were not significant changes made to the website design and its curation based on the student critique and this conversation. The collaborative process involved workshoping draft designs with contributors and collaborators so that the final piece resonated with participants and target audiences. This kind of iterative design and curation process resulted in an expanded “About” section; a “Maps” section that visualized the Delaware River watershed, where students conducted water monitoring, and the type and amount of waste they found at each site; curated sections for “Eastwick,” “Cooper River,” and “Tacony Creek, the three sites where we collaborated with activist groups to produce place-based stories; expanded “Credits” sections to more explicitly point out who was involved in which parts of the project; and the reordering of all the sections for better user experiences.

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Author Biographies

jesikah maria ross has three speeds: listening, creating, and sharing. She is an interdisciplinary artist and the senior community engagement strategist at Capital Public Radio, Sacramento's National Public Radio affiliate. She leads participatory documentary projects around the globe, creating a path and a plan that changes how we collect, tell, and share the stories of our communities. She makes media work for change, for social justice, for art, for everyone.

Vicky Funari is a documentary filmmaker, editor, and teacher. Her films have aired on PBS, HBO, and the Sundance Channel, and won numerous awards, including Grand Jury Prize and Audience Awards at the San Francisco International Film Festival. She is a Guggenheim Fellow and MacDowell Colony Fellow. She is a Visual Media Scholar at Haverford College and is currently in post-production on a movie about ladies in a pool.