To Create Live Treatments of Actuality: An Investigation of the Emerging Field of
Live Documentary Practice

by

Julie Fischer
B.A. Wellesley College (2007)

Submitted to the Department of Comparative Media Studies
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract: The field of documentary is undergoing a transformation as it collides with digital technologies. A new arena of Interactive Documentary production is thriving, and critics and scholars are taking note. Within this field, there is less attention to new opportunities and new theoretical challenges for live practices within the documentary sphere. This thesis argues for a fuller conceptualization of Live Documentary practice. First, it questions the current state of assumptions about documentary, as a form related to the 'document,' as a particularly film-leaning form, and as a lasting and historicizing form of discourse. Next, it examines the historical underpinnings of two forms of live documentary practice and exemplar projects of each: Live Performance Documentary and Live Subject Documentary. The former is situated in the media category of live theater and performance, and the second, the author will argue, is an instantiation of television in its earliest configuration as a device for two-way audio-visual communications and not just unidirectional broadcasting. The study concludes by positing a third medium-specific form of live documentary native to the computer, the Live Data Documentary. This final, more speculative form is defined by drawing on the meanings of 'liveness' examined in the previous chapters and the history of real time computing to generate a suggested framing for computer-native live documentary practice.

Thesis Supervisor: William Uricchio
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Acknowledgements

Biographical Note

Julie Fischer graduated from Wellesley College in 2007 with a B.A. in Philosophy. She has been a contributing researcher on a number of public television and independent documentary productions. Before arriving at MIT, she served as researcher for documentary filmmaker Errol Morris, whose work, sense of humor and approach to investigation is an endless inspiration.

"Theorizing about the nature and meaning of the documentary is a risky task."

J.T. Caldwell,
Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and
Authority in American Television

INTRODUCTION

In October of 2012, I saw a series of group portraits by photographer John Clang. Titled *Being There*, the photographs were of families who communicated regularly with the Internet video telephony service Skype. The pictured family members lived in different countries and sometimes on different continents, and found video chatting a comforting and satisfying way of keeping up intimate connections with their loved ones. Clang found artistic inspiration in the power of Skype to support emotional ties. For his series of family photographs, he put the technology right in the frame. Keeping both sides of these families in their respective homes, he used a projector to beam one half of the family – via live video feed – into the living room of the other. With their live video

image splashed onto the wall, he positioned the present family members near their projected relatives, and snapped a family photograph of people thousands of miles apart[1].

Figure 1. Skype family portrait from John Clang's *Being There* series, 2010.

The series spoke to me because it highlighted the emotive capabilities of live video technologies. Here was a tool for moving image production – I had just arrived at MIT with a background in documentary film production. I couldn't help thinking about how live video technologies might be incorporated into the documentary toolkit. Live video telephony has been made possible through the high-bandwidth network of the Internet. Increasingly, documentary is moving there, too. Many documentary practitioners are experimenting with web-native documentaries, both linear and interactive, rich with video content but also imagery, text, soundscapes, animation or visualization – the field of documentary is rife with experimentation and change online.

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[1] These Skype family photos were featured on several pop culture blogs, *The Atlantic* and *The New York Times*. In 2013, Skype hired Clang to create more photographs as a part of a commercial campaign for the service.

Surely, I thought, live video might be an affordance of the web that documentary producers could run with.

But even before the technical logistics of how one might embed a Skype-like live video feed in a web-based documentary, there seemed to be a conceptual problem that needed to be addressed. Could something utilizing live video, not recorded video, be considered a documentary?

When first approaching this question, I was struck by the seeming tension in the phrase "live documentary." It smacks of the opposition between 'live' and something that is a 'document' – something in the moment, unfolding in real time, fleeting, and something recorded, static, complete. Weren't these concepts, by definition, at odds?

As soon as I pulled on that seemingly small definitional tangle, however, I realized there was far more to this topic. Attempting to articulate why live video – or any form of liveness – and documentary are at odds first begs the question, 'What is a documentary?' And that is a notoriously difficult question to answer. And what is 'liveness'? It's equally problematic if you're seeking a clear definition. Both 'liveness' and 'documentary' are slippery terms. But their terminological vagueness is a boon for this project. An investigation into the complexity of these terms reveals that there really isn't inherent tension between documentary and liveness, merely interesting histories and institutional practices that have tended to bound documentary to film-based forms in some places and to skirt over non-film based documentary practices in others.

Documentary as document might be suggested in its name, but it is rarely confirmed in its study or practice. The documentary discourse doesn't claim that documentary must be a record. Yet there is something intriguing, almost radical, in the

force of the phrase "live documentary" – radical for those who have come to documentary through film or who rely on their understanding of it as a film-based form. Some practitioners see this as a critical feature of their documentary work.

During my research for this project, I spoke with a number of new format documentary practitioners experimenting with different forms of liveness. One was Florian Thalhofer, an accomplished interactive documentary filmmaker. Thalhofer is the creator of the Korsakow System, software for creating interactive, nonlinear documentaries using rule-based connections between different clips that will unfold in various ways based on user selections. In 2012, Thalhofer began experimenting with what he's come to call Korsakow Shows, live performances of Korsakow films. At Korsakow Shows, the interactive documentary interface is projected on a screen at the front of the room, and each audience member points a laser pointer at one of a handful of clips on the screen. The clip with the most interest is played until another interactive juncture is reached. Thalhofer, sometimes with guest panelists and speakers, narrates the live performance. I see Thalhofer's work as a wonderful example of the types of projects I will discuss in Chapter 3 on Live Performance Documentary. And yet Thalhofer insists that the documentary itself is the interactive piece on the computer, the performance is just an added layer – it's not live documentary, it's a live show featuring a documentary. He said:

> Just doing the show, without recording that, I wouldn't think that the documentary is then really the thing that was done. It's a screening of it. But you could easily put the screening into the Korsakow system [as a recording]. … But I think there is a difference between a live performance and a documentation of it.

I thought of my conversation with Thalhofer often as I conducted research for this project. His eloquent discussion of his many goals as a documentarian included not just the desire for each person to bring to his works their own complex interpretation, but to create something that is a *record* of a contemporary moment so that audiences in the future can continue to bring fresh interpretations to the same piece. I am equally drawn to the historical value of film and other representational works – even *fiction* film can offer a historical resource to future generations. What I want to tease apart in this study, however, are the personal and professional objectives of documentarians – which vary widely – from the category of documentary itself. I would like to see live forms of documentary tackled with the same artistic and philosophical fervor as documentary films and other recorded forms of documentary.

Documentary film scholar Bill Nichols notes that film has an indexical quality, the same way that photographs and sound recordings do – a direct relationship between what they represent and what was actually in the world. Of course, this is also true of the live video feeds of a Skype call, but these indexical forms are fleeting and ephemeral, and they're configured to leave no trace. Film, as a document, provides lasting evidence of their subjects. But Nichols point is that the indexical quality of film is not the primary meaning of the documentary:

> But a documentary is more than evidence: it is also a particular way of seeing the world, making proposals about it, or offering perspectives on it. It is, in this sense, a way of *interpreting* the world.[2]

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[2] Bill Nichols, *Introduction to Documentary* (Indiana University Press, 2001), 34-35.

The scholarly discourse on documentary certainly leaves room for live practice in its definitions. However, I'll argue in the next chapter that documentary discourse today houses associations with film, associations that are something of a historical accident enforced by various industrial and critical perspectives. Not only is documentary far more than evidentiary, as Nichols says, it is far more than just film. We know this in theory, but I think in practice our language sometimes trips us up and creates associations and assumptions about documentary as a recorded media form. To clear the ground of some of these associations, I'll mobilize the long history of documentary practice in other media – media that trade in various forms of liveness. Radio documentary, for example. In a brief article in a 1949 volume of the Hollywood Quarterly titled *Notes toward an Examination of the Radio Documentary*, radio and television critic Saul Carson wrote about some WNYC programs from the mid-1930s featuring person on the street interviews and other sounds from around New York City, "I am not sure whether the shows were then called 'documentaries,' but that's what they were – in a sense."[3] Despite not knowing whether these programs were designated documentary at the time, Carson stands a mere decade later surveying a field of radio *rich* with documentary content and documentary institutionalization: he lists radio documentaries from three major networks, and credits much of the surge in quality to the 1948 creation of the CBS Radio Documentary Unit. Carson's article speaks to an ecosystem of radio documentary that includes fully recorded programs, programs that utilize recordings and live broadcast, but also fully *live* dramatizations of nonfiction issues read by actors on the air. I will investigate this form in the next chapter.

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[3] Saul Carson, "Notes toward an Examination of the Radio Documentary," *Hollywood Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (October 1, 1949): 69–74, 69.

Theater also has a sub-category called documentary theater, sometimes known as 'verbatim theater' for its use of court transcripts, oral history records, newspaper reports, or other texts or spoken words surrounding actual events into the script of the play.[4] Theater scholar Gary Fisher Dawson calls Georg Buchner's 1835 play *Danton's Death*, which drew on primary source materials to create the script, "the proto-documentary play in the modern sense."[5] He identifies documentary theater's second wave in the "Living Newspaper" practice in Weimar Germany in the early 1920s and in the US in the 1930s, in which traveling acting troupes gave public dramatic readings of the latest headlines[6].

In this thesis, I won't be able to cover the full range of non-film documentary work to mine it for live practices. I'll stick to a history of broadcast documentary, because of the rich associations of liveness with radio and television. Of course, this isn't to say that even film can't be integrated into what is described as live. Liveness, it turns out, is an even trickier term than documentary itself. 'Liveness' is deployed in different ways at different times, representing something that *seems* intuitive but actually represents complex historical and theoretical framings.

Performance scholar Philip Auslander tackles the shifting meaning of liveness in his text *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (2008). Auslander stresses the lack of ontological distinction between live and mediatized performance, arguing instead that persistent opposition between these two categories has more to do with "cultural and

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[4] Stephen Bottoms, "Putting the Document into Documentary: An Unwelcome Corrective?," *TDR (1988-)* 50, no. 3 (October 1, 2006): 56–68. 59.

[5] Gary Fisher Dawson, *Documentary Theatre in the United States: An Historical Survey and Analysis of Its Content, Form, and Stagecraft* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 1999), 1.

[6] Ibid., 76.

historical contingencies" and in fact rely on one another to build themselves up.[7] He

notes that in the context of performance, the Oxford English Dictionary first cites the

word 'live' in reference to the radio. Auslander argues that the gramophone already

existed as a means of creating recorded sound, distinct from live musical performance.

But, he argues, it was obvious to audiences that they were listening to a gramophone, not

in a theater, because of the setting. With radio, however, that awareness was removed.

Auslander notes, "Radio's characteristic form of sensory deprivation crucially

undermined the clear-cut distinction between recorded and live sound," which meant

suddenly there was a need for a 'live' category that could label and distinguish one type

of radio broadcast from another[8]. Live radio and then television are not live in the

theatrical sense, which features physical *and* temporal co-presence, but generated this

category in dialogue with live performance to create the notion of 'live broadcast.'

Auslander claims:

> The word "live" was pressed into service as part of a vocabulary designed to
>
> contain this crisis by describing it and reinstating the former distinction [between
>
> live performance and recorded performance] discursively even if it could no
>
> longer be sustain experientially.[9]

Auslander locates television as a major force in inscribing concepts of 'liveness' in both

the televisual *and* in live theater practice. He highlights contemporary theater's frequent

use of screens, projected imagery and other mediatized forms, claiming, "In the theater,

as at the stadium, you are often watching television even when attending the live

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[7] Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (Routledge, 2008).
11.
[8] Ibid., 59.
[9] Ibid., 60.

event."[10] As I will discuss in Chapter 3, one way to produce documentary work may be to craft an experience that allows audiences to watch *documentary* even when attending live theater. In any case, Auslander's discussion highlights the constant negotiations that 'liveness' as a concept and term makes to accommodate different modes of various media. The term's shifting meaning and its importance to particular media has fueled a wide array of theoretical discussion amongst television scholars as well.

Jerome Bourdon notes that in the 1950's heyday of live television broadcasting, 'liveness' was one the characteristics seized on in order to distinguish this new medium from film[11]. Liveness was extolled as one of television's most attractive qualities. The Oxford English Dictionary's earliest usage of 'liveness' related to television is in a 1966 Washington Post article, which claims, "The greatest assets of television are liveness and immediacy. Much of the vitality has been drained out of television with the increasing use of tape."[12] I will argue in Chapter 2 that 'documentary' was applied to a certain type of pre-recorded rather than live television content because of institutional practices, further corralling documentary into the pen of pre-recorded instead of live forms.

However, as time went by, even the continued proliferation of taped materials on television didn't keep discussions and visions of 'liveness' at bay. Rather, it was propagated in the style and rhetoric of television. Jane Feuer has argued that television "exploits its assumed 'live' ontology as ideology," enforcing a sense of immediacy and all-encompassing wholeness by gesturing towards a technical liveness (that of immediate

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[10] Ibid., 25.

[11] Jerome Bourdon, "Live Television Is Still Alive: On Television as an Unfulfilled Promise," *Media, Culture & Society* 22, no. 5 (2000): 531–56. 1-2.

[12] *Oxford English Dictionary*, "Liveness, N.," *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed July 22, 2014, http://www.oed.com.libproxy.mit.edu/view/Entry/109320.

broadcast) that is not there.[13] Bourdon picks up this argument, noting the specific ways television gestured to live broadcasting as "a technical possibility, translated into specific codes, [that] remains a fundamental part of viewers' expectations" of the medium.[14] Arguing in another direction, J.T. Caldwell warns against television scholars' own "theoretical obsession: liveness."[15] He sees Feuer's construction of liveness as a potential blind, distracting from other key stylistic characteristics of television. He wants to turn Feuer's argument inside out, stating: "Whereas Feuer argues that stylistic codes produce realism and liveness, I am suggesting that liveness is a visual code and component of a broader stylistic operation."[16]

Caldwell cites Paul Vianello's arguments on liveness as construction used to enforce power, for instance the power of the networks in the broadcast era. Vianello suggests that to retain power over affiliate stations, networks focused on keeping up a schedule of live broadcasts centered on particular, presumably socially important, events to keep affiliates dependent. Networks could access and broadcast these events live, and in enforcing their central importance affiliates were discouraged from branching out and broadcasting their own pre-recorded content that was easier to produce.[17] For Vianello liveness is *wielded* as "a weapon, not so much to be used against non-live film … but

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[13] E. Ann Kaplan, *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches- An Anthology* (Praeger, 1983). 16.
[14] Bourdon, "Live Television Is Still Alive: On Television as an Unfulfilled Promise." 1.
[15] John Thornton Caldwell, *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television* (Rutgers University Press, 1995). 27.
[16] Ibid., 367.
[17] Robert Vianello, "The Power Politics of 'Live' Television," *Journal of Film and Video* 37, no. 3 (July 1, 1985): 26–40. 32.

against interests competing with the network to whom film had been left as their only option."[18]

The employment of liveness by various producers as a means of control is an interesting one. In this thesis, the arguments about liveness stemming from various media-specific forms will be explored in part for the authorial control they offer to the documentarian – generating new affordances for the field through experiments with live documentary forms. But my focus here is the inherently *constructed* rather than *essential* nature of 'liveness,' a crucial framing for this entire project. Chapter 3 and 4 discuss pieces using documentary framing in live theater and live video production, and as shown above, theoretical discussions of both performance and television run deep. In the final chapter, I'll conclude my examination with an investigation of a newer form of liveness that I believe will be crucial to the live documentary scene: live documentary utilizing computational forms of liveness. Here I will do a bit more legwork to establish how 'liveness' might be conceptualized in the context of discussing documentary but in a computer-native form. The computer has associations with the term that are – I'll argue – a bit of a red herring for live documentary. Drawing on lessons from liveness in the live performance and live subject chapters, I'll argue that computational liveness seems best configured as the Live Data Documentary.

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[18] Ibid.

The Documentary Experience

Referencing Vianello's argument, I offer one form of power that liveness might provide to documentary – though it's not institutional but cultural. It could be framed as a value within the "cultural economy," a concept Auslander employs to discuss the unbalanced cultural prestige of theater in relation to mediated forms of entertainment. I argue that liveness can be seen as offering ephemerality, a term used by new media scholar Nathan Jurgenson to articulate the value of temporary photography services like Snapchat in a sea of digital photograph archiving sites like Instagram.[19] In thinking of liveness as an escape from the "deepening documentary vision" of the web (which not only hosts media but makes it available on-demand to viewers), individual documentary projects might utilize liveness to highlight themselves against the backdrop of that deepening documentary vision.

Beyond the sense of ephemerality – of fleetingness – that exists in some senses of 'live' media, I will argue in this thesis that live documentary is best considered if we change our lens for examining documentary. Rather than thinking of the form as an object of study, a 'document,' be it film or photograph, or the recording of a live broadcast, I want to urge readers to relocate their examination of any documentary by looking at its active process of *documenting*. This not only applies to the unfolding of a film in the present moment when viewed, it enables a method of address that encompasses documentary as a particular type of process that can be performed on a stage, or hosted on a livestream, or enacted in the moment in a number of different forms of live work. After all, think of Grierson's oft-cited expression that documentary is the

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[19] Nathan Jurgenson, "Pics and It Didn't Happen," *The New Inquiry*, February 7, 2013, http://thenewinquiry.com/essays/pics-and-it-didnt-happen/.

"creative treatment of actuality."[20] I think we'd do well, as a field and as audience members to a new generation of documentary work, to consider that such a creative treatment might be carried out before our eyes rather than first being encapsulated in a particular medium like film.

Changing our lens to see documentary as a more active media form, the embodiment (in many guises) of a process of documenting, we're also prompted to reconsider the role of the people who are there to *see* the documentary's process unfold. I argue this role can be, not more active, but more *activated*, through liveness – rich with interesting new potentials. I don't want to get too bogged down in the debates over notions of the active audience, a longstanding issue in mass communications studies.[21] I merely want to suggest that in thinking of documentary as a project of documenting, rather than the already completed document, we clear the ground for liveness that brings audiences into new configurations – spatially co-present and/or temporally co-present with each other, and even potentially with the subjects of the documentary. These arrangements present some interesting new possibilities for interaction.

In this sense, live documentary fits right in with the burgeoning field of Interactive Documentary. This new form, often web-based and featuring user interaction with the piece as well as user-generated or participatory content, is rapidly solidifying

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[20] Brian Winston, *Claiming the Real: Documentary: Grierson and Beyond*, 2 edition (London : New York: British Film Institute, 2008), 14.
[21] See for example Frank A. Biocca, "Opposing Conceptions of the Audience: The Active and Passive Hemispheres of Mass Communication Theory," in *Communication Yearbook 11* (Thousand Oaks, CA, US: Sage Publications, Inc, 1988), 51–80; David Morley, "Active Audience Theory: Pendulums and Pitfalls," *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (December 1, 1993): 13–19; Rob Cover, "Audience Inter/active Interactive Media, Narrative Control and Reconceiving Audience History," *New Media & Society* 8, no. 1 (February 1, 2006): 139–58.

into a *field*. The signs are cropping up everywhere. In terms of academic study, the i-

Docs project is a center of study for interactive documentaries located at the University of

the West of England.[22] Across the pond, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology is

home to the MIT Open Documentary Lab.[23] 2010 saw the publication of an "Interactive

Documentary Manifesto" by students in Portugal, followed by a rousing performance in

2013 of the "Webdocs Manifesto" created by interactive documentary practitioners and

read on stage at the Tribeca Film Festival's interactive showcase.[24, 25] I absolutely see the

developments in Live Documentary, and the projects I examine in this thesis, as a part of

this movement of experimentation with the documentary form and distribution.

In grounding my own study in this field, I want to acknowledge the PhD work of

i-Docs co-convener Sandra Gaudenzi as a particular influence on this project. Gaudenzi's

is one of the first PhD theses to address the field of interactive documentary, and offers a

valuable conceptual framing of these new documentary forms – as "Living

Documentaries." She sometimes switches to the phrase "Live Documentaries" to describe

these works. I find her framework for the interactive documentary field engaging and

energizing, particularly in that she is also interested in thinking about the meaning of the

role of the interactive documentary viewer – or, as she describes them, "user." She

writes:

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[22] "i-Docs – About," http://i-docs.org/about-idocs/
[23] "MIT Open Documentary Lab," http://opendoclab.mit.edu/
[24] Andre Almeida and Heitor Alvelos, "An Interactive Documentary Manifesto," in *Interactive Storytelling*, ed. Ruth Aylett et al., Lecture Notes in Computer Science 6432 (Springer Berlin Heidelberg, 2010), 123–28.
[25] "2013 TFI Interactive: Zeega's Web Doc Manifesto," https://tribecafilminstitute.org/blog/detail/2013_tfi_interactive_zeegas_web_doc_manifesto

Interactivity gives an agency to the user – the power to physically "do something," whether that be clicking on a link, sending a video or re-mixing content - and therefore creates a series of relations that form an ecosystem in which all parts are interdependent and dynamically linked.[26]

This is strongly aligned with my own interest in the new viewer or user agency afforded by new forms of documentary. My formulation of "Live Documentary," however, is quite different (and thus generates different affordances for viewers and makers) though I think it fits well as a smaller category within Gaudenzi's "Living Documentary" category. My study establishes meanings and boundaries of liveness taken from historical lineages of particular media forms, particularly theater and broadcast media, with a concluding investigation of extrapolating concepts of liveness inscribed by these forms into a view of computational liveness for live documentary. Gaudenzi's 'living' and 'live' documentary category is far broader, anchored in the computer and its interactivity:

> It is argued that this human-computer system has many of the characteristics associated with living entities. It is also argued that by looking at interactive documentaries as living entities (Living Documentaries) we can see the relations that they forge and better understand the transformations they afford – on themselves and on the reality they portray.[27]

I hope to locate my concept of "Live Documentary" well within Gaudenzi's "Living Documentary" framework. I also want to demonstrate how exciting the

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[26] Sandra Gaudenzi, "The Living Documentary: From Representing Reality to Co-Creating Reality in Digital Interactive Documentary" (Goldsmiths, 2013), 4.
[27] Ibid.

affordances of the Live Documentary projects I examine are to the field of interactive documentary as a whole. But to do so, I'll work with the concepts of liveness born in the broadcast era, which as Auslander points out, pitted broadcast performance against live performance and created the need for the "live" broadcast designation.[28] Both theater and broadcast structured senses of liveness against one another's, both forms also grappled with recorded materials and their relationship to 'liveness,' as radio and television made sounds and images live and audio-visual recordings became part of live theater. The swirling notions of liveness I describe here and above have collided in different ways with forms of documentary. I will argue we had recently been resting in a period in which liveness was at the outskirts, but that we have reached a point at which forms of 'liveness' are poised to return to a more prominent place in the discourse and production of the documentary form.

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[28] Auslander, *Liveness*, 60.