

Facing Reality: How Documentaries Have Changed

PAUL BOORSTIN '65

IN THE BEGINNING, when we were undergraduates at Princeton, television documentaries were produced “in-house” by network news. It was the only game in town. The ABC, NBC, and CBS news departments each had a monopoly on the documentaries shown on their network, and the advertising dollars and clout it gave them. Their specials also gave them prestige they couldn’t get from regular newscasts, with programs such as Edward R. Murrow’s ground-breaking “Harvest of Shame” (CBS 1960) about the plight of migrant farm workers.

But when I started working for Wolper Productions in 1966, things were already starting to change. David Wolper, a young, take-no-prisoners producer with a gift for salesmanship (His motto: “Why give them s*** when you can give them Shinola?”) and an eye for hiring talented young film-makers, cornered some rare footage about the Soviet space program. He used it to sell his first independent documentary special to the networks, “The Race for Space.” He was an outsider to the network system, but he had the goods that no one else had and that trumped everything else. Starting in an office on Sunset Strip in Los Angeles, he collected talent from the network news departments until he had a small and feisty team of writers, producers, and directors of his own. To say they were “pushing the envelope” is not quite right, because the niche they carved out for themselves was that of “prestige” network documentaries.

Wolper and his staff went on to originate their own genres, inventing the National Geographic specials, the Jacques Cousteau specials, “The Making of the President” programs and more—the gold standard of high-end programming that the networks broadcast even though they had not made them, because of the cachet it brought them in awards, reviews, and a high-end audience. None of the programs dealt with controversial subjects. They were intended as entertainment at a time when everything on television was G-rated.

In the winter of 1967, when I married one Sharon Silver (yes, we are still married, and proud parents of a son and daughter who are both Princeton graduates), I had to cut my honeymoon short to finish writing “Amazon,” a National Geographic one-hour documentary special on ABC. To share writing credit on a network program at 23 was my big break. “Amazon” won the highest ratings of any TV program for the week it ran. For a network documentary special to win the week’s ratings race today would be unthinkable. But there were far fewer programs to choose from in those days, and the audience had not yet become jaded with the allure of exotic locations and animals eating other animals. (Although the National Geographic Society lent its name and research to the effort, all the actual production and editing was done by the Wolper team.)



Boorstin (left) shooting baboons for National Geographic in South Africa

In 1972, thanks to my executive producer and mentor, Nick Clapp, a brilliant Brown graduate, I got my first chance to write, produce, and be a director on “The Big Cats,” a National Geographic special for ABC. Many aspects of the production seem quaint by today’s standards. Setting out on an expedition to faraway locations, we would make up a fancy-looking phony document plastered with gold seals that would enable us to whisk past local bureaucrats and border guards. This document was nicknamed (in the politically incorrect language of the era) the “Dago Dazzler.” We also had special Nation-

al Geographic expense books where one line-item was “Gifts for the Natives.”

The biggest differences between the documentaries back then and now were the budgets and the time we had to work on them—in other words, everything that mattered. My “Big Cats” special had a whopping (in 1972 dollars) budget of \$250,000. I was paid Writer’s Guild rates and received union benefits. Equally impressive, we had a year in which to make the hour-length show. (Today, except for a few high-end PBS or HBO specials, you might have three or four months for planning, shooting, and editing.)

We had no kids then, so my wife Sharon came along on the four-month shoot. We literally traveled around the world to locations in India, the Amazon, Poland, Sweden and the USA. For a young guy not yet thirty, it was a life-changing experience.

The travel part was luxurious by today’s standards. We flew first class and, when in major cities, stayed at the best hotels, such as the Taj in Mumbai. This wasn’t extravagance, but rather the best way to make sure our thousands of dollars worth of camera and sound gear weren’t stolen. Our crew was flown in from Holland (because André Gunn, the cameraman, and his team, were deemed the best at wildlife photography). He brought along a Dutch assistant cameraman and a sound man.

There were hardships, of course. When we stayed in really isolated places, like India’s Gir Forest, where we filmed Asiatic lions, we roughed it. There was cholera, malaria, and a monotonous diet of rancid goat stew. Oh, and I almost got eaten by a lion.

OUR equipment caused production problems. The 16-mm film was sensitive to heat and would be ruined if it was X-rayed at an airport-security checkpoint. The film would also be ruined if an over-eager customs inspector opened the film can, exposing it to light. In the editing room as well as on location, film-making was a lot more difficult back then. When you brought the film home, your problems were just beginning. If you wanted to lengthen a shot, you would have to double-print it at the lab, which was expensive and time-consuming. The same was true of making a freeze-frame, or any other optical effect. David Saxon, my wonderful editor, was an expert at making the most of what we had.

After “The Big Cats” I wrote, produced and/or directed many other documentaries. One ABC special on which I received writing credit won the Emmy for Best Documentary as well as an Academy Award nomination for Best Documentary: “Journey to the Outer Limits” followed American high school kids of different ethnic backgrounds taking an Outward Bound mountain-climbing expedition in the Andes. The director carefully planned out the story, not quite scripting it, but almost. It may not have been a 100 percent

“pure” documentary but people loved it, and it was the forerunner of future “reality shows” which, decades later, dominated programming.

Cut from the 1970s to the 1980s

With the explosion of cable, everything changed. Instead of there being only three channels to run documentary shows, there were hundreds. The increased demand for documentaries might seem to be a good thing, but it wasn't. With the fragmenting of the audience into narrow groups (Discovery, History, Court TV, TLC, A&E, to name just a few), the networks had much lower budgets from advertising revenue to produce the programs, which also meant less time to make them. With less time and fewer resources, quality had nowhere to go but down.

Network TV shows had contracts with unions like the Writers Guild and the Directors Guild. But cable companies, for the most part, did not. There were no benefits or protections for the writer or director on the work they did on cable. In fact, with cable, virtually no one made—or makes now—a decent wage as a freelancer writing or producing documentaries. (And still film schools keep cranking out eager graduates by the thousands!)

I had friends who ran small production companies that barely scraped by producing a couple of shows a year. Bigger production companies cranked out a lot of series programming, often without much regard to quality, and made money by the economies of scale.

To draw viewers, the cable networks went for the lowest common denominator. In nature shows, the “sexy animals”—lions, tigers, sharks, elephants—dominated (witness “Shark Week” on Discovery). And there were the *cute* animals (a la “Meer-Cat Manor”). It was said that to get a high rating, a cable documentary had to be about sharks, Hitler, or the Kennedys. And then, of course, there were the countless shows on alien abductions, Area 51, ancient astronauts, and Bigfoot. The more tabloid the subject, the more hope that it would bring in the lowest common denominator of viewers. (One of the specials of which I am most proud is “Voodoo,” a two-hour A&E program I wrote and produced that won the CINE Golden Eagle, perhaps because we treated a potentially lurid subject with journalistic restraint.)

As the country's puritanical rigidity loosened up in the 1970s, the uptight morality of the network era died a swift death. The networks' “Standards and Practices” departments, the gatekeepers of propriety, simply didn't exist on cable. (When I produced “The Big Cats,” we could not show lions mating on ABC in prime time. Now on cable they show people mating, and for all I know, people mating with animals!) It became less what “should” be done than how much they could get away with in pushing the envelope to hook an audience.

The revolution from making programs on film, to video, and then digital made shooting much easier. You didn't have to worry about getting digital images X-rayed or exposed to sunlight. When you brought it back, you didn't need a fancy editing system. You could edit on your home computer. And with digital editing, you could lengthen or shorten a pan shot, or make a freeze frame, with the touch of a button. As for location shooting, instead of having to transport a whole production team, it was now possible for a single cameraman to shoot a sequence in Afghanistan, upload it to the Internet, and send it to an audience in minutes.

But just as changing from quill pens to typewriters to computers didn't make for more Tolstoys, so changing from film to video to digital did not make for better TV documentaries. Instead, the technological leap to something faster, easier, and cheaper seemed to make things worse. Small durable cameras capable of shooting under extreme conditions meant that controversial new subjects could be dealt with that had been shunned before. Shooting in the shadows, a camera could follow people unobtrusively into bars or bathrooms or brothels. The genie was out of the bottle.

The technical breakthroughs that should have liberated documentaries and made them more varied, instead somehow encouraged them to focus on shock and sleaze. They reeled in viewers for shows like

“Jersey Shore” and “Real Housewives of Beverly Hills.” It was entertainment in the raw. Instead of exploding caricatures, it was all about cashing in on them, with bigoted behavior (“Duck Dynasty”) or obscene wealth (“Beverly Hills Housewives”). Stock characters included the fat black woman with “attitude,” the dumb blonde, or the drunken redneck. “Documentaries” (a word that turned many people off by seeming to imply something dreary and dull) turned into “Reality Television.”

What surprises me most is not that “reality” programs are so heavily scripted and manipulative; it’s that nobody in the audience seems to care. Old-fashioned documentaries had their faults. They were often slow-paced and boring, and there were interviews with professors with soup on their ties, which went on far too long. But the new “reality” shows were scripted dramas with amateur actors pulling down their pants.

WHICH brings us to today. The mania for reality programming may finally have peaked. It’s being replaced, it seems, by viral videos viewed by tens of millions of people all over the world on the Internet. Whether or not this is a good thing, it is too soon to say.

As for prestige documentaries, there will always be people with deep pockets (no doubt, some of them Princetonians) who can finance wonderful productions, of which a handful will find an audience each year. PBS documentaries still survive in cultural ghettos like “American Experience,” or the occasional highly promoted show on National Geographic or Discovery. And HBO has the means to make some first-rate productions. But the sad fact is that there are hundreds of quality documentaries for television and theaters made with the inexpensive, easy-to-use new technology that no one will ever see, because there is no profit in showing them. As with e-publishing today, it’s easier than ever to “publish” a book, but harder than ever to have anyone know it exists—or make money from it.

Despite the whiplash of accelerating technology—or maybe because of it—for me the journey has been a great adventure. I have been lucky to keep pretty much on the high road, writing programs like “The Lost Kennedy Home Movies,” a two-hour special on the History Channel, and “Moments in Time,” a series of ten one-hour programs that combined archaeology with historical reenactments, as well as writing and directing a National Geographic program on DARPA, the top-secret R&D arm of the Defense Department. I have not sunk to making shows on alien abductions, Bigfoot, or Nevada brothels (though I certainly forgive anyone who has been forced to, for their own survival). I have worked with brave, talented, wonderful people and had many exciting adventures all over the world—most recently in South Africa, writing and directing shooting for a National Geographic series on baboons invading a village near Capetown.

Ironically, the real happy ending to my documentary saga is that both of my kids, Julia (Class of ’00) and Adam (Class of ’06), have prospered in “new media” fields that did not exist when I was at Princeton, or even twenty years after. My Cornell MBA son is an executive at BuzzFeed, one of the most successful of the new viral-media content companies. Their videos are viewed by millions more people than ever watched a documentary. My daughter is the CNBC media and Silicon Valley on-camera reporter. By the time my kids are my age, who knows what direction things will have taken? But by then, it won’t be my problem any more—or yours!