

Radio Documentaries: An Introduction

Fourth course, Fourth grading period, Weeks 2-3

Documentaries examine their subjects in depth. A radio station's decision to tackle a documentary requires the investment of employees' time, station resources and a commitment to one's community. The radio documentary requires an archeologist's intensity to dig for facts and clues, an artist's creative expression and an investigator's eye for details and relationships. "At its best, radio combines the power and immediacy of great documentary films with the intimacy and poetry of a New Yorker-style magazine piece." (Columbia Graduate School of Journalism document).



Enduring Understanding

The challenge to the broadcaster often is to determine how to present the complexities of human behavior without compromising or reducing the range of subject matter, depth of coverage or artistic expression desired by the broadcaster and its audience.



Essential Questions

What is the purpose of a documentary? What are the characteristics of a radio documentary? What has been the impact of classic and contemporary radio and television documentaries?



Objectives and Outcome

- Students will be introduced to classic and contemporary examples of radio documentaries.
- Students will understand the purpose of the documentary and its potential impact on a community.
- Students will be able to list characteristics of a radio documentary.



Suggested Time

Two weeks



Resources and Materials

Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University (<http://cds.aas.duke.edu/>)

The Art of the News Documentary (www.rtnda.org/communicator/showarticle.asp?id=38)

Youth Document Durham (<http://wunc.org/tsot/archive/sot072106b.mp3/view>)

Radio documentary tutorial (www.cbc.ca/outfront/contribute/radio_doc_tutor.html). Eight pieces, all but one are excerpts of longer documentaries.

Salt Institute for Documentary Studies (www.salt.edu/). Visit the Salt Student Galleries (www.salt.edu/student_archive.html) for many examples of radio documentaries.

Salt Radio Program (www.transom.org/shows/2004/200402_salt.html)

This hour features Salt Institute for Documentary Studies Rob Rosenthal, talking with host Jay Allison about learning the craft of radio, the way they do it in Portland, Maine. Works include “Jaz, The Cleaning Woman” produced by Jamie York and “Roadway Renaissance Man” produced by Carla Neufeldt.

September 9, 2006 (#56): The MBK Show (www.thirdcoastfestival.org/resound_2006_september.asp)

Two pieces from the early days of American long-form documentary production and an interview with the pioneering radio producer, Mary Beth Kirchner.

Leonard Bernstein — An American Life (www.wfmt.com/main.taf?p=13,1)

Docufest (www.museum.tv/educationsection.php?page=6)

Selected documentaries (with lesson plans) from the archives of The Museum of Broadcast Communications.

Nichols, Bill. *Introduction to Documentary* (Indiana University Press, 2001). Nichols, film scholar and authority on documentary and ethnographic film, defines six modes of documentary film.



Procedure

This lesson offers resources and several approaches to introduce students to the radio and television documentary and minidocumentary. Teachers are encouraged to review this lesson and the next one, “Doing a Radio Documentary,” and all handouts at the beginning of the term in order to map out the best plan.

As the most advanced of the projects and the final one in the four-course sequence, the unit offers each student a challenge. Teachers must determine to what extent it may be handled as an independent project rather than a class one. Whether all students in the fourth course will produce a documentary or the documentary is one option for a final project, we encourage teachers to introduce students to the documentary.

1. Play excerpts from “Leonard Bernstein — An American Life” (www.wfmt.com/main.taf?p=13,1), “My Lobotomy” (www.soundportraits.org/on-air/my_lobotomy/), and another selected radio documentary. Refer to “Contemporary Documentarians and Documentaries” for sources of examples and some current documentarians who are producing notable work.

Have students begin a Documentary Log that will be kept throughout the term. In it they will record basic information about each documentary they hear (and view), techniques that stand out and their personal evaluation of the presentation of the subject.

Discuss, compare and contrast the works. Questions may include:

- Which opening grabs their attention? Is it because of the subject or the approach taken?
- Does a host introduce the topic, is an anecdote presented or are listeners placed in media res?
- Critique the “listenability” and storytelling qualities of each.
- What makes the subject of interest to today’s public?

Define documentary.

2. Distribute “Documentary Vocabulary.” Discuss the different definitions of “documentary” that are provided. Play another example of a contemporary documentary or an older one for students to add to their awareness of the array of topics and approaches as well as to apply the definition.

Why produce documentaries?

3. Discuss the influence and potential impact of a documentary. Play “Ghetto Life 101” (http://soundportraits.org/on-air/ghetto_life_101/). This is an example of the radio diary approach that documents the life of two boys and their neighborhood.

- What view of students and their lifestyle does this documentary present?
- Do your students relate to these students in any manner or gain an understanding of the choices made by these teenagers?
- This is ostensibly the story of two boys. How is it more than their story?
- What do your students know that they did not know before?
- If your students were to take the diary approach, who would they interview and what larger story would be told through their lives?

4. Based on the definitions of documentary and the examples they have seen, why do students think people produce documentaries? What do they add beyond a report or an interview show?

One professional responds: Why radio? Why documentary? Answer: “No other medium can provide me with more freedom of creation and investigation. It meets my urgent interest in reality and the desire for a ‘musical’ expression. The material (der Werkstoff) is sound. And sound always surrounds us. And: I’m not so much interested in the description of stable situations, but in processes. Our medium is not space, but time; our stories are not glued to the ground, but have motion, life ... That’s why!” (Helmut Kopetzky, German author and documentarian).

Characteristics of a documentary

5. Distribute copies of “Worth the Hour: Qualities of a Great Documentary.” Discuss each of the qualities that distinguish the best documentaries. Have any of the documentaries that they have heard or seen exemplified any of the qualities?

Classic radio documentaries

6. Introduce students to some classic documentaries. French travelogues of the early 1900s and “Moana” (1926) were described as documentary, but we start our study of the American documentary with Edward R. Murrow. Distribute and review “Documentary Timeline — Beginning with Edward R. Murrow.”

Show and discuss “Harvest of Shame,” which is considered by many to be one of the most important news documentaries produced, having an impact then and continuing to draw attention to the work and life of migrant workers. “A Report on Senator Joseph R. McCarthy” from the “See It Now” program is another that can be viewed for its use of the subject’s own words, documentary techniques and impact on society. Excerpts from other documentaries that are listed might be selected as they relate to students’ other classes and interests.

“The Most Trusted Man in Television News” features Walter Cronkite (www.pbs.org/wnet/american-masters/database/cronkite_w.html), another respected journalist who has hosted and produced documentaries. After leaving the CBS anchor desk in 1981, he hosted the Emmy-winning “Children of Apartheid” (1987). In 1993, he co-founded The Cronkite-Ward Co., producers of award-winning documentaries for The Discovery Channel, PBS and other networks. “Avoiding Armageddon: Our Future. Our Choice” (1993) is available on DVD (www.pbs.org/avoidingarmageddon/meetThePeople/meet_03_03_01_cronkite.html) [An Aside: Early in his career, Cronkite was a sports announcer for an Oklahoma City radio station.]

Where are documentaries found?

7. Al Tompkins of the Poynter Institute notes that the documentary thrives on public and cable-TV channels like The History Channel, but that those productions don’t address community issues the way a local news operation can. Minidocumentaries are found on “60 Minutes” and some television newsmagazines. See Resources and Materials above for sources of radio documentaries.

The Alfred I. du Pont-Columbia University broadcast news awards include documentaries. In 2006, for example, North Carolina Public Radio-WUNC, Chapel Hill, received recognition for “North Carolina Voices: Understanding Poverty,” a series of features and documentaries, and HBO won an award for “Real Sports with Bryant Gumbel: The Sport of Sheikhs.” The investigative report documented slavery and torture of boys, 5 years old and younger, who were trained to race camels in the United Arab Emirates.

RTNDA’s Edward R. Murrow Awards include recognition for regional and national News Documentaries. The 2006 Region 10 winner, “Snakeheads & Slavery — Britain’s Human Traffic” (www.insideout.org/documentaries/snakeheadsslavery/default.asp) includes an excellent Web site with Reporter’s Notebook and commentary for parts 1-3.

8. A few examples of radio documentaries are in the archives of The Museum of Broadcast Communications. These include:

- “Journeys: From Vampires to Slashers, the American Taste for Horror” (parts 1 and 2), the evolution of the horror genre in radio and film, 1920-1970.
- “Journeys: Radio Covers the News, An Historic Overview” (parts 1 and 2), development of radio news broadcasting from the 1920s-1960s
- “Journeys: Blacks in Radio, Destination Freedom 1948 through 1950” focuses on Chicago radio drama profiles of prominent blacks
- “Yiddish Radio Project” (parts 1 and 2), based on Henry Sapoznik’s collection of Yiddish radio programs, from the 1930s to the 1950s

The examples of TV documentaries include:

- “Empire of the Air: The Men Who Made Radio.” Ken Burns covers the development and different types of radio
- “Amos ‘n’ Andy: Anatomy of a Controversy.” George Kirby hosts a look at the TV and radio series and the historical stereotyping of blacks in media

9. Introduce students to the variety of minidocumentaries produced by students found on Youth Document Durham. Other excellent examples are provided by the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University and the Salt Institute for Documentary Studies.

10. Teachers who have completed course work in film studies and are familiar with film documentaries may wish also to approach radio documentaries through chronological and technological development. In his 2001 book, *Introduction to Documentary* (Indiana University Press), Bill Nichols, film scholar and authority on documentary and ethnographic film, defines the six modes of documentary film: Poetic (lyrical form, associated with the 1920s), Expository (authoritative narrator, 1920-30s through WWII), Observational (smaller cameras allow movement to filmmakers, 1960s), Participatory (reporter-subject interact), Reflexive (acknowledges viewers, 1980s), and Performative (autobiographical, ideas as part of context). Teachers could introduce the modes, the technology available and provide examples of documentaries from different time periods. Students could be asked to identify use or presence of the different modes in contemporary documentaries they have listened to or viewed.

These approaches can be found in archived radio documentaries. DocuFest (www.museum.tv/educationsection.php?page=6) provides examples for classroom use. Under “Civil Rights” TV documentaries produced in 1957-2000 demonstrate different production styles. Each is accompanied with lesson plans.



Homework

Students will keep a Documentary Log of documentaries heard in class and for homework.

Students should be provided the URLs of sources of radio documentaries as listed in Resources and Materials and other sources. This assignment may be part of the Documentary Log or a separate assignment. Ask students to listen to three radio documentaries during the first week. They are to identify qualities and characteristics of the documentary that are utilized by the producer and what aspects of content and structure make/fail to make it an effective work.

Academy Award and Other Documentary Winners

As an extra credit option, students might be encouraged to view and evaluate the qualities of these films that define them as documentaries yet distinguish them. In 1941 from 11 nominees, “Churchill’s Island” (National Film Board of Canada) won the first Oscar for Documentary (Short Subject). Two years later the first Documentary (Feature) was awarded to “Desert Victory” (British Ministry of Information). Just viewing titles of nominees and winners gives a sense of the events and culture at the time — “The True Glory” (1945), “Robert Frost: A Lover’s Quarrel with the World” (1963), “Woodstock” (1970), “Genocide” (1981), “March of the Penguins” (2005). Other documentaries worth consideration: “Nanook of the North” (1922), one year in an Inuit family; “Streetwise” (1984), nine teenagers in Seattle’s streets; and “Common Threads: Stories from the Quilt” (1993), patchwork of the lives and deaths of those commemorated in the AIDS quilt. More recent documentaries have had some box office success (U.S. gross in millions as of 7-31-06, according to Box Office Mojo): “Fahrenheit 9/11” (\$119.2 million), “March of the Penguins” (\$77.4 million), “Bowling for Columbine” (\$21.6 million), “An Inconvenient Truth” (\$19.2 million) and “Super Size Me” (\$11.5 million).



Assessment

These approaches are meant to introduce students to the documentary. Students should be encouraged to engage in class discussion and to complete homework listening to and viewing both TV and radio documentaries. Active discussion of documentary techniques is encouraged.

Assessment will follow in the next weeks when they produce their own documentaries.



Academic Content Standards

Understands how different media (e.g., documentaries, current affairs programs, Web pages) are structured to present a particular subject or point of view (McREL Language Arts, Standard 10, Benchmark 2, Level IV, grades 9-12)

Understands that media messages have economic, political, social, and aesthetic purposes (e.g., to make money, to gain power or authority over others, to present ideas about how people should think or behave, to experiment with different kinds of symbolic forms or ideas). (McREL Language Arts, Standard 10, Benchmark 1, Level IV, grades 9-12)

Understands the role of the media in addressing social and cultural issues (e.g., creating or promoting causes: U.N. military action, election of political parties; use of media to achieve governmental, societal, and cultural goals). (McREL Language Arts, Standard 10, Benchmark 12, Level IV, grades 9-12)



Industry Standards and Expectations

The challenge to the broadcaster often is to determine how suitably to present the complexities of human behavior without compromising or reducing the range of subject matter, artistic expression or dramatic presentation desired by the broadcaster and its audience. For television and for radio, this requires exceptional awareness of considerations peculiar to each medium and of the composition and preferences of particular communities and audiences. (“Responsibly exercised artistic freedom,” Statement of Principles of Radio and Television Broadcasters issue by The Board of Directors of the National Association of Broadcasters)

Identify ethical responsibilities and how they relate to the degree of influence the media have on individuals. (Performance Element, Pathway KS Statement: Exhibit knowledge of ethics and legal issues related to journalism and broadcasting, States’ Career Clusters, National Association of State Directors of Career Technical Education Consortium)

Documentary Vocabulary

Docudrama A dramatic reconstruction of an actual event in which actors representing real people work from scripts based on eyewitness accounts and the public record (*Source: Announcing*)

Documentary A nonfiction report that devotes its full time slot to one thesis or subject, usually under the guidance of a single producer. Part of the fascination with documentaries lies in their unique blend of writing, visual images, sound tracks and the individual styles of their producers. In addition to their particular contribution to the television medium, however, documentaries are notable because they have intertwined with wrenching moments in history. (*The Museum of Broadcast Communications*)

A relatively long piece done in dramatic style. Generally, a documentary focuses on one issue and has a plot line. A documentary usually reaches a conclusion and makes a point. (*Source: Announcing*)

Refers to film or video that explores a subject in a way the public expects to be factual and accurate. Documentaries may be balanced by including various viewpoints or they may be subjective, offering the viewpoint and impressions of one producer. (*Source: PBS, glossary, My Journey Home*)

A documentary programme is wholly fact, based on documentary evidence — written records, attributable sources, contemporary interviews and the like. Its purpose is essentially to inform, to present a story or situation with total regard for honest, balanced reporting. (*Source: Radio Production*)

A program that is a creative treatment of actuality other than news, current affairs, sports coverage, magazine infotainment or light entertainment program, and corporate and/or training programs (*Source: Australian Broadcasting Authority*)

Minidocumentary Having all the qualities of a documentary, but shorter in length. The TV news-magazine 60 Minutes is composed of minidocumentaries and commentary, for example.

Contemporary Documentarians and Documentaries

Documentaries

Soundprint (www.soundprint.org) produces weekly 30-minute documentaries. Producers are from many countries.

Third Coast International Audio Festival (www.thirdcoastfestival.org/index.asp), WBEZ in Chicago, presents a collection of audio feature and documentary work from fine contemporary radio producers.

Youth Document Durham (<http://wunc.org/tsot/archive/sot072106b.mp3/view>)
Local teenagers spent the early part of a summer recording their lives for the “Youth Document Durham” project at the Center for Documentary Studies. Host Frank Stasio talks with program coordinator Tennessee Watson and two of her students about the stories they produced, which include fitting in with the right clothes to getting out of gangs.

Ghetto Life 101 (www.soundportraits.org/on-air/ghetto_life_101/)
In March 1993, LeAlan Jones, 13, and Lloyd Newman, 14, collaborated with public radio producer David Isay to create the radio documentary Ghetto Life 101, their audio diaries of life on Chicago’s South Side. In 10 days of taping, the boys brought listeners face to face with a portrait of poverty and danger and their effects on childhood in one of Chicago’s worst housing projects.

My Lobotomy (www.soundportraits.org/on-air/my_lobotomy/)
“On January 17, 1946, a psychiatrist named Walter J. Freeman launched a radical new era in the treatment of mental illness in this country. On that day he performed the first-ever transorbital or ‘ice pick’ lobotomy in his Washington, D.C., office. His patient was a severely depressed housewife named Sallie Ellen Ionesco. After rendering her unconscious through electroshock, Freeman inserted an ice pick above her eyeball, banged it through her eye socket into her brain, and then made cuts in her frontal lobes. When he was done, he sent her home in a taxi cab.” The story follows another patient as he investigates why his family subjected him to this procedure.

Some Contemporary Documentarians

John Biewen — At American RadioWorks and the Center for Documentary Studies, Duke University; received awards for investigative reports and historical documentaries.

Kyla Brettle — Freelance audio producer and documentarian, Australia; Wired Vision, production company. Trauma (2004), 000 Ambulance (2006)

Gemma Hooley — Documentarian for the Soundprint Media Center, a national source of weekly radio documentaries. Hooley's documentaries include an investigation into dating and what it's like for an African-American housewife to work as a slave in historical re-enactments at Colonial Williamsburg.

David Isay — Sound Portraits Productions, dedicated to bringing neglected American voices to a national audience. Profiles as radio documentaries.

Bill Lichtenstein — Award-winning investigative producer and documentary maker who has distinguished himself in health journalism; Lichtenstein Creative Media in Mass.; produces The Infinite Mind, a health and science program and documentaries such as West 47th Street, If I Get Out Alive and Juveniles in Crisis.

Steve Rowland — Respected and awarded sound documentary producer; Miles Davis Radio Project (5 parts) and Leonard Bernstein — An American Life (11 parts)

Worth the Hour: Qualities of a Great Documentary

Siphoning resources away from the news of the day to produce a long-form documentary can leave a news director thin-staffed and scrambling for short hits, so the project truly must be worthwhile. Those who do them well say worthy documentaries share a few ingredients, including:

Depth — A long piece isn't necessarily an in-depth piece, notes Deborah Potter, executive director of NewsLab. "There's a tendency to think a documentary is just the same as any other story, but longer. ... That's not an adequate definition of what a documentary is," she says. "By its very nature, a documentary requires heavy lifting."

Surprise — Good documentaries, says Al Tompkins, of The Poynter Institute, leave the audience with an understanding and some insight into the topic that they didn't have at the beginning of the hour. "You want the viewer to lean forward all the way to the last couple of minutes, at which time they lean back and say, 'Wow,'" he says.

A Local Angle — Stories worthy of an hour of the local viewer's time are local stories, Potter says. "In a TV newsroom, viewers equal ratings, [which equals] ad revenue. The trick is to be willing to put the resources into a documentary that will draw viewers."

Importance — WCPO-TV news director Bob Morford waits until a story cries for a long-form treatment before he will turn it into a documentary. "The problem with documentaries sometimes is that the story doesn't merit it," he says.

Compelling Characters — Viewers who commit an hour to watching a documentary want to get to know emotionally open people with something large at stake, says Morford. "You're not just spending time with people who are compelling," he says. "They're compelling in the midst of discussing something that's vitally important."

Beautiful Visuals — WRAL-TV news director John Harris says he struggles between making documentaries about hard-to-illustrate, important issues or about weaker stories that lend themselves to strong visuals. "It's a common struggle in any television newsroom," he says.

New Information — Potter says documentaries should inform viewers about something new, "so ideally when they're watching they're not sitting there saying, 'I knew that.' They're saying, 'I had no idea.'"

Heart — "At their best, they touch your heart," says Jill Geisler, a onetime news director who now heads The Poynter Institute's leadership and management group.

Source: In the October 2003 Communicator article, "The Art of the News Documentary," (www.rtnda.org/communicator/showarticle.asp?id=380) Sharon O'Malley discusses the reasons to produce the long-form documentary. The above is the sidebar to that article.

Documentary Timeline — Beginning with Edward R. Murrow

If one were to look over the history of the documentary, one name would reappear — the man whose journalism has become legendary: Newsman Edward R. Murrow, who created the CBS documentary unit in 1946. The unit operated on the principle that those who are licensed to use the airways have a responsibility to provide the listening public with the very best in news reporting. Into the 21st Century, other broadcasters have followed Murrow's example and pursued his standards. They value an informed public and provide documentaries on a wide range of subjects.

- 1946 Edward R. Murrow creates CBS documentary unit.
- 1951 Edward R. Murrow and Fred Friendly team to produce "See It Now." This TV series is considered the beginning of the American TV documentary.
- 1954 "A Report on Senator Joseph R. McCarthy" airs on "See It Now."
- 1960 "Harvest of Shame," the final Murrow documentary airs. "Harvest of Shame" is considered one of the most important news documentaries made.
- 1964 "ABC Scope," a weekly series, begins.
- 1966-68 "ABC Scope" becomes "Vietnam Report" as the conflict in Vietnam escalates.
- 1966 "Vietnam Weekly Review" airs on NBC.
- 1968 "Of Black America," a seven-part series, airs on CBS.
- 1968 CBS premieres "60 Minutes," a newsmagazine featuring minidocumentaries.
- 1969 NBC creates "First Tuesday," a newsmagazine.
- 1973 ABC begins "The Reasoner Report" and resumes the "CloseUp!" documentaries.
- 1983 PBS premieres "FRONTLINE," investigative documentary series.
- 1983 "Vietnam: A Television History," a 13-hour documentary, airs.
- 1984 Arts and Entertainment Network starts; features documentaries.
- 1985 Discovery Channel begins broadcast; features documentaries.
- 1987 "Eyes on the Prize," a PBS series documents the modern civil rights movement.
- 1987 "Children of Apartheid," hosted by Walter Cronkite, wins Emmy.