



“Minding the Gap”: Reflections on Media Practice & Theory

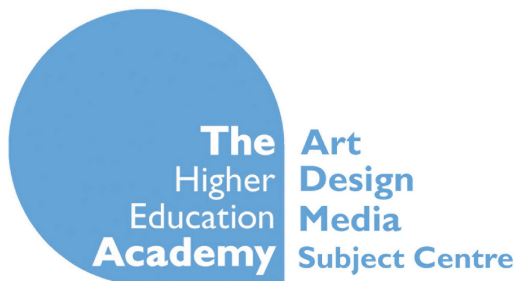
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**‘Documents of Ordinariness – The BBC Video Nation Project’
Camcorder Cultures – Media Technologies and Everyday Creativity (2005 –2008)
Centre for the Study of Children, Youth and Media.**

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My research examines the interface between amateur video production and the UK cultural industries, specifically the BBC’s Video Nation. This paper, ‘Documents of Ordinariness’ firstly examines a range of practices that are incorporated under the term video generated content, highlighting the dualism of amateur / professional raised in its inclusion in the media which is continued in the examination of the Video Nation project.

Video generated content covers the practices that have previously been described as user, audience or viewer generated content, where non-professionally produced material becomes assimilated into the mass media. The term also covers the productions of the citizen producer or citizen journalist – where the notion of citizen is implied by the ideological position of the media producer. Citizen producer and citizen journalist are terms that have come out of new media discourse, but do not necessarily refer to practices that are new or exclusive to digital media.

The low-grade video image has become a familiar element of news broadcasting, since the appearance of the CCTV footage of Jamie Bulger in 1993. Increasingly video generated content is shot on mobile technology, first seen in Alexander Chadwick’s image of the evacuation of a tube train at Kings Cross on 7/7. A few months later, when the BBC requested images and footage of the Buncefield Oil Depot explosion, (December 05) they were inundated with nearly 7000 responses. The few selected for broadcast were clearly marked by an - ‘amateur footage’ tag. As Jon Dovey points out “... the ‘amateur video’ tag seen with increasing frequency on TV newscasts signals subjectivity, but also immediacy and truth.” (Dovey: 1993, 168) The amateur tag also implies that the footage is unprofessional and sub-standard, that it has no commercial value. It is used to distance the broadcaster from the lower production values present in amateur video and to promote commitment to participatory practices.

In breaking news stories such as Buncefield, the video generated content is, where possible, quickly replaced by a professionally shot 'news item' – removing the subjectivity and immediacy and reformatting the truth.



This example taken from the commercial news network ITN, The 'amateur-video' tag that would have appeared on the BBC is replaced with the tag of exclusivity - a signifier of value in the commercial world.

The footage is of the arrest of those suspected of the July 21st bombings. The arrest took place on a West London housing estate, sealed off by the police. It was shot by an estate resident and is the only representation of the event

I want to explore some of the issues that an article on this footage in the Independent supplement Media Weekly (Monday 8th August 2005) raises regarding video-generated content and news production. The article 'How ITV got the scoop of the Year' centres on making a distinction between professional and amateur, explicit in the sub-title 'How a quick-witted amateur and a consummately professional editor clinched an outstanding exclusive'. The quality of the footage, is praised, - it is of such 'professional quality that the producer should walk off with a prize at the next Television awards. The article then describes a complex commercial arrangement of joint ventures, extolling the negotiating prowess, of the professional editor, and the amateur producer. Although the amount is not disclosed we are told that there was a 'bidding war' that went up to 'fairly serious sums'.

In the article, the producer is clearly constructed as amateur whilst situated outside of the traditional definitions of being unpaid, unprofessional and producing work with no commercial value.

Amateur produced goods, particularly photographs are sometimes 'adopted' by the commercial media, which problematizes the unpaid element of the definition of amateur.

The amateur status of the citizen journalist can also be used to discredit the content, most famously demonstrated in the usage of George Holliday's footage of the arrest of Rodney King, in the subsequent trials of 4 of the police officers. The successful denigration of the amateur status of the evidence coupled with what was widely seen as a rigged jury, resulted in defendants acquittal that sparked the LA Riots of 1992.

The article goes on to say that the position of ITN's first female editor, Deborah Turnbull will be boosted 'if ITV can own this citizen reporter territory by establishing a day-to-day platform for footage from mobile phones and mini cameras'. The launch of ITN's platform on May 1st this year indicates that the citizen producer is recognized as a content source by the commercial broadcast media. This has long been acknowledged and encouraged within the BBC's public service model. The relentless requests to 'send us

your images and footage' can; as well as being grossly over-subscribed, move items up the news agenda.

Video generated content that highlighted the condition of accommodation provided for the armed forces led to countless images of similar or worse conditions, being submitted to the BBC developed into a full-blown domestic story with 'questions being raised in the house'. The minister for the armed forces was held 'virtually' responsible to members of the public in a 'scripted and controlled', a 'mediated' web-environment. Web-driven, video-generated content raises the possibility of the news agenda being hijacked, being used to give credibility to groups that fall outside of notions of citizenship. The use of video amongst extremist groups or individuals is a fast growing area of practice, and research.

My concern, is on the more benign types of production such as the BBC Citizen 1000 initiative, here the citizen producer is constructed as a community minded volunteer freely contributing their ideas and contacts, in exchange for the possibility of appearing on telly. Citizen 1000 is a West Midlands based cross-platform pilot project that provides content for regional radio and tv and the local 'Where I Live' site. Currently there are fifty-five Where I Live sites to cover the UK, providing a link between the regional radio and tv centres in providing information for the local community. These sites are one of the ways that Video Nation produced content can be accessed. Video Nation is a web-based cross-platform project based on the video-diary genre that was developed in the Community Programmes Unit in the early 90s as part of their remit to provide access to the mass media for under-represented individuals and groups. One of the Unit's initiatives was the Video Diaries Series where feature-length programmes were shot by the participant and co-edited with a BBC producer. The, then producer of Video Nation, Bob Long has since described the participant as 'the ordinary person – the non media professional' – the amateur.

I use the term 'video diary' to refer to stand alone media texts. Outside of broadcast initiatives and first-person film-making, it tends to be used within an institutional context

be that, health service, research project, or museum. This may change, but as yet, video diary footage does not have a significant presence on the video sharing sites, which did not exist when the Camcorder Culture project started. These sites such as You Tube or My Space, display growing numbers of recorded web-cam vlogs and ‘promotional’ shorts that share some of the conventions of the video diary, as well a video-diary spoof productions. The aesthetics of the video diary have become incorporated into dramatic storylines, reality genres, news broadcasts, spoofs and adverts across international media.

Video Dairies developed into Video Nation to fill a regular weekly 4-minute broadcast slot. Instead of the in-depth portraits, Video Nation would provide ‘snapshots of life’, what Jon Dovey calls ‘postcards from reality’ (Dovey:2000 121). In principle, the content could be anything the contributor could say and the broadcaster could show, within four minutes. Although with shooting ratios sometimes as high as 200:1, it was rarely an unedited monologue. In continuation of television access principles, the participant continues to have at the very least, approval of the final edit, although levels of consultation between participant and producer vary. The producer/editor shapes the material into the format and overall style of Video Nation. They ensure that the material is presented with the ideological framework of the BBC

Video Nation changed to a web-based ‘online community and archive’ in 2000.

(www.bbc.co.uk/videonation) It remains that, the participant is loaned equipment and given basic training in its use. The completed short, once approved, can be used across the BBC, although permission for new use will be sought. Participants are free to withdraw from the project at any time.

The Video Nation home page provides a space for you to represent ‘your views and your experiences online’. There’s lots of information about the project, how to take part, history, recent productions etc. and a link through to the Where I Live sites. The featured video provides an opportunity for the viewer watch this video, to respond to the filmmaker/ wider community, or to watch more like this..... although of course, the point of Video Nation is to highlight the specific individuality of this subjective experience.

Instead this will bring up shorts that have been archived under the same categories, such as health, teens, sadness, location of the contributor etc, or other shorts produced for the same campaign. The BBC promote 2 or 3 campaigns in each of the broadcasting quarters, the current one is to commemorate the abolition of slavery. One of the campaigns last year was Homelessness which ran to mark the 40th Anniversary of Shelter, an organization that was brought into existence as a direct result of the BBC2 broadcast *Cathy Come Home*, Ken Loach's 1967 gritty social realist television drama.

Within the stranding and branding climate of the BBC, Video Nation has concentrated participating in these campaigns as a means of retaining the profile of the 'brand'. This results in a process where the participant is more likely to be specifically 'recruited' by the producer to take part in a particular campaign where your views and experiences' can be voiced, as long as they remain situated in the private and domestic realm. This type of commissioning, categorizing and cross-referencing can be seen to function in what Homi Bhabha calls 'the grid of containment' (Bhabha: 1990, 208) in that it allows for representations only from pre-allocated positions. The wider political issues too often and too easily occluded from Video Nation's representation. The concern becomes the danger of losing the remarkable freshness and spontaneity of the

Video Nation that display the surrealism of the everyday that fascinated the Mass Observation movement that Video Nation affiliates itself to. Such as *Gone Fishing* by Nica Pritchard, http://www.bbc.co.uk/videonation/articles/u/uk_gonefishing.shtml A four minute short about a woman who teaches fly fishing to ethnic minority women in Swansea. Within this framework Nica Pritchard manages to address the lack of opportunities for young people in Wales, the necessity of emigrating to England, cultural identity, class, immigration and integration as her personal and autobiographical experience.

Other shorts present charmingly traditional interpretations of a more familiar British cultural identity familiar from the output of Ealing Studios, such as *Cop in a Frock* by Martin Ivef. www.bbc.co.uk/videonation/articles/k/kent_copinafrock.shtml Each year, the Thanet police, put on a pantomime to support the work of a local charity, last year it was a production to raise awareness and prevent the closure of the local orphanage. The two

minute short features a fragmented representation of the dressing routine of the pantomime dame, and finishes with a mother-in-law joke, referencing two of the staples of British comedy in a ‘good citizen’ narrative.

Certainly Video Nation texts display the same auto-ethnographic impulse present in both the self-selected Mass Observation diarists, and increasingly in new media sites where participatory projects are developing new first-person forms of anthropology. New forms of participatory projects utilizing media technologies like the “How We Are – Photographing Britain” exhibition that opened last week at Tate Britain, in conjunction with the photo-sharing site and online community Flickr offer new ways to examine the enactment of institutional power through representations. However, the existence of video-sharing technology also allows for, for now, a non-mediated site of representations produced outside of the reach of the institution challenge the flow of representations for, by and of ourselves. The impact of the technology has yet to be fully felt, but it is clearly a potential threat to the institutional control of the public sphere maintained by the news media.

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