

Navigating distant worlds: International development and social change in interactive web documentary

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Abstract

At present, INGOs, development agencies and media producers who attempt to engage audiences in issues of international development and social change operate in an increasingly saturated media environment, which is content rich but time poor. This leads to a search for innovative, web 2.0-native ways of presenting these often complex and challenging issues such as is interactive web documentary -a format that combines digital, interactive and social media with the documentary form. In this article I consider how interactive web documentary might affect audience engagement with issues of international development and social change via audience surveys and interviews based on two cases of *idocs*. Three modes of engagement appear to be enhanced by the format: active, emotional and critical engagement. Barriers to engagement -access, audience interest and tensions between discourses of gaming and issues of international development and social change- must be negotiated for the format to succeed in its aims.

Introduction

In recent years, small numbers of INGOs, newspapers and independent documentary producers have started to harness the tools of the Web 2.0 by blending stills, moving image, audio and 360 degree immersive virtual environments with social media, gaming and other interactive technologies to create interactive web documentaries.

Whilst some media practitioners and academics have begun to debate the potential of these interactive web documentary projects for communicating issues of international development and social change, some key elements of the discussion appear to have received little attention. How do audiences feel about interactive web documentary? What effect does the interactive format have upon the ways that they engage with the content? What are the benefits to audience engagement of using the interactive format? And what potential might this format hold for engaging audiences in issues of international development and social change?

In this article, based on my Master's thesis in Communication for Development, I address these questions with survey data from three 'audience' groups, semi-structured qualitative interviews and focus group discussions. Responses refer to two cases interactive web documentary that deal with issues of international development and social change.

Documentary 2.0: What is interactive web documentary?

Documentary film producers have arguably been at the forefront of a wave of new media experimentation in the Web 2.0 media environment (Kat Cizek, 2013), with documentary

content increasingly made available online or having some online media element - be that a website with further information, a campaign page, or social media links within the film. On the more progressive end of the spectrum, documentary filmmakers have spearheaded the convergence of digital, social and new media with the documentary format, to create the interactive web documentary (Gifreu, 2011). Interactive web documentary is a relatively young and thus under-theorized format, with scarce critical analysis having been carried out. It is also part of an extremely broad and rapidly evolving field, with advances in technology and new approaches emerging all the time. These two facts combined make defining and studying the genre particularly challenging (Gaudenzi 2012: 4).

A simple definition of what constitutes an interactive web documentary could be: any documentary that uses audience interactivity as its primary mechanism for delivering information (Galloway et al, 2007: 331). For further refinement, a comparative approach that states what interactive web documentary is *not* might be useful: interactive web documentary is *not* simply documentary hosted online, usually termed 'web documentary'. Interactive web documentary, whilst supported by online platforms, is ontologically different. Its key characteristics are: user participation, the subversion of linear narrative, the availability of multiple perspectives, immersion/simulation, and play.

Key characteristic I: User participation

Interactive web documentary makes specific demands of its audience that the traditional documentary does not. It transforms its audience into active users by demanding that they participate in some form of physical interactivity within the media text beyond the 'mental act of interpretation' of the content provided (Gaudenzi, 2012: 14). For example, the user must use the mouse and keyboard to click on and navigate a virtual setting, add content, pose or answer questions (Gifreu, 2011: 3).

But these qualities alone could still encompass certain forms of web documentary not strictly interactive. For example, Invisible Children's *Kony 2012* film launched online and required that its viewers click and share the documentary after viewing, i.e. a basic form of physical interaction. Whilst the film achieved global viral success through the harnessing of social media, the content itself takes the form of the traditional linear format. Simply hosted and distributed on the web, *Kony 2012* was not interactive in the true sense (O'Flynn, 2012).

Key characteristic II: Subverting linear narrative

Another significant element of interactive web documentary relates to non-linearity and user control. Most documentaries follow a standard linear narrative controlled by the filmmaker, which unfolds on the screen in front of the viewer. The viewer does not have a role to play in the unfolding of the narrative beyond the mental act of interpretation. In interactive web documentary, linearity is subverted to a varying extent (Gifreu, 2011). The viewer, turned user, is provided with a starting point and skeleton structure by the filmmaker within which to navigate. But there are various different ways the narrative can unfold, according to user choices. Content can only progress in response to input from the user (Gaudenzi, 2012; Gifreu, 2011; Galloway et al, 2007), who is empowered to choose not only what content they view but also in what order they view it (Carolyn Handler Miller, 2004: 345). In some examples of interactive web documentary, users are even able to contribute additional

content, creating new, organic narratives and perspectives that are beyond the control of the filmmaker.

Key characteristic III: Multiple perspectives

A side effect of the disruption of linearity is the creation of space for multiple perspectives to be communicated through the text. Some interactive web documentaries choose to emphasize this capacity in their structure, moving away from the singular authorial narrative traditionally associated with documentary, towards a more multi-layered representation of different issues, interests and perspectives (Gifreu, 2011). As Sandra Gaudenzi (2012: 36) explains, the subversion of linear narrative moves the interactive web documentary away from the singular authorial perspective and towards an affordance for the ‘creation of debate’.

Key characteristic IV: Immersion and simulation

A further characteristic is immersion or simulation, where users are immersed in the ‘reality’ represented in the documentary to a varying extent through the use of 360-degree stills, video and audio and even full 3D imaging, which create navigable landscapes. According to immersive journalism expert Nonny de la Peña, this approach is built not with the sole aim of *representing* the facts of a given situation, as is arguably the case with linear documentary, but rather to provide ‘the opportunity to *experience* “the facts”’ (de la Peña et al, 2010 in Gaudenzi, 2012: 44). The idea behind this is that audiences are given the opportunity to learn through first person experience, instead of gaining knowledge through a third person explanation.

Key characteristic V: Play

The immersive approach taken in many interactive web documentaries has led to the format often being likened to videogames. Indeed, many interactive web documentaries explicitly use aspects of the video game discourse to represent other worlds and engage audiences. Often known as docu-games, in these interactive web documentaries audiences are invited to ‘play’ within specific scenarios and thus learn through that process. Whilst video games are traditionally understood as a fictional, entertainment genre, the docu-game attempts to straddle fact and fiction, ‘striving ‘for ‘facticity’ or ‘documentarity’ in order to ‘expose players to events and places that would remain inaccessible to them otherwise’ (Raessens, 2006: 215). The strategy of employing gaming discourse suggests an attempt to engage through entertainment, giving the user ‘a sensation of deep immersion [that] stops their learning from being boring...’ (Gifreu, 2011: 10) Indeed, some argue that immersion in the reality of the interactive web documentary, while offering users all kinds of possibilities to participate, for example in making choices with moral implications, transforms play into ‘a meaningful, interactive experience’ (Raessens, 2006: 216).

Methodology

In order to investigate audience engagement with issues of international development and social change through interactive web documentary, I chose a mixed method approach. I carried out surveys, qualitative interviews and focus group discussions with three audience groups, covering school children, university students and adults between 17-76 years old. A

total of 96 surveys were completed in Norway, the United Kingdom and Sweden. These were supplemented by 10 one-to-one interviews and 4 focus group style discussions. The investigation was based on two cases. The first case was [The Awra Amba Experience](#), an idoc that gives audiences the opportunity to explore an egalitarian community in rural Ethiopia via 360 degree photography, films and visuals, as well as pose questions and discuss issues with the community and other users. The second case study was [Inside Disaster: Inside the Haiti Earthquake](#), based on the 2010 Haiti earthquake, which allowed users to experience the aftermath of the disaster either as a survivor, an NGO worker or a journalist. In order to establish a comprehensive critical framework for my research I carried out an extensive literature review.

Results & analysis

One of the challenges to engagement in issues of international development and social change within the Web 2.0 media environment is the perceived demand amongst audiences to be entertained rather than simply informed (Mouffe in Carpentier and Cammaerts, 2006: 968). The traditional linear documentary format has been characterized as too 'dry' or 'worthy' in its representation of the often-complex issues of international development and social change, thus causing a drop in audience engagement in these issues (Scott, 2011). Interactive web documentary on the other hand- in blending the trusted 'discourse of sobriety' (Nichols, 1991) for which documentary is known with interactive tools that are often associated with entertainment genres - could have the potential for changing the relationship of engagement with these issues.

Within my survey my first question investigated whether the interactive web documentary format as an abstract concept something that might make respondents feel more interested in engaging with issues of international development and social change in comparison to a linear format? Data was mixed in response to this question, with 58 respondents out of 96 claiming the ability to interact via clicking, sharing, chatting, navigating virtual environments etc., would make them *more* interested in engaging with content on issues of international development and social change in comparison to linear documentary. However, 32 respondents claimed it would not make a difference, whilst 6 respondents claimed that it would make them feel less interested. Respondents who did see a positive relationship between interactivity and engagement, appeared to focus on the entertainment value of interacting, with one respondent stating, *'when I interact I can learn in a fun way and not just watch something for an hour. It's more interesting that way.'*

When answers were cross-referenced with replies to questions directly related to the specific cases studied, respondents appeared to be significantly more positive about the interactive web documentary format and its relationship to their interest and engagement in the issues presented: 81% of the schools group and 88% of the adult group respondents claimed the interactive presentation of *Awra Amba* made them feel *more* engaged in the issues of international development and social change that it deals with. This discrepancy between responses to the general and case study specific questions suggests that interactivity as an abstract concept is not enough to guarantee audience interest - it is the specific ways in which interactivity is employed that determines this. It also warns against generalizing about interactivity and the interactive web documentary – the approaches taken can be diverse,

resulting in different experiences for different users and thus different experiences of engagement (Gaudenzi, 2012)².

In focus group discussions of *Awra Amba*, respondents in both the school and adult groups pointed to interactivity as being key to their engagement in the issues presented. One respondent claimed, *'My mind was more active with the interactive experience, it was harder to drift off so it kept me interested'* whilst others explained: *'Being able to do everything yourself, kind of makes you more interested. You decide what you want to do and go through different types of explanations (sic) so you understand the issues more. I think it's more interesting'*.

In the semi-structured interviews I probed respondents' claims to feeling more engaged, asking whether they were certain it was the interactive format that made them feel this as opposed to the content itself or the issues that were being presented. All respondents who claimed to feel more engaged point to the interactive format as being the key to their increased engagement. As one *Inside Disaster* respondent explained: *'...It was the interactivity for me. The interactivity makes you feel more active and so for me it made me want to carry on being active and look into it more. The linear documentary is very passive, although the documentaries can be great, to me they are pretty passive and don't build the regular agency so much. They can make you look into things further if it's quite a shocking or interesting subject but that takes a lot to make you actually go and do it. Of course it depends on the person but for me the interactivity gives you a boost to start to engage more, whatever the issue is.'*

'Active' engagement

A common theme identified in survey answers and focus group discussion was the sense of becoming *active* within the interactive web documentary experience. *'You change from being a passive consumer of information to being and feeling more active.'* What distinguishes interactive web documentary from traditional documentary is partly the demands made of the user for interaction with the content, which has led to a reconceptualizing of the audience as 'active users' empowered to act on and through these media texts (Gaudenzi, 2012; Carpentier, 2008). The notion of the active audience is in fact contentiously theorized, with some suggesting audience action could lead to civic participation (Dahlgren, 2007) whilst others, more sceptical about what levels of activity are really achieved, arguing that this 'activity' often does not reach beyond the boundaries of the text (Budarick, 2009: 258).

Indeed most respondents who answered positively about interactivity and engagement referred to being active as a key determinate of their engagement. When asked to explain how and why they felt more active, most of their answers were linked in some way to a sense of having both freedom and control.

From active to action

Arguably one of the primary aims of any form of *international development and social change communications* is to provoke some kind of response from its audience, expected to act in some way, be it through joining a campaign, direct activism, behaviour change, voluntary work, or most commonly donations. It is therefore interesting that some

respondents pointed to the sense of being an active user as a catalyst for carrying out action beyond their role within the interactive web documentary, e.g. finding out more about the issues dealt with, sharing the case study with others, or entering into discussion or debate. One respondent who interacted with the *Inside Disaster* case explained: *'It's easier to get active.... I would speak just about me, but I think interactive documentary makes me feel more active than a regular documentary – it made me want to carry on 'doing something'.'*

Describing the kinds of action they intended to take, it appeared that respondents' activity fell short of the 'political', in the sense that it did not appear to be linked to direct activism or contact with political institutions. Rather, their action was more focused on finding out more about the issues, donating to NGOs and related causes, and sharing and discussing content. The above-quoted respondent as stated: *'I will seek more information and definitely I felt like I wanted to try to get more involved even with certain elements of aid and voluntary work and I felt like I wanted to donate. But first it made me want to look more into it and research more...'*

Emotional engagement

One of the key elements and indeed hurdles inherent to communications on issues of international development and social change is the mediation of distance and the establishment of an emotional connection with the 'distant other' (Stone, 2002; Silverstone, 2007). Indeed, since the days of Aristotle it has been claimed that proximity has a direct relationship with people's willingness to help or feel empathy, such that we are more willing to aid or try to understand those to whom we feel 'close': 'Be it geographic, age, character, habits, or familial: you pity those you know' (Kennedy, 2009). It was therefore intriguing that 60 out of 81 respondents claimed that a unique aspect of *Awra Amba* was the fact they could 'feel closer to the people in Awra Amba' through their experience of the virtual environment. A number of respondents claimed, 'It feels like you're there' and 'it makes the world smaller'.

Mediating distance

Respondents who interacted with the *Inside Disaster* case study also spoke of the mediation of distance as being a key aspect of the interactive web documentary that impacted their engagement with the issues of international development and social change that were dealt with, *'It helps one feel closer to victims and understand the story from different angles.'* During focus group discussion of *Awra Amba*, respondents who claimed to have felt closer were asked to explain why feeling like they were there or closer to the subjects of the case studies was valuable to them. One respondent explained, *'by feeling like you are there you get a more personal relationship to the issues.'* Their colleague expanded upon this by stating: *'Yeh, it makes it more personal and I tend to care more if I feel closer and can see individuals instead of just thinking about them as a massive group that is far away. When I can interact like this, I become more aware of what I see and I get to know the persons (sic) better. It makes me feel more interested because I feel closer.'*

One of the perceived risks of using interactive web documentary and immersive environments to communicate issues of international development and social change is that users may mistakenly believe they have a complete understanding of the environment they are able to

explore, when in actual fact they remain distant observers (Smith, 2011; Scott, forthcoming). Interestingly, in the *Awra Amba* groups 93% of respondents expressed a desire to ‘find out more about the community’ after being introduced to the case study. Indeed respondents’ qualitative responses in this regard revealed a sense of having had an introduction to, rather than a full experience of, the community and the issues that affect their lives through the virtual environment. One respondent explained: *‘I want to know more...I feel close to these people now even though they are far away, I feel like I know a bit more about their lives than normal so it makes me want to find out even more. I’m interested now so I want to know more.’*

Another respondent from the schools survey group revealed: *‘Now that I have seen Awra Amba and feel like I have been able to explore it a bit, I want to see it properly, for real. It was very different to how I imagined a village in Ethiopia but I still don’t know the whole of it. That makes me want to go there for real and see it with my own eyes.’*

These responses suggest that, despite feeling a shortening of distance through the interactive web documentary, respondents remained aware of the mediating role of the format, seeing it as a way of getting an introductory view of another part of the world, rather than buying into any false promise of it being a first-hand experience.

Responsibility

Respondents for both cases identified a link between the mediation of distance and an increased sense of responsibility. An *Awra Amba* respondent explained: *‘You feel more responsible when you have gotten so close to the people.’* One of the *Inside Disaster* respondents pointed to the immersive nature of the case as key to invoking a sense of responsibility and emotional connection that could be read as linked to a cosmopolitan or transnational idea of the imagined global citizenry (Nash, 2008: 168; Anderson, 1996; Kyriakidou, 2009) and a broader concept of engagement ‘with the world’ through participation: *‘It gives you a sense of satisfaction to be involved and the fact that you are deliberately made to participate. It makes you be more responsible or think more responsibly because you are connected to the situation – you are seeing how different actions you choose has an effect on the outcome of the situation in Haiti. You know, everyone likes that feeling of being included in something, appreciated and involved so I think that is what this feeds into....So you feel you are a global citizen in this way, it makes you connect and it makes you a bit more responsible about things that happen globally. It makes you feel closer to the situation and so it is harder to ignore. It diminishes the distance of ‘Oh, over there something has happened’, no, no, no, I’m here and I’m going through this process and I’m experiencing it in my way. So it diminishes the distance that is often described when talking about how we view these things.’*

This response can be read to suggest that for some users this immersive experience could overcome the perceived ‘anaesthetizing’ effect of the television or computer screen outlined by Chouliaraki (2006:25) in terms of traditional documentary, allowing the ‘distant other’ to be conceived of in more emotionally connected terms.

Critical engagement

Respondents across both studies and all groups identified a sense of critical engagement with the issues of international development and social change within their interactive experience, although it was the *Inside Disaster* case study groups that spoke in most detail about this aspect. According to one respondent, *'[Inside Disaster] makes you think more of the other ways of doing things and the critical options.'*

Becoming a critical thinker

Ten out of fifteen *Inside Disaster* respondents directly referred to the notion of criticism or thinking critically as a positive aspect of their engagement with the issues of humanitarian disaster relief that were dealt with. One respondent stated, *'Thinking about what I would actually do in that situation was helpful. And I suppose the fact it's something that it forces you to think about...if you were the typical person just passively watching a documentary, you wouldn't necessarily think critically that much. Inside Disaster forces you to think critically.'*

Here, the aspect of immersion in *Inside Disaster* is identified as important to encouraging -or in the respondent's words, forcing- users to become critical thinkers, which is arguably an important part of understanding the often complex socio-political issues of international development and social change.

One respondent made the comparison between linear documentary and the interactive web documentary in their description of this critical element, *'I think definitely, in linear documentary, you don't have to think necessarily, you just have to receive and then it is up to you whether you think about the issues in more depth. Whereas with Inside Disaster, you definitely have to put a little more effort in, you have to become a form of critical thinker in order to navigate the different paths so that is a benefit right there.'*

Discussion and dialogue

A key aspect of this sense of critical engagement that was discussed by respondents within the *Awra Amba* group was linked to the opportunities available for discussion or dialogue, not only with other users but with the subjects of the documentary itself. The opportunity for discussion and debate could be said to make steps towards achieving the types of civic engagement that traditional documentary on issues of international development and social change issues has often strived for – by harnessing the power of the Internet to create 'an immediate dialogue and exchange with and between a global audience via Web 2.0 platforms' (O'Flynn, 2012).

When asked whether *Awra Amba* made respondents feel more inclined to discuss the issues dealt with, they all said that they felt interactivity led to more opportunities for discussion. During the focus group discussion, one respondent explained: *'Because you are already online you can talk to other people to get their opinion, it's harder to do that with a normal film or documentary. Discussing and debating is a good way to think about the things you are seeing.'*

Respondents from both groups were enthusiastic about the potential for discussion with the people they saw in *Awra Amba*. One respondent stated: *'It would be really good to be able to ask questions and speak to the people we have seen about what we have learned. You can't do that normally. That would be really cool and make the world feel smaller.'*

Respondents within the *Inside Disaster* group also brought up the opportunity to discuss or debate what they had seen as being a desirable aspect of the interactive experience. As one respondent put it: *'That's like the ultimate interaction, for people to ask a question and actually get an answer. I think that could be the main area where the potential [of interactive documentary] lies – in helping you have conversations with the people you are watching and who live so far away.'*

Critical thinking, dialogue and the public sphere

Couldry argues that by increasing the numbers of people who can potentially contribute to discussions of socio-political issues, such as those in the two case studies, this in turn could lead to more people having access 'to the public sphere, enabling, in principle, quite a radical revision of both of Habermas' accounts (the earlier pessimistic and the later, more optimistic accounts) of the public sphere' (ibid, 2008: 22). Indeed, in providing a 'virtual space' online, the interactive web documentary could be said to offer an arena where 'physically dispersed citizens...deliberate amongst themselves, so enhancing public connection within and across communities' (Dahlgren, 2003).

This idea, which could perhaps be read in the above-mentioned data regarding debate and discussion, was more directly alluded to by one respondent who made reference to something akin to the public sphere when they spoke of the benefits of being able to discuss and debate the issues they experienced within the interactive web documentary: *'Creating a space where you can directly pose questions and debate and interact, without the mediation of a camera – so posing questions and getting answers somehow would be where interactive documentary has an opportunity to improve the way audiences engage with complex issues of development and social change.'*

Another respondent made the link between dialogue with the *Awra Amba* community and the ability to gain multiple perspectives, using these to critique and debate what is shown: *'Being able to speak to the people involved would be awesome. Because it's one thing to see a documentary with a filmmaker's idea of how things are, picking some images etc. But you can check the truth when you are speaking to people and also see their impressions of the situation, not just listening to what one person thinks about the situation of others but actually being able to hear people's perspectives related to their situation. That would be great.'*

Multiple perspectives

The act of simulation through immersion that is central to many interactive web documentaries has been said to present a powerful means of experiencing 'multiple realities that belong to parts of society that might not always be in dialogue with each other' (Gaudenzi, 2012: 246).

When asked to identify qualities within *Awra Amba* that were particularly useful to their understanding and engagement with the issues of international development and social change that were dealt with, 68 respondents claimed that by presenting issues in different ‘huts’ that contained different media content around each issue, the issues were easier to understand and different perspectives were made available. Indeed, 83% of respondents identified being able to get ‘different points of view’ as a key quality of the *Awra Amba* case study. One respondent explained: *‘Often you have to learn the whole topic to understand different facts and you can’t really do that with a normal film, it would be so long. But with Awra Amba it gives you them in different ways so that in the end you can see more’*.

Similarly, a common feature of the *Inside Disaster* experience identified by respondents was the presentation of multiple perspectives on issues of humanitarian disaster, relief and aid. 14 out of 15 respondents claimed that the multiple perspectives that could be found in *Inside Disaster* made the complexities of humanitarian relief ‘easier’ to understand than via a linear approach, whilst 13 respondents claimed *Inside Disaster* made these issues ‘clearer’. However, one respondent who stated that the complexities were easier to understand stated that the format was at the same time ‘less clear’ than a linear approach due to the ‘jumping back and forth’ of the interactive structure.

One respondent described how this feature was key to allowing the complexities of these issues to be communicated more clearly: *‘Being presented with alternative options and things like that was a really good way of allowing me to understand the complexities of the situation, better than if I was just seeing one view or route. You know, that is something that a traditional documentary wouldn’t offer’*

Another respondent spoke of getting a bigger picture view through different perspectives which in turn was positively connected to their interest in the subject: *‘It’s interesting to be able to navigate through different kind of experiences because normally what you see is just one slice of the situation but this way, you get to see more views of the same things. So it’s interesting to see more than just....to see the broader picture rather than just one idea.’*

These positive reflections on the multiple perspectives afforded by the interactive format serve to support the hopes of academics such as Denis Kennedy, who have pointed to Internet supported communications as having the potential to provide multidimensional portrayals of development issues (Kennedy, 2009).

Negative effects upon engagement

There are naturally some reservations, particularly within the field of development studies, over the use of interactive web documentary to communicate the complex and politically laden issues of international development and social change. It is thus important to analyze the negative effects upon engagement that were identified by respondents across both case studies.

High expectations of interactivity

Whilst the sense of being active was connected to a positive feeling of engagement for the majority of respondents, a small number pointed to the case studies restricting their

opportunities for action, which in turn frustrated their engagement. A respondent to the *Inside Disaster* survey claimed: *'I guess Inside Disaster made me feel a bit restricted in that there were defined routes and paths and options I could take and normally on the Internet I am used to being able to explore infinite options.'*

This point speaks to the fact that whilst the interactive web documentary might employ the Web 2.0 interactive tools that are said to transform audiences into active users, this comes with an inherent level of expectation for what that experience will allow audiences to do. As Galloway et al (2007: 330) explain, 'Part of the problem with interactive television and film is that audience expectations are high. The very notion...raises the bar, creating in the viewer the sense that they will be presented with televisual or filmic quality images over which they will have full and complete freedom of control...'. When these expectations are not met, audiences can become disillusioned and even frustrated with the content.

Non-linearity and disruption

One of the negative issues identified by a small number (5) of the *Awra Amba* respondents was in fact linked to the non-linear approach taken to the presentation of the content. One adult respondent explained, *'It is easier to concentrate and get into the themes, emotionally, in a conventional movie without interruption'* For this respondent the interruption experienced through consuming content in a non-linear way actually led to emotionally disconnect from the issues that were dealt with.

One respondent who claimed the interactive web documentary format would make them less interested in engaging with issues of international development and social change explained: *'I enjoy more to just view a movie and afterwards think of what I learned and what I didn't understood (sic)...Sometimes it can be more comforting by not having to interact with the documentary, instead you can just see a film and do nothing but listen and watch.'* This response implies that the demand for direct participation can in fact present a barrier to engagement: for some, it could require too much effort. Indeed, when it comes to documentary, audiences are used to fulfilling a more passive, interpretative role, and for some the demand for participation could be too disruptive of this established audience logic (Gaudenzi, 2012).

Another negative issue highlighted by an *Awra Amba* respondent was the issue of time. This respondent argued *'exploring is too time consuming'* claiming that this would make them less inclined to engage with the issues presented, *'I don't have time, if I want to sit and watch a film I will make time because I can relax, this feels like way more work.'*

Access

A respondent *Awra Amba* made an interesting point that speaks to the issue of Internet access. The 78 year old respondent stated, *'This doesn't appeal to me at all because I don't use the Internet.'* Indeed, it is important to acknowledge that some will not have the opportunity to engage at all if they do not have access to the Internet. Whilst the numbers of those who have Internet access are rising all the time, the fact remains that just 35.2% of the world population has access (Internet World Stats, 2013)³ and indeed it is predominantly elites that engage and interact within the online media sphere (Dahlgren, 2007). Thus the online nature of the

interactive web documentary as well as the demands for, albeit quite basic, online skills could be said to alienate some users, which in turn problematizes the impression that the format provides an open access platform for international debate. Whilst the fact that it is presented online does significantly increase the numbers of people who can access it in comparison to a film that is offline, as well as the geographical reach of the content, there are important audiences, including those living in rural Ethiopia and Haiti for example (the locations of the two case studies) who will not necessarily have the Internet access or language or literacy levels to become involved in any form of discussion or debate. The Awra Amba project attempts to overcome this by providing translation into multiple languages, but the fact still remains that whilst the reach of this content is certainly wide, the political and social constraints of the offline world still restrict access for many (Pieterse, 2009).

The dangers of simulation and play

The potential for entering into uncomfortable relations of power, where the empowered user may gain the sense that they understand the life and experience of the ‘distant other’ that is represented by ‘playing’ within a fictional, albeit based on fact, virtual environment, has been highlighted earlier as a danger inherent to simulation and play in the context of international development and social change. Indeed in the virtual environment the user has the freedom to leave at any moment – a luxury that is not afforded to those whose lived experience the interactive web documentary is supposed to represent (Chouliaraki 2006: 25; Fenyoe, 2010 in Smith, 2011: 7). Whilst seemingly more ‘real’ than other forms of mediation this environment is still mediated, and so fails to communicate certain elements of reality, such as ‘the smell that comes from lack of sanitation or the true reality of having to walk miles to get any water’ (Watkins, 2010).

Whilst the majority of respondents identified the immersive, gaming element of *Inside Disaster* as having a positive effect upon their engagement, by encouraging critical thinking and exposing multiple perspectives, one respondent viewed it more negatively, arguably speaking to the above criticism. They claimed that the experience of immersion in fact made them feel more distant: *‘I think I still felt, even though there’s this interactive component, with people talking to you on the screen what that actually did was it made it feel even more distant...because I realise I’m not there, I’m not actually a journalist or a survivor or an aid worker and so I can’t really totally appreciate the whole experience as it would be. I still very much feel like an outsider and I think it was maybe even more pronounced through the fact that it was trying to bring me in. You know, through the act of pretending.’*

This response also touches on the argument that in the employment of the fictional tools and ‘visual language’ commonly associated with video games (Watkins, 2010), interactive web documentaries like *Inside Disaster* could in fact serve to fictionalize the lives and experiences of those being observed and at worst perhaps ‘fetishize suffering or exoticise the other’ (Kennedy, 2009) rather than encouraging engagement with the issues portrayed.

Another of the perceived dangers of using ‘play’ or immersion to engage audiences in the politically complex issues of international development and social change is that the entertainment element of interactive web documentary could end up superseding the documentary value of the content (Raessens, 2007: 223), oversimplifying these issues. A respondent independently highlighted this drawback: *‘The gaming nature displays it as*

though there is always going to be a "right" or "wrong" choice, until you "win." That feels oversimplified to me.' Interestingly, this respondent took a somewhat more reflexive view later in their qualitative interview, reflecting upon the academic literature they had been studying and the influence this might have had upon their initial response: 'I don't know, maybe I was too critical because I'm studying these issues so I'm aware of that stuff....I think maybe I'm coming at it from that critical academic angle. Maybe if I hadn't studied that stuff I wouldn't be so aware of the politics of distance and would feel closer...'

Conclusion

Within this research, I set out to uncover the ways in which interactive web documentary might affect engagement with issues of international development and social change, through surveys, interviews and group discussion based on two case studies. The implicit initial assumption was that the interactive format might present new and potentially interesting opportunities for engaging audiences in these issues, which are often viewed as 'boring' or 'difficult'; by blending aspects of entertainment, through interactive tech, with the authority of the documentary format; making use of immersive technology to allow audiences to have virtual 'experiences' and using the networked Web 2.0 to enable engagement 'with the world' through discussion and debate.

I identified three modes of engagement in issues of international development and social change amongst respondents: active, emotional and critical engagement. Within these modes, different qualities of interactive web documentary were also identified and linked back to engagement. The *mediation of distance* through immersion was identified as key to allowing respondents to establish closer *emotional* connections with the otherwise distant characters and issues that were dealt with in the respective case studies. This emotional connection was in turn linked to a perceived sense of cosmopolitan responsibility and connection (Nash, 2008; Kyriakidou, 2009) whereby audiences claimed to 'care more' and 'feel closer' to the issues and people portrayed than they would otherwise.

'*Being active*' within the interactive web documentary was also connected to an increased willingness to act on the issues dealt with, although the level and nature of that action appeared to be restricted to sharing and 'finding out more'. This could on the one hand be due to alternative options for action, such as signing petitions etc., not being explicitly presented in these case study examples or on the other hand illustrate Evgeny Morozov's critique of online activism, as being limited and often politically ineffectual (Morozov, 2013).

The promotion of *critical thinking*, through *discussion and debate* and the representation of *multiple perspectives*, was similarly uncovered as being a valued element of the interactive web documentary format, allowing respondents to engage with 'the bigger picture' and gain a 'clearer' understanding of the issues of international development and social change that were dealt with. The opportunity afforded to participate in more traditional forms of communication on a global scale, to discuss, to debate and to deliberate across national borders and with 'distant others' was also identified by the majority of respondents as being the most valuable aspect of engagement afforded by the format – even being referred to as 'the ultimate interaction'. The expression of a willingness or desire to engage in debate and discussion on issues of international development and social change could be said to indicate a potential role for the format in facilitating a form of Habermasian online public sphere

where socio-political issues are negotiated and contested (Couldry, 2008). However, because my research did not allow me to directly monitor research participants, I am unable to assess whether genuine discussion and debate would occur in this space and can only point to a potential opportunity and enthusiasm amongst my respondents for this form of global civic engagement ‘with the world’.

My findings indicate that the interactive web documentary, through the various Web 2.0 and interactive characteristics outlined earlier could enable audiences to enjoy the active, emotional and critical modes of engagement in issues of international development and social change, arguably more difficult to achieve through other mediums. That said, there are a number of limitations that emerged Access, the willingness to interact in the first place, and the ethical and political issues connected to the processes of simulation and play – such as power asymmetries, observer/observed relations and trivialization - are all issues that need to be taken seriously and carefully considered in approaches to interactive web documentary. My research merely scratched the surface of this relatively under-theorized field and there are a number of different avenues that could be pursued in future research. Each of the three modes of engagement identified within this article could indeed be researched independently and in more depth, particularly emotional engagement and the notion of cosmopolitan responsibility.

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² It is worth noting that the comparative element, between interactive web documentary and linear formats, of the first more general line of questioning, could perhaps have negatively affected respondents' answers. Analysis of data indicates that respondents were often uncomfortable when explicitly asked to make direct comparisons between linear and interactive web documentary in terms of which one was more effective at engaging them. As one respondent put it, 'I'm not sure you can compare them like that, they are really different and I think both are good in different ways for different things.' However, respondents often made their own comparisons between the formats within their answers, without prompting. Another issue could perhaps be that there was no direct example for respondents to compare to. If time and resources had allowed I would have carried out a control group with a linear documentary in order to investigate this comparison further. Unfortunately in this study I was unable to organize this with enough time.

³ See <http://www.internetworldstats.com/list2.htm>