DOCUMENTARY MAKING

For Digital Humanists

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19. Post-Production Workflow

It is probably not too much of an exaggeration to say that documentaries are truly created during the post-production process. Of course, that could be said about most dramas as well, but documentaries are a particularly reactive type of film. Of all genres, they are most likely to be shot without the benefit of a script or pre-defined schema. Where a script does exist, the nature of the interviews captured, or the events documented, may well require the original structure, premise, or intellectual position be revised. Indeed, you must be open to change, minor or radical, throughout the production process. To be sure, it is entirely possible to construct a documentary film around a tight script which differs little from the final product, but even in those cases, the post-production process creates opportunities to change, innovate upon, or improve the original vision for the film.

The editing process presents filmmakers with a litany of possibilities. There is no one version of any single film, no inevitable final form that a production must take. The individual components of the documentary — contextual footage, interviews, animated sequences, voice-overs, connective tissue, soundscapes, music, and so on — can be combined in a practically infinite number of ways.[1] The same footage can be stacked, cut, juxtaposed, and remixed in such a mind-boggling variety of ways that the sheer number of possibilities can threaten to overwhelm you. At the start of the post-production process, then, you should take some time away from their footage. Moving straight from production to post-production (from shooting to editing) leaves little opportunity to recharge. In addition, some distance from your material will allow you to (re)appraise it from a fresh perspective.[2]

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1   Sheila Curran Bernard, *Documentary Storytelling: Creative Non-Fiction on Screen. Fourth Edition* (New York: Focal Press, 2016), pp. 189–232.
2   Murch, *In the Blink of an Eye*, pp. 5–22.

Returning to your raw material, refreshed and reinvigorated, will allow you more easily to imagine the viewing experience you can create. To facilitate that process, you should ask yourself the following questions:

- What is the story (narrative structure) I want to tell?

- What is the most important story I can tell?

- What is the most important intellectual idea I can share?

- What are the key themes or ideas that my film needs to identify?

Working through these questions should help you to enter the post-production phase with a set of clear ideas and objectives. The answers to these questions may also highlight conflicting ideas that need to be resolved before your film can be constructed. Consider the subtle difference implied by the first two questions. Recognising and responding to this can be a challenge. But it can also be intellectually freeing and invigorating.

By the time you reach the editing phase in the production cycle, you will have likely been immersed in the creation of this work for weeks, if not months or years. Realising that an original concept may need to be revised or even abandoned may prove difficult, requiring you to excise significant amounts of prior work. If, however, you are able to recognise that there is a more compelling story to tell, or a deeper intellectual inquiry that can be made, it will almost certainly make for a superior final product.[3]

The second, third, and fourth questions are meant to encourage you to think about the ideas and themes that the post-production process can help you to realise. Are your preferred themes and ideas compatible with your initial vision; are the answers to those individual questions compatible with one another; have they changed over the process of your production? If, for instance, you find that the intellectual idea, your thesis, is no longer compatible with the narrative you believe your film should tell, it is likely that you will need to revise the intellectual basis of your work. This, in turn, will require you to revisit your film's structure and the key turning points faced by your audience and/or protagonist.

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3   Sam Billinge, *The Practical Guide to Documentary Editing: Techniques for TV and Film* (New York: Routledge, 2017), pp. 190–97.

 Nothing about your film is final until post-production is complete and your film is released.[4] You are not subject to your initial line of intellectual inquiry; as a result, you should be prepared for the possibility of further change and revision as the editing process proceeds. Remain flexible, in other words. Allow yourself to react to your footage. The following post-production workflow will allow you to work through the potentially daunting task ahead of you in a logical manner. Review your footage (all of it).

1. (Re)Consider your audience's relationship to the film.

2. Plan (or re-plan) a working structure for your film.

3. Begin creating a rough cut.

4. Step back from what you have produced.

5. Critically review the rough cut and reassess. If necessary, return to step two. Cut and replace those sections that do not work and preserve those that do. This process may involve a significant revision of your work. Once you have a rough cut that satisfies your intellectual criteria, proceed to the next step.

6. Begin refining your rough cut, paying attention to the timing and rhythm of the film.

7. Add polish to your film — colour-grade your footage, add music, adjust volume levels, add titles.

8. Step back from what you have produced.

9. Critically review your fine cut and reassess. If necessary, return to step seven and revise as necessary.

This ten-step process will help you to turn your raw, unedited footage into the best version of your film. Huge amounts of work and creativity will be involved in this process, probably at least as much as went into shooting and conceptualising your film. As a result, you should not be afraid to take your time in post-production. You should also be prepared for disappointment. There is every chance that sections of your film will not appeal to test audiences, requiring further work and revision.[5] This

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4   Murch, *In the Blink of an Eye*, pp. 10–14.
5   Murch, *In the Blink of an Eye*, pp. 52–56; Hampe, *Making Documentary Films and Reality Videos*, pp. 307–08.

is, of course, all part of the process. Build disappointment (and the need to revise your work) into your expectations of what the post-production process will entail. Now, consider the post-production workflow in detail.

Review your Footage

Following the end of production, you need to acquire a firm grasp of all the footage you captured. You will be unaware of some of the successful (though unintentional) material that you captured, whilst some footage for which you had high hopes might, upon review, turn out to be unusable. It is, therefore, necessary for you to review every piece of footage you collected, taking detailed notes about what each video file contains. Unusable footage should be labelled as such, but notes should be taken as to why the footage is not usable — as the editing process commences, an 'unusable' shot may prove to have some use, albeit in an unexpected way. Every interview should be watched, from start to finish. Again, copious notes should be taken and, where possible, sections that directly speak to the main themes and ideas of your film should be carefully annotated.

Reviewing footage can be a tedious affair, often proving to be one of the least enjoyable aspects of the process, but it must be done fastidiously. The raw footage you captured represents the building blocks from which you will fashion your larger structure. Having an intimate knowledge of the footage you captured will allow you to begin envisioning the different forms your finished film might take.

(Re)Consider your Audience's Relationship to the Film

In many respects, discussions about structure are really discussions about how one might fashion a relationship between your film and your audience. As such, this stage in the post-production process should see you refining how you previously envisioned your project's structure.

Will your audience serve as the protagonist in a participatory experience (see chapter twenty-one); or will a more conventional on-screen protagonist or narrator be utilised instead?

Having reviewed your footage you may well find that your original plans are no longer suitable. Does the footage of your on-screen guide work as you envisioned it? If not, you may need to cut that idea and replace it with something else. By replacing an on-screen guide, however, the tone of your film — and the audience's relationship to it — may change substantially. This is something you will need to deal with in the next step of the process.

Plan a Working-Structure for your Film

Having reviewed your footage and considered the type of relationship you wish your audience to form with your piece, work can commence on the creation of a structure around which you will construct your film's rough cut; this is the point when your film will start to take on a meaningful shape. Until this part of the process, your documentary has been little more than an abstract, a collection of unconnected pieces of footage which could be assembled in any number combinations — a thoroughly theoretical proposition. When a structure is settled upon, something that resembles a film will begin to emerge from these building blocks.

When we started to assemble *Looking for Charlie*, we mapped out our working structure on three sheets of paper, each one representing an act of the film. With post-it notes and stills from our raw footage we then began to plot out a rough timeline, imagining the succession of sequences and ideas that our film would explore. At this early stage in the process, it was easy to over-stuff some sections whilst under-serving others. Post-it notes are easily amassed, and a design that appears to work on paper will not necessarily work when the editing process actually commences. Some sections will become dense and confusing whilst other will suffer from pacing issues and will require heavy revision. Still, this process allowed us to crystallise prior ideas whilst still experimenting with the different forms that the final piece could take.

The initial structure that you design should serve as a blueprint for your film — but be prepared to alter it, perhaps significantly, if the editing process demonstrates that parts of your plan are unsound. You must prepare yourself ahead of time to respond to your film as it begins to take shape. When some aspect of its emerging form does not work, do

not be afraid to consider radical revisions. It can be difficult to set aside material that took significant effort and resources to film, but if it serves to create a more cohesive final product, such cuts or alterations should be embraced.

Begin Creating a Rough Cut

A 'rough cut' is the first draft of your film. During this process, the emphasis is not upon creating a releasable version of your film, but a version that is intellectually or emotionally competent. It is unlikely your rough cut will resemble a finished product, but it should at least be watchable to the filmmakers, if not to any outsiders. The creation of a rough cut should not see filmmakers overly concerned with precise matters of timing, of getting their edits exactly right. Nor should they be concerned with creating a cinematic look or feel through colour-grading and the precise organisation of music, and so on. Instead, they should focus upon the assembly process, of ordering shots and sequences to create a coherent narrative or an effective intellectual exploration of the subject at hand.

Raw footage should be combined with the other basic elements of the film. If a voice-over will be used, a working, rough commentary track should be recorded and added. You might record several versions of your voice-over — one deadpan, one conversational, and so on. Where necessary, sound from external sources (such as a lavaliere microphone and sound recorder) should be synced up with the appropriate footage. Complicated shots, which do not yet exist in a finished form — for example, an animation — should be represented by 'place holders'. These are typically simple blank screens with literal descriptions of the shots that will replace them. Some music, depending upon the importance it will play in the film, may be added to the rough cut. Final music selections (and timing) will be established at a later point in the process.

Despite being unwatchable to outsiders, the rough cut should provide the filmmaker with a reasonable idea of how their project, as it is currently designed, will turn out.

Step Back

By the time a finished rough cut is created, the likelihood is that you will have lost much of your objectivity — you will be so intimately connected to the material you have collected, and the rough cut that you have created, that you may find it almost impossible to assess it dispassionately. At this stage, therefore, you should consider taking a break from the process. Just as it is necessary to distance yourself from the project following the production phase, so too should the creation of a rough cut prompt another break. Only after you have been able to untangle yourself from the work will you be able to review the rough cut in a critical manner.

Critically Review and Reassess

Once you have gained some distance from your rough cut, you should arrange a private screening. To the extent that you are able, you should try to create an atmosphere that will allow you to appreciate the film as your intended audience will consume it. A projector would be ideal, but a large television in comfortable surroundings would also suffice. By moving away from the computer monitor on which the editing has been carried out, you will create a new contextual viewing experience which should allow you to achieve some degree of separation (and thus objectivity).

The screening of the rough cut should, as much as possible, occur organically; which is to say that you should avoid taking a significant number of notes as you watch it. Whilst there will no doubt be much to consider, all of that can wait for a second screening. In the first instance, you should attempt to keep this first screening as pure as possible. Most audience members will not be taking notes when they watch your film, so you should avoid this too. Instead, aim to open yourself up, as much as you can, to an organic viewing experience. Following this first review, the necessary post-mortem can begin.

Post-Mortem

Depending on how complex your project is, there will be much to analyse in your rough cut. It is not unusual for filmmakers to be deeply disappointed by the initial assembly of their material. Ideas that seemed to work perfectly on paper, or in the field, may not come together as expected. Finding yourself in such a situation, know that you are in good company.[6] Whatever issues you identify, they are likely to be surmountable challenges that the application of some imagination can repurpose into more effective sequences. If you find yourself uncertain, you should consider showing select moments from your work to trusted outsiders. They should be able to offer feedback on what does or does not work about a given sequence. If you find that you receive positive feedback about a section of your work that you find unsatisfying, it is likely that the issue is with the structure of your film — the sequence works, but not in context. Knowing this, you can reconsider and reappraise this aspect of your project and feed this perspective into the next edit.

Following this initial reappraisal, you should develop solutions to the issues you have identified. Are there problems with your narrative, or long sections that fail to engage? If so, consider new ways of presenting those aspects and implement them into a new rough cut of your film. Again, take some time away from your material and then reappraise it in another private screening. Repeat this process until you believe that you have a functional cut that is ready to be turned into a complete film.

Refine Your Rough Cut

Reviewing your rough cut should provide you with a clear sense of how your film is progressing and, in particular, its emerging strengths and weaknesses. When you are satisfied that it offers a solid foundation upon which you can build, you must then begin the process of refining it. This part of the process will produce a version of your work that will start to approach releasable quality. During the refinement process, you should pay particular attention to the timing and feel of your film. Shots

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6   Empire of Dreams. Directed by Kevin Burns and Edith Becker. Los Angeles: 20th Century Fox, 2004.

or sequences that go on for too long, or are cut too abruptly, should be adjusted appropriately. All of your edits should be finalised so that the final pace of your film is realised.

Temporary music tracks should be swapped out for the music you intend to use, and working commentary tracks should be replaced with polished recordings. In addition to this, you should colour-grade your production, adding the final level of visual polish which will give your film a cinematic feel.

Step Back, Review Your Fine Cut and Reassess

You should now replicate the screening experience that you organised for your rough cut. Again, take some time away from the project in order to revisit the material with as much objectivity as possible. As you will be reviewing a near-final version of your film, you may wish to screen it with trusted friends or advisers. Naturally, however, they will be biased in your favour and keen to support you. Producing anonymised questionnaires to be completed after your screening may help to gather the type of critical notes from third-party viewers that you require.

Once you have screened your near-final cut, critically reassess its strengths and weaknesses and, if necessary, rework it to bring out the former whilst eliminating the latter. Add any final polish necessary to complete your project, including titles, any final editing decisions, and so forth. By this point, your production should now be complete.

Reflections

Throughout the post-production process, you should expect to be disappointed by your work as new cuts of your film emerge. This is completely normal and you should not unduly criticise yourself if your piece takes time to realise in the edit. You should also expect to be impressed with at least some of material you created. Post-production can be a time of significant highs and depressing lows.

You must also prepare yourself to solicit feedback and to respond appropriately. If you show a third party a rough cut, understand that they will not be able to fill in the blanks as easily as you. They will likely not understand the purpose of a rough cut and may, for instance, struggle

to move past a lack of music, clumsy cuts, or poor editorial timing. Consequently, you should avoid screening rough cuts and instead solicit feedback only for material that is closer to completion. Criticism of your work can be difficult to process, particularly if you have invested significant time and resources into a project, but it is not the fault of your viewer if they do not enjoy what you have produced. Instead create a forum in which they can deliver honest, constructive feedback (such as through a questionnaire) which is directed and focused enough to help you as you continue the post-production process.

   If you are prepared for the involved nature of post-production, you will be best positioned to take advantage of the many opportunities it offers you to realise the best possible form of your project.