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**SOCIAL MEDIA AND DOCUMENTARY
PHOTOGRAPHY**

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AKADEMIE MÚZICKÝCH UMĚNÍ V PRAZE
FILMOVÁ A TELEVIZNÍ FAKULTA

Fotografie

BAKALÁŘSKÉ PRÁCE

**SOCIÁLNÍ MÉDIA A DOKUMENTÁRNÍ
FOTOGRAFIE**

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Declaration

I declare that I have prepared my Bachelor's Thesis/Master's Thesis, Dissertation independently on the following topic:

SOCIAL MEDIA AND DOCUMENTARY PHOTOGRAPHY

under the expert guidance of my thesis advisor and with the use of the cited literature and sources.

Prague, date:

Signature of the candidate

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Klíčová slova

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Abstract

In recent decades, one can observe a crisis in documentary photography with a spreading distrust regarding the truth claim and indexicality of photography and major skepticism about its ability to depict reality with relative objectivity. In response several attempts have been made, in both theory and practice, to resolve or overcome such a crisis. One of these attempts is Mette Sandbye's introduction of her conception - New Mixtures. This conception describes a new form of documentary that goes beyond the traditional approaches and is more socially and politically engaged by utilizing various genres and mediums. In this essay, I will attempt to depict that this idea has been developing in practice with the simultaneous growth of technology and social media documentary. Using case studies this paper will attempt to portray how, by combining these two developments together, the resulting method could provide us with a new form of documentary that relies on using any available resource, medium and genre available to document an event in a holistic, neutral way.

Abstrakt

V posledních desetiletích můžeme pozorovat krizi dokumentární fotografie, kdy se šíří nedůvěra k pravdivosti a indexovosti fotografie a velká skepse k její schopnosti relativně objektivně zobrazovat realitu. V reakci na to bylo učiněno několik teoretických i praktických pokusů o řešení nebo překonání této krize. Jedním z těchto pokusů je představení koncepce Mette Sandbyeové - Nové směsi. Tato koncepce popisuje novou formu dokumentu, která přesahuje tradiční přístupy a je více sociálně a politicky angažovaná díky využití různých žánrů a médií. V této eseji se pokusím zobrazit, že se tato koncepce v praxi rozvíjí se současným rozvojem technologie a dokumentárního filmu na sociálních sítích. Na základě případových studií se tento článek pokusí vylíčit, jak by nám kombinací těchto dvou vývojových trendů dohromady mohla výsledná metoda poskytnout novou formu dokumentárního filmu, která se opírá o využití všech dostupných zdrojů, médií a žánrů, jež jsou k dispozici, k celostnímu a neutrálnímu zdokumentování události.

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INTRODUCTION

When a bomb explodes in Beirut, the first photos and videos of the incident are from the bystanders recording on their phone. When a senate hearing takes place journalists live tweet every instance as it occurs. When a Black Lives Matter protest breaks out, it is documented through tiktoks and Instagram stories before any photographer can release their photos. Even mainstream news media has now begun to rely on media they first saw posted on the internet. A viral internet video of a father teaching his daughter to make a game out of the bombs being dropped in his neighbourhood in Syria gives us a better insight into their lives than any photo or documentary film ever could.

We are rapidly approaching a new era in terms of documentary and journalism wherein social media is playing a bigger and more important role in terms of reaching people. By allowing people to use the full extent of all the resources available on social media platforms, we can experience an event across the world through various forms and mediums and get a more comprehensive understanding of these issues. It also allows them to expand the horizons of what is accepted as documentary evidence.

Today, we find ourselves at a remarkable point in the evolution of documentary and in the midst of an ever-expanding form that is a culmination of decades of theoretical debate and deliberation of practical implications. We find ourselves already surrounded by what I go on to describe as social media documentary. A method of documentary that manages to consider most obstacles of the postmodernist idea of photography and its relationship to reality by relying on a self-reflexive, multimedia, democratic process of documentation.

There has been a considerable amount of deliberation on the indexicality of photography and its ability to represent the world accurately. Subsequently, the documentary abilities of photography have been questioned from many theoretical angles over the years. As with any field, the contemplation of these theoretical ideas has reflected in modifications in documentary practices. However, it is only when we frame these transformations next to the evolution of social media technology and use, in order to compare them parallelly, do we come across the contemporary and

pertinent conception of social media documentary that has come to dominate the public space.

It is this very practice that I attempt to expand on through this text.

In order to do so, I review early texts on the modernist ideas on photography and its perception as evidence or a “mirror into the world”. I consider the faith in the application of photography in different fields and how it came to garner absolute trust as fact.

I proceed to trace this belief and follow it to a theoretical shift. I then demonstrate different considerations of documentary and how we’ve come to categorize and utilize them over the years. I then progress to elucidate on the current practices of documentation and the conception of Mette Sandbye’s New Mixtures.

Once considered, I relate these changes to the changes in social media - how it is used, what it achieves and what it has the potential to achieve.

I depict how this new technique that Sandbye has claimed for documentary photography has also simultaneously developed in social media in order to document events, both political and cultural, significant and insignificant.

Considered altogether one can infer a transition that has very quickly become widespread. A transition to social media documentary. It is this very notion that I attempt to elaborate on in this paper.

EARLY CONCEPTIONS OF TRUTH

The ability to reflect nature as it is created and it is treated as nothing short of miraculous. Exclamations are made about its potential use for science, art, business; extending the human abilities of observation – all based in a firm belief in photography as authentic and reliable fact. It is celebrated as a tool of observation ranging from advancements in scientific fields to tourism to archival purposes. As Schwartz states:

“But photography was also used, not so much to generate rigorous scientific data... but rather, more generally, as an enhanced form of visual note taking, a tool of observation, and an accurate and reliable means of documentation. A marvel of optics and chemistry, a ‘mirror’ of nature, and a ‘window’ on the world, the photograph was absorbed into engagement with physical and human reality and into the diffusion of knowledge. It was a way of communicating empirical facts – ‘brutal facts’ – in visual, purportedly unmediated form across space and time. Photographic witnessing became a substitute for eye witnessing.”¹

There is a firm and absolute belief in photography as the whole truth. It is treated as fact – as in what it reflects is above all else true and nothing less.

“Photographs are not second-hand reports; they are brutal facts.”²

It is even suggested that photography may be above direct observation by the human eye. That somehow by observing through a photograph the viewer may get a deeper, truer and more complete understanding of the subject.³

It is treated as a true record of all things and an unbiased witness with no hindrance in depicting or recording reality. It is supposedly a mirror image of reality and things as we observe them, with their actual real state and appearances as they are known and seen.⁴

This confidence is propagated by theorists across various fields. Applauding the capabilities of photographs to observe things small and big and deepen scientific understanding. It is celebrated for its anthropological advancements by acting as a surrogate for people to witness entire countries, cultures and people from the comfort

of their homes. It is regarded highly as a method to record and categorize reality accurately, serving as the perfect archival machine for both evidence and memories. There is a certain fascination with the ability of the photograph to mirror life itself and to see the truth without any cultural, political or technological barriers.

This fascination translates into the role that photography begins to play in society and how we rely on its veracity. From scientific photographs to journalism to evidence, we depend on photographs to be able to document and objectively present the scene unfolding before us or that had already taken place. People had absolute faith in this technology that would ostensibly replicate reality as it was seen by the human eye.

A CHANGE IN PERCEPTION

However, time and again there have been incidents suggesting that photography can be utilized to distort reality and falsify facts as they were presented. It is difficult to maintain the same trust in the accuracy of a photograph if such clear examples, even by institutions and sources reputed for their accuracy and truth-telling journalism, exist. With every incident the fear of whether what we're seeing is actually the truth or a distorted version of reality sets in and a certain level of skepticism, more in some people than others, arises, putting photography under scrutiny.

As decades and discussions advance, questions arise about the representational accuracy of the photograph. An anti-aesthetic, postmodernist view takes a contrasting position to a previously celebrated medium and emphasizes on questions of transfiguration of reality by photography.⁵ Photography is accused of "beautification" of the world and its limitations in documenting the social, political and economic intersections of the circumstances behind the photograph by only offering a two-dimensional surface appearance focused on visual pleasure of an otherwise complex and interdisciplinary environment.⁶

We are introduced to the questions of human intervention and the possibility that even when selecting, framing and shooting the picture there is a bias of the photographer who is photographing what he *believes* to be the accurate depiction of truth, that may not be universal. It is argued that we are groomed by our cultures and the way we perceive and process information and images is dependent on the same. Even if we attempt to remove the physical factors of alteration like cropping, adjusting lighting, fixing scratches or removing blemishes or the overwhelming power of digital manipulation to even recreate a photograph, the bias of the photographer and his own perceptions and beliefs, and how they affect the entire process of selecting and choosing the scene, lens, and subject and finally shooting the photograph, will always be a barrier to depicting the "absolute reality".⁷

We are also forced to confront power structures and the systemic cultural hierarchical systems that may determine the context and implications of certain specific photographs and be used as a tool of surveillance and control rather than observation.⁸

As Joel Snyder claimed: “A photograph shows us ‘what we would have seen’ at a certain moment in time, from a certain vantage point if we kept our head immobile and closed one eye and if we saw with the equivalent of a 150-mm or 24-mm lens and if we saw things in Agfacolor or in Tri-X developed in D-76 and printed on Kodabromide #3 paper.”⁹

Furthermore with the advent of digitization in the 1990s, questions arise about the ease of manipulation with which photographs can be altered. The shift from analog to digital brings about an omnipresent suspicion. In analog, the image is created by the transformation of light sensitive emulsion on photographic negatives caused by the object reflecting light into the camera lens. Digital images, however, are created by encoding data about light and the object into a matrix of numbers and information. This brings up the issue of how we can store and transfer digital images and how this would allow us to manipulate these images with ease, a luxury not afforded by traditional photographs that are, though not impossible, but much harder to alter.¹⁰

We experience a diminishing quality of the real, intimately linked to technology and in particular to technologies of image reproduction that allow us to create a reality in the absence of it.¹¹

As we move forward and look deeper into the mistrust of the photograph, it is easy to observe that the questions of authenticity, indexicality, accuracy and the dismissal of objective truth under the added insecurity of photographic manipulation we were naturally faced with a crisis in documentary photography.

This crisis can be attributed to a number of reasons. The technological advances that allowed us to manipulate and recreate realities, twist social narrative and reduce the trust in the originality of the photograph clearly didn't help the increasing shadow of doubt cast on the practice however it had only accelerated what was already a consequence of a growing environment of uncertainty and cynicism about the real and objective truth. The precariousness of representation of the truth and the rapidly advancing technological methods that make it easier than ever to recreate even non-existent realities is a common factor in the shared consensus by a number of theorists about the disintegration of the reliability of documentary.

This “cultural logic of postmodernism” is effectively weakening historicity and the loss of grand narration present in modernity that allowed for representation of political issues regarding social and economic classes is acutely felt.¹²

CHANGES IN DOCUMENTARY

Along with these developments, it is important to contrast the evolution in documentary forms. American theorist Bill Nichols categorizes six different forms of what he refers to as “documentary modes” in his book “Introduction to Documentary”. He organizes a flow chart showing their chronological appearance in practice along with their basic traits and characteristics.¹³

As the diagram goes, 1920s saw the prevalence of poetic documentary mode – a lack of rhetoric and narrative content that serves to focus on subjective interpretations to create a mood or environment that emphasizes associations over rhetorical content by utilizing “temporal patterns and spatial juxtapositions” – followed by expository documentary mode – focused on narration and visual footage to accompany the same, it emphasizes informational content and “evidentiary editing” – that takes a sharp turn away from the aesthetic based methods of the poetic mode.

The 1960s saw the rise of objective documentary mode – instead of leaning towards subjective or narrative importance, allows the audience to simply observe and reach whatever conclusions they may infer accompanied by no music, narration or interaction and pure fly-on-the-wall observation that seems like a first-hand experience – followed by the participatory documentary mode – where the filmmaker does interact with the subjects instead of merely observing them and makes it clear that the meaning is provided by the collaboration between the filmmaker and the subject.

In the 1980s, he identifies the precedence of the reflexive documentary mode – demystifies the filmmaking process, involves aiding the audience in understanding the construction of the film and critiques on other forms of documentary – followed by performative documentary mode – stressed subjective performances in the context of objective issues allowing for unique perspectives.

While it may be tempting to adhere to such a clear outline of the evolution of documentary so neatly categorized, it is important to pay attention to the note-worthy critique by Toni de Bromhead. She stresses that emotional responses and understanding are central and critical to documentary storytelling and celebrates subjective points of view and expression of opinions and does not shy away from

creative influence. She attempts to move away from the questions of objectivity and truth and focuses instead on the “relationship to the represented” understanding that documentary can never really be truly objective and its claim to the real is mediated by the filmmaker. She presents her own contrasting views of cinematic qualities of documentary.¹⁴

Linear Mode which is centered around the character and follows a linear three-act structure of conflict and resolution providing a chronological arc in the storytelling events.

Discursive mode which prioritizes information, logic and facts mostly used for political, social documentaries based around current affairs.

Episodic mode which juxtaposes multiple situations and episodes with no relation to the narrative but often based around a central theme or concept.

Poetic mode which avoids a traditional route of a narrative or storyline by focusing on audio visual combinations to adhere to a poetry-like framework.

Hybrid mode which allows the structuring of the narrative to take place by following the linear passing of time or traveling of a journey.

While these categorizations, discussions and arguments are important and even relevant today it is important to note that this repeated criticism of the idea of any truth in the climate of rejection of any form of documentary as a narrator of the truth is leading us speedily into a spiral of rejecting reality.

CRISIS IN DOCUMENTARY TO NEW DOCUMENTARY

As documentary photography began to lose its truth claim and indexicality supplemented by an ongoing general crisis in documentary photography that stemmed from the general suspicion of objective representation, mass production and distribution of media at a breakneck pace and an increasing spread of “post-truth” politics, one can observe a perceived death of facts and a “collapse of reality” whereby all statements, true or false, are cloaked in doubt.¹⁴

“The aide said that guys like me were ‘in what we call the reality-based community,’ which he defined as people who ‘believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality.’ I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. ‘That’s not the way the world really works anymore,’ he continued. ‘We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality -- judiciously, as you will -- we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.’”¹⁶

In 2004, a senior white house advisor to President George W. Bush, widely speculated to be Karl Rove, spoke to Ron Suskind for an article for The New York Times, introducing the term “reality-based community” – a community of people who study circumstances and facts as they are and form conclusions about a shared reality. However, as the quote above implies, the assumption that we can construct any form of objective truth has so far been widely contested especially in the context of documentary. In response to these allegations, theorists and practitioners have attempted to come up with different approaches in order to avoid a “collapse of reality”.

Linda Williams explains this brilliantly in her book “Mirrors Without Memories: Truth, History, and the New Documentary”. She talks about this very self-reflexive crisis in documentary claiming that “what was once ‘a mirror with a memory’ can now only reflect another mirror. She comments on that because there was so much reliance on the camera’s ability to reflect object truth, with the loss of this trust people may be propelled into a nihilistic rejection of absolute truths.

In an effort to illustrate this idea of the “postmodern hall of mirrors”, she seems to simultaneously commend and condemn Oliver Stone’s cinematic reconstruction of the JFK assassination.¹⁷ He creates a narrative of a paranoid conspiracy that acts as a countermyth to the official version provided by the Warren Commission but with little hard evidence to back it up. She lauds his accomplishment of interfering with the public perception of the official truth of the investigation and shines a light on his awareness of the impact of images on knowledge and the negativity and nihilism that led him to believe that he can in fact interfere in the process of construction of truth.

She then begins to describe the “new documentary” within the paradox of intrusive manipulation involved in documentation while aiming to uncover ultimate truths. Using Errol Morris’ *Thin Blue Line*¹⁸ as an example of this kind of approach, she discusses the personal and self-reflexive aspects of the film. Morris includes expressionistic reenactments of different witnesses’ versions of the murder demonstrating that subjects’ perspectives are not necessarily consistent as much as they are contrasting narratives, which are important to be constructed and staged appropriately by the documentarian. The film ends up being instrumental in exonerating the wrongfully accused man on whom the movie is based. Willaims notes that it is Morris’ abandonment of the need for purely observational objectivity that actually aids in the production of the truth.

*“Truth exists for Morris because lies exist; if lies are to be exposed, truths must be strategically deployed against them. His strategy in the pursuit of this relative, hierarchized, and contingent truth is thus to find guilty those speakers whom he draws most deeply into the explorations of their past.”*¹⁹

She writes that this very self-reflexive quality and the desire to not reveal the ultimate truth, but frame competing truths and combine them as master narratives to make sense of events can be observed in the new documentary. These reconstructions of subjective points of view providing different truths understand that truth is not absolute and complete objectivity may not have been achieved but there exist some kind of partial truths that can keep us from oscillating between idealistic faith and cynical denial.

NEW MIXTURES

It is these very qualities observed by Linda Williams that Mette Sandbye embraces in her proposal of a new documentary approach – “New Mixtures”.

“New Mixtures” is an article written by Mette Sandbye, a renowned academician and professor of photography studies at University of Copenhagen, for *photographies*, a journal examining the developments in the history and theory of photography with relation to contemporary culture in the context of technological, economic, political and cultural change. This article was published in 2018 and is an insightful piece on a new kind of art-documentary that moves away from the “politics of representation” and instead engages with a more self-reflective, ethical and positive approach to documentary.

In the beginning of her article, Sandbye talks about a crisis in documentary photography that can be attributed to “the politics of representation”, a growing doubt on the truth claim of photography and criticisms about creativity and objectivity. In response to this crisis, both in theory and in practice, Mette Sandbye observes a similar shift in the approach to documentary photography where she talks about a new form of documentation that uses a large scale of complex combinations made of a variety of materials, technology, formats, genres and forms of expression.

In this particular article, she expands on her previous works studying digital revolution and its impact on photography, family photo albums, archiving, and the indexicality of photography to introduce “New Mixtures”, a new form of documentary that goes beyond the traditional approaches and is more socially and politically engaged.

She starts by explaining the conventional approach of delineating between different genres of documentary and art photography, that has persisted in practice from the early years of the institutionalization of photography. In the past decade or so, she observes, there has been a fusion or what she calls “a welcome blurring” of the line between politics and aesthetic. This “happy marriage of content and concept” has resulted in a self-reflexive form of documentary that is aware of its own limits and possibilities and utilizes various genres and mediums to achieve its potential to

document and mediate between the personal and political where sensitive topics like war, migration and suffering have become the focus.

This new kind of documentary is what she refers to as “New Mixtures”:

“By the term “new mixtures” I mean works that mix hitherto separated photographic forms and formats: conceptual photography, family photos, cell phone photos, reportage, landscape, portraiture in one work, and which sometimes even mix photographic practices and agents in variations of participatory strategies, thus embracing the whole spectrum of agency and emotion related to various photographic forms and materialities.”²⁰

To exemplify this lack of fundamental distinction between documentary and realism she primarily presents two Scandinavian photographers as typical examples of this method – Swedish-Danish photographer Kent Klich, who completed a trilogy of photography books on contemporary Gaza and the conflict (or war) between Israel and Gaza: *Gaza Photo Album* (2009), *Killing Time* (2013), and *Black Friday* (2015) and Danish photographer Tina Enghoff who followed various groups of undocumented African immigrants in Copenhagen for her project “Migrant Documents” (2011–2012, published in book form in 2013).

In his book-works, Kent Klich uses the whole spectrum of forms of photographic representation as well as photographic materialities: classical black and white reportage, large-format landscape color photography, appropriated family photographs, private videos taken on mobile phones and stills from these videos. He also includes aerial photography and maps as well as reports and factual material collected from Amnesty International and the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, with which he collaborated on the projects.

By combining these various sources Klich uses a progressive new way of documentary that works along a large scale of complex combinations made of a variety of materials, technology, formats, genres and forms of expression that strike the right balance of personal and political, of emotion and facts, and allow him to capture the full spectrum of the struggles and sufferings of the people.

Sandbye observes that the many photographers limit themselves to either reportage, documentary, large-format color art photography, political activism or conceptual art while Klich argues “Why not combine them all?” which is exactly what allows photography to be the perfect medium for representing such fraught issues as war, immigration, racism, and political or religious conflicts, not because of its contested indexicality and iconicity, but rather because it allows for more varied and intricate ways of representing than any other medium.

She observes the same approach in the works of Tina Enghoff, who in her project “Migrant Documents” includes series of photographs such as portraits of immigrants

seen from behind in large colour formats, black and white close-up photographs of the few belongings of one particular group of undocumented immigrants from Ghana, grainy black and white screengrabs from a surveillance video of three snowy, January nights in the same park, set up by Tina Enghoff herself, extreme close-ups of blood tests in test tubes from the Health Clinic for Undocumented Migrants, and a series of colour photographs of a closet with blankets and ground pads where each blanket becomes an index, indicating that a person had used it the night before and placed it in the closet the next morning.

Enghoff also carried out participatory workshops, in which she provided the immigrants with instant cameras and asked them to photograph the Copenhagen they wanted to depict on a postcard where the photographs that ended up being produced were similar to those taken by a tourist indicating a very positive and curious outlook towards the country and their relation to it.

We are only ever allowed to see the immigrants as unidentifiable figures in pictures taken from behind, grainy screen grabs from surveillance footage whose existence and experiences are documented with the photographs of their belongings, temporary housing situations and forensic looking evidence provided by the blood samples. Like Klich, Sandbye observes, Enghoff also uses a whole spectrum of mediums, materials, and expressions to try to tell the stories of the subjects from their eyes but also including different perspectives to fully utilize the language of photography while acknowledging its constraints and potential.

She briefly explains the background behind this new tendency, attributing it mainly to three important changes. First, she refers to the general crisis in reportage photography in news media that is struggling under the pressures of the fast paced nature of mass media that populates TV screens, the internet, as well as the overcast of doubt caused by the fear of digital manipulation. She also considers an increase in “compassion fatigue” among people that has prompted photographers to turn to new forms of photography techniques that try to use different ways to appeal to the target audience.

Second, the “new mixtures”, similar to the “conceptual documentaries”, have been received as a welcoming presence in the art world, including by exhibiting institutions and publishing houses that follows the trajectory of a general turn in the art world that seeks to be more politically and socially engaged following the post-9/11, post-financial crisis era, inciting the art world to embrace more global issues like war, migration, climate change, etc.

Third, she perceives a general longing for the slow and primitive form of still photography in an expeditious world where vast amounts of photographic information is produced and disseminated rapidly. There is a need for such a strategy that she notes has been observed by others like “forensic photography” by Paul Lowe, and “aftermath”, “late photography” by David Company, “slow journalism” by Fred Ritchin

or other related strategies like “archival” or “atlas strategies”, as articulated by Sven Spieker and Georges Didi-Huberman and more, that provide a space for reflection and slow, thorough consideration after the fact.

She argues that along with these there have been theoretical developments in which the social, emotional and relational aspects of photography have been accentuated and become the central focus, taking the place of discourse, ideology and power. Affect, emotions and feelings are now central to the social and political and not just seen as something subjective and private. There is less of an emphasis on what a photograph is and rather it is on what a photograph does.

SOCIAL MEDIA DOCUMENTARY: CASE STUDIES

This technique is observed even beyond political events and for day to day or cultural occasions. People make videos and take photos of their experiences with other attendees who do the same from their phone allowing a third person who is viewing multiple sources and materials to be able to gain a broader insight into the occurrence. People regularly post cell phone footage, write blogs, post twitter updates, upload vlogs, live streams, use portraiture, landscape and reportage photography, upload short videos accompanied by text and all of this allows for real time documentation of not just events but general circumstances without following the traditional rules of documentary photography. This kind of thorough documentation on social media has developed simultaneously with the theoretical turn that Sandbye talks about in her article.

During a 2020 survey, more than 70 percent of respondents from Kenya, South Africa, Chile, Bulgaria, Greece, and Argentina stated that they used social media as a source of news.²¹ Such statistics give us an insight into the relevance and importance of social media as a source and how one can fully utilize it to tell stories. Similar to web docs, this concept of social media documentary expands the traditional form of using websites to display documentary projects and instead uses the full range of tools available on digital platforms.

Over the past few years with the rampant development of technology, especially in the context of social media and particularly in terms of instant stories or live streaming, there has been a globalization of social issues and an accelerated utilization of social media for social and political change using digital storytelling.²² This digital storytelling allows us to view multiple perspectives, sources, materials, mediums and forms to gain a more comprehensive understanding of an experience.

GEORGE FLOYD

On May 25th, 2020, as Darnella Frazier was walking towards a convenience store with her 9 year old cousin to get some snacks, she came across an arrest taking place where she saw a man on the ground and a cop kneeling down on his neck. Terrified and scared for his safety, she takes her phone and presses record. She

creates a 9 minute 29 second video of the arrest that consists mostly of George Floyd being suffocated by Derek Chauvin, pleading for his life and crying out that he can't breathe, and shares it on social media.²³ Subsequently, further sentimental details about George Floyd's life are released on social media and the details of the arrest are circulated online. The video, along with additional cell phone footage by other bystanders, specific details and witness accounts, sparked nationwide protests and riots in the United States that resulted in multiple arrests, vast property damage and major consequences, which were further documented and shared by the attendees using various social media tools.

The video's claim to authenticity is reaffirmed by The New York Times using this video along with CCTV footage, bodycam footage of the police officers and official police documents to reconstruct the series of events as they took place²⁴ and almost a year later, the same video becoming the "star witness for the prosecution" in convicting Derek Chauvin of murder.²⁵ Darnella's use of the digital space and social media to document the incident resulted in active social and political action wherein various sources, mediums and approaches were used to piece together the truth both in a journalistic, legal and social context.

The video by Darnella Frazier became the starting point of mass protests both on the streets and on the internet across the globe. It empowered the Black Lives Matter movement and inspired intense emotional responses from people all over the world.

If not for this piece of evidence, the official police statement would have claimed the following:

"Two officers arrived and located the suspect, a male believed to be in his 40s, in his car. He was ordered to step from his car. After he got out, he physically resisted officers. Officers were able to get the suspect into handcuffs and noted he appeared to be suffering medical distress. Officers called for an ambulance. He was transported to Hennepin County Medical Center by ambulance where he died a short time later," the statement read.

"At no time were weapons of any type used by anyone involved in this incident," the statement read.²⁶

This statement implies no fault of the police officers present during the arrest and actively encourages a point of view that supports the actions of Derek Chauvin, claiming that everything was done according to policy and within the bounds of the law. Along with other sources, the video provided a counter narrative and helped to create the true picture of incidents as they took place.²⁷ Such innovative uses of social media and phone cameras have allowed emerging activists and everyday people to be able to document not only their daily lives but also areas of political and social significance.

BBC AFRICA EYE: KHARTOUM MASSACRE

An interesting example of mainstream news media taking advantage of this kind of instant reporting is a mini documentary film by BBC Africa Eye about the Khartoum Massacre.²⁸ On 3rd June, 2019, Sudanese security forces cracked down on a major protest camp outside the military's headquarters in the capital, Khartoum. While there is difficulty in the estimation of the number of deaths, it is believed that over a 100 people were killed in the terrible encounter.

BBC Africa Eye created a timeline starting from before the attack, during the attack and the aftermath and a more holistic understanding of the massacre by using an approach similar to that noted by Sandbye. Primarily, they used live streams by three different witnesses. They grouped the live streams with a map where they traced the location and movement of the people who recorded them and consequently also the rest of the crowd. They displayed tweets posted by people updating the news in real time along with personal messages sent to them on twitter. They also used official videos of the leader of the RSF, or Rapid Support Forces – Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo also known as “Hemetti” - speaking to a crowd about the crackdown and denying the involvement of the RSF and immediately following the same with voice actors narrating audio recordings of an RSF Lieutenant and Captain admitting their involvement as per orders from “the top” thereby juxtaposing two separate positions of the same incident.

All of these sources were interspersed with regular cell phone footage by people who recorded bodies of the injured or dead being carried away, people being beaten by the security forces and people crying and mourning. For some of these, BBC Africa Eye also marked the location of where they believe these videos might have been filmed by using the visual cues present in the footage. These videos also included the victims talking about their experiences and who they felt was responsible.

This horrible episode was recounted by BBC Africa Eye by using a variety of sources, mediums and methods but it is important to note how not only was most of their primary material collected from social media but also how most of that material had already existed on the internet, allowing people to learn and be updated about the incident, before the documentary was ever made.

INDIA: FARMER'S PROTEST

Such examples have become very common especially when it comes to protests. A noteworthy example of a photographer and activist employing all possible resources to do the same is Vibhu Grover. When the ongoing farmer's protest in India started in August 2020, Grover, an independent photojournalist, embedded himself with the protestors and documented everything that was occurring using multiple mediums. He took photographs of the farmers who were part of the protests both as portraiture, conceptual and reportage photos. He also used instagram stories to post updates about the movement of the protestors, the electricity and water being cut off, and

police attacking and arresting the people present at the event. He also used Instagram live to live stream certain incidents that took place like police raiding news organizations and from outside police stations while waiting for the protestors and journalists arrested to be released. The farmers at the protest themselves made videos of themselves and took photos of the atmosphere and posted it on social media.

In fact, social media became a battleground between supporters of the ruling party as well as members of the government and those in support of the farmer's movement including high profile celebrities. With attempts to deface the farmers and disband the protest, the farmers decided to come up with their own strategy. Recognizing the power of digital storytelling in sharing stories from on the ground, farmers protesting against the three farm laws on the borders of Delhi decided to use social media to tell the truth amid news of the borders being vacated. One of the leaders of the movement, Jagtar Singh Bajwa, told IANS²⁹:

"We are not angry with the media but with a section of the media which is constantly spreading fake news."

"We have asked the sons of the farmers to train the farmers to use social media platforms. After that, we will post the things related to agriculture and tell the truth about the protest site to everyone."

"We have made this strategy after the recent news about the borders being vacated. Our fight is not only about the farm laws now, we also have to fight against those who are trying to weaken the movement," he added.

His contempt for the narratives being pushed by the media is clear but what is important to note is the understanding of social media as a capable tool to not only document the truth but also present credible evidence against what he believes to be attempts to weaken the movement by traditional media.

CAPITAL RIOTS IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

Another popular situation where posts and data from social media was used as a tool to grasp the circumstances was the Capitol Riots on 6th of January, 2021, in the United States. As propaganda against the legitimacy of the presidential election was amplified by right wing media and officials, a rally hosted by President Donald Trump escalated into an agitation that involved large numbers of people breaking into the US Capitol.³⁰ The weeks following the riots involved the FBI tracking down the people who illegally broke into the building and arresting them.

Reportedly, along with CCTV footage, cell phone service records, and other tactics, they used social media to track down these people. Most notably, the FBI posted over 300 images on their website seeking public help in tracking down the rioters involved in the Capitol siege, relying on social media to be able to accurately present

them with their identities.³¹ In fact, an Instagram account dedicated solely to the identification and arrest of the perpetrators of this siege, from crowdsourced and publicly available information, gained a significant amount of followers.³² Many of these rioters brazenly posted status updates, photos, videos, texts and live streams of themselves declaring their presence at the Capitol which were then in turn used against them in court.³³

Interestingly, dating platforms also turned out to be instrumental in tracking them down. Robert Chapman, of Carmel, New York, was arrested April 22 after he matched with a woman on the dating app Bumble that he was part of the group to "storm the Capitol" during the January 6th riot. "I did storm the Capitol and made it all the way to Statuary Hall,". She reported him to authorities by sharing a screenshot of her Bumble conversation with him, according to the complaint. The FBI then proceeded to verify this claim by looking at surveillance footage and identifying an individual that appeared to be Chapman. They also used posts from what they believed to be Chapman's Facebook profile that read: "I'M F***** INSIDE THE CRAPITOL [sic]!!!" He further posted a photo of himself posing in front of a statue in the Capitol Rotunda. Chapman was charged with trespassing and disorderly conduct on restricted government property for his alleged role in the Capitol siege.

In fact, social media posts show that many people deliberately used dating apps to catfish rioters by changing their preference to "conservative", looking for those present at the Capitol, screenshotting the conversations that could indict them and submitting them on the Instagram page Overheard DC, who posted 25 submissions involving these dating profiles and also encouraged the people who submitted them to also turn it over to the FBI.³⁴ Across all these mediums texts, portraits, landscapes, surveillance footage, body cam footage, screenshots, live streams, vlogs, etc. were all utilized to piece together information both on news broadcasts and by law enforcement which is a credit to the indexicality of these materials that were mostly sourced from social media.

Even currently, as the coronavirus pandemic rages across India, multiple people have been posting videos of people begging and crying outside hospitals, putting up stories and tweets about available resources, posting obituaries on social media, making vlogs about the dangers and symptoms of the virus and the vaccine.³⁵ Both the general population and photojournalists alike have been taking portraits of the victims and landscape photos of the crematorium grounds that have incited an emotional response from people and governments all over the world inspiring them to take major political actions like dedicating resources for vaccination and considering a waiver for the patent for the vaccines.

As we see crises unfolding one after the other, even news organizations have also started to rely on photos and videos of a variety of genres and subjects posted on social media as authentic documentation of events, like the fire at Notre Dame, the explosions in Beirut, the Israeli airstrikes in East Jerusalem among others.

Even today, as we see the war in Ukraine wage on we are exposed to a global response over social media including first-hand accounts of victims, soldiers and all others involved, information via organizations and institutions, resource links from the viewers and much more.

There's already mass amounts of information and documentation from witnesses and victims that have garnered the attention of the global audience quite virally. Only a handful of journalists have been able to enter and stay in Ukraine in order to report on the rapidly evolving state of affairs. Even as the Russian government aggressively questions the legibility of the verified information being posted on various platforms, the dreadful glimpses into life in Ukraine at the moment has rallied support from around the world, aiding them in this informational war.

Anastasiya Magerramova, a press secretary for the Okhmatdyt pediatric hospital in Kyiv, and a handful of colleagues have documented the civilians pouring in with injuries. They are sleeping in the hospital and working around the clock, phones and cameras at the ready. They post the images on Instagram, Facebook, and Telegram with detailed descriptions of what happened to those shown in the pictures.

"I feel that my job is important, it is also like a weapon," she said. "I want to show the people the consequences of this war: poor children with shrapnel in their legs, their arms, in their heads. It's not OK, it shouldn't be like this."

The hospital's social media accounts have become a running documentation of the civilian toll, showing — often in excruciating detail — the suffering of those caught up in the war.³⁶

Ms. Magerramova posted a photo on social media of Olga, who had used her body to shield her baby from shelling. The father was also injured. This photo instantly went viral around the world, picked up by the government, Ukrainian news media, by activists, and later, international outlets.

A good example of what I'm trying to propose in this essay is Promote Ukraine, a non-governmental media hub started in 2014 by Marta Barandiy. With the escalation of the Russian invasion, Promote Ukraine began expanding its online presence to become a deep communication platform for unheard Ukrainian voices so the victims, both in Ukraine and in other countries having found refuge, can tell their stories.³⁷

As the events unfold and mainstream news is unable to find the necessary access to the center of this conflict, we rely on a variety of media - photos (both in posts and temporary stories), videos (on stories, as posts and as reels or tiktoks), live streams, facebook posts like status updates, tweets on twitter

There have been previous examples of this kind of documentation on online platforms. What is probably one of the earliest successful examples is 18 Days of Egypt. An online sharing platform that was started in 2011 by journalist Jigar Mehta and developer Yasmin Elayat who collaborated to create a crowdsourcing hub that would allow the people experiencing the events themselves to post on the site and for visitors to be able to jump from stream to stream and perspective to perspective.³⁸

Personally, I also decided to build a website where people would be able to access materials posted on social media regarding an event from Twitter. For the same, I decided to use the Farmers Protest in India as a case study. What drew me to this particular event is the deep importance given to social media where many significant exchanges took place including with Greta Thunberg, Rihanna and other famous figures. Material posted about this protest was even considered important enough to arrest activists over and to ban certain accounts from releasing that information.

Moreover, the farmers' explicit distrust of mainstream news media and utilization of social media as a tool to tell their own story made this particular event perfect as a starting point.

I spent over 3 months researching everything about the protests and spent about 2 months learning how to code in order to build this website. I acted as a curator and went through hundreds of thousands of tweets in order to select the most relevant and most influential posts. I arranged these posts in collections and created a timeline that would allow people to access posts from a particular period of time from the protests. Learning how to code the website and sorting through the tweets was probably the hardest but most rewarding part of the project as it allowed me to culminate the concept of citizen journalism manifested in digital form. I came across photos of children at protests, people posting their selfies from protests, making videos at the protest, posting their opinions about the same, adding updates live from the protests. I especially included tweets from important political figures like the president of the opposition and heads of the farmer unions.

I never attended any of the protests but personally felt like I had got a unique experience of what was going on in India during those incidents all through material I found on Twitter. But none of the examples or the case study above can truly replicate the immediacy, accessibility, popularity, participation rate and versatility of the existing social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, Tiktok, Snapchat and Twitter, etc.

ANALYSIS AND DRAWBACKS

However, as with any practice, we must not ignore the drawbacks. Sandbye specifies reasons for the conception of New Mixtures. She discusses the general crisis in documentary photography like the struggle to keep up under the fast paced nature of TV and mass media and the audience's need for a kind of slow primitive form of documentary. But this temporality of mass media and the rapid pace of distribution she talks about is also a very prominent aspect of social media and everything uploaded on it. An Instagram or Snapchat story once uploaded only lasts for 24 hours after which all proof of it disappears apart from the user's personal archive that only they have access to. An image or tweet is posted, circulated and then lost in the sea of millions others uploaded everyday. More often than not a live stream is only available for its duration and not after the fact. This often allows important issues to fall into the same small lifecycle of a "trend".

Second, along with the general shadow of doubt cast over these works because of the ever present fear of digital manipulation there are also questions of objectivity that have to be seriously taken into consideration whenever it comes to documentary photography. Sandbye claims that new mixtures take account of the limits and possibilities of photography and subsequently create more ethical and socially conscious works. This kind of thorough consideration into the theoretical aspect of the materials posted on social media do not go through such an analysis and every documentation is extremely subjective, reported from a purely personal experience. Not to mention the rampant digital manipulation that takes place for almost everything posted on social media.

Third, Sandbye talks about a kind of "compassion fatigue", a concept famously explored by Susan Sontag³⁹, that follows viewers witnessing excessive visuals of death, destruction or general distress that make the audience insensitive to the tragedies. With the advent of social media technologies and sharing of images of global issues, sometimes multiple at a time, at breakneck speed, the viewer is overwhelmed with these images and might become desensitized to these issues and develop some form of immunity to the shock factor that is meant to incite an emotional response and prompt social and political action, thereby rendering it useless.

Nathan Jurgenson quotes Van Dijck - “[young people] take less interest in sharing photographs as objects than as sharing them as experiences.” – in his book *The Social Photo: On Photography and Social Media*. He describes the social photo as being more expressive than informative, more subjective than objectively neutral, as a way of communication and interaction.

“Through the elimination of visual noise, the viewer can focus more on essence.”⁴⁰

He looks at the fast-paced mass production of media on these platforms as its own unique quality. He compares it to the panoramic view afforded from a train car moving at a high speed through the montage-like scenery. He also talks about the easy manipulation on social media as also an indicator of the events or the experience and observes it as its own way of self-expression.

CONCLUSION

So, despite the drawbacks, one must also take into consideration the tremendous advantage that this application has on social media. Allowing not only for real time documentation, but real time documentation from multiple point of views at the same time by using the various types of mediums available, social media serves as a common point for a realistic and indexical depiction of events. It allows for a collection and a mixture of materials, technologies, genres, sources and concepts along with multiple perspectives which follows no traditional rules of documentary photography. This kind of use of the New Mixtures technique allows the general population to be able to get a more holistic comprehension and get a deeper, more authentic understanding of events. It allows people to use social media and digital storytelling to achieve the goal that Sandbye believes documentary photography can achieve through New Mixtures.

This is a kind of documentary that engages with difficult subject matter such as war, globalization and migration using multiple forms of representation that communicate the complexity of the subject matter. Taking a self-reflexive approach to photography that takes into account and reflects the limits and possibilities of photography. It is a new representational form that uses the whole spectrum of agency and emotion along with a variety of photographic forms and materialities that allows a better, more comprehensive method of documentary photography that doesn't follow the restrictive practices of traditional documentary photography and instead aims to push the boundaries of how to approach sensitive topics of the contemporary world.

We live in a shared reality so it makes sense to communicate our perspectives of this reality on these shared platforms and allow us to use social media platforms to do what they do best – document.

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