

Research on the Development of Chinese “Network Generated Documentaries”

DeMin He^{1,*}, WenHui Li¹

¹ Media technology of Liaocheng University, Liao Cheng, Shan Ddong, China

*Corresponding author. Email: 7269516@qq.com

ABSTRACT

Study Report of the Development of Chinese Documentary in 2018 demonstrates that Internet, currently the largest carrier that broadcasts documentaries, has commenced to substitute for television screen, while the audience tend to be younger and inclusive, which presents a new communication pattern and marks the beginning of the Internet age of Chinese documentaries. This paper aims to furnish other scholars researching Chinese network generated documentaries with some references by analyzing the necessary factors of their occurrence and historical significance and exploring their unique creation mode from the perspective of their historical stages and background.

Keywords: Network Generated Documentaries, Development Research, Creative features

1. INTRODUCTION

Each industry is undergoing rapid development in the Internet era. Network generated documentaries that remain in tune with the times and assume a young attitude gradually enjoy wider popularity among the audience. They are documentaries created by Internet platforms themselves mainly for Internet users with Internet intervening the critical time nodes of documentary industry before broadcasting on such platforms. Their audience have a wider age range and their subjects are principally derived from daily life, creators' personal hobbies and many other aspects as opposed to traditional ones covering science, history and geography, while their marketing strategy adopts product thinking. Thanks to their lower threshold for creators, openness of the communication channels, and high efficiency of creation and production, network generated documentaries, an object being pursued by documentary workers in the new era, bring more diversified content resources to the audience than traditional ones and new opportunities to Chinese documentaries.

2. THE BACKGROUND OF NETWORK GENERATED DOCUMENTARIES

2.1. Substantial support from national policies

Documentary, a significant cultural industry bearing on history and national image, is normally affected by national policies to a great extent. The rapid growth of China's economy commencing since the 20th century

leads to people's growing requirements for materials, culture and increasingly frequent foreign exchanges. In consequence, the development of documentary among many other cultural industries has been listed as one of the top agendas of the government. The executive meetings of the State Council in July 2009 deliberated and passed the Cultural Industry Revitalization Plan, elevating cultural industry to the level of national strategy. Subsequently, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT) issued Guidelines on Accelerating the Development of Documentary Industry, which points out that documentaries remain significant for highlighting China's development and transformation, inheriting the Chinese nation's fine traditions, building advanced socialist culture, satisfying people's spiritual and cultural needs, promoting cultural exchanges and cooperation around the world, taking Chinese culture to the global stage, and enhancing the soft power of Chinese culture. The government will boost documentary creation and production.

2.2. The emergence of network documentary channels

In the initial development period during 2000 to 2009, video-streaming websites concentrated on integrating and storing online video resources principally provided by traditional media, whereas self-made documentaries only accounted for a small proportion. Nevertheless, as the audience shift from traditional media to Internet platforms, video-streaming websites begin to shed dependence on the video resources of traditional media and their video sources comprise buying copyrights, co-production, self-made contents, and other netizens' sharing and creation. Since Sohu.com launched the first high-definition documentary channel in China, a great many websites

have successively set up such channels in an attempt to take a share of this niche market. Report of the Development of Chinese Documentary in 2011 indicates that in 2011 numerous video-streaming websites including CNTV, Sohu.com, Iqiyi.com and Ifeng.com started distinctive documentary channels, the domination and participation of websites in documentary events and exhibition became increasingly frequent, constituting new sights in documentary industry, and plenty of documentaries disseminated via Internet ended the history of television stations being the only broadcasting approach. Nonetheless, they have long served as secondary transmission channels that indiscriminately imitate the audience mode of thinking, content duration, and pattern of presentation of television documentaries rather than establishing their own characteristics. "The audience constitute the market". They are consumers of information that choose certain media by the standards of whether their individual requirements of contents and browsing habits can be satisfied. Consequently, documentary channels on websites operating under such business model exist in name only, and their small amount of traffic attracted and revenue on advertising cannot even offset the copyright payment, which requires websites to actively participate in the creation of documentary programs. Since 2014, the application of the commission mode has allowed independent creation teams and user-generated content (UGC) to dominate the production of website documentaries, while network generated documentaries tend to be more refined, categorized and standardized. In 2017, a quantity of personnel previously committed to radio and television within the system shifted their career path to the Internet, making the production of network generated documentaries more standardized and their quality enhanced. For instance, Che Xiaoqing, the director of *A Bite of China*, left CCTV to shoot the documentary *Once upon a Bite* that was produced by Tencent. It is safe to say that early website documentaries have sown the seeds of prosper of network generated documentaries.

2.3. Targeted user groups in the era of big data

Big data analytics is a means of analyzing user behaviors based on a large volume of data collected through distributed cloud platforms. Data remain the "strategic resource" possessed by video websites per se in the background of big data. Firsthand service data are available thanks to the large number of users, while the diversified channels are favorable to establish a long-term, stable interactive relationship by means of carrying out customized marketing activities and cultivating the dependence of the audience based on data analysis. Sina, Tencent, Sohu and Netease are four major web portals that not only produce and provide media contents but have certain characteristics of social interaction and services. For instance, the large number of relatively loyal users accumulated provide website media represented by Sina Weibo, Tencent WeChat, Sohu video, and Netease mail with sound fundamental conditions for big data-based

marketing and possibilities for their further development. In the initial period of network generated documentaries, data source processed through big data analytics can assist video websites in analyzing. The funnel analysis (filtering useless data), storage analysis (storing user behaviors) and analysis of users' return visit (analyzing such behavior of the users whose information has been stored) can be utilized to process big data and analyze their connection before building data models. The ensuing data abstraction helps to fully understand the overall trend, so that limited resources yield more fruitful results. Normally most data that appear useless require to be filtered through funnel analysis and some of them to be discarded. Understanding the data orientation is helpful to identify certain popular subjects for subsequent analysis.

Therefore, with regard to content creation, Internet data can be mined by mentioning keywords ranging from script subjects to core topics and relevant selling points, identifying the core demand of targeted users through heated topics, and examining the market value of core topics and relevant selling points by monitoring real-time communication trends. Quantifiable suggestions should be provided for the optimization of program production in accordance with the attributes, characteristics, preferences, and demands of prospective targeted customers. Meanwhile, websites can launch their videos precisely to specific users based on big data analytics. Each website has its own loyal users whose viewing habits and degrees of preference are recorded. Video websites can disseminate information by sending push notifications to targeted users.

2.4. Constant decline in traditional documentary influence

Firstly, traditional television stations are characteristic of linear communication, which imposes restrictions on expansion of documentary audience. The broadcasting mode in linear communication that allows the audience simply to watch fixed programs within fixed time frame puts the audience in a passive situation where they have to satisfy high requirements of viewing and have little flexibility to choose freely, which severely constrains the increase of the documentary audience.

Additionally, the limited broadcasting time of television stations reduces the influence of documentaries. A constant and stable cultivation process is indispensable to the formation of certain group of audience or users, and viewers need a stable environment of viewing and constant broadcasting of programs. Nevertheless, China's television documentaries have not yet satisfied these two conditions as expected, which can be seen from the fact that a number of national or provincial television channels still lack of a fixed program or link, many documentary contents or programs are broadcast in fringe time, and even worse some influential and well-made documentaries are broadcast only once per week. The limited time and uncertainty of broadcasting environment, two significant

factors that restrict the formation of market users, tremendously decrease the influence of documentaries.

2.5. The unexpected going viral of traditional documentaries in websites

Masters in Forbidden City, a documentary whose broadcasting in CCTV in January 2016 failed to obtain a satisfying result, was uploaded to the website bilibili by netizens in the form of “pirate copies” after its producer sold copyright to video websites such as Iqiyi at a cost of merely tens of thousands of yuan. Within an extremely short period of time, clicks totaled one million and bullet comments over ten thousand. Thanks to the “bullet comments” and “clicks” of the audience via Internet, Masters in Forbidden City boomed in its popularity and underwent a transformation in its fate of communication. Life Matters, another sensational TV documentary containing ten episodes that were jointly planned and shot by Shanghai Television and Shanghai Health and Family Planning Commission, was viewed by limited audience when initially broadcast in the news channel of Shanghai Television. However, subsequent secondary dissemination on video websites including Iqiyi aroused strong sense of immersion and brought irresistible viewing experience to the audience, giving rise to sensational heated topics of communication. That these traditional documentaries unexpectedly go viral on video websites makes producers realize that the underlying problem turns out to be inappropriate mode of communication rather than the audience’s dislike. Consequently, network generated documentaries are attracting increasing attention from documentary producers.

3. THE COMMUNICATION ADVANTAGES OF NETWORK GENERATED DOCUMENTARIES

3.1. More flexible availability of viewing time

The permanent content storage and non-linear communication that are characteristic of website documentary channels allow programs to be played for as many times as the audience want rather than one time only. Moreover, the on-demand mode of websites weans the audience off the fixed programs in fixed broadcasting time frame, and lifts the temporal-spatial restrictions, providing more flexible time and space for the audience to choose.

3.2. Focus communication

Based on their respective themes, network generated documentaries emerge on the Internet channels with the labels such as nature, humanity, geography and history that can differentiate their categories. The audience

demanding certain type of documentary can quickly locate a considerable number of them with the help of these labels and establish connection with congenial netizens in the discussion board to build an Internet community, while producers can utilize these virtual communities to launch their targeted programs to achieve the effect of focus communication.

3.3. Interactivity of the audience

Interactivity proves a revolutionary transformation of documentary dissemination arising from the emergence of Internet. The hypermedia documentaries require the audience to participate in and interact. The communication mode of traditional media remains a one-way process from release to dissemination and then reception, whereas the communication via Internet is bilateral, interactive and reversible. The interactive presentation brings users immersive experience that helps them acquire a deeper understanding of certain topic and more intuitive experience in the intriguing process of interaction and exploration, which makes in-depth reports of serious topics less monotonous and grave. For instance, the website bilibili features a quantity of bullet comments flying across the screen, which, though sent from different locations at different times, still brings the experience of “real-time interaction”. In this process certain view or emotion can quickly spread across a group of people and elicit intense reactions.

4. THE CREATION CHARACTERISTICS OF NETWORK GENERATED DOCUMENTARIES

4.1. Fragmented narrative mode

Fragmented narrative breaks the temporal-spatial unity in a long period of time and intersperses a narrative scene with events taking place in other spaces and time, presenting multiple points of information that jointly constitute the entire narrative. Internet users show preferences to such novel narrative mode with rhythms changing relatively fast. Since it was adopted as early as in A Bite of China and gained popularity among the audience, it has been imitated by numerous network generated documentaries during creation. Despite fragmented narrative, certain logic must be complied so that the audience can successfully piece together the complete story in accordance with the couple of information points arranged, or otherwise the narrative might prove incomplete or unavailing.

4.2. Co-existence of entertainment and story-telling

In the Internet era, the voice of documentaries transforms from previous didactic tendency to current style that concentrates on evoking resonance among the audience with commonly shared cultural cognition and life feelings and understanding. The presentation of documentary contents appears increasingly down to earth and younger in order to adapt to the younger Internet users. With regard to narrative voice and mode of expression, network generated documentaries, in comparison to traditional ones, attach greater importance to using a variety of different forms rather than sticking to one type as long as the authenticity is preserved, appearing more colorful, comprehensive and fashionable. Their narrative mode incorporates many other comprehensive and diversified forms according to specific contents apart from story-telling, for instance, the means of processing documentary contents including entertainment-oriented editing and post-production used in variety shows, which make documentaries more vivid. The commentaries of network generated documentaries attempt to interpret by using new methods that can present the contents of documentaries in more diversified forms so as to better fit the appreciation habits of the new media audience.

4.3. Diversified and targeted narrative themes

The most unique feature of network generated documentaries is that each major network agency can, based on its own positioning and resource superiority, explore the various possibilities of documentary categories in the new media from the perspective of history, popular culture, science, technology, and education. Tencent Video spares no efforts to cultivate the demands of younger users and concentrates on the two categories of "lifestyle" and "pop culture". During its V Vision Conference in 2019, Tencent Video announced its documentary content layout in 2020, intending to launch a number of documentaries pertaining to food, nature, history, education and pop culture. In 2019, the website bilibili produced 16 major documentaries centering on the principle of "authentic content, heterogeneous forms, humanism, people orientation, emphasis on interaction, and widespread dissemination" with the aim of attracting younger Internet users through original themes, including social humanity, historical culture, and topics concerning youth. Youku plans to launch *Who Designed the Universe*, *Human Playground*, *Running Wild*, and *Always Beautiful* in 2020, covering the topics of science, sports, women and environmental protection among many others, which will further enrich the contents of documentary section and intensify the atmosphere of humanity. Systems obtained through big data analytics will differ due to disparity in the targeted audience of each platform. A broader boundary of documentary themes is available thanks to network generated documentaries, while themes can be selected

specifically in accordance with what the targeted audience seek for.

5. CONCLUSION

Network generated documentaries are not happenstance but an inevitable outcome of the development of times, benefiting from national policy support to the documentary industry, the powerful dissemination capability of the Internet media, and their own demands of pursuing development to tackle the bottleneck impeding the video websites of network generated documentaries and satisfy the audience's needs that emerge in the new media age. There is no denying that they remain a novel kind of documentary whose new characteristics might impact existing boundary of this field. Nevertheless, we are supposed to take a progressive perspective and try new approaches in practice under the premise of preserving the true essence.

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