

From Social Movements to Documentary: How Nonfiction Films in the US and UK Engage with and Reflect Social and Political Issues

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Abstract. In the era of digital media and global communication, documentary film has evolved from a medium for recording reality into a powerful tool for political expression and social mobilization. In the US and UK, political documentaries not only chronicle social events but also shape and public discourse, reflecting the close relationship between media and power. This paper explores how American nonfiction films intervene in sociopolitical issues through narrative structures, aesthetic strategies, and political functions. Using a qualitative approach that combines historical review, textual analysis, and comparative case studies, this study examines 13th and Fahrenheit 9/11. Findings indicate that these films strategically create a sense of “presence” and emotional resonance through cinematography, editing, and visual style. They use voice-over narration, interviews, and archival footage to construct multiple perspectives and enhance political persuasiveness. Emotional mobilization emerges as a key technique for emerging audiences and fostering social action. Moreover, while streaming platforms have broadened the reach of political documentaries, they also introduce challenges such as “filter bubbles” and fragmented expression. This research contributes to understanding the agenda-setting role, ethical boundaries, and public function of political documentaries and suggests future research on non-Western contexts and emerging technologies.

Keywords: Nonfiction Films, Political Documentary, Public Engagement

1. Introduction

Recently, nonfiction film—particularly documentaries—has increasingly evolved from a medium for recording reality into an important medium for political expression and social mobilization. Under the influence of media convergence and accelerated image circulation, the production and dissemination of documentaries have undergone profound changes. The rise of digital platforms, such as Netflix, YouTube, and social media, has lowered traditional technical and economic barriers, allowing creators to bypass institutional gatekeeping. This decentralized model enables grassroots voices and politically sensitive content to reach wider audiences, fostering across-regional dialogue and mobilization [1]. Notable examples include *Eyes on the Prize* and *The Battle of Orgreave*, which not only document historical events but also actively shape public memory and engagement. These

works reflect a shift toward “digitized political mobilization,” where documentaries align with grassroots activism through horizontally networked distribution, strengthening their influence in social movements.

Although prior studies have addressed the political functions of documentaries, few studies have systematically investigated how aesthetic strategies and narrative structures influence political communication. This study addresses three core questions: How do nonfiction films reflect the political atmosphere of their era; how do their visual and narrative strategies influence audiences’ political consciousness; and how do they spur public participation and collective action? This research adopts comparative case studies and content analysis and selects two representative documentaries for in-depth analysis. It focuses on the aesthetic and rhetorical strategies employed by the directors—such as visual style, narrative structure, and music/sound—in order to reveal the mechanisms of their political expression. This research is expected to deepen the understanding of the interplay between media and politics and offers theoretical insights for filmmakers seeking to amplify marginalized voices and foster democratic discourse.

2. Political documentary’s historical evolution

2.1. Origins of nonfiction film and its early political representations

As a cinematic form, nonfiction film emerged almost concurrently with the development of the film medium itself. In 1926, British critic John Grierson, in his review of *Moana*, first coined the term “documentary,” and in 1933, he further defined it as the “creative treatment of actuality,” an assertion that emphasized the coexistence of artistic construction and social function in nonfiction cinema [2, 3]. In the early 20th century, documentaries quickly became an important tool for state power and ideological dissemination [4, 5]. Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov proposed the concept of the “Kino-Eye,” arguing that cinema should abandon staged performance and fictional storytelling and instead use the camera’s objective recording of reality to capture “unnoticed truth.” He stressed the use of techniques such as non-actors, everyday scenes, hidden cameras, and montage editing to construct a kind of vision beyond human subjectivity—a “mechanical vision” that served the propagation of socialist ideology. Meanwhile, during World War II, the U.S. government incorporated documentaries like the *Why We Fight* series into its national propaganda efforts, mobilizing public support for the war. These cases show that from its very inception, documentary film has hovered between “objective representation” and “political construction,” becoming a central arena in the struggle between power and visual culture [6].

2.2. Documentaries and political activism in the American Civil Rights Movement

In the 1950s and 1960s, the American Civil Rights Movement was a social revolution aimed at ending racial segregation and systemic discrimination. The struggles of this period leveraged visual media, particularly documentaries, to achieve unprecedented public visibility. Documentaries not only recorded events but also intervened deeply in political action through narrative structure and emotional mobilization. As Whiteman’s “coalition model” emphasizes, the political impact of documentaries is not limited to changes in individual viewers’ cognition but operates through an interactive network connecting social movements, media dissemination, and public policy [2]. This model posits that political documentaries should be seen as tools of social strategy, engaging in the interactions among social organizations, audiences, and policymakers.

Compared to the fragmentary presentation of television news, documentaries integrate multiple sources and employ structured storytelling to present the complexity of movements, reinforcing the agency and moral legitimacy of marginalized groups. By removing authoritative voice-over and emphasizing diverse voices, such films effectively resist mainstream media's tendency to "other" the protesters, shaping a counter-narrative perspective from the grassroots. Furthermore, technical choices—such as handheld filming, cross-cutting, and the unflinching "direct presentation" of violent scenes—not only strengthen visual impact but also spur moral engagement through emotional resonance. The networked circulation of images transforms individual emotions into public consciousness, placing viewers, as they witness injustice, before an ethical choice of action or silence. As Wall's theory of the "aesthetics of witnessing" suggests, by reproducing oppressive realities, documentaries make viewers into moral accomplices. Through "evidentiary images," they intervene in institutional reform, and by adopting counter-narratives, they challenge state ideology, thereby reconstructing the boundaries of democratic politics on both cultural and political levels.

3. Aesthetics and rhetorical strategies of political documentaries

Traditionally, documentaries have been viewed as objective representations of reality, an aesthetic convention that further developed in the mid-20th century with the rise of *cinéma vérité* and direct cinema. Robert Drew's *Primary* (1960) is regarded as a representative work that "broke the old mold," with his team dispensing with traditional voice-over narration and lighting in order to "maintain emotional truth even in technical imperfection" [3]. Drew and his collaborators emphasized unifying the roles of cameraman and editor, giving the creator greater "observational control" on location. This approach marked the formation of a documentary style guided by an "observer's logic." However, the "reality" of documentary is not a mechanical reproduction of the world but rather reveals the director's subjective selectivity and emotional orientation in the construction of images. Canella argues that documentary creators constantly negotiate between "factual objectivity" and "emotional authenticity" to craft a more affecting "emotional truth," which in essence is a form of news production logic involving subjective choice [3]. For example, slow motion, color grading, and musical score are not only used to convey events but also carry specific moral emotions and political stances. This intertwining of narrative aesthetics with political issues constitutes a balance in documentary filmmaking between visual realism and artistic stylization.

In constructing a political narrative, documentaries rely on elements such as voice-over narration, interviews, and archival footage. These devices not only serve to convey information but also shape the film's ideological framework and guide the audience's understanding. Studies have noted that interviews in documentaries function to "restore individual subjectivity," while archival materials serve as evidence in the "re-encoding of history" [7, 8]. The use of voice-over reflects narrative authority; some scholars argue that when narration comes from the director's first-person perspective, such narrative intervention can diminish the openness of the image. Balancing perspective and informational guidance becomes a crucial issue in documentary storytelling [9].

Political documentaries often employ emotional appeals to evoke audience resonance and motivate action. However, in recent years, as social movements have progressed, the documentary field has begun to reflect on traditional emotional mobilization mechanisms and has proposed an ethics of "non-extractive" filmmaking practice. This ethical stance emphasizes building an ethical relationship of trust, respect, and participation between filmmakers and subjects to avoid turning the suffering of marginalized groups into visual consumption [6]. As Bullock Brown and Childress observe, a growing number of creators advocate "establishing trust-based relationships between the director and the protagonists" in order to reshape the social ethics and activist foundations of

documentary practice. Correspondingly, “emotional authenticity” has become a key mechanism in contemporary political documentaries, aimed not only at arousing viewers’ emotions but also at activating moral judgment and political participation [8]. Nash further cautions that when documentaries rely excessively on images of suffering or tragic narratives, they risk falling into “emotional exploitation” and causing “compassion fatigue” [7]. Therefore, filmmakers must maintain a tension between emotional mobilization and rational expression, ensuring that political advocacy is not achieved at the expense of ethical integrity.

Through diverse aesthetic and rhetorical strategies, political documentaries seek a balance between objective representation and subjective expression. These strategies influence not only the films’ narrative effectiveness but also their social impact and ethical responsibilities. As documentaries become increasingly political, their ethical issues have gained more attention. In recent years, the American documentary community has launched a series of discussions on establishing ethical standards, particularly regarding how creators balance narrative authority with transparency of information. Aufderheide suggests that documentaries should establish clear ethical guidelines between truthfulness and political advocacy in order to meet the audience’s growing expectations for authenticity and representation [5].

4. Case studies of American political documentaries

4.1. 13th: American racial politics and mass incarceration

13th, directed by Ava DuVernay in 2016, delves into the connection between the Thirteenth Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and racial discrimination and mass incarceration. The film reveals that although the Thirteenth Amendment ostensibly abolished slavery, its “exception clause”—which permits forced labor as punishment for crime — became a legal loophole perpetuating racial oppression. By tracing developments from slavery and Jim Crow laws to the modern criminal justice system, DuVernay illustrates how African Americans have continued to suffer systemic discrimination and injustice.

The film’s structure artfully blends historical materials, expert interviews, and dynamic graphics. By incorporating extensive archival footage and news clips, viewers gain a vivid understanding of the evolution of race relations in America. At the same time, DuVernay weaves in insights from scholars such as Angela Davis and Van Jones, adding depth and authority to the film. The interwoven use of animated graphics and statistical data also clarifies complex information, enhancing the audience’s grasp of the severity of the problem. 13th succeeds in rendering the abstract concept of “structural racism” into a visual and emotional experience. By presenting concrete historical events, statistics, and personal stories, the film allows viewers to tangibly feel the profound impact of racism on the lives of African Americans. This emotionally charged approach evokes audience resonance and reflection, prompting viewers to pay attention to and contemplate injustices in society. In terms of social impact, the film was widely disseminated against the backdrop of the Black Lives Matter movement, sparking in-depth discussions on racial discrimination and criminal justice reform. However, the film also triggered some controversy, arguing that its interpretation of history was overly one-sided, or that its criticisms of specific political figures were too sharp. Overall, 13th is a documentary of significant social importance, successfully bringing public attention and discourse to the issue of racial inequality.

4.2. Fahrenheit 9/11: the war on terror and American political propaganda

Fahrenheit 9/11 (2004), directed by Michael Moore, offers a scathing critique of the George W. Bush administration and its War on Terror following the 9/11 attacks. The film questions the Bush administration's motives for launching the Iraq War and exposes the complex relationship between the government and Saudi Arabia. Through extensive archival footage and interviews, it depicts the war's impact on ordinary Americans and Iraqi civilians, underscoring the pain and cost inflicted by the conflict. The film employs a first-person subjective perspective, directly involving Moore in guiding the audience's thought process. Moore builds on his personal views and experiences, using satire and humor to sharply criticize the Bush administration's policies. For example, accompanied by Moore's narration, it shows a clip of President Bush continuing to sit in an elementary school classroom after being informed of the 9/11 attacks—a segment that satirizes Bush's slow response to the crisis. Moore also uses provocative editing to juxtapose official statements with actual events, revealing contradictions and hypocrisy. At the same time, the film makes extensive use of archival material, including news clips, official statements, and war zone footage. By contrasting the government's rhetoric with on-the-ground reality, Moore exposes the interest-driven motives and moral issues behind the policies. This approach keeps viewers continually questioning the credibility of official information throughout the viewing experience.

In terms of societal response, the film provoked polarized public opinion in the United States. Supporters argued that it exposed government failures and the truth about the war, prompting the public to reflect on government policies. Detractors accused the film of a subjective stance and bias, suggesting it could guide or even mislead viewers. Released on the eve of the 2004 U.S. presidential election, Fahrenheit 9/11 was seen as a direct challenge to Bush's re-election campaign, attempting to influence voters' choices. Furthermore, the film achieved enormous commercial success worldwide, becoming one of the highest-grossing documentaries of its time and demonstrating its broad influence in popular culture.

4.3. Commonalities and differences between the two films

Although the two documentaries focus on different issues, both intervene in structural problems of American society with a strong political stance and critical narrative. 13th centers on systemic racism, constructing a rigorous and somber structural critique through academic discourse and historical documentation; Fahrenheit 9/11, by contrast, engages with contemporary politics from the director's personal perspective, employing humor, satire, and provocation to expose the complex web of media manipulation and war propaganda. Both films make full use of archival footage and emotional mobilization techniques, effectively stimulating public consciousness and performing an agenda-setting function. However, their narrative styles stand in stark contrast: the former emphasizes rational analysis and moral appeal, whereas the latter relies more on a subjective viewpoint and narrative tension to drive engagement. This difference reflects the choices of expressive strategy that political documentaries make in different eras and media contexts, and it highlights the diversity and possibilities of political documentaries as tools of public discourse.

5. Influence of political documentaries on social and political discourse

5.1. Assessing the influence of documentaries on public opinion and policy-making

Political documentaries guide public attention to specific social issues by setting the agenda, thereby influencing policy debates and public decision-making. This process is known as the “agenda-setting function.” Research shows that sustained media exposure and emphasis on an issue significantly raise that issue’s salience in the public mind, which in turn places indirect pressure on policymakers to respond by prioritizing the issue. For example, Michael Moore’s documentary *Fahrenheit 9/11* premiered on the eve of a U.S. presidential election and directly questioned the Bush administration’s handling of 9/11 and the legitimacy of the Iraq War. The film, with its high profile, sparked intense controversy in American society and to some extent influenced certain voters’ attitudes toward Bush’s re-election, becoming a key text in political discourse. Although the extent of its policy impact is disputed, there is no denying that the film broadened public discussion about the war and national security.

Therefore, evaluating a documentary’s influence on public opinion requires a comprehensive analysis of audience survey data, mainstream media reactions, and political discourse feedback. In recent years, scholars have increasingly employed empirical methods and social-scientific tools—such as content analysis, surveys, and focus groups—to explore how documentaries shape viewers’ attitudes and propensity for action on both emotional and cognitive levels.

5.2. The role of streaming platforms in the dissemination of political documentaries

The rise of streaming platforms has radically changed the distribution logic of documentaries and the composition of their audiences. As Zafra noted in a study of the transmedia documentary project *Obrero*, new media forms like Facebook and web documentaries not only extend the reach of documentaries but also create “like-minded publics” within different communities, fostering sustained social impact [7]. In the digital distribution environment, platforms typically recommend content based on users’ viewing and interaction preferences, causing viewers to more frequently encounter information that aligns with their existing views. While this mechanism improves the efficiency of content matching, it can also gradually distance users from alternative perspectives, thereby affecting the public’s comprehensive understanding of social issues.

Meanwhile, streaming audiences’ preferences for pacing and visual style have prompted documentary creators to adapt structure and presentation, resulting in a shorter, more conflict-driven editing style tailored to fragmented information-consumption habits. Netflix, for example, not only increases the exposure of documentaries through its homepage recommendation system, but also frequently releases trailers, behind-the-scenes clips, and interviews on YouTube as part of an integrated cross-platform marketing strategy. This heightened interactivity and sense of participation help boost user engagement and the intensity of discussion, further amplifying a film’s social impact.

However, the algorithmic recommendation systems of streaming platforms also carry certain risks. By pushing similar content based on user preferences, such systems easily lead to an “information bubble” effect, confining viewers to a homogeneous information environment where they are less likely to encounter diverse viewpoints. In addition, to suit streaming media’s fast pace and “short content” trends, some documentary productions have trended toward fragmented structures and emotionally driven narratives, weakening thorough exposition and logical development. This platform-driven logic poses a dual challenge to both the artistic form of

documentaries and their public function. Moreover, the integration of virtual reality in nonfiction storytelling challenges existing journalistic norms and highlights the urgency of updating ethical frameworks to account for the immersive and emotionally charged nature of these media formats [10].

5.3. Ethical boundaries: when documentaries shift from advocacy to propaganda

When a documentary has a strong standpoint, its truthfulness often comes under scrutiny—this issue is especially pronounced in political documentaries. In his research on “emotional truth” in documentary, Canella notes that many directors tend to reinforce their message through emotional strategies. While this can heighten viewers’ emotional resonance, it may also blur the boundary between documentary and propaganda [3]. For example, by employing first-person narration or highly subjective camerawork to create a sense of “moral complicity,” a director can reduce the viewer’s critical distance. On this point, Canella cites one documentary director’s view: “Documentary is art, whereas journalism is practice and science,” highlighting the tension between the ethical responsibilities and the expressive freedom of the two forms. This tension demands that creators, while preserving creative freedom, also adhere to basic standards of truthfulness and fairness, avoiding the sacrifice of factual completeness in the face of a forceful stance [3].

Documentary filmmakers bear significant ethical responsibilities in the production process, particularly in ensuring information accuracy, fairness in editing, and balance in presenting perspectives. For instance, *Sicko*—which drew widespread attention for confronting flaws in the U.S. healthcare system—also provoked multiple legal and ethical criticisms for factual inaccuracies. The crux of the controversy was whether a documentary may sacrifice the completeness of information for the sake of advancing its agenda.

Therefore, when treading the line between advocacy and propaganda, documentary creators must carefully gauge this boundary. Filmmakers should express their viewpoints while ensuring that the factual foundation is not distorted, upholding the credibility of the film’s narrative. Only in this way can a documentary advocate for change while preserving its moral legitimacy as a carrier of public knowledge and a truthful record of reality.

6. Conclusion

This paper explored how political documentaries in the US and UK engage with and reflect social and political issues. By using methods such as historical review, textual analysis, and case studies, it revealed the role of nonfiction film in political expression and social mobilization. The study reviewed the evolution of documentaries from observational record to political action medium, focusing particularly on their significance during the American Civil Rights Movement. Political documentaries seek a balance between visual realism and artistic treatment through camera language, editing rhythm, and color design, and construct multi-perspective narratives through voice-over, interviews, and archival footage. Emotional mobilization has become an important mechanism for stimulating public participation. Through analyses of *13th* and *Fahrenheit 9/11*, this paper showed how documentaries in different contexts visualize structural injustice and perform an agenda-setting function. At the same time, the rise of streaming platforms has expanded the influence of documentaries but also introduced issues like filter bubbles and homogenization of form. Despite attempts to integrate multiple dimensions in theory and practice, this study has certain limitations. First, it mainly focuses on the American context; while representative, it lacks comparative analysis of documentary practice in other cultural systems and political regimes.

Second, due to methodological and data constraints, it did not conduct a systematic quantitative analysis of audience reception, which limits a comprehensive assessment of a documentary's social impact.

In sum, political documentaries, as an amalgam of artistic expression and real-world intervention, have become an important force in shaping social consciousness, fostering public discussion, and constructing collective memory. They not only “record reality” in their expression, but also “shape reality” in their representation—continually prompting us to reflect: Who has the right to speak? Who decides what is true? And how should we, as viewers, assume the responsibility of witnessing and acting? As noted in a study on immersive nonfiction media, when nonfiction is transformed into virtual reality, it allows audiences to become not just spectators but participants—experiencing the events from within and thus deepening emotional and moral engagement [10].

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