

Ethics of Choice, Empathy, and Evidence in Interactive Documentary Forms

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the ethical dimensions of interactive documentary (i-doc) forms through three interrelated lenses: choice, empathy, and evidence. As digital technologies transform documentary practice, interactivity introduces new possibilities for user agency, participatory storytelling, and co-creation of meaning. However, these affordances also generate complex ethical challenges. The study explores how choice architecture shapes autonomy, responsibility, and narrative control, often balancing user freedom with subtle forms of coercion. It further analyzes empathy as both an affective and cognitive mechanism, highlighting how interactive engagement can deepen emotional connection while also risking manipulation or selective identification. In addition, the paper interrogates the evolving nature of evidence in interactive contexts, where user-generated content raises questions of credibility, data provenance, and representational truth. Drawing on conceptual analysis and case-based insights, the study underscores the need for robust ethical frameworks that address design practices, stakeholder involvement, and methodological evaluation. Ultimately, it argues that while interactive documentaries hold significant potential for enhancing civic engagement, critical literacy, and participatory culture, their ethical integrity depends on carefully negotiated relationships between agency, empathy, and evidentiary standards.

Keywords: Interactive documentary; Ethics of choice; Empathy; User-generated evidence; and Narrative agency.

INTRODUCTION

Interactive documentaries (i-docs) have emerged as digital entities that extend the documentary impulse into the interactive domain [1]. They differ from linear formats in that they offer greater flexibility of choice in navigating the content. While individual platforms and practices vary considerably, the ethical stance and affordance embedded in the interactive dimension may be organized along three delineations [2]. The first involves aspects of choice, where an ethical consideration relates to the user-driven decisions the user can take to interact with the documentary content; it encompasses notions of autonomy, agency, consent, responsibility, and accountability [1]. The second concerns empathy as an experiential mechanism, the idea that interactive engagement with documentary content holds the potential to heighten affective engagement, perspective, and relational ethics [2]. Third is evidence in interactive form, which addresses the epistemological dimension and grapples with the complexities of representational truth, evidentiary standards, data provenance, and the credibility of user-sourced documentary input [3].

Conceptual Framework

Interactive documentary combines conventional film or video with digital interactivity, enabling user input to shape fundamental narrative elements. A precise definition remains elusive, as the term encompasses distinct but interconnected forms of narrative-telling [4]. Approaches differ according to the scope of interactivity, the nature and degree of user input, and the narrative logic of the work itself [4]. Interactive documentaries that permit users to input data while sourcing, producing or curating audiovisual materials challenge traditional notions of authorship and publication, along with expectations of veracity and credibility [5]. Concerns extend beyond the

decision and commitment to allow user-input decisions; they encompass the reliability of the content once the decision has been made. Data provenance and credibility become paramount issues, particularly when developing shared repositories where individuals contribute user-generated evidence linked to contested topics, events, or occasions [5]. Qualitative social science denotes a driving aspiration toward empathy formation, illuminating a rich evolutionary trajectory since its inception. A human-centred, situated perspective emphasises lived experience, subjective understanding, and intersubjective exchange among stake-holders, promoting a focus on situations, places, people, objects, and relations [6]. Single-case studies that explore how enduring, palpable, and even celebratory aspects of interactivity operate at each of the nine levels contemporaneously in socially engaged interactive documentaries, striving to augment the communal commons, reinforce social ties, and cultivate convivial public action [6]. In tandem, where the citizenry experiences privileged access to context-sensitive creation and collective, collaborative learning, sympathetic participation within moral dilemmas emerges as a central design challenge that warrants elucidation [2]. Various choices manifest goal-oriented inertia or systemic narrowing, irregularly inducing systemic and sometimes systemic magnification [7]. Certain choices appear compulsory, eliminating alternative routes or potential unfolding perspectives, whereas others propose compelling pathways, governing the trajectory yet allowing pronounced diversity within the progression [8]. Although ethical design decision remains omnipresent, certain interactive documentary works provoke acute reflective questioning. Empathy formation typically materialises without the element of choice, occasionally surfacing a broader understanding of multi-dimensionality [9]. On the one hand, comfort and safety are preserved; on the other, the aspirational intent to see, feel, and understand widely varies, driven by preconceptions, fear, distrust, indifference, rebellion, or sometimes even pleasure [10]. Nevertheless, user-driven choices and their unfolding implications may sometimes disturb or disrupt the process of broadening, enlarging or even shattering extant horizons of empathy. Although the zones of possibility thus shift, the difficulty of eliciting engagement with illustrative interactive resources persists [1].

Interactive Documentary: Definitions and Scope

Interactive documentary eludes a universally applicable definition. Husak [3] proposes an intricate conceptual framework that comprises four closely aligned modes, conversational, hypertext, experiential, and participative. These specifications, the apparatus deployed, and the extent of user access to cinematic material circumscribe an ambiguous and fluctuating terrain in which documentary practices are invariably evolving [11]. Interactive documentary encompasses a spectrum of centralized and decentralized projects across varying dimensions of interactivity, user input, and narrative logic. Two axes hold particular significance [3]. First, user control can range from zero to complete agency over the circumstances in which the documentary is consumed; users may or may not contribute content, explore selected sites or frames, or choose among pre-defined options. Second, the form or grammar of an interactive documentary may embrace one or multiple options, linear, episodic, parallel, branching. Sustained consideration of these aspects has far-reaching implications for ethical, epistemic, and evaluative examination, smoothly accommodating normative and rigorously descriptive perspectives [3]. As they assume greater influence, authors exercise augmented responsibility for authorship and signification. The necessity for a more precisely articulated characterization arises from the complex interrelation of individual architecture, interactive apparatus, narrative structure, technical infrastructure, and programmatic specification. Across virtual environments that foster multimodal documentation of lived experience, the denomination remains pertinent and meaningful [2].

Ethics of Choice: Autonomy, Agency, and Responsibility

Within current scholarship, interactivity and user agency are viable routes for advancing ethics in documentary expression [4]. Increasingly, these pathways are pursued in interactive documentaries that allow viewers not merely to interact but to make choices that propel narratives in different directions. Such projects primarily accommodate an ethics of choice, whereby autonomy, agency, and responsibility surface as the most relevant ethical attributes potentially underpinning user involvement [5]. Precisely how each of these attributes intersects with emergent technologies such as artificial intelligence also merits attention. An elaborated ethics of choice must accommodate the positions articulated by major figures such as Huhtam and Murray, according to whom participatory forms such as interactive television do not legitimately incorporate the term “documentary” [6]. considered a condition governing the relevant body of forms. Interactive documentary proper, distinct from participatory or interactive documentary, thus adopts the definitional scope elicited in the following. Specifically, it prioritizes both interactivity and user input while maintaining a commitment to factuality as a core aspect of representational logic [7].

Empathy as Experiential Mechanism

Feeling a sense of empathy has been shown to be related to socially adaptive and altruistic behaviors [4]. The experience of an empathetic reaction to someone who is suffering can consist of both [1] an affective response in the form of a change in one’s own bodily state that matches that of the afflicted person (often understood in terms of the phenomenon of “emotional contagion”) and [2] a more cognitively nuanced attempt to understand what the

other is encountering [5]. The interplay of these two components is complex, and their relative influence can fluctuate over time; the same person can undergo different mixtures of affective and cognitive resonances in response to the same stimulus [6]. Different interactive documentaries activate empathy via channels that shape the sensorimotor coupling connecting the participant to the multifaceted experience embodied in the materials.

Evidence in Interactive Form: Representational Truths

Interactive documentary examines new representational truths by extending evidence beyond the recorded. Numerous documentary forms support claims beyond the screen, yet relatively few explore evidence inside the frame [3]. Standards foreshadow emergent practices. Users generate content within interactive forms, shaping provenance and credibility upon which representational truth depends; interactive documentary therefore occupies a special position. Precisely because users supply data, standards cover iterative ethics that eight earlier works represent unreliably [4]. Interactive proposals rely on content-agnostic patterns abundantly available. Other approaches endorse rather than bracket user agency by encouraging thoroughly documented justifications as design decisions evolve [5]. Representational accounts of interactive documentary explore new forms of narrative. Interactivity privileges the participatory; hence interactivity becomes only one trait of interest, alongside input, narrative, and mode. Participatory “recording,” “civic involvement,” and “persuasion”, play the principal role during an age of misinformation. Political dimensions preoccupy each consideration; the interactive environment steers toward exclusively political analysis [6]. A recent outline explores autonomy, agency, consent, responsibility, and accountability. Formal distinctions among interactive documentary types often clarify ethical interaction at no longer require interactivity as a formal qualifier [7].

Methodological Considerations

Interactive documentary forms motivate ethical, epistemic, and evaluative investigations across design, representation, engagement, and reception [1]. Established design ethics focused on stakeholder involvement, agency, and control warrant attention, particularly clarifying user roles, consent, transparency, and potential coercion. Evaluation frameworks that incorporate ethical effectiveness provide pertinent lenses for analysis; effects arising from user-driven choices correspond closely to ethical impact indicators [1]. Ethics of choice, agency, evidence, and accountability spur mixed-method proposals for assessment; ethical metrics enable comparative analysis of practice, theory, and exemplars. Coupled with case selection, preliminary heuristic guides normative reflection on ethical balances and tensions across interactive documentaries [2]. Ethics also intersect with learning, civic engagement, and documented participation; interactive formats advance citizenship while supporting media literacy, critical reflection, and democratic discourse. Educational frames connect to curricular aspirations across diverse settings and spokes. Societal and institutional dimensions, augmentation of collective memory, and sought legitimacy amplify participation opportunities [3]. Formative approach enters at earlier stages; institutions at broader scales hold public trust and influence opportunities for national representation. As participation risks underrepresented viewpoints, appropriate guidelines for authorship, privacy, and reuse spur further exploration [3]. Tensions between user involvement, co-creation, and minoritized status abound; unstructured, stimulated, and contextualized agency shapes degrees of shared authorship responsive to system atmospheres. Processes of representation, voice, and consent emerge across interactions with sensitive, intimate, and personalized topics [4]. Curricula quote broader pedagogical implications spanning democracy, citizenship, new literacies, and participatory cultures; deeper consideration probes instructional means, embedded forms, broader societal ramifications, and articulation in scholarly contexts. Within deliberation, interactive-engagement qualities teeter between ethical stimulation and persuasion. Contrasting characteristics, specification, polyvocality, and coalescence, shape ethical in/appropriation across embodied, social, political, cultural, and historical dimensions and contexts [4].

Design Ethics and Stakeholder Involvement

The ability to record video on mobile devices and share it instantaneously on social media has led to a huge increase in the volume of spontaneous user-sourced evidence being generated. Crowdsourcing, citizen journalism, and user-generated content are not new concepts, but their scale, prevalence, and apparent acceptance have changed dramatically [5]. When-formatted as first-person documentation of real-world events at or near the time of occurrence, such content is often viewed as more truthful and trustworthy. Interactive documentary projects frequently depend on user-sourced material to convey stories, raising questions about how personal data is treated. User-generated evidence often documents sensitive incidents that can trigger anger, sadness, and feeling of disgust. Potential handling and follow-up have become tremendous concern of filmmaker. Government counter-propaganda and public in-depth explanations have come into play [5]. Consent after video uploads and dissemination establish a fine line before and after user agreement on complex issues. Four general informal restrictions frequently applies to completing the archival activities user share the videos with a specific hashtag 6. User-sourced content reliability, trustworthiness, and motives, are subjects of investigations in which the original source of data pictures taken by public news coverage and deliver are traced [6].

User Agency and Narrative Control

The degree of user control and narrative agency in interactive documentaries varies widely across productions and directly shapes users' experience with the work. Some i-docs afford extensive possibilities for branching paths, while others limit control to a single trajectory with selected moments of interactivity [6]. User agency cannot easily be described as merely "high" or "low"; the range of choices granted in a digital documentary does not correlate reliably with the user's feeling of being able to influence the story [7]. Control emerges as an important dimension of the user experience because it can segment what might otherwise be a unified temporal flow, deliberately interrupting immersion to stress that the user bears responsibility for selection. Interactivity often creates an inherent conflict between freedom and coercion, raising the possibility of non-linear paths that nevertheless pressure the user toward specific outcomes [1, 7]. Observers should therefore consider how and to what extent the design of a given i-doc involves users in the construction of meaning and the elimination of options rather than limiting engagement through moderation by the author or institution.

Evaluation Methods for Ethical Effectiveness

Determining the ethical effectiveness of interactive documentaries requires rigorous mixed-methods frameworks that address two related challenges: [1] establishing metrics of ethical impact capable of identifying, tracking, and measuring the changes and continuities that arise during interactive documentary engagement, and [2] validating ethical impact concerning both the developers' ethical intentions and the interactive documentary's actualisation of those intentions as perceived by participants, the audience, and wider stakeholders [2].

Case Studies

The ethical, empathic, and evidentiary dimensions of choice in interactive documentary forms are examined through three case studies [3]. The first case explores how the specific design of interactive narratives that present moral decision points can illuminate ethical dilemmas, while the second considers the data-related ethical implications of user-generated content across interactive works [4]. The final case investigates how choice architecture can either amplify or dampen the potential for empathy activation among users. The analysis highlights the need for enhanced scrutiny of the ethical ramifications of choice in interactive contexts, together with corresponding opportunities to reinforce ethical responsiveness and empathic engagement [5].

Interactive Narratives and Moral Dilemmas

Interactive documentaries often provide opportunities for users to engage in meaningful decision-making processes that are ethically charged. Several interactive case studies employ branches in the narrative structure of user-centric formal stories set in a non-fiction context, thereby generating additional opportunities for ethical considerations [6]. The exploration of such ethical questions typically takes place through interaction that highlights potential consequences associated with a selected choice of action [7]. Another interactive documentary positions user as decision-makers confronted with ethical dilemmas that present direct conflicts involving prima facie moral obligations. The articulation of such ethical tensions motivates considerations of the choice architecture that shapes the level of empathetic engagement experienced by users throughout the interactive documentary encounter [8].

Data Ethics and Privacy in User-Generated Evidence

Empirical documentaries such as iWitness (TV5, 2011) invite users to submit evidence and make discoveries about a humanitarian catastrophe [9]. In this case, data submitted by individuals become the grounds for witnessing the event; the evidence must be secure and the subjects of it must be protected. Respecting user-generated data raises complexities in the treatment of collected evidence. Edwards et al. summarize key ethical issues that occupy the attention of organisations filling such roles [9]. The framework adopted for iWitness centres upon the collection, security, retention, dissemination, capacity for anonymisation, removal process, and reuse of user submissions. A key role of data ethics, an ongoing and increasingly urgent aspect of ethical digital communication, encompasses the care exercised over the material produced by witnesses, who deserve to know how it will be handled. Such treatment is intimately bound up with respect for human agency and for the contexts in which evidence is generated [10]. Despite shared efforts to articulate ethical data use in user-generated practices, guidelines often exist in conflict with aspirations set out in earlier frameworks. Within and beyond documentary forms, user-generated material attains significance as the strength of an evidence claim directly correlates with its provenance and the degree of control exerted by the person or group submitting it [11]. Interactive documentaries enable users to play an important evidential role through means such as data input, visualisation, rankings, curation, follow-up questions posed to a submitter, and invitation to respond to ongoing contributions made by others. Such supply mechanisms for evidence drift further away from an emphasis on user agency than methods which merely allow users to submit documents [11]. Decisions about the content and conduct of the represented, already pressing in conventional documentary practice, become at once both vital and problematized. Understood through a digital or interaction-architectural lens, evidence arising from user evidence generation hangs in an unsettled, complex, and frequently aporetic balance between agency, agency's unbuilding or altering force, and respect for the very conditions of agency [8, 11].

Empathy Activation through Choice Architecture

Whether through gameplay, interactive fiction or user-driven documentaries, content that invites input from viewers often stirs a mix of emotions, reasoning and support for vocal concerns. Movement or shifts in perspective allow for consideration of what resonates, and thinking through hypotheticals illustrates the impact of current circumstances [11]. In the case of video games, players character analysis on a human scale has character-driven consequences that some find relate to or difficult to digest [1]. Choices made often influence plot direction and have consequence that shape invested time as controllers represent stakeholders' evolution and adaptation. Placing commands repeatedly on animated graphic-equitable attachments allows for guided exploration of landscapes, yet independent or proactive attitude helps drive the experience [2]. If the story is compelling or offers an alternative realm to flora and fauna work (fic between established lines), acts or scenes in contemplation of narrated events alongside active user-perceived build further invites thought into consequences of specific factoids and the role of pre-selection raises concerns about prejudice from shared online material, waxed under the ornament, and augmented reflectance well in [9, 10].

Pedagogical and Societal Implications

Interactive documentary forms represent a burgeoning area of scholarly and artistic attention; these works engage with longstanding questions about knowledge, truth, ethics, empathy, and agency in documentary forms; and these questions resonate in the broader, still-evolving debate about meaning-making, meaning-sharing, critical literacy, and the obligations of researchers, educators, and artists who conduct their work in the public sphere, in different formal media, and across digital environments [5]. Educational digital media have long been framed as instruments for learning and civic engagement in topics ranging from media literacy to critical thinking, citizenship to healthy living, and science to the arts; some of these discourses have been dominated by notions of how media influence behaviour, others have stressed the need to tackle part chess/part checkers media literacy for a post-researched public, and still others have made efforts to rethink educational protocols and media practices within a critical education framework; contemporary interactive documentaries draw on the comprehensive concept of education in development and citizenship, citizenship as exercised through community action and engagement, and critical digital literacy as a reflexive engagement with the current era of selfies and saturation [2]. The public memorialisation of the Holocaust by, for, and with various communities appears to be one of the most salient reasons that interactive documentary, with its distinctive production protocols and modes of circulation, has recently drawn the attention of researchers and artists; discourses of collective and shared memory, of public remembrance, framing, and commemoration recur in much of this work and in several of the case studies examined; and the legitimisation of the documentary tradition remains at stake, not least because the genre continues to be under sustained, even systematic adverse critical scrutiny across multiple media [6].

Education, Citizenship, and Critical Digital Literacy

Throughout history, the notion of subjectivity and the ethos of citizenship have undergone several transformations. The enlightening aspirations of the early century were devolved in the era of totalitarianism [8]. Cultural movements attempting to restore the value of subjective experience seem to shift the focus from the "Why" questions posed by the radicals, to "How" questions posed by the liberating movements. Viewed through the lens of the crisis of representation, interactive documentaries act both as a document of culture and as a site for social engagement [3]. A growth in user-generated content is an anticipated part of the logic of the interactive Web, with seen transformations allowed via social networking gateways. This content and evidence has reliability but remains contingent [9]. Interactive exhibits involving user-generated content currently rest by the articulation of the system of documentation framing the limits of information and opportunity [9]. At the limit of this system lie modes of evidence where interactivity subsumes contingency and the user appropriates a point of view rather than merely an opportunity to suggest alterations. Practices emerge based upon position, where only invaders are visible to a choice of "drew This" or "drew That," demonstrating a preservation of system and witness as evidence counter to those claiming the second mode is the sole opportunity remain to the user. Continued discussion around the first mode also note that while freedom is existence of content rather than a sequence to be enforced on the content, the line between experience and exposition remains [10, 11].

Public Memory and Documentary Legitimacy

The current discussion about digital media is marked by a confusing overabundance of conditions and hybrid forms affecting many genres including documentation and fiction and established boundaries between widely accepted types of documents [1]. The core questions of public memory and documentary legitimacy help clarify relationships between institutions, technologies, texts, and audiences, make sense of the complex power dynamics involving these elements, and visualize the ties between records, people, and situations [2]. Authors acting outside institutional recording and mainstream narratives create works that provide others with genuine documentary evidence of struggles, injustices, and individual and collective experiences [2]. Most interactive and participatory documentary projects still tend to correspond to traditional practices based on recording, persuading, analyzing, and expressing. They exhibit varying degrees of recording, persuasion, analysis, and expression while also

engaging people and designing encounters that can be participatory even when the main emphasis lies on recording or persuading [3]. A range of formats and creative combinations now design encounters and stimulate discussion, turning interactive documentary into a potential space for contemplating the consequences structural adjustments and neoliberalism imply for democracy and citizenship [4]. Regenerating the public sphere through documentary repose in agency grounded in a public self, public memory that is clearly confirmed by the ontology of the medium and the condition, action pair of documentary events in which intentions strive to be fulfilled and material conditions threaten to thwart them [5]. Citizen engagement with documentary media remains vital for thinking about situations collectively and constructing a public point of view and it also continues to play a significant role in checking the expropriation of collective evidence. Such collective engagements are not without contemporary precedents; past documentaries whose authors sought audience participation produced several citizen archives [4]. At both the level of production and reception, interactivity the relationship between the author, the text, and the audience stimulates corresponding activism. Yet at the same time, large numbers of free mobile cameras and editing suites continue to circulate on a planetary scale, the opportunities for the recovery of collective memory laid out by the three conditions remain extremely tenuous at best [5]. Throughout its long history, interactivity continues to serve as a conceptual and strategic tool to interrogate the public sphere, renovate historical knowledge, and confront concurrent rehabilitations of fascism. In the interactivity of the public event conception of citizens as engaged spectators and participants in vernacular public remembering struggles continues to help critically rethink the global character of the apparatus and its technical components in situated struggles [1, 4].

Policy and Professional Standards for Interactive Documentary Practice

Interactive documentaries have emerged as a distinct genre, gaining increasing recognition and engagement through establishments such as the International Documentary Association's DocuLab and various festivals dedicated to the art form [5]. Interactive documentaries differ from other forms of documentary, as users may select the sequence of content rather than following a predetermined path, yet they still remain obliged to respect the conclusion and the location of shots [5]. As interactive documentary becomes more mainstream, ethical questions surrounding the form increasingly arise and the importance of establishing ethical guidelines and professional standards grows [6]. These queries have emerged due to the recent popularity and accessibility of interactive documentaries, yet the tension between choice and effect in relation to ethical questions has been inadequately addressed in the field [6]. Seeking to uncover both the thematic aspects of choice and its inherent evidentiary nature, this paper undertakes the task of providing the necessary foundation for action, the very foundation of documentaries rooted in the practice of choosing [6].

Challenges and Controversies

Difficulties remain in using interactive documentary forms for journalism and social commentary. When ethical commitments are marked as paramount, they take precedence over user engagement, and the usability of the interactive medium is compromised [7]. Strategies have been developed to stimulate user engagement, engagement which at times exceeds ethical boundaries. Some of the most controversial documentaries rely heavily on viewing metrics rather than ethical indicators to assess their effectiveness [7]. The relevance of ethical commitments has also been debated. The purpose of interactive formats is seen as reaching out to an audience that might otherwise resist, and the pursuit of an audience has been suggested to justify setting aside ethical constraints [8]. It has similarly been observed that interactive documentaries can move the viewer to empathize with the plight of others while simultaneously drawing attention away from their respective suffering as the individual grapples with moral dilemmas concerning representations of those others. Ethical concerns are rendered moot, it is suggested, for media that are already beyond the pale. In such cases, however, formal characteristics of the interactive documentary may be retained as a form of irony or critique, a travesty of the possibility of ethical choice [9].

Balancing Engagement with Ethical Constraints

All interactive documentary forms risk eliciting heightened engagement at the expense of ethical integrity, turning immersion into a dangerous lure [2, 8]. The potential for user agency and empathy to amplify narrative power also renders them vulnerable to manipulation and distortion [8]. Even the framing of choice can weaken democratic discourse, nudging audiences towards predetermined conclusions. Configuration decisions, audience-specification in particular, shape textual affordances, gradually shutting off opportunities for discussion or participation [9]. Interactive documentaries that utilize choice to compel or preempt dialogue accentuate this danger. Stories are often organically delivered through participatory web platforms, fostering open-ended engagement [9]. Presenting moral dilemmas as interconnected and situational; not prescriptive, decisions initiate, persist, and evolve within the participatory process [9]. Authors also control the level of prior epistemic access granted to audiences, mitigating the risk that details dominate without sufficient comprehension of competing values. Yet these same affordances can equally facilitate coercive narrative pathways, crowding out rather than

supporting engagement [10]. Such capacity for distortion introduces new stakes alongside theoretical issues of autonomy and agency [9].

Representation, Voice, and Consent

The creation of interactive documentaries exposes the underlying crisis of representation inherent in recorded forms of expression in both digital and nondigital spheres, a participatory democracy engagement affects a plurality of distinct communities that transcends the boundaries of sectarianism, fosters the voice of the mute, enables the emergence of a multitude of practices through the use of a wide range of devices, operates entirely outside commercial environments, opens hybrid channels of communication that utilize various languages, and strives to occupy the public space of collective existence through co-creational dialogue [3]. The affordances of interactive documentary, along with their blending of the contemporary and the ancestral, increasingly favour the adoption of renewed visual strategies that broaden documentary practices beyond the doxa of the century-long activity by reconnecting with the political dimension of documentary in a meaningful yet disregarded form [4]. Such a drama-oriented participation is particularly relevant in regions appearing as no-more-than-contexts marked by the homogenizing logic of global developments misleadingly coined as democracies, where the combination of archival materials, digital technologies, collective work, and interactive documents allows a distinct social imaginary to emerge [5].

Methodological Validity in User-Sourced Evidence

User-sourced evidence can lend credibility to interactive documentaries by anchoring layers of meaning and countering charge of manipulation, yet it also raises concerns about validity [1, 10]. Crowdsourced data often exhibit inconsistencies, lack representativeness, and reflect diverse motivations that are difficult to verify or qualify [11]. Stakeholder-produced content may further diverge from shared definitions of evidence or document status, given different epistemologies, cultures of expression, and publication idioms across contexts [10]. Specifying and controlling permissible forms of user input, whether data and media must directly relate to the topic, whether content must convey experience rather than opinion, would therefore not only facilitate interchange across contributions but also enhance users' capacity to comprehend the rationale for selection and probing [10].

Future Directions

Emerging digital technologies, from datafication and algorithmic automation to 3D, augmented, and virtual realities, continue to transform creative media [11]. These developments provoke debates about alterity, materiality, representation, and ethics, influencing numerous fields including interactive documentary, whose formal definition incorporates a broader range of projects than typically identified as interactive documentaries. Many existing and anticipated creative works are neither fit for interactive documentary nor are defined as such. Interactive and transmedia have become adjectives characterising a wide variety of projects. Authored, directed, curated, and edited digitally born media on topics, places, and people distinct from one's everyday life engage differently with theorists of the nonhuman who question anthropocentric assumptions [11]. Media, integrated at a conceptual level within interactive documentary, perform as infrastructures in augmented and virtual spaces, enabling an increasing number of creative possibilities [11]. The ethics of choice raise additional attendant issues regarding interaction in interactive documentaries. Choice has become a dominant topic of debate, addresses the unexamined assumption that choice is a highly desirable attribute of an experience, and identifies a number of emergent characteristics related to choice within the poetics of interactive documentaries [9]. Projects that engage ethical questions as part of the practice or within the content itself have emerged within the interactive documentary field [10]. Empirical research continues to explore the manner by which viewer agency within the human machine relationship of a choice; consequence model influences social media messaging and evaluative questions concerning assertion vs. ambiguity. The emergence and consolidation of ethical discourse across interactive documentary scholarship now connects discussions of content, experience, and epistemology through a shared interest in documentation as a mode of cultural engagement. Further, that discussion can usefully be extended to enquiry whether such attention should be situated historically rather than discursively within the form [11].

CONCLUSION

Interactive documentary forms represent a significant evolution in documentary practice, expanding the boundaries of storytelling through user participation and digital interactivity. This study has demonstrated that the ethical landscape of these forms is structured around the dynamic interplay of choice, empathy, and evidence. While interactivity empowers users with agency and participatory roles, it simultaneously introduces tensions between autonomy and authorial control, raising concerns about manipulation, coercion, and accountability. The analysis reveals that empathy, though a central objective of many i-docs is neither guaranteed nor uniformly beneficial. Its activation depends heavily on design choices, narrative framing, and user predispositions, which may either broaden understanding or reinforce bias. Similarly, the incorporation of user-generated evidence transforms traditional notions of documentary truth, demanding stricter attention to credibility, data governance, and ethical standards in representation. To address these challenges, the paper emphasizes the importance of integrating

ethical considerations into all stages of interactive documentary production, from design and authorship to dissemination and evaluation. Mixed-method approaches to assessing ethical effectiveness, alongside clear policy guidelines and professional standards, are essential for sustaining trust and legitimacy in the field. In conclusion, interactive documentaries possess considerable potential to foster democratic engagement, critical thinking, and collective memory. However, realizing this potential requires a deliberate and reflexive ethical framework that carefully balances innovation with responsibility, ensuring that the power of interactivity enhances rather than undermines the core values of documentary practice.

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