# ... a constant reminder that real issues exist needing real solutions and true compassion

By Weyinmi Atigbi

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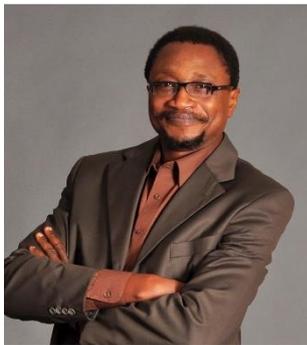
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I'M truly honoured to be standing in front of you giving this talk. I'm also appreciative to the organizers of iRep for considering me for this, and I hope I can share with all of you a few perspectives that with a bit of luck, will contribute to the discourse on the future of the art of documentary film making in this digital age. Let me just say it upfront, I think the documentary film is probably one of those art forms that must be at the center of virtual space. How it can successfully evolve into this position, with its integrity intact, is the real question.

My background isn't directly in filmmaking, even though over the years as a creative director, I have been involved with the medium. I do however share the passion for documenting circumstances and situations within my own work and I also have been part of the major disruptive force we call the digital revolution, experiencing first hand, how it changed what we thought was possible, and in the process, changed whole industry structures even while inventing new ones.

Maybe for this very reason I suspect, I was chosen to give this talk, since I represent a perspective from just outside the documentary filmmaking circle but with roots in the new force that we all have been compelled to take extremely seriously; which is the power of the digital. So, my talk isn't so much a lecture as it is a sharing of thoughts and ideas that might hopefully provoke action in some, or for others, help to confirm similar concepts on the possible way forward.

I have always loved documentaries, and I have loved them above other forms of filmmaking. Even when I am absorbed in conceptual or fiction film, I find myself attracted to themes that attempt to capture the world in its naked splendor. I really can't remember the first documentary that caught my attention, but I must have been five or six years old, when I noticed that I loved watching them. Even at that age it seemed to me to be such a vast canvas for sharing a good story, except that there was a catch; these were "true" stories, not anything made up or attempting to approximate it. For this very reason, documentaries had, and still have the power of capturing the imagination in a way that fiction

films could never do. At that age, their impact for me was all the more compelling since in my mind I kept telling myself: "wow... this is real!" And its effect would linger with me for days on end, trailing into the background of my mind only weeks later.

I think that this ability of the documentary, be it in motion or still format, to claim to capture life in its actual raw state, is what makes it so fundamentally different from other art forms. When you watch fiction film you must be ready to suspend belief and empirical judgment, but with a documentary, you actually expect truth.

The very notion of a verifying witness, observing all that transpires even as it happens, is quite powerful. It has an almost ethereal quality to it, like a divine being constantly observing every action taken by us mere mortals.

Of course, the influential style of "Cinema verite" or observational cinema, can trace its essence to that notion of the all-pervading witness, seeking persistently to observe all things and thereby revealing some sort of cinematic truth. If, however, the documentary did not always reveal truth, it was not for want of those who did not try. The intentions were somewhat idealistic but the power that documentaries possessed, held sway on too many people for it to not be abused. It was quickly realized that the very act of directing focus upon an event or a subject, and the way it was done, could give that thing immense influence and power within our psyche.

Propaganda, the less pleasing sibling of the documentary art form soon became a major tool of governments and administrative structures, spitting out specific perspectives in order to control whole societies. It became a tool of war and a tool in peacetime, a tool for galvanizing whole nations towards a higher common goal, and a tool for promoting hatred and bigotry. Throughout all this, its power and the sanctioned subject matters it depicted, remained almost unquestioned.

This was after all the broadcast age, where all dissemination of information and misinformation was centralized and controlled.

The role of technology for the most part was initially perceived to help create this centralized broadcasting structure, from the invention of cinemas to the radio, to television. Even in the print world, the centralized mass media model also held sway. It must <u>have seemed too adventurous to documentary filmmakers</u> then, that making pure documentaries that strove to tell an alternate story from what was socially sanctioned, was extremely difficult if not at times impossible.

The questions then became, "what was the true intention of documentary?" Where did pure documentary film end and propaganda begin? I suspect that this is a question that can be debated even today, as the grey areas between the two sides have become more subtle and subliminal. This is an issue, which I shall attempt to touch on further in this presentation.
But overall, and without a doubt, the broadcasting model was king of the hill, with no questions asked.

THEN the digital age burst upon us. For many people at that time, it initially seemed like a bad joke. Here was a promise for a new way of doing things but which would make many skills obsolete overnight and put many industries in jeopardy. But it also promised to make things easier to create and easier to access – now who wouldn't want that? I remember then, that the promise of being COMPACT AND ENHANCED seemed quite romantic, an ideal to be chased after but not really achievable, and as is the case with all disruptive technologies, the professionals who represented the *status quo* at that time, didn't take it seriously at first. I believe that the promise was delayed more by the reluctance of the old to adopt the new, than the maturation of the technologies. But then you always get a few who can perceive the possibilities of the new way and are soon in collaboration with it, creating powerful and

more compacted versions of many of the processes and tools that they as professionals had battled with previously. And all the digital tools are now available, and they are getting even more compact and more enhanced with each six-month cycle. The digital age has not just affected hardware and software, but also processes and perception. It seems to be telling us all that it will stop at nothing until it has consumed all things unto itself.

In his book *Winning the Story Wars*, Jonah Sachs claims that we are now in a new age which he describes as the 'Digitorial age' (a hybrid word from oral tradition and digital). He states that we initially had oral traditions with which most stories, information and knowledge was disseminated. Of course, with this style of communication, it relied heavily on individuals to not only pass the stories on, but for them to be personally invested in the stories they shared. It had a two-way flow between the one who shared and the one that received, only to share also. Then came the broadcast era and people stopped being sharers of information and stories but became one-sided consumers with all content handed down from the center. Then it gave way to the digital or 'digitorial' age, once again making us participants and sharers of information and knowledge through social media and other online channels. He claims it has all come full circle.

To remain relevant and develop into a modern-day tool for self and collective transformation as its oral tradition ancestor did, the documentary film must evolve fully into the digital space despite all the challenges. Probably the slogan for documentary filmmakers and many others alike, must be "ADAPT AND SURVIVE... BY ANY MEANS NECESSARY!"

SO, what are these challenges and also opportunities that the digital age presents not just to the documentary film but to a number of other art forms? For one, in the age gone by, the relationship between information and knowledge was a strong, almost assured one, with major research efforts going into bridging the two. Now, we have massive amounts of information existing at the click of a button but most times without curatorial context to help distill it. A large amount of Information doesn't necessarily translate to knowledge, but in fact may probably produce the opposite effect. There are a number of ways to hide knowledge. One way, being the obvious, is to refuse to make the information available. Another is to make too much information available, thereby creating an overwhelming overload, such that true knowledge is lost in the morass.

Secondly, the broadcast model has been disrupted. It is no longer the only kid on the block and even within its own space the proliferation of diverse competitors, empowered by more affordable and more powerful broadcast hardware and online alternatives have created a distracting array of options. The influence the broadcast model once had, which assured audiences for many films and documentaries is being eroded, restricting many a brilliant work to limited screenings. The more adventurous filmmakers with riskier subject matter, of course, can always be relied upon to look for alternative channels for screening, even in the days before the digital revolution. With the advent of online video, they soon discovered a new way to screen their films. Nowadays, online video sites such as YOUTUBE and VIMEO are standard with many filmmakers and their popularity is growing.

In a recent report by *Venture Beat* on video streaming in the USA, it says, and I quote; "...the decline of the home DVD market, due to the rise of Internet video streaming services has almost destroyed that entire segment... According to research by PricewaterhouseCoopers, physical home entertainment revenue will decline 28 percent from $12.2 billion last year to $8.7 billion in 2018. This year, the total revenue from video streaming will match that of physical home sales." The report goes on to say, "The YouTube platform reached a billion dollars in revenue in 2014, as advertisers have had to look elsewhere to reach teens and millennials, who are just not watching regular television... Twitter, Vine, and Instagram have succeeded here as well, although to a lesser extent than YouTube, which is probably due to YouTube's maturity."

At first glance, online video streaming might be the main way to go, after all, even Hollywood is being disrupted by online video delivery, and although these trends start offshore, they tend to spread fairly quickly within the global space. However, the problem of not being guided, or being able to access a coherent stream of ideas, so important to the effective consumption of the documentary experience, still exists. It seems the first challenge of information overload still haunts the second.

Thirdly, the documentary also has competition from pseudo-reality video shows that exist on broadcast and online platforms. I would argue that this segment further erodes the potential audience for documentary film. The popularity of voyeurism television with shows like *Big Brother*, has created an appetite for frivolous reflections of reality that have nothing to do with the so-called reality that is claimed to be shown. It's a fact that once you introduce the camera into a "reality" situation, those being filmed go to great lengths to act out scenarios in front of the camera that have nothing to do with the truth. The audience brought up with this type of instant reality programming may find it more difficult to follow the subtleties of a documentary's unfolding, and at times, lengthy story.

Which brings us to the problems of limited attention spans created by an online culture that demands that information be available instantly and that solutions be instantly downloadable. A number of studies have inferred that there is a link between ADD – Attention Deficit Disorder and our intense, fast-moving, digital and media culture, with the latter contributing to a breakdown of interpersonal relationships and a surge in self-absorption. With emails seeking people's attention every few minutes, *Twitter* and *Facebook* updates running constantly and News feeds passing hundreds of posts by them every day, they have very little focus left in them.

In a recent article, Dr. Elias Aboujaoude, director of Stanford University's Impulse Control Disorders Clinic at Stanford University, said, "The more we become used to just sound bites and tweets, the less patient we will be with more complex, more meaningful information. And I do think we might lose the ability to analyze things with any depth and nuance. Like any skill, if you don't use it, you lose it."

The potential audience is getting lost in their own world and living mostly in their heads. For them, virtual space is as much a reality as the outside world, sometimes more so. It is for this reason that most advertising on the Internet is based on impression rather than content. So how do you communicate with an audience that finds it difficult to focus on anything for more than 10 minutes? It would seem that any hope of the documentary film thriving in the digital world, will definitely need a major rethink. Like all situations confronted by change, the hand with which we hold on to the old is what we must use to grasp the new. We must let go of the one in order to hold firm, the other.

SO, maybe we need a redesign of what we consider the documentary film. And to do so holistically, I contend one must effectively address what I call the three 'P's -- Product, Process and Perception.

Let's start with the process side of things. The democratization of the tools for filmmaking has been ongoing for a number of years. The adoption of Non-Linear editing along with digital video formats and codec's as well as professional digital film cameras has become standard and with solutions like RED and BLACK MAGIC amongst others. These solutions are becoming more accessible and affordable. The disruptive effect of the humble DSLR (Digital Single-Lens Reflex) camera and its adoption by mainstream professionals has been documented extensively and is now a reality. The software hacking of these tools to produce RAW video footage that, at times, rivals the quality and dynamic range of some of the best cameras available, at a fraction of the price, is amazing. You can now even get a drone video camera shooting remote aerial video for less than a $1,000. But it seems the disruption refuses to stop there.

Just the other day, I came across a short film produced for Bentley Motors called "Intelligent Details". It was beautifully shot as expected, except that it was all shot on the iPhone 5S and edited entirely on an iPad. Amongst last year's notable entries to the Sundance festival was Director Sean Baker's feature film *"Tangarine,"* also entirely shot on the iPhone 5S. It got picked up by Magnolia Pictures and was one of the most talked-about films at the Festival. This represents COMPACT AND ENHANCED 2.0, an extreme empowerment of the tools at an extremely affordable price. And may I remind you that to snigger at these developments is to fall into the same trap as those professionals who initially made light of the evolving digital age, much to their regret. Since the ideal of true *cinema verite* combined improvisation with the use of the camera to help reveal truth, I believe there exists here, great opportunities with the camera phone. Because it has become ubiquitous in society, the camera phone can become unobtrusive within the film making process and can enable the capture of true *"verite"* footage.

I am not suggesting though, that just by changing the tools, one can easily solve the challenges. No matter how good the tools are, in the hands of the rash, its output can only lead to a distortion. Any work of art that relies solely on the latest digital tricks to gain attention and make its statement is setting itself up for aesthetic obsolescence and can only limit its long-term worth.

Great art has however, also evolved out of expediency.

I recently came across the short documentaries of Cecile Emeke, a British Filmmaker of African descent and was quite taken in by her young vibrant perspective. Another thing that impressed me was the way she was thinking, when it came to articulating her stories. They were all produced with the young urban digital savvy audience in mind. The series of short films called *"Strolling"* centered on what she feels are grossly under-voiced issues and challenges of people of the African Diaspora, born and living in, and identifying more with Europe than with their Diaspora roots. Each segment featured young people sharing their concerns and opinions around this central theme of identity and was produced to not exceed 14 minutes in length, many being shorter than this. It was released on her web site and every week or so, as each one was released, she had email, twitter and facebook feeds informing her audience of the latest segment of the story. She has grown quite a following but this approach grew out of expediency since she said that getting a film grant for her subject matter was out of the question. The series was quite revelatory for me. Some of the issues touched on, I didn't even know existed. For me, this was documentary film doing what it should do, informing me but also opening my mind to new ways of seeing life and ultimately questioning my judgments and assumptions of what is true. And she was doing all this through the media clutter of the digital space.

I immediately recognized in this, a possible model for other young and even more established filmmakers. Even the raising of her financing was done online by crowd funding, with individuals contributing   as   little   as   \$1   towards   her   projects. She obviously isn't the first to do this, even the great filmmaker Spike Lee recently used *"Kickstarter"* the online crowd funding portal to raise over \$1.4 million for his latest indie film. As a film Professor, he admits that it was an idea inspired from his students.

Most times, our assumptions within convention arise from the limitations of the day, but these limitations have an expiration date and at times we don't realize they have expired. It seems to me that it is time to question these conventions and redesign the Product.

SOME years back working in Advertising, a client in the FMCG (Fast Moving Consumer Goods) sector observed that their products were being re-packaged, that their milk was being portioned into smaller cellophane bags and re-sold by the street vendors. What they realized was that because of a harsher economy, their consumers couldn't afford to buy the large packs that they produced at that time. The street vendors realized this gap and were making a killing. Suffice it to say, that the client immediately responded by introducing single-serving packs at a more assessable price point. I think there is a lesson for us here.

Why can't a story be split into segments and screened as interrelated but self-sufficient pieces. The audience within this digital age will have less time or a reduced inclination to sit down and absorb a documentary film developing gradually over 1 and a half to 2 hours but can reference to 15-minute segments spread over the entire content.

This isn't new I know; we have seen segmenting in one form or the other in different ways, but I feel this is a good example of how it can be redesigned to meet the current challenges. It would require a different way of thinking and it would affect the way these segments are edited, the way the information is arranged. A different type of editing language will need to engage the audience within a 10 or 15-minute framework but still create continuity. At the same time each segment must be self-contained and must lead the audience to the next segment by creating momentum. There are a number of advantages to this approach. One of them is that the filmmaker can engage an audience on their own terms and still be seen. The documentary can go on almost indefinitely as long as its subject matter is evolving, and it can continue to engage its audience. The filmmaker can also receive direct feedback through online chats and commentary. Another advantage of this model is that just like Cecile's series, it could be produced in batches making it more affordable for the filmmaker, depending on the subject matter.

This sort of film will need a deliberate effort to curate the various segments and add conceptual clarity to the experience. Each filmmaker could easily setup their own website and online enterprise to manage the content and social media feeds for their films but a more sustainable solution would be the creation of a special online portal for this type of documentary film, where one would be able to help exhibit and guide this type of approach. It would be video streaming for documentary filmmakers with the curators being documentary filmmakers themselves and who will be sensitive to the creative intention of the material. This would represent a larger collective voice that can create more traction and presence for its content and subscribers. Even YOUTUBE have recognized the importance of creating a separate medium for specific content and have just launched YOUTUBE for ARTISTS.

AT this juncture, I would like to challenge iRep to expand its laudable achievements and evolve into the digital arena by championing a portal such as this. What this would mean for the brand is that your involvement in documentary film will transcend the physical time and space limitations that you are presently bound by. The film festival and its impact will be able to continue online even after we have concluded it four days from now.

To believe that all challenges can be addressed with tools and technology is to reduce the form to a somewhat simplistic assumption that great art is made solely with skill and good equipment. Great filmmaking, like all great art is always more than the sum of its parts. I will argue here, that the integrity of creative intention behind each work of art or documentary film is one of the greatest tools it has to elevate it above the cacophony of media distraction. I believe that it represents the silent partner in every project the artist or filmmaker embarks on that somehow transfuses itself into the work and leaps beyond it, to create a genuine connection with the viewers' innate striving for truth.

I reference to Jonah Sachs once more, where he claims that we now have a Story War playing out all around us — the battle to be heard in a world of noise and clamor. In this post-broadcast world, he says that only a few have been able to break through the clutter by using a timeless tool that has always moved minds and changed behaviors. These are great stories, espousing deep values and truths that all of us instinctively recognize and respond positively towards. This is the connection that I believe is enabled when creative intention is right. All the technique, skill and technology should lead us to this one place of creative integrity.

Earlier in this presentation I touched on Propaganda and the grey areas surrounding it that allow for truth to be perverted and for lies to be held sacred, for inadequacy to be marketed in place of empowerment. This type of propaganda can only persist if people remain passive consumers of content. With a well-articulated strategy for using the digital landscape, we have an opportunity to ensure that this no longer remains the case. But it will also challenge stereotypes of all forms. We know that issues are rarely simply black or white but always involve a series of grays to varying degrees, that societies are affected as much by external factors as they are by the consequences of choice and collective action, or inaction. That romanticizing a situation is as much an avoidance of the truth as is, telling a lie. By ensuring a constant feedback from the very source of the filmmaker's attention, we might be able to better discern and articulate truth, even as the film is being shot.

This feedback could also help us ask and try to resolve those really difficult questions about the stories we are telling on behalf of others or ourselves. Why are we doing it? What is our hidden agenda and why should we even care? How can we claim to help the audience seek truth in the circumstances we film when we struggle to find truth within ourselves? But many times, great work will proceed out of the depths of tortuous inquiry, the openness to wonder and the human experience.

The late South African writer **Nadine Gordimer** put it simply when asked about the art of being a creative writer... "You have a responsibility as a human being... you belong in the world..."

I had also asked earlier, what should be the true intention of documentaries, especially in this digital era? My submission is that, the self-same ability of the documentary to reflect and reveal truth through the eyes of its craft should be the dominant and overriding intention of its practitioners, along with the responsibility to help curate the mass of information that currently exists into decoded knowledge, and the ability to act as a reflection of our common humanity, fault lines and all.

But that's just me raving... the reality is that documentary filmmakers must earn a living. However, we must realize especially in Africa, that not only should our voices be heard, but it should also be taken seriously. And that happens when truth is told. Truth is truth in any social context and when at its core, it is revealed I believe it transcends any agenda and resonates with all those seeking it.

Finally, in this age of SGI special effects and Photoshop, where anything that can be imagined can be created in virtual space, I believe that we must constantly question what is true and what is manufactured, what is augmented reality and what is real. We should ask these questions even if the answers make us uncomfortable. And I think this is more the case now than ever before.

If the great claim of the documentary is the unveiling of truth, it must constantly stand against the new propaganda that claims that development is about technological and statistical growth over real world infrastructure and community wellbeing, that achievement is all about more power over more people, that success is about how much one can spend and consume over how many people one can empower and uplift, that economies can create hyper-growth indefinitely without consequence to its society and its environment, that a ruler should have more power over and above the collective responsibility and will of a society to transform itself, or that system efficiency and international expansion is worth striving for at all cost over and above the soul of the individual.

The documentary must, with sincere intention remind us that there is life outside virtual space, that real issues exist needing real solutions and true compassion, that life has a yearning to be lived with dignity and respect, that the wind blows, that plants sprout anew and that birds do fly.

It must help to show the humaneness that exists in spite of an otherwise increasingly impersonal global structure.

- *Being text of the keynote at the 5th iREP FESTIVAL on March, the 19' 2015.*

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