



SEARCHLIGHTS AND SUNGLASSES

LEARNING LAYER

Opinion documentaries as journalism

A Missouri School of Journalism conference called “Based On A True Story” brings in documentary filmmakers, journalists and academics to discuss the distinctions and similarities between documentary and journalism. In 2012, BOATS invited speaker Jason Spingarn-Koff, who oversees The New York Times website Op-Docs, a “forum for short, opinionated documentaries, produced with wide creative latitude and a range of artistic styles, covering current affairs, contemporary life and historical subjects.”

Newspapers have a long tradition of printing the work of columnists who offer up analysis and opinions rooted in fact. Opinion journalists, like advocacy journalists or crusading editors, are still journalists, so long as they remain non-fiction storytellers who are transparent about their personal opinions.

Op-Doc creators express their views in the first person, through their subjects or more subtly through an artistic approach to a topic. The documentaries are done on deadline and assigned in a way similar to the way other news is being assigned.

Assignments on three levels:

Flashlight: Have students watch this Op-Doc on the rise and fall of the first democratically elected president of the Maldives, Mohamed Nasheed. Ask them to imagine they are media reporters writing reviews of the documentary. Students should read the comments on the article written by the filmmaker and add their own.

Spotlight: Long-form videos can be journalism, too. Ask students to browse the documentaries on the Knight-supported Snag Films site. Each should pick one to view. Is it journalism? Why or why not?

Searchlight: Some say the digital age means the end of long-form journalism. Yet sites such as Longreads and Creativist, as well as such news organizations as the New Republic. Ask students to pick one story from these sites or others specializing in long-form journalism. What does it say that the day-to-day coverage of that issue leaves out? How many news people do you think were required to collect, check, write, illustrate, code, design and do all the other

things needed to publish the story? How does that collaboration affect content quality?