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# I-Docs as Intervention: The Poetics and Politics of Polyphony

# Editorial

Judith Aston and Stefano Odorico

The idea for this special issue of *Alphaville* originated at the *i-Docs 2018* Symposium, held in March 2018 in Bristol, UK, where we jointly convened a discussion on the potential engagement of the interactive documentary (i-doc) form with Mikhail Bakthin's expanded concept of polyphony. As part of this, we presented a series of provocations with a view to generating a new theoretical framework for i-docs.[1] These provocations were inspired by all aspects of Bakthin's polyphony, from both a theoretical and a practical point of view.

Much like Giulio Camillo's "Memory Theatre" (Yates xi), which brings order into the complexity of the universe (of the media, in our case), we argue that i-docs can be considered as a method that facilitates intervention in our societies, cultures and knowledge. Hence, this contemporary digital form can be also described and defined as a complexity of methods that find their space of action, dialogue and completion within the concept of polyphony. This issue's general focus, indeed, is on i-docs as often complex projects that embrace, within their structures and production processes, multiple voices that interact together in the creation of content. This brings us to what Bakhtin has written about the polyphonic and multivocal novel, which, he claims, "is constructed not as the whole of a single consciousness, absorbing other consciousnesses as objects into itself, but as a whole formed by the interaction of several consciousnesses, none of which entirely becomes an object for the other" (18). We believe that Bakhtin's theory, which gives account of this plurality, is well suited to i-docs and, although his work has been mentioned before in the literature (Daniel; Aston, "Direct"; Aston and Matthews; Zimmermann and De Michiel), it still has a lot to offer to the field, especially due to its multifaceted nature.

This special issue, accordingly, aims to analyse, reflect and raise questions on approaches to polyphony and complexity within i-docs. It also aims to begin to critically theorise this within the wider context of how media research methods can influence knowledge generation across different disciplines. We are interested in the use of i-docs as an interventionist form in any area of research, whether it is part of a participatory process, a tool for data analysis or activism, a reflexive exploration of new and creative methodologies or a dialogical machine. Furthermore, we are interested in how the creation of a theoretical tool within a Bakthinian framework of analysis

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implies the inclusion of the concept of "carnival" and "carnivalisation" of different aspects of the i-doc form itself.

Our initial study, as presented at *i-Docs 2018*, was generated from a coming together of our combined interests. Judith Aston began to work on polyphony and heteroglossia in the early 2000s through her doctoral work with the Oxford-based anthropologist Wendy James (Aston, *Interactive*). The initial outcome of this collaboration was *Voices from the Blue Nile*, a website to support James's third book on her fieldwork (James and Aston) but the project has the bigger aim to create a narrated archive of her fieldwork recordings. These span more than forty years of intermittent but ongoing fieldwork with the same group of people from the Blue Nile region of Sudan/Ethiopia and are a unique record of the effect of war and displacement on a marginalised community. The aim of this intermittent but ongoing collaboration is to present "the story of the events and changes that have occurred over the course of James' fieldwork as far as possible through the words and experiences of the people themselves" (Aston and Matthews 42). In this sense, the point of view of the anthropologist as contextual narrator does not have final authority, "with contradictory ideas and different styles of speech being able to co-exist in a more dialogic form" (Aston and Mathews 46; Aston, "Direct"). This dialogic approach is also a key driver behind much of her ongoing curatorial work with i-Docs, as a shared concern with her co-convenors, Sandra Gaudenzi and Mandy Rose.

Meanwhile, in 2017 Stefano Odorico organised a workshop at the University of Bremen, Germany, on i-docs as a research method, in which some of the contributors to this issue (including Judith Aston) were involved. Starting with his work on communicative structures and pragmatic strategies in i-docs, which began with his doctoral project, Odorico has been involved for several years in the field both from a practical and theoretical point of view, focusing mainly on the documentary role of i-docs—for, as he has noted, "[o]ne of the main characteristics of interactive documentaries is the practice of inviting the audience to participate in the process of construction of reality, not only in the manipulation of the story itself" (Odorico 224). His current research project concentrates on the aesthetics and form of i-docs, on issues of preservation and distribution and, in particular, on i-docs as a research method for interdisciplinarity.[2] This special issue of *Alphaville* is a direct result of this project.

As a form of analysis of research based both on theory and practice, this issue offers a number of contributions divided into research articles, interviews with practitioners, and case studies discussed by their makers, who are also scholars. All the authors included in this publication have been active members of the *i-Docs* community since its inception and have consistently contributed to its development. This accounts for the close intellectual dialogue that informs the different sections of the issue; at the same time, we believe that these articles invite a broad readership and engage with issues that are central to contemporary film, media and society.

In her opening contribution, Patricia Zimmerman raises a dazzling number of important issues and offers invaluable inputs for further research. Many of her "speculations", in fact, recur throughout the entire issue, and are analysed in more depth by the other contributors, thus creating a fruitful internal dialogue with their work. In her thirty incisive bullet points, Zimmerman clearly demonstrates the complexity of i-docs and the necessity of tackling them through a polyphonic

approach which must take into account multiple aspects including distribution, exhibition, iterations, interfaces, platforms, technologies and so much more.

In the articles section of the issue, Amir Husak, Anna Wiehl, Paolo Favero, and Judith Aston and Stefano Odorico tackle polyphony from a more theoretical point of view, while still including examples of i-docs projects and referring to practice in order to identify specific analytical issues. In the interviews section, Sharon Daniel and Florian Thalhofer share their experiences as practitioners and scholars in ways that pertinently link i-docs not only to polyphony but also to a myriad of contemporary social, political and cultural issues. The case studies, then, offer further insight into i-docs and polyphony through discussions of the practice of Elizabeth Miller, Daniel Fetzner and Martin Dornberg.

More in detail, in "Exercising Radical Democracy: The Crisis of Representation and Interactive Documentary as an Agent of Change" Amir Husak approaches the i-doc form as a tool/method to describe our contemporary society with an "activist" approach. Husak introduces the concept of the democratic power of the Internet in i-docs and shows how contemporary digital technologies can be used for activism. He brings to the table his current research project and a number of examples, such as *4 Stelle Hotel* (2014), *The Texas Border* (2010), *18 Days in Egypt* (2011) and *Quipu* (2015). He claims that these new technologies, dominated by immediacy and accessibility, are particularly suitable for projects that aspire to mobilise for action, engage with communities and challenge central power structures. However, quoting the author, "a healthy dose of utopian thinking and awareness of the paradoxes of new technologies is needed to achieve that".

Anna Wiehl's research hypothesis in her "Beyond 'Toolness': Korsakow Documentary as a Methodology for Plurivocal Interventions in Complexity" is that new documentary practices facilitate new forms of mediation allowing all interactors to experience complexity, polyphony and multiplicity. Working mainly on Korsakow as an authorial tool and on a number of Korsakow films, Wiehl analyses how the editorial options of Korsakow affect the users' experience in terms of a coauthorship and a cocreation that generate complexity and assemblages. The conclusion of her analysis demonstrates how Korsakow is more than a mere authorial tool and a platform for distribution and production, but it is methodology that helps us deal in a more complex way with contemporary documentary issues.

Drawing on the work of Clifford Geertz, Wiehl's analysis can be seen as a form of "thick description", in that it addresses context as well as behaviour. Paolo Favero's article, meanwhile, looks at complexity through revisiting the concept of "thin description". Analysing the subject matter of this special issue from an anthropological point of view, in his "Rediscovering 'Wonder' through I-Docs: Reflections on 'Immersive' Viewing in the Context of Contemporary Digital/Visual Practices" Favero focuses on the concept of "image" as the basic element of analysis in an audiovisual context. For him, images created with contemporary digital technologies in Western society challenge traditional conventions. This includes challenges to concepts of the observer/observed and linearity, as well as to modes of observation. Favero also looks at how these images generate new forms of image-making practices that are characterised by new modes of fruition, including nonlinearity, interactivity, participation and immersion.

Judith Aston and Stefano Odorico's "The Poetics and Politics of Polyphony: Towards a Research Method for Interactive Documentary" offers a series of "provocations" with a view to generating a new theoretical framework for i-docs. While reflecting upon these provocations, the authors analyse a number of key issues, including multiplicity, chronotope, dialogism and interaction. These lead towards new ways of approaching complexity. Drawing on examples such as *Hollow Interactive* (2013), *Highrise* (2010), *Choose Your Own Documentary* (2013), *Question Bridge* (2012) and *Priya's Shakti* (2014), the article investigates several theoretical aspects of Bakthin's wider idea of polyphony. In so doing, it offers input for further research, particularly in relation to the concepts of heteroglossia, carnival and, more generally, aesthetics. With the aim of using juxtaposition, nonlinearity and layering to break down binaries, their article considers how complexity can be embraced and, crucially, how the simplicity contained within it can be revealed.

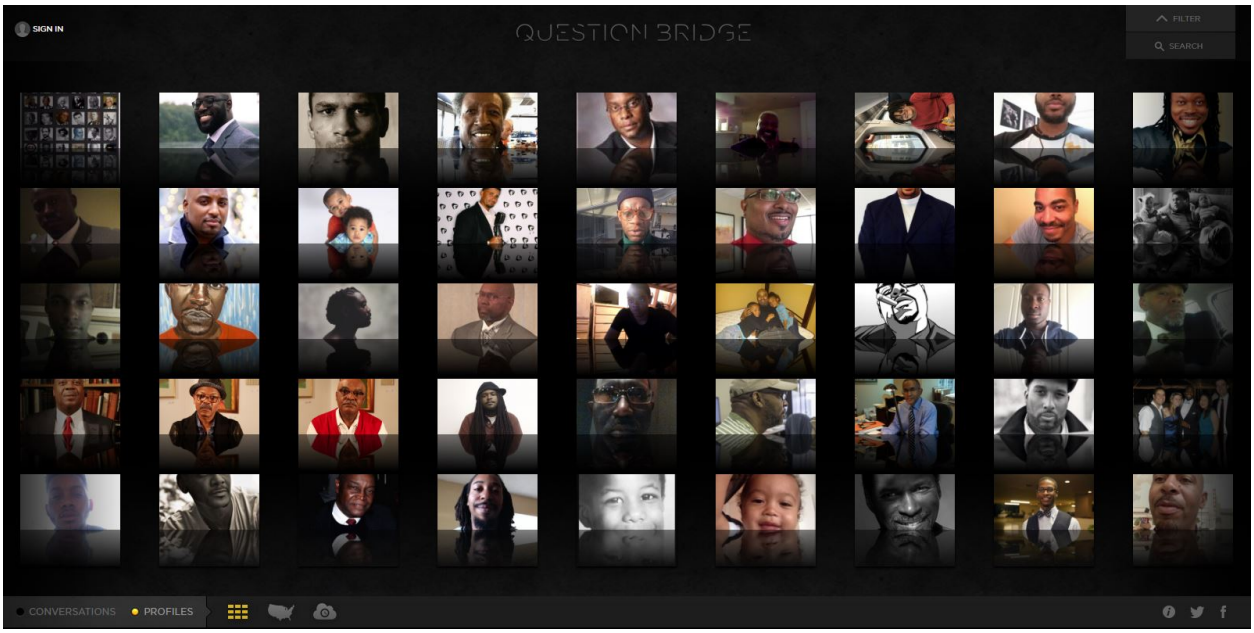



**Figure 1: *Question Bridge* (Chris Johnson, Hank Willis Thomas, Bayete Smith, and Kamal Sinclair, 2012). Screenshot.**

The interviews section includes two conversations between the curators of this special issue and two practitioner/scholars who are deeply involved in the world of i-docs. In the first interview Sharon Daniel talks of her experience of being a media artist and how her artistic practice needs to be understood as (not unlike what Husak describes in his article) political activism. Constantly challenging issues of power, structural inequality, racism and state violence, Daniel's practice perfectly embodies the concepts of urgency and intervention. Her idea of polyphony was mainly generated from a musical and performative context, later merging with Bakhtin's theories. It is included in the majority of her projects, in particular in her powerful *Undoing Time* and its different versions (2013; 2017). Furthermore, in the interview, she shares her vast experience of working with new technologies and innovative platforms.

Like Daniel, Florian Thalhofer is both interested in the theory and practice of i-docs. In this interview he describes in detail his software, Korsakow, which has been part of the i-docs

community since the beginning. Korsakow is a tool that helps authors to create complex films and a new kind of story. It allows video makers to create nonlinear and interactive films, and to tell stories through a number of links generated by keywords. Thalhofer shares his ideas about narrative in relation to our society and to our general perception of "stories". Like Daniel, he believes in filmmaking as a form of activism. Furthermore, an important point of the interview is that, for Thalhofer, the strength of computer-based narration is that it frees the authors from telling *any* story, allowing them to better understand the complexity of stories and the complex nature of reality. His utopian goal, as a Korsakow filmmaker himself, is to make the world more tolerant.

There are two case studies included in this special issue: the first is an i-doc project by Elizabeth Miller and the second is the work of Daniel Fetzner and Martin Dornberg.

Elizabeth Miller's project *The Shore Line* (2017) is a collaborative i-doc that features over forty individuals from nine countries who are confronting the threats of unsustainable development and extreme weather along our global coasts. Again linked to urgency, actuality and activism, this complex (and beautifully designed) project includes several media, such as video profiles, dynamic maps, visualisations, and soundscapes. In her discussion, Miller effectively shows how the polyphonic nature of i-docs is a key element in the educational use of this documentary form and demonstrates how her project was originally designed with educators in mind. Quoting the author, polyphony in this context is "the creative engagement of voices, authors and forms towards a common objective". The interview addresses the strategies and challenges involved in engaging her target audience—teachers invested in sustainability.

Working with artistic and interdisciplinary research methodologies, Daniel Fetzner and Martin Dornberg present a large number of their projects. Often based on a theoretical concept, these projects use polyphony in a range of ways. This enables them to address complex interactions with a number of different elements in the natural habitat, such as bodies, plants, living organisms and waste. Exploring a set of diverse avenues in i-docs, including performances and installations, the two authors introduce the project cycle *INTERCORPOREAL SPLITS* (2015), the artistic intervention *BUZZ* (2014–15), the project *WASTELAND* (2015–17), and a new project cycle, *DE\GLOBALIZE* (2018). This latest project is characterised not only by a complex structure and theoretical background but also a complex geographical structure, being based in three different "critical zones" of the earth: India, Egypt and Germany.

Overall this issue, due to its multidisciplinary nature, unites together several different areas of interest, backgrounds and methodologies, thus creating a dynamic and fecund dialogue between subjects that might not normally "talk" to each other. We believe that this approach locates this issue, and its polyphonic approach, in an ideal position to create an open forum for current and future research. This research should be focused on an interdisciplinary, intercultural and intermedial enquiry into the ongoing practices and development of i-docs.

**Notes**

[1] Quoting Judith Aston, Sandra Gaudenzi, and Mandy Rose, i-docs may be defined as "any project that starts with the intention to engage with the real, and that uses digital interactive technology to

realize this intention" (1). The notion of the real within this definition is expansive and "embraces the breadth of lived experience" (Aston, Gaudenzi, and Rose 1), thus taking on board Clifford Geertz's position that "rocks and dreams are both of this world" (qtd. In Aston, Gaudenzi, and Rose 1).

[2] This research project has been fully funded by the DFG (German Research Foundation), is based at the University of Bremen, and will be presented in a forthcoming book.

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