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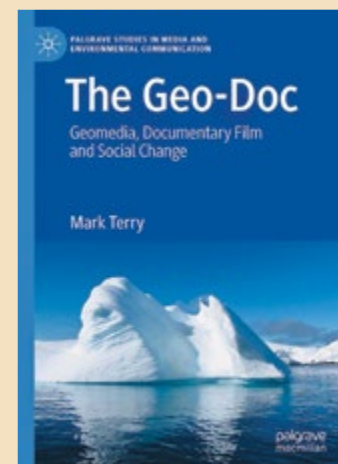


Elephant poacher patrol emerging out of an early morning mist, Chitwan National Park, Nepal. Photo: Robert Griffith

the Geo-Doc

explorations in digital media

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Communications is one of our most valuable commodities. How we use it can begin and end wars; it can inform and misinform millions of people; it can confirm and deceive; it can educate and suppress knowledge. Often, communication is taken for granted and only missed these days when we can't get a WiFi signal. Social media has made communicators of us all, but with little of the ethical or moral requirements necessarily associated with the responsible dissemination of information. Memes attribute currently convenient philosophies to famous historical figures who never said any such thing in their lives. One such famous meme claims that Abraham Lincoln once said "The problem with quotes found on the Internet is that they are often not true." For many, this is laughable; but for some, it's credible.

The problem with this abundance in communication is sifting through it all for the truth. One medium that I have spent most of my career in exploration using is the documentary film. Its claims to the truth are well-documented, both in its purist form with such pioneers as Dziga Vertov (*kinopravda*, Russian for "film



Geo-Doc world graphic presented in 2016 at Marrakech

truth"), and in its misrepresentative, re-creative, or staged forms as we have seen in the works of, among others, Robert Flaherty, who once famously said "Sometimes you have to lie to tell the truth" in defence of fabricating scenes for his film *Nanook of the North*.

My approach to documentary filmmaking has always extended from my training in journalism: to tell a story incorporating truth in all its forms within a non-editorializing narrative. This approach has served me well professionally with documentaries I have made for PBS, the Discovery Channel, and similar broadcasters worldwide. What I did not anticipate, however,

was the value placed on my films as data delivery systems by the United Nations.

After inviting my film *The Antarctica Challenge: A Global Warning* to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in Copenhagen, December, 2009, a relationship developed that would see me produce similar documentary films on climate research around the world each year for the annual COP conferences. My documentaries were no longer just educational or entertaining, they were now in a position of informing and influencing policy on a global scale. Keeping up this annual pace of production and the volume of international representation of data became a challenge. My graduate studies at York University in Toronto provided some intriguing theoretical alternatives to documentary film production and exhibition incorporating geomedia that would accommodate these unusual demands.

As a result, the *Geo-Doc* was born. Conceived as a multilinear, interactive, database documentary film project, it is presented on a platform of a Geographic Information System map of the world. Each pin on the digital map



Mark Terry, Antarctica, International Polar Year 2009

contains a stand-alone documentary short film along with a myriad of metadata related to each film's content. Relevant data such as location, dates, photography, links to scientific reports, research institutes, government programs, NGO websites, virtually anything on the web related to the film subject, makes the *Geo-Doc* a robust and dynamic multimedia communications tool intended to bridge the gap between science and policy.

As I write this in March 2020, we find ourselves in the midst of a global pandemic, one in which we struggle to understand and find reliable information. The *Geo-Doc* is designed to provide "visible evidence", a hallmark of the documentary film, through its film units and to provide such evidence on a global scale. Along with its unlimited supply of related metadata, a *Geo-Doc* project is specifically designed to speak truth to power on global issues like the coronavirus and climate change.

One of the unique aspects of this digital architecture is the *Geo-Doc's* ability to reveal new data that is evident in the implicit narratives that emerge from relating the film units

to each other. An early multimedia film concept, the Korsakow System, presents multiple film units in the same digital space allowing the user to select the one they want to see in whatever order they want. This ostensibly eliminates the role of the editor in this documentary film project. Critics of the system have pointed out that when the film units are all related to one narrative, there exists the possibility of seeing scenes "out of order", thereby potentially rendering the story confusing or incomprehensible. With this in mind, I conceived the participating film units to be stand-alone documentaries, linear storylines within a multilinear structure. That way, the film units do not rely on a collective narrative to view in a particular order, but rather a collective theme to which each film unit makes a unique contribution.

When the film units are compared to each other the explicit narratives of each film reveal implicit narratives relationally. For example, in the UN's *Geo-Doc* project, the *Youth Climate Report*, the user may want to compare reports on glacier retreats in the Arctic with those in

Antarctica. The user might learn that glaciers in Antarctica are discharging ice at twice the volume as those in the Arctic within a specific year. This relational process of spatial and temporal analysis may yield the new information that Antarctica is warming or melting ice twice as fast as the Arctic. What makes these data discoveries different from those that can be found in scientific papers and other forms of written text is the visible context provided by film. There is also an ease-of-access in a *Geo-Doc* project that affords the user a global perspective of a global issue all in one digital space, an important consideration for international policymakers trying to make sense of issues that impact on all of us worldwide in an urgent timeframe.

The destination of discovery begins with a journey of exploration. In these difficult times when travel has been curtailed like never before, we need to find new areas of exploration and new methods of getting there. Using new digital communication tools like the *Geo-Doc* may enable us to reach those destinations in altogether new ways.