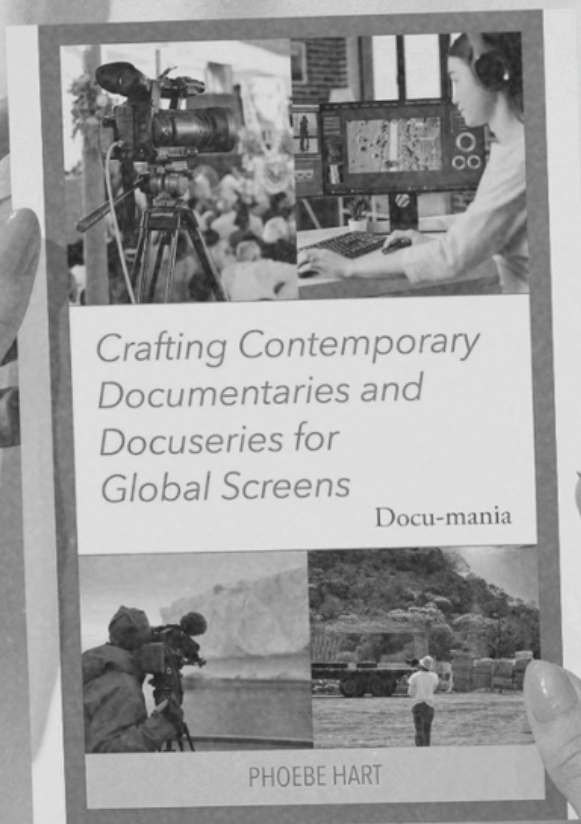


BOOK REVIEW

# CRAFTING CONTEMPORARY DOCUMENTARIES AND DOCUSERIES FOR GLOBAL SCREENS: DOCU-MANIA

BOOK BY PHOEBE HART, REVIEWED BY SOL RICCO





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### **Book Review:** *Crafting Contemporary Documentaries and Docuseries for Global Screens: Docu-Mania*

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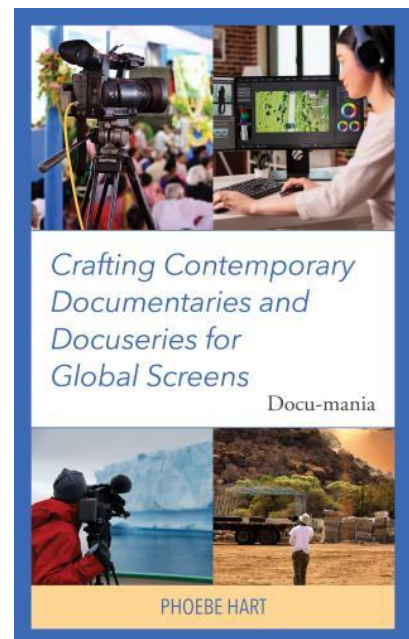
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Hart, P. (2024). *Crafting contemporary documentaries and docuseries for global screens: Docu-mania*. Lexington Books.

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In a world of increasing media consumption and accessibility, *Crafting Contemporary Documentaries and Docuseries for Global Screens* is rooted in empowering the social and cultural value presented in documentary filmmaking. Author Phoebe Hart (2024) offers a critical approach that combines diverse perspectives, blending theoretical frameworks with the lived experiences of contemporary filmmakers. One of Hart's fundamental assertions throughout the book is that documentary filmmakers can serve as changemakers if they choose to do so, and Hart explores how documentaries can serve as a tool to inform and unite diverse audiences. While not all documentaries or filmmaking practices are rooted in public interest communications principles, many of the frameworks in Hart's book could be of use to public interest communicators building compelling narratives to drive social change.

Much of Hart's book is oriented to budding filmmakers and includes advice for succeeding in the documentary filmmaking industry. Hart (2024) informs readers that "to achieve mastery of the craft, one needs not only specialist resources[...]but also continued and iterative opportunities to present their creative works to an audience" (p. 162). The



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book seeks to provide readers with necessary perspective and insight into the actionable tools one can use to carve out a path in the profession of documentary filmmaking, encouraging readers to adopt a mindset of flexibility and resiliency to withstand the continually diversification of demands embedded into the profession. Specifically, Hart's work examines post-COVID-19 documentary filmmaking, exploring successes and struggles for recognition amid industry limitations through a series of case studies. Interviews with global filmmakers reveal challenges, innovations, and recommendations to support impactful storytelling.

Hart highlights the importance of lived experience by synthesizing in-depth interviews with established documentary filmmakers to navigate the themes of each chapter. The author also continually emphasizes reflexivity "by acknowledging and creating an awareness of how my research values and assumptions affect the collection and interpretation of data" (Hart, 2024, p. xxiv), thus maintaining a realistic and relatable perspective for readers. In many ways, the book acts as a historical encapsulation and academic time stamp as the content development for the book intersects with the COVID-19 pandemic. Hart addresses the ambitious concerns associated with complex storytelling and offers a key takeaway: that global documentaries and docuseries are influenced by and, in response, shift and shape societal values, often amplifying underrepresented narratives and marginalized experiences. According to Hart (2024), the public's "appetite and tolerance for voices outside dominant paradigms is increasing" (p. xv) even in the face of "contemporary limitations on creativity, creative practice, work, mobility, and access" (p. xv) that impact the modern filmmaker. Understanding the need to promote counternarratives to harmful dominant narratives is a core tenet of public interest communications.

Providing layers of depth in each chapter, Hart develops arguments based on filmmakers' lived experience and advocates that documentary filmmaking deepens viewers' awareness and understanding of social phenomena by encouraging a self-driven connection. Chapter One homes in on the documentary industry's history and contemporary state of affairs and explores several key filmmakers' career journeys, characterizing these careers as boundaryless and requiring adaptability, flexibility, and alignment with personal values. Much like the process of filmmaking itself, Hart positions a career in documentary filmmaking as a lesson in self-efficacy and confidence, emphasizing the ability of individuals in the field to "take control of their own destiny" (Hart, 2024, p. 2). In describing the industry itself, Hart paints a picture of a complex landscape organized around specific markets, content formats, genres, and platforms. The book promotes the idea that documentary filmmaking is effectively a form of knowledge production with an emphasis on empathetic learning. Documentary filmmaking also shares certain features with the field of journalism, including a commitment to fairness and accuracy. However, Hart underscores a key difference in approach with documentary filmmaking: filmmakers build lasting subject relationships and often explore topics from a single nuanced perspective. Chapter One ultimately offers tips for budding filmmakers, including learning on the job and finding a hot topic to explore, all to take advantage of those unique career opportunities available in different markets and with different types of content.

Chapter Two focuses on the process of development in documentary filmmaking, outlining how filmmakers generate ideas, conduct research with experts, and create initial materials like synopses or proposals. These materials support funding pitches, enabling further script development, preliminary shooting, or sizzle reels to attract investment, and the chapter focuses on various elements within these steps—all leading toward the goals of production and distribution of viable projects. Hart (2024) proposes that documentary filmmakers “may be viewed as functional authors, typically crafting the story arc, and preparing detailed scripts, treatments, synopses, and voice-over narrations” (p. 30). In this function as an author, Hart recommends one possible route that she calls “following a thread” (p. 35), or maintaining a thematic or topical pattern both within a single documentary and across documentaries in a broader portfolio of work. This tactic could help budding filmmakers establish their own reputation and carve out a niche in the field. For example, Hart (2024) discusses filmmaker Betsy Kalin, who “declared a strong interest social justice theme, although she often sought out a thematic of community in her work in arenas where she was at times an insider and at other times an outsider” (p. 38). Above all, Hart champions the position that documentary filmmakers must be persistent and possess the ability to contextualize the social layers surrounding the topic of interest both while seeking investors and during the actualization of the project itself.

In Chapter Three, Hart examines the crucial and often complex relationships between documentary filmmakers and collaborators, highlighting how support, competition, and power dynamics influence creative success, ethical challenges, and project development from start to finish. Collaboration is often essential in the process of filmmaking, but, as Hart notes, “Collaborations are subject to disturbances, divergences, and differences in the speed at which people prefer to work” (Hart, 2024, p. 58). In discussing the role of relationship building, Hart again touches on the recurrent theme of filmmaker reflexivity. The chapter positions collaborators as co-creators, emphasizes the importance of the filmmaking crew, and illuminates the sometimes-contentious relationship between documentarians and the subjects who allow their lives to be documented. Hart (2024) recalls, “In the past, many documenting ventures were exploitative at their core, visiting vulnerable communities and extracting their stories for the entertainment of the masses or career advancement” (p. 67). Per Hart, an intentional awareness of intent versus impact—or gain versus loss—is key to mitigating the exploitation of participants for entertainment and is an essential aspect of the creative filmmaking process. This takeaway rings true across disciplines, as it is also inherent to the task of making personal narratives public more generally.

Chapter Three also reinforces the notion that social relationships, whether between creative collaborators or between filmmaker and subject, are strengthened through an experience of immediacy and validation. Hart encourages readers to consider the function of meaningful collaboration and urges documentary filmmakers to build genuine connections with participants, celebrating their openness in sharing stories in such a public manner. As Hart (2024) explains, “The time and space before documentary filming begins is critical for the smooth production of the documentary, and to ‘brief’ the participants on not only the questions that will be asked, but

how the filming works,” arguing that this actionable step contributes to a foundation of building trust with your participants (p. 73). The author thus presents a balanced argument considering the difficulties embedded in collaboration, but ultimately posits that embracing a person-first mindset and community-centered approach to documentary filmmaking is both necessary and respectful in terms of interacting with subjects.

In Chapter Four, Hart shifts from framework and philosophies to a more concentrated focus on pragmatic approaches to documentary filmmaking. Specifically, Hart explores the more technical aspects of filmmaking, including cinematography and sound recording, as well as contemporary filmmakers’ perceptions of this technology. The author acknowledges the increasing accessibility of filming equipment, but again underscores the central role of the filmmaker in that, “The effective deployment of all these technologies requires a raft of skills, dispositions, and cognitive abilities that contribute to the crafting of exceptional visions and potent screen stories” (Hart, 2024, p. 88). Hart asserts that filmmakers’ choice tools and technology should be reflective of the documentaries’ goals and argues that participant comfort and creative experimenting with respect to such tools are also key elements to impactful documentary filmmaking. For instance, Hart (2024) explains how filmmaker Yilmaz Vucuru infused his work with experimentation, noting, “His creative explorations of self-expression may be a form of...catharsis or the emotional release from speaking about traumatic experiences, recognising the potential therapeutic benefits of the creative work” (p. 98). The author offers readers actionable takeaways such as infusing the process of filmmaking with creativity, including not only the art of storytelling but also the more technical aspects. According to Hart (2024), “The practical uses of these tools are highly cognitive, and their applications speak to the intentions, ideas, and aims of individual documentarians more broadly” (p. 100).

Hart uses Chapter Five to explore editing and rewriting in documentary filmmaking. In doing so, Hart provides practical guidance to budding filmmakers in terms of preparing for the reality of feedback about their work. The process of incorporating feedback and conducting revisions allows filmmakers to address concerns that arise around complex narratives, including the ongoing struggle to translate multidimensional storylines into the meta-analysis of a documentary's final product. As Hart (2024) describes, “contemporary documentary filmmakers are faced with the challenge of crafting content in the edit for increasingly sophisticated audiences who often desire longer formats with intricate interweaving storylines” (p. 111). Hart thus prepares readers for common challenges in post-production, characterizing these hurdles as innate to the creative process. The author also explores how essential narratives will be unlocked by embracing the post-production phase through balancing the emotional intensity of revision with time, perspective, and an open mind. Hart (2024) assures readers, “Crafting the documentary narrative in the edit is testing, as it requires a re-writing of the narrative that adds more time to the edit than a typical fictional film of a similar length if justice is to be done to the creative undertaking” (p. 120). Hart effectively characterizes the editing phase of filmmaking as a challenging but necessary step in the making of a successful documentary.

With the understanding that filmmakers develop a deep emotional and personal attachment to their work, the sixth and final chapter of the book explores gauging and growing the real-world impact of documentaries. While not all documentaries will reach global or commercial success, Hart (2024) provides readers with encouragement, in that “even the modest majority of finished factual screen projects may achieve significant audiences and influences for the documentary subjects and their situations if distributed and promoted carefully” (p. 121). Hart describes common distribution and promotional tactics including film festivals and broadcasting, but also more innovative and strategic approaches that may be suitable for certain types of documentaries. For instance, Hart discusses the case of Karina Holden, the documentarian behind *Blue*, which presented audiences with a message of protecting oceans and marine life from the negative impacts of industrialization. Hart (2024) notes, “As part of their plan, the *Blue* producing team built strategic partnerships between community groups such as the Australian Marine Conservation Society, the corporate sector, NGOs, and policy makers, and drummed up support for the project with the assistance of Good Pitch” (p. 134). Especially for topics of public interest, filmmakers can get creative by forging connections with established groups and building strategic communications approaches to expand the impact of their work.

Ultimately, even as documentary filmmakers may seek to create compelling work around contemporary issues, documentarians are not solely responsible for the impact of what they produce. Per Hart, “For all the ways that creators try to ensure their documentaries are provocative and court controversy, the distribution period is highly unpredictable and may rely on the available human resources to be stretched to their limits, which may lead to burnout for the creators” (p. 140). Documentary reception is influenced by various aspects such as depicted realism, modality of viewing, and prior knowledge. Audience members bring in their standpoint when watching documentaries and become active participants who are emotionally invested in the film. Hart argues that this transformative process builds a bridge of trust in the viewer, as the narrative is trusted to be real and true because the film is recognized as a documentary, so much so that the audience member may start to experience attitudinal changes after viewing. From this perspective, the book seeks to influence an awareness that compelling nonfiction narratives have ripple effects and a unique relationship with social change. Chapter Six underscores the ongoing assertion that documentary films can be tools to inform and/or unite audiences across social and cultural differences, presenting filmmakers as agents of change.

Overall, Hart effectively characterizes the industry and art of documentary filmmaking, while reinforcing the notion that documentaries have the power to influence societal values and amplify underrepresented narratives and social experiences. Hart’s concluding chapter provides readers with support and perspective to overcome documentary making barriers. The final notes are pragmatic and layered with perspective from established filmmakers, highlighting the impact of COVID-19 on filmmaker’s decision-making processes as it relates to sustainability and well-being. Hart asserts that there were both positive and negative hurdles to overcome but ultimately, the pandemic brought about a heightened sense of work-life balance within the industry. Hart speaks to the fundamental role of funding and how documentary filmmakers must often

supplement their work portfolios with peripheral work. Funding challenges are an ongoing hurdle for documentary filmmakers, but Hart also recognizes not all filmmakers prioritize financial gain—the closing chapter provides budding filmmakers with the reassurance that there is diversity in how filmmakers define and achieve success.

*Crafting Contemporary Documentaries and Docuseries for Global Screens* ultimately seeks to identify methods for building support for documentary filmmakers through exposure to a variety of viewpoints rooted in lived experience, reminding readers of the importance of reflecting on intent versus impact. As a source of academic scholarship, the book provides readers with practical skills and theoretical frameworks to approach the layered challenges present in documentary filmmaking. As a critical piece of scholarship, Hart's book acknowledges and encourages readers to recognize the social context and power dynamics inherent to documentary filmmaking, reminding readers that documentary filmmaking at its core is relational. *Crafting Contemporary Documentaries and Docuseries for Global Screens* leaves readers reassured that filmmakers oftentimes embody a role of changemaker, recognizing that this form of filmmaking grows to become a tool to inform and unite audiences across social and cultural differences.