

**A Call for Change:
The Evolution of the Modern Documentary from Informative Media to Persuasive
Platform**

Valerie England
San Jose State University

Communication Studies 145i: Rhetorical Criticism

Gina Firenzi

December 14, 2011

Abstract

In the past several years, new documentaries have begun to evolve from informative media to persuasive platform as a result of changing cultural contexts and ideologies. These four films – *Sicko*, *Food Inc.*, *Waiting for Superman*, and *Inside Job* effectively utilize common narratives and themes to present audiences with calls for reform in critical areas such as food safety, quality education, access to healthcare, and financial regulation. This shift reflects a transformation of the valuation of knowledge and how it serves various conflicting group interests.

In an increasingly materialistic and visual culture, where media holds hegemonic sway over mass audiences through its reinforcement of dominant meanings and perspectives, the “success” of a film is often understood by the public in terms of sales. Documentaries have suddenly become rather lucrative in the last several years and are enjoying large gains at the box office. Michael Moore’s *Sicko*, for example, wowed at \$24.5 million in the United States alone. Others would argue that their success is rather limited, pointing out the one-sidedness of directors’ perspectives and apparent unwillingness to present all aspects to an issue. Success from this perspective is defined not by commercial gains but by objectivity and faithful representation of facts outside of personal belief or political agenda. The new documentaries shown in movie theatres are anything but; controversy surrounds many current releases, with sparks flying between critics who laud – or denigrate – the relative fairness of truths and conclusions presented to audiences.

Whether these documentaries incite progressive activism or active dislike, however, one thing that they have in common is their success to initiate mass dialogue about social issues. Although it remains to be seen whether these subjective, call-to-action films truly ignite lasting social change, new documentaries are becoming

increasingly successful at reaching wide audiences and fostering a national conversation about the underlying social issues of our time.

What factors brought about this shift? And how have these artifacts irrevocably changed over time? To discuss this phenomenon, this paper discusses four recent films that shed light on the prevailing social issues of our time – access to healthcare (*Sicko*, released in 2007), sustainability of food practices (*Food, Inc.*, 2008), quality of public primary education (*Waiting for Superman*, 2010), and financial market regulation (*Inside Job*, 2010). Through analysis of narrative, context, and themes presented in these films and critical readings of existing research in the field, this paper will address how the modern American documentary has evolved from informative media to persuasive platform and reflect on its underlying cultural implications.

The Use of Narrative

Each of the four films utilizes common elements to move viewers such as calls to action, voice overs, and emotive narratives. These structural elements serve to integrate aspects of bestselling blockbusters with the phenomenon of investigative journalism in order to attract large audiences and sway mass opinion.

New documentaries seek not only to influence consumer attitudes but to create mass support of their proposed solutions in order address perceived iniquities in society. In *Sicko*, Michael Moore implies that, as patients and consumers, we should demand quality universal healthcare. *Inside Job* refers to the necessity of grassroots political participation so that leaders to answer to their constituencies, constructing viewers as the 99% (now a well-known phrase of the nationwide Occupy Wall Street movement). *Waiting for Superman* and *Food, Inc.* each contain the most explicit calls to action, with clear instructions during credits for audience members to text or log in to websites so

that they can participate in campaigns to reform education and change our food systems.

All films use voice overs to tell us the story from a set perspective. In two of the films, *Sicko* and *Waiting for Superman*, the narrators are the directors (Moore and Davis Guggenheim, respectively) themselves, who reflexively lead audiences through their personal thought processes, relaying their aspirations, motivations, and fears as they progress through the film. Guggenheim, for example, relates his fears as a parent about sending his child to a 'failing' school. Their intellectual and motivational journeys from start to finish become intertwined with the overall story, encouraging us to agree with their findings. In each there is no attempt to deny the bias of their stated beliefs –the conclusions they reach are presented as natural common sense, inviting the audience to accept their alternative stance much like a dominant-hegemonic reading.

Furthermore, modern American documentaries extensively use interviews of individuals from all walks of life (from layperson to perceived experts in their fields) to establish emotional rapport and experiential credibility. They effectively weave narratives from “ordinary” people that we can relate to the issues presented and insert sound bytes from “experts” as needed to convince us of a common sense imperative to change the system that we live in. In *Food, Inc.* we hear from all kinds of witnesses: from low-income family struggling to make affordable nutrition choices for their children; multitudes of farmers raising everything from chickens to grain; managers of food conglomerates such as ConAgra; and supposed experts such as organic celebrity farmer Joel Salatin and food social movement authors Eric Schlosser (“Fast Food Nation”) and Michael Pollan (“The Omnivore’s Dilemma”), who also narrate the film.

Waiting for Superman serves as the best example of this personal narrative use. Throughout the film, we closely follow the lives of five young students (Daisy, Anthony, Francisco, Bianca, and Emily) as they attempt to gain access to better primary education

through application to charter schools. Due to the high demand for these schools, all five are placed in the schools' lotteries. The students tell of their family struggles and dreams for the future, and viewers are effectively drawn in by the anticipation, anxiety, and hope as the children succeed – or fail – to gain admittance to their desired schools (three out of the five do not win the lottery). In between these compelling personal narratives, we hear testimonials from proponents such as DC's former superintendent Michelle Rhee, Harlem Children Zone's founder Geoffrey Canada, and major philanthropist and Microsoft founder Bill Gates – all noted advocates of controversial education reform through tenure removal and stringent evaluations of teachers.

Over-the-top examples and exaggerations are also not uncommon here, as the films make no attempt to disguise their overall agendas. In *Sicko*, we see a Los Angeles cab drive up to a homeless shelter and toss Carol out (still in her hospital gown) because she was unable to cover her medical bills. Through security camera footage we watch as Carol wanders disoriented up and down the street in her bare feet. "Skid row," quips Moore, "is the best bed in town." *Inside Job* introduces us to a madam who provided call girls to Wall Street executives while expensing the bill to their respective corporations. Interestingly enough, the absence of an interview is also used to indicate blame or guilt of individuals that support a status quo. In *Sicko* and *Inside Job*, we are told that various individuals declined to be interviewed, leaving us with powerful implications of culpability and denial even though no real facts have been presented. In this case, the lack of proof is presented as proof. With each witness (or lack thereof), we are given statements that present truth as relational. We come to understand 'truth' not as objective or universal but as the result of the various subjectivities that the films' characters each occupy, encouraging us as audience members to accept the conclusions the films reach despite their failure to provide a balanced representation of available information.

American Social Context

The evolution of documentaries from informational to persuasive is strongly influenced by cultural and historical context such as current events, active polarization and partisanship, and the valuation of news. We live in an increasingly competitive global economy with diminished access to fundamental necessities such as jobs, clean food, and quality education. We live in a world of recession, mistrust, and resentment, with regular wage-earners losing their retirement and their homes while financial executives receive millions of dollars in bonuses and golden parachutes. We live in fear of E. Coli and Salmonella outbreaks in our food, of bioterrorism and weapons of mass destruction, of unanticipated medical emergencies that force us to file for bankruptcy. These complex and interlocking factors have led to a polarization in our politics and active partisanship of constituents, who demand more radical solutions to deeply pronounced problems. Instead of moderate conservatism, we speak in terms of Tea Party and Occupy protestors; instead of compromise, we find we must choose sides.

New documentaries have evolved as a result to become more polemic, with sweeping generalizations used to create seemingly black-and-white situations where shades of grey actually exist. Instead of recognizing that many consumers actively turn to fast food choices due to time and budget constraints, *Food, Inc.* instead tells us that we choose to eat burgers because we're simply ignorant of the barbarism inherent in our food system. *Waiting for Superman* concludes that tenure tracking as a primary reason behind poor teaching methods, even though many dedicated teachers in successful schools have tenure. *Sicko* viewers are likewise removed from acknowledgement of longer wait times and far-away practitioners for patients receiving care under a universal health coverage system, and *Inside Job* tells us that American corporate greed and financial deregulation alone caused a global recession.

Another recent phenomenon to consider is the unprecedented valuation of news. News channels are now subject to the whims of commercial cable, audience demand, and ratings. In order to attract and keep the attention of postmodern consumers, who are jaded and continually distracted by technology, news media must now rely on entertainment in order to stay on the air. Objective and investigative reporting has been replaced as a result largely by crises creation and provocative political commentary focused on keeping audiences glued to the screen. Viewers are kept enthralled by an unending series of disaster reporting: a flood, a murder, doomsday predictions, and unemployment figures. Commentators such as Glenn Beck, Sean Hannity, and Rachel Maddow maintain a dedicated audience following through espousing their strong political beliefs on “news” television. Entertainment and opinion are thus understood as being more important than objective information. If we glean our knowledge of the world using news media channels, we find that truths, if any, are relative to their speakers, and that the value of entertainment and opinion prevails over objective epistemologies.

Themes and Ideologies

Throughout each of these films, there are recurring themes and ideologies that drive each narrative and connect with audiences. The first is the value of consumer power. Each call to action contains a fundamental belief – whether implied or explicit – about the power of civic participation and bottom-up knowledge. This ideology is rooted in American capitalism and supply and demand. If we choose not to buy into something like public education or private health insurance, for example, and enough of us choose en masse to make that change, then we assume that businesses and political structures will be forced to adapt to meet our demands. *Inside Job* specifically embodies this belief through its use of “we are the 99%”, referring to our potential to vote as a majority bloc.

In each we are told that change is infinitely possible if we simply choose to disrupt business as usual.

Cast alongside beliefs of consumer power is a distrust of consolidated power and government conspiracy. Government and powerful corporate entities are constructed as corrupt and abusive, fostering fear and through crisis media and consumer ignorance of unsustainable business practices through commodity fetishism. We are told that powerful groups have a vested interest in purchasing their way past the democratic political process: “drug companies,” comments Moore, “like to buy their members of Congress too.” In *Waiting for Superman*, the senior editor of *Newsweek* refers to education bureaucracies such as DC’s Central Office as “The Blob,” with governance “a tangled mess of conflicting regulations and conflicting agendas.” In *Food, Inc.*, “food is coming from enormous assembly lines... the food is becoming more dangerous in ways that are deliberately hidden from us.”

This belief in consumer power and concurrent government conspiracy naturally results in the creation of a binary of us versus them – the 99 percent versus the one. We are seen as the common sense heroes who must take back our country and restore tradition to improve our healthcare, food, education, and economy. This oversimplification of complex social issues serves to present the age old tale of good versus evil and to present viewers as the common sense champions of change for good.

Additional Research Perspectives

In new documentary discourse, we are continually confronted with a dialectic between the concepts of corporate citizenship and social responsibility versus private interest. On the one hand, we believe that businesses have a responsibility to all of its stakeholders to foster a just and equal society. On the other hand, as Americans, we are taught that self-fulfillment and capitalism serves the common good. This conflict is

demonstrated by our subjective valuation of news and the valuing of private profits and opinion over information serving true public interest. Christina Schlachter, founder of the Center for Socially Responsible Leadership, contends that the evolution of the documentary from informative persuasive serves a critical function to bridge this communication gap. Although it remains to be seen whether these calls to civic action are truly effective at igniting social change, “media and [the] public sphere play a critical role in facilitating a sounding board for public discourse to develop a common definition of the public interest” (p. 88). In an era of sensationalism and disaster media:

These films are not only a necessity in engaging and linking a diverse public in critical discourse, but come at a critical time in our society. While many news organizations tend to report every minor news story as a major crisis, these documentaries have moved the real crises into awareness and calls to action. As investigative journalism is pushed aside for a more profitable ‘talking-head’ format in mainstream television news, documentaries have taken on the role of acting as the public’s investigative journalists in the corporate citizenship space.

(p. 94)

As mass media becomes increasingly subjective, new documentaries serve an important role for citizens to remain connected to community issues.

These documentaries are closely tied to social movements which largely promotes awareness and ‘knowledge generation’. However, as Flowers and Swan believe, consumers must be aware of the specific kinds of knowledge promoted by these movements, particularly as it pertains to *Food, Inc.*: “the politics of knowing, what is known, who produces it, and ‘who is in the know’ are critical to food social movements” (p. 236). Food science, for example, is universally presented as “bad” knowledge or detrimental to “clean” food in *Food, Inc.* when many of these innovations prevent the spread of disease. It validates marginalized, bottom-up knowledge over other forms,

and gives audiences contradictory evidence as the movement engages in a struggle over what knowledge is really valuable. This is demonstrated in *Waiting for Superman*, where Guggenheim mentions in passing early in the film that only one in five charter schools are actually successful, but then moves on throughout the rest of the film to extoll the virtues of charter school education. “This work,” writes Flowers, “asks us to think hard about what we romanticize or see as authentic or real” (p. 240).

Other scholars disagree on what kind of discourse and knowledge is truly represented in documentaries. In the four documentaries, we are presented with knowledge that is seen as subversive, powerful, and hidden, with a call to use this knowledge to reclaim power for ourselves and create a more equitable society. Katy Swalwell and Michael Apple of University of Wisconsin-Madison disagree. Rather than it being discourse stemming from bottom-up knowledge, they contend that in *Waiting for Superman* that the messages embody the politics of needs and needs discourses. The solutions presented in *Superman*, are reinterpretations of social issues through the lens of powerful group interests, who seek to remain in control. Although *Superman* does start a dialogue, it creates one specifically leading to conclusions that serve the dominant interest – “efforts to deprofessionalize teachers, weaken in the extreme the functions of unions, sacrifice class time to test preparation, build curriculum around hegemonic cultural narratives, [and] marketize schooling through choice programs” (p. 379). The weakening of tenure contracts and de-unionizing of faculty would indeed serve conservative interests, and meritocratic curriculums built around “no excuses” as *Superman*’s charter schools claim to do fail to address the unique needs of diverse minority groups. Although new documentaries are important to raise awareness of critical social issues, their polarization and biased perspectives should serve as a reminder for us to question what we see. It is crucial for us to seek multiple media channels so that we can make fully informed decisions.

The fact that new documentaries have agendas, however, is well known. According to Marmor, Okma, and Rojas, the bias is irrelevant. After all, audiences already know what to expect if they see a Michael Moore film: “funny, sarcastic, [with] heartrending provocation... the goal here is not balance, but persuasion, avoiding complexities and ambiguities. No one should expect ‘balance’ from these ‘campaigns’” (p. 50). Instead, we should consider these films as a reflection of the media as it relates to current politics. These narratives serve as a “barometer” for public opinion and gives “promise for reformers [in their] apparent capacity to mobilize supporters to demand change” (p. 50). Will there be lasting change? That depends on us. But are these films successful in reaching a wide audience and initiating dialogue about true community issues? Absolutely.

References

Flowers, R. , and Swan, E. (2011). 'Eating at us': Representations of knowledge in the activist documentary film *Food, Inc.* *Studies in the Education of Adults*, 43(2), 234.

Marmor, T. , Okma, K. , & Rojas, J. (2007). What it is, what it does and what it might do: A review of Michael Moore's *Sicko*, 113 minutes, Dog Eat Dog Films, USA, 2007. *American Journal of Bioethics*, 7(10), 49-51.

Schlachter, C. (2009). The new transformation of the public sphere: Discourse through documentary. *Journal of Corporate Citizenship*, 87.

Swalwell, K. , & Apple, M. (2011). Reviewing policy: Starting the wrong conversations: The public school crisis and "Waiting for Superman". *Educational Policy*, 25(2), 368-382.