Documenting diversity on screen: interactive documentaries (i-docs) as tools for queer activism

Natalie Krikowa & Evangeline Aguas

Published online: 24 Jan 2025.

Submit your article to this journal ↗

Article views: 5

View related articles ↗

View Crossmark data ↗

Documenting diversity on screen: interactive documentaries (i-docs) as tools for queer activism

Natalie Krikowa 🅾 and Evangeline Aguas 🅾

School of Communication, University of Technology Sydney, Sydney, Australia

ABSTRACT

This article advocates for the use of online interactive documentaries (i-docs) by creative practitioners and creative practice academics for social and cultural activism by drawing on two LGBTIQA + focused i-docs: *Queer Representation Matters* [Krikowa, Natalie, dir. 2023. *Queer Representation Matters*. Sydney, Australia. http://www.queerrepresentationsmatters.com.] and *Queer Interruptions* [Aguas, Evangeline, dir. 2021. *Queer Interruptions*. Sydney, Australia.]. *Queer Representation Matters* explores historical and contemporary issues in queer screen representation in Australia and overseas. The i-doc draws from interviews with queer screen media scholars, TV writers and directors and film festival curators, to investigate storytelling tropes such as 'bury your gays' and 'cancel your gays' within an industrial context to highlight the importance of representation of queer people and stories in screen media. *Queer Interruptions* focuses on the contemporary queer viewing experience and queer fans' reactions to tropes such as 'bury your gays'. The project explores the sense of repetition and melancholy that fans felt upon reliving these deaths, linking these to abstract theories of queer time. The work seeks to intervene in issues of queer representation through a multidisciplinary, innovative, and accessible approach to queer theory, fan studies and online interactive works. These works illustrate how creative practice researchers can make research on activism accessible to a wider range of audiences outside of the academy.

Introduction

Interactive documentaries (i-docs) have historically been used for social, cultural, or political activism within media and communications more broadly. I-docs can provide transformative narratives that are urgent in our current times (Aston 2023) and that might lend themselves to examinations of pathways to a preferred future (Scott-Stevenson 2019). Within academia, scholars have studied the practice and outcomes of i-docs, with creative practice academics exploring the affordances and opportunities of the medium for social

justice storytelling and cultural activism (see Aston 2016; Gaudenzi 2013; Nash 2012). Activism here refers to action taken to challenge institutions of power, to bring about social or cultural change, and benefit the greater good.

Much has been written about the format of i-docs, with a host of disciplinary case studies exploring issues in civics[1], health[2], conflict[3] and climate. On the topic of climate, for example, Liz Miller's recent interactive, virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and immersive installation documentary works *ShoreLine* (2017), *SwampScapes* (2018), *Wastescapes* (2021) and *As the Gull Flies* (2023) respectively explore environmental justice through various technologies. Zimmerman and De Michiel (2018) argue that projects like these 'facilitate connections, circulate ideas, propel conversations, and sometimes accomplish social change' (vii).

There has yet to be, however, any discussion of the use of i-docs on LGBTIQA + issues or activism. While i-docs have received attention from media practice scholars for over a decade now[4], there remains a lack of research on the potentials of digital and interactive media in queer, gender and sexuality or screen media studies. Historically, activism for queer screen representation manifested through modes like informational websites such as https://wedeservedbetter.wordpress.com/, social media hashtags like #LGBTFansDeserveBetter, and traditional documentaries including *Dykes, Camera, Action!* (Caroline Berler 2018) and *Queering the Script* (Gabrielle Zilkha 2019). Accessing these films and their messages can be challenging due to distribution and broadcast agreements. We chose to use the i-doc form specifically for its online accessibility and distribution control, aligning with Munro and Bilbrough's view on widening visibility beyond academia (2018, 267).

This article demonstrates how creative practice researchers can utilise the form of i-docs to advocate for social and cultural change within queer screen studies. It will do this by first contextualising the use of i-docs in social and cultural activism before situating it within key issues of LGBTIQA + (Queer) screen representation. Then, through the two recent i-doc projects, *Queer Representation Matters* (Krikowa 2023) and *Queer Interruptions* (Aguas 2021), it will demonstrate that by situating these stories outside of mainstream screen media (TV and film), i-docs can act as commentary on contemporary screen media issues. These i-docs aim to not only scrutinise the evolution of queer screen representation and assess whether meaningful change has occurred, but ask how i-docs, as an activist platform, can allow for broader engagement. Finally, it will illustrate how these i-docs can serve as examples to other creative practice researchers in how to make research accessible to a wider range of audiences.

Contextualising i-docs

I-docs are an innovative hybrid form of storytelling, garnering significance among immersive media of the twenty-first century. Practitioners and scholars may define or understand i-docs in slightly different ways however there is general agreement that they are defined by their non-linear spatiotemporal organisation that diverges from a predetermined order found in traditional, linear documentary, and their interactive capabilities enable multiple pathways through documentary audio-visual and textual materials (Harris 2017, 25). This article uses the Galloway et al. definition of i-docs as 'any documentary that uses interactivity as a core part of its delivery mechanism' (2007, 330) and the Aston and

Gaudenzi classification of an i-doc as 'any project that starts with the intention to engage with the 'real', and that uses digital interactive technology to realize this intention' (2012, 125). Delving deeper into specifics, we draw on Aston's explanation of i-docs as:

> … a way of framing a set of possibilities, as opposed to being a specific medium, genre or platform. This seems prescient in light of the 'immersive turn' with interactive work starting to become more closely defined in response to it … This is contributing to a rising interest in 'experiential storytelling' and 'alternate realities' and a potential re-framing of what is meant by interactivity (Aston 2016, para 1).

I-docs can take on many forms integrating elements from film, journalism and digital games. The accessibility of the Internet as a distribution platform enables creative practitioners to distribute their stories with fewer restrictions or gatekeepers. Before the rise of Web 2.0, independent producers had to navigate a landscape dominated by gatekeepers who controlled access to media platforms. However, as the Internet evolved into a primary space for distributing and showcasing independent work, the challenge shifted from bypassing traditional gatekeepers to effectively promoting their productions to reach potential audiences (Marcus 2016, 194). As computers and networked devices become more embedded into and ubiquitous in everyday life, the possibilities of i-docs continue to evolve. As Aston (2016) suggests 'there also needs to be an acknowledgement that documentary is not just about filmmaking and that, although technology is key to the debates, ultimately it is people and not machines that should be at the centre of the design process' (para 8). Interactive documentary, as Aston additionally defines it, is 'a term used to describe the new possibilities for both the construction and representation of 'reality' brought about by the human – computer interface' (2016, paras 6–7). In this context, i-docs require a physical action to take place between the human and the computer. Physical actions can include many different types of interactivity, including 'clicking through a website, tapping on a multi-touch tablet screen, activating censors in gallery installations, using a smartphone to call up locative media, and participating in a live performance' (Aston 2016, para 7). Framing interactive documentary as 'web documentary', Nash also provides some definitional work for the field, discussing i-docs as 'a body of documentary work, distributed via the internet that is both multimedia and interactive' (2012, 197). Additionally, Nash identified three interactive structures – narrative, categorical and collaborative – as frameworks to explore the interaction and navigation approach for i-docs (2012, 197). Both i-doc case studies explored in this article are web-based and explore narrative and categorical structures.

The convergence of the personal computer, mobile communication technologies and accessible media production tools has provided the vast potential for counter-hegemonic discourse and an incentive for creative expression by minority practitioners.[5] As a genre of storytelling, interactive documentary has become an accepted format for the delivery of factual content whereby the response to or debate about the documentary itself can present insight into online community behaviour and capacity (Donald and Galloway 2013).

The genre's non-linear format not only disrupts traditional narrative, but also stands as a symbolic disruption of prevailing cultural normativities. As we will illustrate in our discussion of two LGBTIQA + i-docs, the deviations and rhizomatic movements performed while navigating i-docs speak to the divergences and detours of queer lives under heteronormativity. The non-normativity inherent in the structure of i-docs allows them to speak

to marginalised groups – those who are non-White, non-male, non-heteronormative (De Kosnik 2016) – and positions the genre as an ideal format for the dissemination of activist materials.

Beyond disrupting norms, DIY i-doc makers (such as those working with low budgets in the creative practice research space) must also balance non-linearity and interactivity with story (Zafra 2021). Makers must consider exactly what interactivity adds to the documentary story that would not be possible through traditional linear storytelling. Additionally, they must consider what the distribution format allows: how might an installation space affect the audience's experience of the story? What kinds of experiences might a VR work evoke in an audience? How does the ubiquity (or scarcity) of online access affect audience experience?

As a format typified by complexity, choice (Nash 2012), modularity, and variability (Gaudenzi 2013), i-docs theoretically 'allow multiple, open-ended narrativisations of their subjects; mobilising interactivity to destabilise representations of issues such as political uprising (*18 days in Egypt* 2015), urban shrinkage (*Hollow* 2014) or energy futures (*Journey to the End of Coal* 2008)' (Harris 2017, 25). Creating i-docs that critique contemporary screen media issues, such as queer representation, demands that creators navigate numerous choices, selecting approaches and techniques that best convey the story and effectively craft the intended audience experience.

I-doc approaches, techniques and affordances

When presented with the same theme or issue (for example, the human cost of war and conflict), designers have an array of approaches, techniques and affordances at their disposal. Each approach determines the user experience, for example, VR, data visualisation and video-based documentaries will utilise different interactive techniques and affordances resulting in varying experiences.

For example, *Clouds Over Sidra* (Arora and Milk 2015) is a VR i-doc that uses 360-degree camera footage to allow users to follow a young refugee girl as she tells her story of life in a refugee camp. The user is immersed in that world and can turn their head to see that 360-degree reality and listen to the narration and ambient soundscape in their headphones as if they were there. The film premiered at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland in 2015 with supporters including United Nations (UN) Secretary General Ban Ki-moon. The film has been widely used to advance the UN's advocacy for the Syrian crisis and has helped raise billions of dollars for the International Humanitarian Appeal for Syria (UNVR 2024). It has been translated into 15 different languages and used by UNICEF for fundraising and educational purposes. Other films contributing to advancing social activist efforts on war and crisis include *Out of Sight, Out of Mind* (Grubbs 2013), a data visualisation i-doc displaying every drone strike by the USA on Pakistan between 2004 and 2015 that killed an estimated 3,341 people (mostly civilians). In this visually striking work, users can uncover the names and locations of the victims of each strike in a user-led process of discovery. The video-based i-doc, *Life On Hold* (Shaibani, Dfouni, and Haddad 2015) narrates Syrian refugees' experiences in Lebanon refugee camps, where stories are fragmented and the user moves through the stories – finding the individual and shared lived experiences. In this way, as Odorico (2020) notes, the user accesses the narration 'from a number of different 'windows', thus the content and order of the

narration are changeable' (Odorico 2020, 96). I-docs offer 'a relevant form through which to explore creative data applications, through [their] ability to incorporate data in both responsive and reflexive ways' (Scott-Stevenson 2020, 302). Scott-Stevenson posits that 'documentaries native to the web are a form that offers particular nuance in exploring data storytelling, through the capacity to connect material in nonlinear and interactive ways' (2020, 305). Compared to linear documentaries, i-docs excel in social activism (Munro and Bilbrough 2018).

This article draws on two LGBTIQA + focused i-docs: *Queer Representation Matters* (Krikowa 2023) and *Queer Interruptions* (Aguas 2021) which utilise the video-based approach to i-doc storytelling. *Queer Representation Matters* explores historical and contemporary issues in queer female representation in screen media in Australia and overseas, drawing from interviews with queer screen media scholars, TV writers and directors and film festival curators, to investigate storytelling tropes such as 'bury your gays' and 'cancel your gays' within an industrial context. *Queer Interruptions* focuses on queer fans' reactions to the 'Dead Lesbian Syndrome', a trope where queer female characters are often violently killed onscreen. The project explores the sense of repetition and melancholy that fans feel upon reliving these deaths, linking these to abstract theories of queer time. The work seeks to intervene in issues of queer representation through a multidisciplinary, innovative, and accessible approach to queer theory, audience reception, and fan studies.

The catalyst for the i-docs discussed below was the 2016 death of a lesbian character, Lexa (Alycia Debnam-Carey), on the CW's *The 100* (Rothenberg 2014–2020).[6] The show was one of the most popular young adult fantasy shows on television, and Lexa was one of the most popular lesbian characters onscreen. Her untimely, violent death sent shockwaves throughout queer online fan communities. At this time, dozens of other queer female characters were also killed on television in what has become colloquially known within queer fandoms as the 'Spring Slaughter of 2016' (Riese 2016).[7]

Queer representation matters: TV, tropes and trauma

Over the past few decades, queer media scholars have shown that contemporary portrayals of LGBTIQA + people have emerged from a long history of negative mainstream representations both in the US and in Australia, where until recently, queerness was either omitted from mainstream television, or, if represented, was portrayed as distasteful, depressing or deviant.[8] Often these portrayals of LGBTIQA + people were trivial or tokenistic and appeared to be created as a way for executives, writers and producers to appear to be inclusive, merely ticking a necessary diversity box (Krikowa 2022, 51–52). Queer screen practitioners, disenfranchised by the mainstream screen media practices, sought alternative avenues to tell their stories.

In the last decade, with the emergence of affordable digital filmmaking technology and free online distribution channels like YouTube, marginalised queer screen practitioners have taken to the online platforms to tell their stories as there are fewer gatekeepers and more freedom to tell the stories they want to tell. Examples in Australasia include the web series, *The Newtown Girls*[9] and *Starting From Now! …*[10] (Monaghan 2017) and commissioned series *Love Bites* and *Out Here* by ABC and Network 10 respectively for their online platforms (Munro 2020). Munro notes that while these online platforms

provide spaces for audiences who feel that Australian broadcast television is not catering to their needs and tastes, relying solely on online distribution means that, as Screen Australia puts it, 'we lose the important integrating effect of free-to-air broadcasting, with its opportunities for shared conversations and insights into unfamiliar communities and experiences' (as cited in Munro 2020, 45). LGBTIQA + stories have also long been celebrated in Australian film festivals such as Mardi Gras Film Festival in Sydney and the Melbourne Queer Film Festival. These spaces offer LGBTIQA + storytellers an inclusive space to tell their stories (Richards 2017), but arguably the audience is still heavily skewed to LGBTIQA + people, where again we are missing opportunities for wider conversations.

In 2016, following the 'Spring Slaughter', Screen Australia released their *Seeing Ourselves: Reflections on Diversity in TV Drama* report, which provided a reflection of the diversity in Australian TV drama. This report painted a critical picture of the lack of inclusive storytelling on Australian scripted TV, inferring that LGBTIQA + people were in fact *not* seeing themselves – that the representation was lacking diversity, inclusivity, authenticity and complexity. The report noted that only 5% of characters were identifiably LGBTIQA + and only 27% of programmes included at least one LGBTIQA + character among the main characters (2016, 4). The report noted that:

> 1 in 10 Australians now identify with diverse sexual orientation or gender identity [and that] the image of Australia that is reflected to us on television has been the subject of much recent debate … [and] commentators are questioning why our TV dramas are not reflecting the diversity that is now such a ubiquitous feature of our workplaces, schools, commutes, neighbourhoods, and, for many of us, our own family backgrounds (Screen Australia 2016, 1).

As many media scholars have noted over the past two decades, media representation is critical in being able to see oneself as important to society.[11] Popular culture and entertainment have not only been a primary mode of expression for queer identity, but one of the most effective means of narrowing social divides and enabling social change. When LGBTIQA + people are simply part of a screen storyworld, the audience is reminded that those characters are a part of that world and, by extension, our own (Krikowa 2022). However, when minority characters, such as those in the LGBTIQA + community, are marginalised or made invisible within these worlds, it not only reminds those being underrepresented that their social position is less than others in their communities, but also makes it more difficult for the majority to see them as part of that world's reality, let alone accepted.

Responding to the 'Spring Slaughter' and the *Seeing Ourselves* report, the theatrical play *All Our Lesbians Are Dead!* was created and showcased at the 2017 Sydney Fringe Festival. The satirical play explored issues of queer representation in screen media incorporating research on the 'bury your gays' trope, 'queer-baiting' and fan-producer interactions on social media. Building on this initial creative research practice, Krikowa developed the i-doc *Queer Representation Matters* (*QRM*) to further investigate these issues and explore how i-docs can effectively communicate research to general audiences beyond academia.

Designing the interactive experience

In *QRM*, academics, filmmakers, and media professionals discuss the 'bury your gays' trope, which sees queer characters being killed off television shows disproportionately to their heterosexual counterparts and often in extremely violent ways. The i-doc discusses the historical and contemporary nature of the trope and the trauma it inflicts on

queer audiences and more broadly explores the history of queer representation, with an Australian focus.

With non-linear interactive narratives 'a significant design feature is the system of navigation' (McErlean 2018, 123). QRM utilises a concentric nodal narrative structure that invites users to explore the content but return to the 'Home page' (by clicking on the house icon in the top-left hand corner of the screen) which features the introductory video that asks the question 'Why does representation matter?' From the 'Home' page the user is then given four buttons to navigate to: 'Timeline', 'Issues', 'The Play', 'About the Project' (Figure 1).

In each of the first three content areas, users are met with short videos and hypertext, which Odorico (2020) notes are almost always present in i-docs along with other specific recurring elements, including 'interactive menus, maps, timelines, user-forums, and links to social networks' (96). The 'Timeline' button is positioned as the first option on the left, suggesting to users (at least English speakers who read left to right), that this is the desired next step from the 'Home' page. Once navigated to the 'Timeline' users move forwards and backwards in time to hear about key moments in the history of queer screen representation (Figure 2).

The content has been designed to be easily navigated and engaged with, which is a key design consideration for i-docs produced for a broad audience. Donald and Galloway (2013) argue that:

> … content should be visually engaging and easy to navigate. Indeed, the exploration of content should not be a barrier to users, quality material should always be easily discovered and specific elements should be able to be browsed via a range of appropriate criterion. The designer should provide an intriguing and clearly stated seed – this is a contributing factor in attracting users to the site, therefore if implemented poorly, the quality of contributions will likely be affected. (Donald and Galloway 2013, 232)

Users can choose which path they take, in whatever order they desire, but they will always return to the core 'Home' page. The i-doc's 'narrative of sorts' can be navigated and experienced according to the viewer's individual engagement with the hypertext and
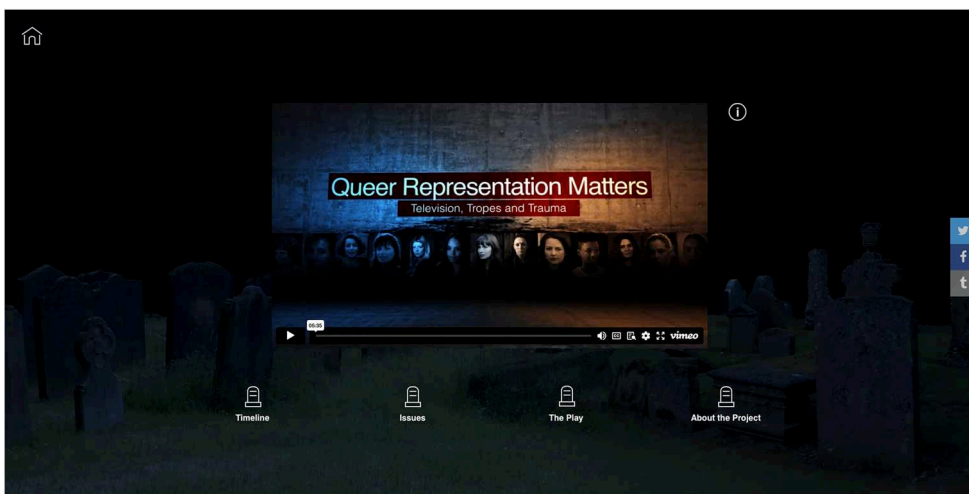

Figure 1. Home page of *Queer Representation Matters* showing the four main content areas (Krikowa 2023).
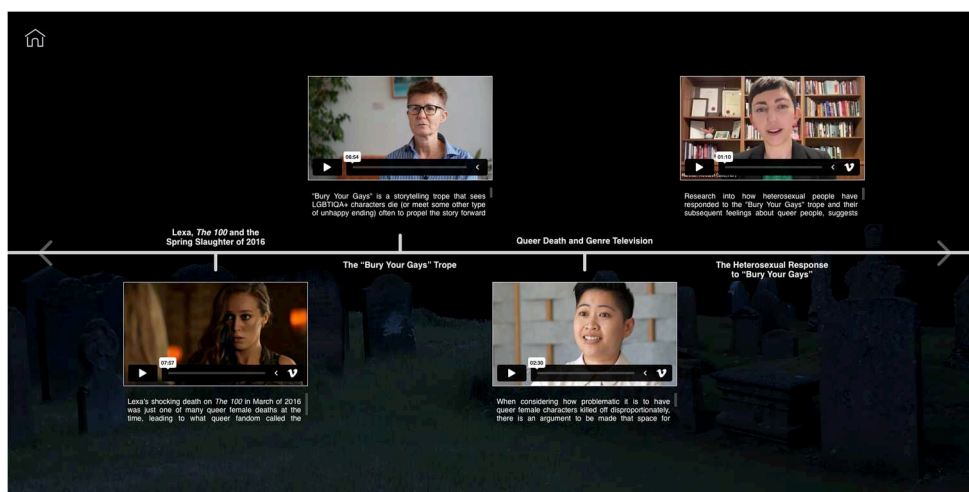
Figure 2. Timeline page of *Queer Representation Matters* showing the video clips and navigation arrows to move forward and backward in time (Krikowa 2023).

the environment designed by the producer (Dinmore 2014, 123). *QRM* utilises familiar HTML hyperlinks and embedded videos to ensure accessibility to a wider range of audiences including users with basic internet navigation skills. The web-based nature allows for on-demand access across various devices (computers, tablets, smartphones) without the need for specialised software. These simple yet effective features enable viewers to engage with the content at their own pace, explore different pathways and access related resources directly, thereby accommodating diverse viewing styles and preferences, while also reaching audiences who might not have access to traditional film screenings or TV broadcasts. Users move through the content and gain 'access to information through participation in the digital space, thus interacting with the documentary and becoming cognitively (and physically) engaged' (Odorico 2020, 97). Each short video stands alone to discuss an issue or moment in screen media history but cumulatively creates a narrative to explain why representation matters, particularly for those who have been marginalised in society and historically victimised on our screens.

Interactive narratives offer pre-specified levels of story agency or choice to the audience, allowing them to exert an influence over their experience (McErlean 2018, 2). The nodal structure provides a great deal of freedom and interactivity, but also means creators relinquish a lot of the control over where their audience goes and what they see. Multiple perspectives create a unique experience for each viewer, however interactivity within the narrative 'creates redundant content, scenes that may never be viewed, chapters that may never be read' (McErlean 2018, 120). Non-linear texts demand careful analysis to create a coherent narrative that guides the audience on a purposeful journey rather than leading them into a confusing or aimless path (McErlean 2018). They may not get the desired 'journey', but this sacrifice is warranted to allow different audience types to experience the project the way that it suits them. Some casual users will dip in and gain a limited amount of knowledge on why queer representation matters, perhaps engaging no further than watching the main page video. Others, from the academic or media

industries, may watch through the timeline videos seeking out clips based on topics of interest. Queer TV fans may watch the theatrical play clips or even the full play if the content speaks to their own lived experience.

Making the documentary both interactive, and available online, ensures that not only the academic community but media professionals, students and general audiences can learn about these issues and better understand the importance of representation for LGBTIQA + audiences (and by extension, other minority and marginalised audiences). As Munro and Bilbrough (2018) note 'perhaps a more productive method of engaging with filmmaking as research, is how these insights can be disseminated further afield that the academic institution, and in ways that are visible and that matter' (267). Furthermore, the i-doc serves as an archive for future research, which as Alisa Lebow (2016) notes, opens up 'the possibilities and uses infinitely' (285). Similarly, our desire was also to create a context for people to engage in the research, or do their own research based on the materials presented in our projects.

Queer interruptions: *queer viewers and 'time-traveling wounds'*

Complementing Krikowa's work in *Queer Representation Matters*, the i-doc *Queer Interruptions* features interviews with queer fans to give insight into the contemporary queer viewing experience. The work draws on contemporary queer theories of temporality which argue that queer people experience time differently: that they deviate from heteronormative life timelines centred on marriage and reproduction ('straight time') and whose lives are instead marked by non-linearity – they are living in queer time (Freeman 2010; Muñoz 2009).

This non-linearity also extends to a blurring of past and present. With the death of the popular lesbian character, Lexa on *The 100,* many queer fans began to question the progress made in LGBTIQA + rights after seeing themselves killed onscreen yet again. *Queer Interruptions* explores the temporal dimensions of this dark screen history and the sense of repetition and 'backwardness' felt by fans. Featuring interviews with queer female and genderqueer fans, the work examines their multitemporal experiences and how they inhabit queer time: how they deviate from heteronormative life timelines and experience a sense of delay or of being out-of-sync; how the fans' bad feelings – their devastation, anger, and despair – are out-of-place in our progressive present; and how the time-traveling wounds of the past touch them in the present. An exploration of the fans' experiences of queer time allows us to question the extent of liberation – which sectors of the LGBTIQA + community are accepted (or perhaps merely protected) and who continues to be marginalised? As Heather Love argues, is the intimacy between the suffering of the past and present that highlights 'the material and structural continuities between these two eras' (2007, 21).

Rather than following a linear mainstream broadcast path, delivery via a web-based i-doc ensured enhanced accessibility for the target audience of queer television fans and allies. Online spaces have been instrumental in building queer connections and identities, particularly for those isolated by geography or privacy concerns (Llewellyn 2021; McCracken 2017). Queer fandoms also thrive in online spaces such as Tumblr, which Allison McCracken describes as a 'powerful site of youth media literacy, identity formation, and political awareness' (2017, 152). These media-savvy online networks are often marked

by 'creative visual and audio production, fluency in visual culture and remix practices, detailed textual analysis and critical commentary, educational and historical perspectives, [and] personal testimonies' (158). The web-based format of *Queer Interruptions* adopts the aesthetics and vernacular of such online spaces, to '[speak] to the community in its own language' (Lee 2021, para. 5.6). By utilising streaming video, animation, media commentary and interactivity, the work aligns with the ethos of a queer online fan culture characterised by digital fluency, information-sharing, and solidarity.

The work's exploration of queer representation and queer fan experience resonates with politically inclined online queer fan communities. Presenting the fans' personal testimonies of queerness, ongoing homophobia, and imagined queer futures aligns with community goals to educate the wider public on issues of queer experience, as well as validating the experiences of fans who are often dismissed or stigmatised (Busse 2015; Stanfill 2013). For example, queer media website, *LezWatch.TV* (Epstein 2021) featured an article on *Queer Interruptions*, highlighting its ability to create a sense of solidarity and support:

> The thing is … you're not alone. We're not alone. And while we are still struggling to carve space out so all of our stories can be told, if you've ever felt out of step with the world, know you have friends (Epstein 2021).

Further, a queer fan (24 years old, White, she/her, demisexual lesbian, Oklahoma, U.S.), shared her reaction to the work via private correspondence on Tumblr:

> I will admit I had to fast forward a little – I still to this day can't watch Lexa's death scene. It triggers and sets me off … But I love being able to see people talk about their experiences and I think this is so important!

> I've never made a YouTube video/video blog in my life but I swear this is making me want to, just to participate and share those experiences in case it helps people.

Queer Interruptions not only furthers community goals of educating and raising public awareness of queer issues but is also indicative of the generative potential of web-based i-docs. By adopting the ethos and aesthetics of online fan communities – increasing access and legibility – the work contributes to the generation of online queer spaces of connection as well as motivating individual and collective activism.

Designing interrupted experiences

The non-linearity afforded by web-based i-docs offers ways to explore not only interactivity and user agency, but also queer temporalities through design and content. The website homepage opens on an animated clock with several hands moving out of sync. In keeping with the non-linear nature of queer time, the main section of the website uses non-linear navigation, allowing viewers to move backward, forward, and laterally between the five videos presented (Figure 3). Building on conceptions of fans not as passive consumers but as 'active participants in the construction and circulation of textual meanings' (Jenkins 2013, 24), the interactive navigation gives viewers agency and allows them to become co-producers of meaning. Viewers are able to make their own path between videos and interview quotes, creating their own narrative connections and distributing authorship among viewers. The interactive meaning-making in i-docs allows for 'infinite polyvocality' but exists in tension with the need for editorial control (Dovey and
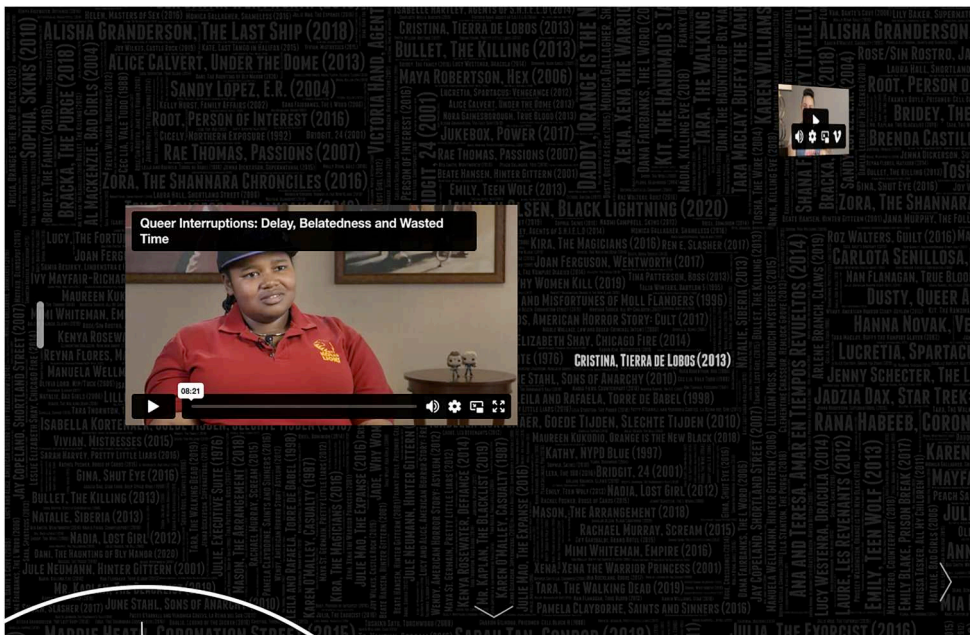
Figure 3. Screenshot of *Queer Interruptions* showing the non-linear layout of the videos (Aguas 2021)

Rose 2013, 370). For example, each of the five videos could have been split into several shorter videos, but the non-linear navigation meant that they would not have been viewed in the intended order. Rather than viewers enjoying 'random access' (Odorico 2020, 96), the degree to which viewers co-produce meaning is negotiated with the need to present the videos with narrative linearity.

The design of the website background also offers opportunities to '[tell] factual stories in an audio-visual context, presenting them not as linear plotlines, but as fragmented interactive experiences' (Odorico 2020, 96). The background consists of the names of more than 200 lesbian and bisexual female characters killed on television since 1976, a list compiled by queer online magazine, *Autostraddle* (Riese 2016). The fans' video testimonials are placed in and amongst this history of queer death onscreen, blurring past and present in queer time and giving the impression that viewers are moving back and forth through queer television history as they navigate between videos. Several character names have also been transformed into buttons that present emotive quotes taken from online surveys with participants. The buttons utilise a hover function to give them a sense of transience and haunting, acting as an interface through which the past makes incursions into the present. Positioning these buttons randomly across each screen encourages a 'logic of exploration' and 'a more active level of engagement' from viewers (Dinmore 2014, 125) (Figure 4). Here, the non-linear and fragmented interactivity transforms the symbolic temporal multiplicity of the buttons, quotes, and imagery into an embodied experience of queer time. With parallels to Alisa Lebow's work, *Filming Revolution* (2016), *Queer Interruptions* translates the fans' sentiments and experiences into website design: a translation of queer temporalities to a 'homologous platform (non-linear, non-hierarchical, spatially and temporally open-ended)' (Lebow 2016, 291).
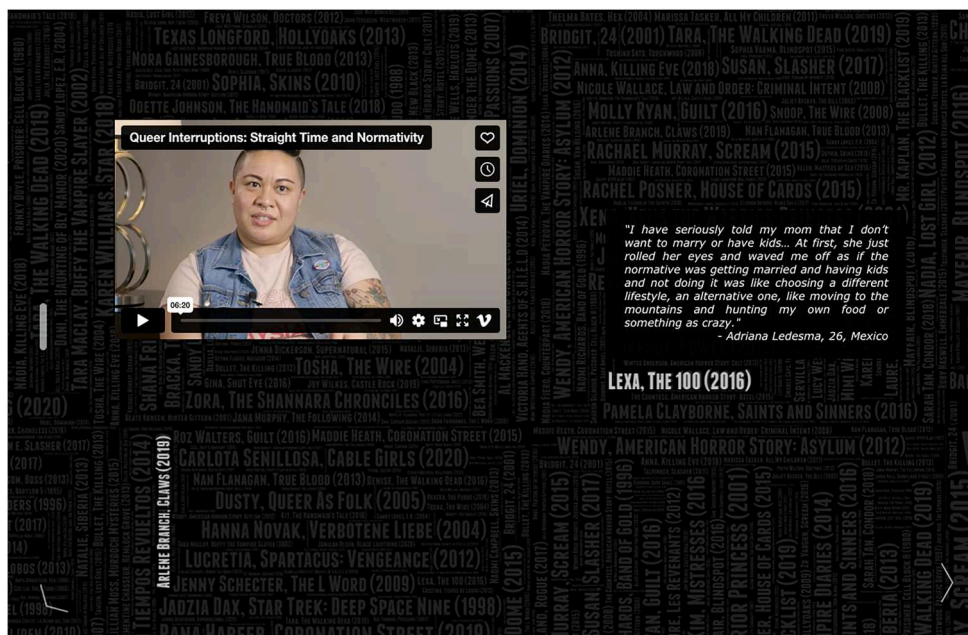
Figure 4. Screenshot of *Queer Interruptions* showing the website background design and buttons that present quotes from research participants (Aguas 2021).

As a form of alternative scholarship, *Queer Interruptions* seeks to expand current methodological trends in queer theory research. Kath Browne and Catherine Nash (2010) describe how queer theory's reliance on textualism has resulted in a field 'disengaged from understandings of contemporary experiences of sexualities and lived socialities' (13). Responding to these methodological tensions, the work grounds abstract theory through ethnographic methodologies common to fan scholarship, and then disseminates the research through an affective method of presentation: an online i-doc presenting the fans in their own voices, in their own bodies, and in their own words. The affordances of web-based i-docs allow interactive explorations of queer temporalities and reveal the potential synergies for interdisciplinary research in online spaces.

Conclusion

This article used two recent i-docs centred on LGBTIQA + identity and representation, *Queer Representation Matters* (2023) and *Queer Interruptions* (2021), to argue that by situating critique of mainstream screen media (film and TV) outside of mainstream screen media, i-docs can act as commentary on contemporary screen media issues themselves, while also making the arguments contained within accessible to a wider range of audiences.

Through a curated selection of video clips, interviews, and textual examples spanning decades, users of *Queer Representation Matters* are invited to traverse the historical trajectory of queer representation in media to situate queer representation within a historical industrial and social context. With increasing numbers of queer stories onscreen, *Queer*

Interruptions gives context to the contemporary queer viewing experience and disseminates the research using the aesthetics of online fan communities. The i-docs transcend traditional academic boundaries, leveraging the i-doc form to democratise access to discussions of media representation. By engaging media professionals, students, and wider audiences in interactive dialogue, these i-docs foster greater understanding and empathy for the importance of representation in screen media narratives.

These i-docs and their predecessors in creative practice academia demonstrate the power of i-docs as tools for activism. However, further research into audience consumption and user interaction is crucial for a deeper understanding of how varying audiences engage with i-docs. Challenges in academia, such as restricted access to quantitative data (for example engagement data for specific project/site elements) and limited post-release qualitative research opportunities (due to a lack of time and funding), can hinder this further exploration. It would be beneficial for scholars to continue to produce insights into how platforms, software, and affordances shape user engagement, how interactions with i-docs influence attitudes and behaviours, and what motivates users to engage with i-docs on a broader scale. Additionally, further investigation into how queer audiences engage with interactive narratives (and if this is counter to heteronormative audience engagement) would also be of interest.

This article demonstrates how i-docs can be designed for social and cultural activism, furthering discourse on contemporary social, cultural and political issues, and how the interactive qualities of i-docs can be used to make these issues more accessible to publics outside the academy. Exploring the techniques and affordances of i-doc storytelling unlocks innovative ways to tell stories that drive social justice and cultural activism. As Scott-Stevenson (2020, 308) notes, documentaries often use small, personal stories to connect to larger issues, revealing something profound about the world. Embracing the i-doc form shifts storytelling from passive information transmission to collaborative engagement, a key strength of its online manifestation (Dinmore 2014, 123). This article showcases how academy-based projects can spark broader social and community discussions. While the i-docs discussed share similar themes and video-based formats, they each employ unique interactive techniques. The DIY nature of i-doc production encourages wider adoption by creative practice researchers. Moreover, the diverse backgrounds of media and communication scholars – ranging from journalism and creative writing to digital and social media – make interactive storytelling a versatile tool for wider social and cultural engagement.

Queer Representation Matters (2023) – http://www.queerrepresentationsmatters.com.
Queer Interruptions (2021) – http://www.queerinterruptions.com.

Notes

1. Projects include *Hollow* (McMillon Sheldon 2013), *Step to the Line* (Laganaro 2017), *Deep Reckoning* (Lepp 2020), and *They Call Me Asylum Seeker* (Shogaolu 2020).
2. Projects include *Are You Happy* (Rose 2010), *The Worry Box Project* (Lusztig 2011), and *Birth in the 21st Century* (Reig 2020).
3. Projects include *Clouds Over Sidra* (Arora & Milk 2015), *Out of Sight, Out of Mind* (Grubbs 2013) and *Life On Hold* (Shaibani, Dfouni, and Haddad 2015).
4. Scholars working on early i-doc scholarship include Nash (2012); O'Flynn (2012, 2016); Aston and Gaudenzi 2012; Favero (2013); Gaudenzi (2013); Dinmore (2014).

5. Examples of how i-docs have been used by minorities for political activism can be seen in Pérez-Escolar and Cortés-Selva (2020) and Zafra (2023).
6. *The 100* was executive produced by Jason Rothenberg for the CW network.
7. These include fan favourites Mimi Whiteman and Camilla from *Empire*, Mayfair from *Blindspot*, and Root from *Persons of Interest*.
8. Davis & Needham's (2009) monograph *Queer TV: Theories, History, Politics* includes a collection of chapters exploring queerness in relation to US television from a variety of perspectives including industry, production, texts, audiences, pleasures and politics. Monaghan's (2020) article 'Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Representation on Australian Entertainment Television: 1970–2000' and O'Meara & Monaghan's (2024) article 'Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and nonbinary representation on Australian scripted television in the 2000s and 2010s' provide the Australian TV context.
9. *The Newtown Girls* (Krikowa 2014).
10. *Starting From … Now!* (Kalceff 2014-2016).
11. See, for example, Hall (1997), Cover (2000), Ahmed (2004, 2006), Berger (2012), and Monaghan (2016).

Acknowledgements

Disclosure statement

Notes on contributors

Dr. *Natalie Krikowa* (she/they) is a media scholar and practice-led researcher at the University of Technology Sydney. Natalie's research focuses on the intersection of media technology, cultural practices and social justice, with a particular emphasis on giving voice to marginalised communities. Natalie's work examines how screen media and digital and social media platforms can be leveraged to amplify underrepresented narratives and influence public discourse. Natalie's queer-focused creative practice works include *The Newtown Girls* (2012), *All Our Lesbians Are Dead!* (2017), and *Queer Representation Matters* (2023).

Evangeline Aguas (she/her) is a media scholar at the University of Technology Sydney. With a background in professional film and television production, her interdisciplinary research aims to combine the fields of queer theory, digital media, and fan studies with creative practice. She has a particular interest in ethnographic studies of queer fans and practices, and how research can be further disseminated through online digital mediums.

ORCID

Natalie Krikowa 🄳 http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3251-1361
Evangeline Aguas 🄳 http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2451-2409

References

Aguas, Evangeline, dir. 2021. *Queer Interruptions*. Sydney, Australia. http://www.queerinterruptions.com.
Ahmed, Sara. 2004. *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*. 2nd Edition. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Ahmed, Sara. 2006. *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Arora, Gabo, and Chris Milk, dir. 2015. *Clouds Over Sidra*. Within. https://www.unicefusa.org/stories/clouds-over-sidra-award-winning-virtual-reality-experience.

Aston, Judith. 2016. "Interactive Documentary – What Does it Mean and Why Does it Matter?" *i-Docs Org*. http://i-docs.org/interactive-documentary-what-does-it-mean-and-why-does-it-matter/.

Aston, Judith. 2023. "Interactive Documentary: Steps Towards Embracing Complexity". *YouTube*. Bellyfeel. Filmed April 28, 2023. 45:13. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v = 24MKnXbnIUE.

Aston, Judith, and Sandra Gaudenzi. 2012. "Interactive Documentary: Setting the Field." *Studies in Documentary Film* 6 (2): 125–139. https://doi.org/10.1386/sdf.6.2.125_1.

Berger, Arthur. A. 2012. *Media and Society: A Critical Perspective*. 3rd Edition. New York: Rowman & Littlefiel.

Berler, Caroline, dir. 2018. *Dykes, Camera, Action!*, Frameline Distribution, USA.

Browne, Kath, and J. Nash Catherine. 2010. *Queer Methods and Methodologies: Intersecting Queer Theories and Social Science Research*. Surrey: Ashgate Publishing. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315603223-1

Busse, Kristina. 2015. "Fan Labor and Feminism: Capitalizing on the Fannish Labor of Love." *Cinema Journal* 54 (3): 110–115. https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2015.0034.

Cover, Rob. 2000. "First Contact: Queer Theory, Sexual Identity, and "Mainstream" Film." *International Journal of Sexuality and Gender Studies* 5 (1): 71–89.

Davis, Glyn, and Gary Needham. 2009. *Queer TV: Theories, History, Politics*. New York: Routledge.

De Kosnik, Abigail. 2016. *Rogue Archives: Digital Cultural Memory and Media Fandom*. Massachusetts: MIT Press.

Dinmore, Stuart. 2014. "The Real Online: Database Documentary and Knowledge Space." *Journal of Media Practice* 15 (2): 123–132. https://doi.org/10.1080/14682753.2014.960765.

Donald, Iian, and Dayna Galloway. 2013. "Documenting Debate: Online Communities and the Expansive Interactive Documentary." *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 10 (2): 220–234. https://www.participations.org/10-02-13-donald.pdf.

Dovey, Jon, and Mandy Rose. 2013. "This Great Mapping of Ourselves": New Documentary Forms Online." In *The Documentary Film Book*, edited by Brian Winston, 366–375. London: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-92625-1_41.

Epstein, Mika. A. 2021. "PhDs, Queerbaiting, and Queer Interruptions." *LezWatch.TV* (blog). August 18, 2021. https://lezwatchtv.com/2021/phds-queerbaiting-and-queer-interruptions.

Favero, Paolo. 2013. "Getting our Hands Dirty (Again): Interactive Documentaries and the Meaning of Images in the Digital age." *Journal of Material Culture* 18 (3): 259–277. https://doi.org/10.1177/1359183513492079.

Freeman, Elizabeth. 2010. *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Galloway, Dayna, Kenneth B McAlpine, and Paul Harris. 2007. "From Michael Moore to JFK Reloaded: Towards a Working Model of Interactive Documentary." *Journal of Media Practice* 8 (3): 325–339. https://doi.org/10.1386/jmpr.8.3.325_1.

Gaudenzi, S. 2013. "The Living Documentary: From Representing Reality to Co-Creating Reality in Digital Interactive Documentary." PhD diss., Goldsmiths, University of London. http://research.gold.ac.uk/7997/.

Grubbs, Wesley, dir. 2013. "Out of Sight, Out of Mind." https://drones.pitchinteractive.com/.

Hall, Stuart. 1997. *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*. London: Sage, The Open University.

Harris, Ella. 2017. "Introducing I-Docs to Geography: Exploring Interactive Documentary's Nonlinear Imaginaries." *Area* 49: 25–34. https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.uts.edu.au/10.1111/area.12275.

Jenkins, H. 2013. *Textual Poachers: Television Fans and Participatory Culture*. New York: Routledge.

Kalceff, Julie, dir. 2014-2016. *Starting From … Now!* Sydney, Australia. http://www.youtube.com/@StartingFromNow.

Krikowa, Natalie. 2014. *The Newtown Girls*. Sydney, Australia. https://www.youtube.com/TheNewtownGirls.

Krikowa, Natalie. 2022. "Where Is Australia's GLAAD? A Case for Establishing an Australian LGBTIQA+ Media Institute to Improve Diversity in Screen Media Representation." *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media* 24:49–63. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.24.03.

Krikowa, Natalie, dir. 2023. *Queer Representation Matters*. Sydney, Australia. http://www.queerrepresentationsmatters.com.

Laganaro, Ricardo. 2017. *Step to the Line*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v = ejVVsM9yG3U.

Lebow, Alisa. 2016. "Seeing Revolution Non-Linearly: Www.Filmingrevolution.org." *Visual Anthropology* 29 (3): 278–295. https://doi.org/10.1080/08949468.2016.1154751.

Lee, Katja. 2021. "Acafan Methodologies and Giving Back to the Fan Community." *Transformative Works and Cultures* 36. https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2021.2025.

Lepp, Stephanie. 2020. "Deep Reckoning." https://www.deepreckonings.com.

Llewellyn, Anna. 2021. "'A Space Where Queer is Normalized': The Online World and Fanfictions as Heterotopias for WLW." *Journal of Homosexuality* 69 (13): 2348–2369. https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2021.1940012.

Love, Heather. 2007. *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvjghxr0.

Lusztig, Irene. 2011. "The Worry Box Project." https://worryboxproject.net/.

Marcus, Daniel. 2016. "Documentary and Video Activism." In *Contemporary Document*, edited by Daniel Marcus, and Selmin Kara, 189–203. New York, NY: Routledge.

McCracken, Allison. 2017. "Tumblr Youth Subcultures and Media Engagement." *Cinema Journal* 57 (1): 151–161. https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2017.0061.

McErlean, K. 2018. *Interactive Narratives and Transmedia Storytelling: Creating Immersive Stories Across New Media Platforms*. New York, USA: Routledge.

McMillon Sheldon, Elaine. 2013. "Hollow." http://hollowdocumentary.com/.

Miller, Liz. 2017. "ShoreLine." https://theshorelineproject.org/.

Miller, Liz. 2018. "SwampScapes." http://www.swampscapes.org/.

Miller, Liz. 2021. "Wasterscapes." https://wastescapes.com/app/.

Miller, Liz. 2023. "As the Gull Flies." https://wastescapes.com/as-the-gull-flies/.

Monaghan, Whitney. 2016. *Queer Girls, Temporality & Screen Media: Not 'Just a Phase'*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Monaghan, Whitney. 2017. "Starting from … Now and the Web Series to Television Crossover." *An Online Revolution?" Media International Australia* 164 (1): 82–91. https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X17708842.

Monaghan, Whitney. 2020. "Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Representation on Australian Entertainment Television: 1970–2000." *Media International Australia* 174 (1): 49–58. https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X19876330.

Muñoz, José Esteban. 2009. *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. New York: New York University Press.

Munro, Kim. 2020. "Making Visible: Out Here, Love Bites and LGBTQIA+ Documentary on the Small Screen." *Metro (Melbourne)* 206:42–45.

Munro, Kim, and Paola Bilbrough. 2018. "An Ecology of Relationships: Tensions and Negotiations in Documentary Filmmaking Practice as Research." *Media Practice and Education* 19 (3): 256–269. https://doi.org/10.1080/25741136.2018.1511361.

Nash, Kate. 2012. "Modes of Interactivity: Analysing the Webdoc." *Media Culture & Society* 34 (2): 195–210. https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443711430758.

Odorico, Stefano. 2020. "Beyond the Screen: Interactive Documentary Exhibition in the Festival Space." In *Documentary Film Festivals: Changes, Challenges, Professional Perspectives*, edited by Aida Vallejo, and Ezra Winton, 93–112. Switzerland, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-17324-1.

O'Flynn, Siobhan. 2012. "Documentary's Metamorphic Form: Webdoc, Interactive, Transmedia, Participatory and Beyond." *Studies in Documentary Film* 6 (2): 141–157. https://doi.org/10.1386/sdf.6.2.141_1.

O'Flynn, Siobhan. 2016. "Designed Experiences in Interactive Documentary." In *in Contemporary Documentary*, edited by Daniel Marcus, and Selmin Kara, 72–86. New York, USA: Routledge.

O'Meara, Damien, and Whitney Monaghan. 2024. "Lesbian, gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Nonbinary Representation on Australian Scripted Television in the 2000s and 2010s." *Media International Australia* 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X241236990.

Pérez-Escolar, Marta, and Laura Cortés-Selva. 2020. "Strengthening Women Empowerment Through i-Docs: Alternative Forms of Participation and Civic Engagement in the Feminist Movement." *Catalan Journal of Communication & Cultural Studies* 12 (2): 255–271. https://doi.org/10.1386/cjcs_00031_1.

Reig, Claudia. 2020. "Birth in the 21st Century." https://lab.rtve.es/webdocs/parto-respetado/en/.

Richards, Stuart J. 2017. *The Queer Film Festival: Popcorn and Politics.* US, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Riese. 2016. "All 225 Dead Lesbian and Bisexual Characters on TV, and How They Died." *Autostraddle* (blog) March 11, 2016. https://www.autostraddle.com/all-65-dead-lesbian-and-bisexual-characters-on-tv-and-how-they-died-312315/.

Rose, Mandy. 2010. *Are You Happy.* http://www.theareyouhappyproject.org/.

Rothenberg, Jason, dir. 2014–2020. *The 100,* CW Network.

Scott-Stevenson, Julia. 2019. "Virtual Futures: A Manifesto for Immersive Experiences". *Immerse.* Accessed 11 September 2023. https://immerse.news/virtual-futures-a-manifesto-for-immersive-experiences-ffb9d3980f0f.

Scott-Stevenson, Julia. 2020. "Do as I say, not as I do: Documentary, Data Storytelling and Digital Privacy." *Catalan Journal of Communication & Cultural Studies* 22 (2): 301–313. https://doi.org/10.1386/cjcs_00034_1.

Screen Australia. 2016. "Seeing Ourselves: Reflections on Diversity in Australian TV Drama." Australia. http://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/getmedia/157b05b4-255a-47b4-bd8b-9f715555fb44/TV-Drama-Diversity.pdf.

Shaibani, Dima, Ralph Dfouni, and Reem., dir. Haddad. 2015. "Life On Hold." https://lifeonhold.aljazeera.com/#/en/loading.

Shogaolu, Tamara. 2020. "They Call Me Asylum Seeker." https://www.adoatopictures.com/projects/they-call-me-asylum-seeker.

Stanfill, Mel. 2013. "'They're Losers, But I Know Better': Intra-Fandom Stereotyping and the Normalization of the Fan Subject." *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 30 (2): 117–134. https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2012.755053.

UNVR. 2024. "Syrian Refugee Crisis", *United Nations Virtual Reality Series.* https://unvr.sdgactioncampaign.org/cloudsoversidra/.

Zafra, Norman. 2021. "Do-it-yourself Interactive Documentary (i-doc): A Post-Textual Analysis." *Media Practice and Education* 22 (2): 89–103. https://doi.org/10.1080/25741136.2020.1851951.

Zafra, Norman. 2023. "From Film to Web 2.0: Transmedia as a Distribution Model for Political Documentary." *Studies in Documentary Film* 17 (2): 172–189. https://doi.org/10.1080/17503280.2022.2120380.

Zilkha, Gabrielle, dir. 2019. *Queering the Script,* Shaftesbury Films, Canada.

Zimmerman, Patricia, R., and Helen De Michiel. 2018. *Open Space New Media Documentary: A Toolkit for Theory and Practice.* New York: Routledge.