

NEWSDOC:
A MODEL FOR ONLINE VIDEO STORYTELLING

by

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Abstract

This paper introduces the ideas for a tool for online storytelling. The purpose of the concept of newsdoc is to make compelling web video stories. The newsdoc model helps to plan the story structure and the use of characters and facts in the story. It helps to decide how to shoot effectively a web video story. A documentary style newsdoc is published in daily episodes on a news site.

Preface

In my experience the documentary style storytelling is rare on news sites; feature stories and long-format videos have rarely space. Jill Drew, a former business editor and foreign correspondent for *The Washington Post*, writes about the state of web videos in *Columbia Journalism Review*.

Strong video journalism is caught in a vicious circle. Because it gets lost in the flood of other video, too few users find the high-quality, well-produced stories. (Drew 2010)

The newsdoc model is based on traditional story structure research and on my ten years of experience as a documentary filmmaker. To place the newsdoc idea on the field of web videos, I surveyed different Internet news sites to see what kind of web video production is regularly published.

Online news videos are featured on a variety of websites these days. To survey what kind of videos are published on news sites, I followed *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* for a week in April 2011 (the 5th – 11th of April). I monitored the two newspaper's websites to see if they use documentary style stories, and if they do, how they build their stories.

Most of the stories were either short news stories or traditional feature stories with a reporter's voice-over and a collection of interviews. During the week, *The New York*

Times produced and published 23 videos on their video page, and only three of those were made in documentary style. *The Washington Post* put a lot more videos online than *The New York Times*, but they used stories from other sources too: they produced only one video during the period that used documentary style storytelling.

One of *The New York Times*' documentary style videos, *Brooklyn Voodoo* by Dan Bilefsky and Erik Olsen (2011), uses elements of voice-over, interviews and separate live action shots to deliver information, but there is no really suspense, no development of the character's storyline that can be followed from the beginning to the end.

In my opinion, the best online video storytelling comes outside of the major media houses. *California is a place*, *MediaStorm*, and *The Sparrow Songs* are great web video sites and good examples of what can be done in the web video genre: these sites feature interesting personal stories with strong main characters telling their own stories without voice-over narration by reporters. These sites often publish a series of individual but thematically and visually unified stories. They have created rich visual styles, by shooting with HD/SLR cameras, and they use varied and captivating story structures: For example, *Cannonball* by Drea Cooper and Zackary Canepari (2010) on *californiaisaplace.com* opens with the shots of empty, dirty swimming pools. Then we hear sounds of skateboarding. The stunning images lead us to a story about

skateboarders taking over the pools at foreclosed houses and talking about dreams shattered by the economic crisis.

The newdoc model is a way to create stories that are somewhere between those two styles of news/journalism and documentary filmmaking. A newdoc is shot in the style of a documentary film, and the story is published in series of daily episodes on a news site, back-to-back days. There will be a strong cliffhanger at the end of each episode, and the story will have a connection to a current news event. The purpose of the episodic story delivery is to hold the viewer's interest and keep suspense alive throughout the whole story.

Many times the most interesting web videos are personal stories, and the newdoc model is a tool to help make journalistic choices that take the viewer close to the main character. The model helps to find the situations, shots, and editing choices that will help the viewer to understand the motives and emotions of the character: when the viewer has an "aha" moment watching the story, he most likely realizes something about the world around him.

Richard Koci Hernandez is an Emmy award winning multimedia producer and is currently a visiting fellow at UC Berkeley developing multimedia storytelling. I had an interesting discussion with him in November 2010: He says the need for documentary style news videos has been slowly rising. Hernandez says it is

important for quality news sites to distinguish themselves from everyday coverage with high-quality stories. He also says that episodic delivery is a good method; that way the story will not suffocate the user by launching a lot of material at once.

There clearly is hope that long-format videos will break through online. Raney Aronson-Rath, *PBS's Frontline's* senior producer, argues that this is one of journalism's most pressing issues: "Cracking the digital narrative is our future."
(Drew 2010)

To put my idea into practice, I made a newsdoc as a part of this project. The three-episode video story was published on *neontommy.com*, the online publication of the Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism at University of Southern California.

Chapter One: An Episodic Story With A Goal

A newdoc should be linked to a current news event. Newdocs follow their characters for several days or even weeks as the characters' hopes, goals, disappointments, and challenges are revealed and followed to the resolution of a story.

A newdoc runs from three to five back-to-back days on a news site, and the length of each episode is from two to five minutes.

It is important for a story that the main character has a goal, a target in the story.

Something is at stake - this makes for strong storylines and lot of suspense that pulls the viewer through the daily episodes.

Visually, newdocs are documentary in style. They are not shot like a traditional TV news piece: The camera follows live action, and the story is told from characters' perspective. There is a minimal amount of interviews, and the story does not use narration or stand-ups by reporters.

With this model of production newdocs will cover a long time frame. It is possible to start filming early, weeks or even months before the assumed final day. Because the shooting of a newdoc takes several days, there is usually enough time for the

main character to become relaxed in front of the camera: the audience will see moments when the person reveals something new about him/herself.

The last episode (or the last minutes of it) is produced as close as possible to the publishing: the last shots of the last episode are taken on the day before or even on the same day of the final action.

Two basic types of the newsdoc

There are two basic approaches to finding a story for a newsdoc. The first is building up to the big moment: We know the date that the story will peak or climax – an election day, the first day of school, the day a tax cut starts, the date a major strike through the eyes of a strike leader, a shop owner's deadline to pay back debt before he's kicked out, the date a cancer patient will hear the final diagnosis. The final day and the final moment will be determined by the goal of the main character.

Newsdocs are waiting for that precious moment when the suspense set up in the beginning gets its resolution.

The second approach is jumping straight in to the situation: Something happens – a wild fire, a riot, a revolution, an accident, a sudden strike in a local factory, a new law is voted through, bulldozers appear to a neighborhood to cut down ancient trees. The camera goes straight in to the middle of the situation, and a newsdoc picks somebody who is effected by the change or the event. Then camera follows the main

character: How does this all effect him? Is he going to make it? What does this all mean for him - and for us all in the same kind of situation?

Chapter Two: A Newsdoc Experiment

The newsdoc for this thesis was shot in February and March of 2011. It follows the Los Angeles city council election campaign of Stephen Box and especially his supporters Josef Bray-Ali and Patrick Pascal. These main characters share a common goal: to get a seat in the city council for a person who represents their passion, bicycling. The Los Angeles city council has only 15 members, and the race in the district 4 was predicted to be very close, although the incumbent had never lost the election.

The transcriptions of the three episodes

The Race for L.A. Directed, shot, and edited by Jussi Jormanainen.

First episode 4:17 - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YEmx0s685fQ>

VIDEO	AUDIO
00:00 Josef Bray-Ali and Claudia Vasquez stand on the street by the bike repair equipment in Silver Lake in Los Angeles, trying to get customers.	Claudia: Free bike tune-ups! For Stephen Box. Josef: I Don't know if you ladies have bikes at home, but we are repairing them for free 'till noon today. Voice-over of Stephen Box: There 300 000 people in council district 4.
00:11 A man is setting up a Stephen Box sign on a fence. Stephen Box is talking a group of people.	Stephen Box: There are 135 000 voters, registered voters. And of those less than 6 per cent will turn out. Group: Wow!

00:21 Title: 16 days to the city council election	Street sounds.
00:26 Wide shot: Josef Bray-Ali with a bike on the street.	Josef: If you want some free TLC on your bike, it's on the house.
00:31 Josef Bray-Ali	Josef: Check your rear derailleur? Yeah, no worries.
00:35 Close-ups of Josef hands repairing bikes. 00:45 Josef talking to people on the street.	Voice-over of Josef: He's running against Tom LaBonge in the council district 4. And he's the one guy that as a cyclist, you guys are probably not big cyclists, but I've been able to call him when my friends have gotten hit and run by cars. Josef: He has actually gotten the police to go to their house, take a police report, and they been able to get medical care because of that.
00:49 Close-up of the rolling rear tire of a bike.	Voice-over of Josef: Free bike tune-ups, if you got'em.
00:52 Josef sitting in his bike shop (interview). 00:56 Josef fixing a bike on the street.	Josef: L.A. is a town built on hype, and lies, and propaganda. Voice-over of Josef: I always had a sinking feeling that our country was doomed in lot of ways, growing up here. Just riding my bicycle to go get... a walk in a park was life-threatening experience.
01:07 Close-up of the back of a t-shirt with the text: 4 LA CITY COUNCIL – North Hollywood, Toluca Lake, Hollywood Hills, Hollywood, East	Street sounds. Sounds of bikes been repaired.

Hollywood, Griffith Park, Mid-City, Silver Lake, Larchmont, Park La Brea, Franklin Hill, Lake Hollywood, Los Feliz, Atwater Village, Koreatown, Windsor Square, Hancock Park, Miracle Mile, Runyon Canyon, Wilshire Center, Little Bangladesh, Beachwood Canyon, Studio City.	
01:11 Medium shot of Josef rolling a tire of a bike.	Josef: You can't vote? No worries, man.
01:14 A man is putting a Stephen Box sign on a fence.	Street sounds.
01:17 Wide shot of a street, Stephen Box by the food trucks.	Stephen Box: Are we registering voters? Are you registered? A woman: I am.
01:21 Hand is writing something on a menu of a food truck. Wide shot of the truck.	Voice-over of Stephen Box: We make stuff illegal all the time. But no one got the mechanism...
01:26 Stephen Box talking to a person. 01:32 Tight shots of food and people buying food from the food trucks.	Stephen Box: ...so we frustrate ourselves with rules that we can't force and plans that we don't even know about. A man (out of frame): There you go, and either... if you force them people would start obeying them or the city wouldn't be as broke when money would be coming in.
01:38 Medium-shot of Stephen Box talking to a person.	Stephen Box: We should also embracing the small opportunities to create jobs. Anyway, what's your name?

	<p>Josh: Josh.</p> <p>Stephen Box: Josh, alright. Josh The Grip.</p>
01:45 Mother and daughter on the street, listening Stephen Box.	<p>Voice-over of Stephen Box: And so if people say it's build for cars, it's build for people.</p> <p>Mother: Now I know of you, I definitely go online and read up. And I hope, you know, things work out.</p>
01:54 Wide-shot of Josef Bray-Ali standing, waiting for customers. 02:11 Josef sitting in his bike shop (interview). 02:15 Wide shot of Patrick Pascal picking up a flyer.	<p>Street sounds for 6 seconds.</p> <p>Josef: It's very easy in L.A to isolate an enthusiast. But with the culture that we the people have create for ourselves, on bicycles, this whole scene.</p> <p>We have organized rides, we organized parties, just for fun. But once the organization of the party is over, now I know all these people, we have worked together.</p>
02:20 Claudia tries to find her keys from her jacket's pockets. She runs away, camera follows. Patrick steps into the shot.	<p>Claudia: And I got to go to activate a phone bank.</p> <p>Patrick Pascal: Oh, Claudia. This one is ready too, the Nishiki, right?</p> <p>Claudia: They're both ready.</p> <p>Patrick: Okay, yeah, you ready to go.</p>
02:35 Close-ups of bike parts, Josef's hand trying the brakes, Patrick standing and talking on the background.	<p>Voice-over of Josef: Now we are communicating online, via internet and Facebook, and on Midnight Riders website, and cell phones, and smart phones, and photographs. Once you get that medium and your bicycle,</p>

	then you're part of this movement. You get 200 of your friends on bikes together, guess what you're a big gun.
02: 54 Medium-shot of Patrick Pascal talking to somebody. (title: Patrick Pascal)	Patrick: And we all know the situation of the city. And yet nobody's been challenged, everything goes along like it's fine.
03:02 Josef sitting in his bike shop (interview).	Josef: I think people really get hooked in this town, because we live mostly such an isolated lives in L.A. trapped in cars.
03:07 Close-up of a hand taking a pastry from the shelf behind the glass. Hand giving a box through the Pick-Up Here window. A young couple eating French fries. Stephen Box talking to a group.	A voice from the food truck: Here you go, thank you. Voice-over of Stephen Box: It's not about my ability to put up a campaign. Stephen Box: It's quite simply, if the voters turn out, we'll do extremely well. And I say that because we have precincts that have been won with as little as 20 votes. There are 135 precincts, so I'm looking at enough people to carry this precinct.
03:30 Wide-shot of a bike store front. Josef sweeping the side walk.	Sounds of cars.
03:37 Josef sitting in his bike shop (interview).	Josef: But this election, in this city that I know so well, that I have worked so hard in so many years now to try improve , going so many meetings and riding and meeting people and photographing, and all the rest, and organizing rides and all these other things. If I don't do something now, for my friend, a guy that I consider my friend, who

	has done things for me and my life. What kind of human am I? I'm just the most worthless kind, of a leach. To suck up someone's productive work and never giving back to them.
04:04 Patrick and Claudia hugging on the street, looking for more people to talk to. And they walk out of the frame.	Claudia: Thank you. Patrick: Oh, this is great, this is great. I think we make some real progress. Here's a bike rider. Claudia: Free bicycle tune-ups.
04:12 title: "to be continued tomorrow" -04:17	Sounds of bikes been repaired.

The Race for L.A. Directed, shot, and edited by Jussi Jormanainen.

Second episode 4:21 - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-pwVYBOU9z4>

VIDEO	AUDIO
00:00 Tomas O'Grady, a city council candidate, talks at a candidate forum.	O'Grady: For God's sake, we can't even house our homeless people.
00:03 Tom LaBonge, a ruling city councilman, talks at a candidate forum.	LaBonge: But at the same time, I think Fleetwood Mac said, don't stop thinking about tomorrow, don't stop thinking about it.
00:11 Stephen Box, a city council candidate, talks at a candidate forum.	Box: We're not staffed for it, because we've cut the departments that provide the services that are essential.
00:16 Title: 10 days to the city council election	Street sounds, birds singing.

<p>00:21 Medium shot: Josef Bray-Ali packing his cargo bike.</p>	<p>Josef: My pimp jacket.</p>
<p>00:26 Wide shot: Josef loads a heavy box on bike.</p> <p>Wide shots Josef leaving home with his cargo bike.</p>	<p>A little girl's voice: Goodbye, daddy!</p> <p>Josef: Hey! Who said that? Hey!</p> <p>Voice-over of Josef: You know, I've been to the library now three times in the last month with my daughter with a library book, every time it's closed. And it's just a joke to me, just a stupid, sick joke.</p>
<p>00:43 Close-up of Josef smiling.</p>	<p>Street sounds.</p>
<p>00:45 Wide shot of Josef standing on a street in Hollywood with his bike repairing equipment ready to use.</p>	<p>Josef: Going to be a hard morning of bike repair, I can tell.</p> <p>Hard.</p>
<p>00:48 Medium shot of Josef talking to passer-bys.</p> <p>Wide shot of Josef.</p>	<p>Josef: You got a bike at home? Ooh. If you got a bike at home... oh. If you guys have... aah, this is not going to work.</p>
<p>00:55 Close-up of Josef's bike, he is moving his spot.</p>	<p>Josef: Alright, so, we are going to move to the protected free-speech zone.</p>
<p>01:02 Close-ups of Josef working on bikes.</p>	<p>Sounds of bike repair.</p> <p>Voice-over of Patrick Pascal: Stephen is also in a great support of governor Brown's...</p>

<p>01:07 Medium shot of Patrick Pascal talking to people.</p> <p>Shots of Patrick and Josef talking to people while taking care of bikes.</p>	<p>Patrick: ...proposals about the CRA and using that surplus to bail out state's cities out. 'Cause you know, if we took the surplus the CRA has been generating for the last few years, we wouldn't have to lay-off the police, the fire, closing libraries, laying-off our park rangers and closing parks, and all his stuff. We got the money to do it.</p>
<p>01:23 Josef fixes a bike and talks to his friends.</p>	<p>Josef: I'm freezing for this guy right now. (laughs)</p>
<p>01:27 Shot of the Farmers Market: close-ups of strawberries and other produce.</p>	<p>Voice-over of Josef: Support the local farmers market!</p> <p>You got it.</p>
<p>01:31 Close-up of Josef repairing bikes.</p>	<p>Josef (voice-over): Hollywood bikes, damn! Where were your guys this morning?</p>
<p>01:39 A girl gets her bike back from Josef.</p>	<p>Voice-over of Josef: Los Feliz, Silver Lake, Echo Park...</p> <p>A girl: Yes! That's where am I, I will totally vote, absolutely.</p> <p>Voice-over of Josef: Cool.</p>
<p>01:43 Wide shot of the street, somebody plays guitar.</p> <p>01:46 Patrick and Josef talk.</p>	<p>Street sounds.</p> <p>Patrick: We did more than one vote with every repair.</p> <p>Josef: You think so?</p> <p>Patrick: I do. (both laugh)... Now the brakes are actually grapping...</p> <p>Josef: They are scared, it's weird... That's cool. I'm not so optimistic, but I think that the people we did help, I hope it's gonna have an impact. Even if it's just five or six votes.</p>

02:03 title: Last candidate forums	Sounds of bike repair and sounds of forum.
02:06 Tomas O'Grady in a close-up.	O'Grady: Council office, for example, each council office has a press secretary. Dude, you're a councilman, you are not the secretary of the state.
02:14 Wide shot, Tom LaBonge talking to the audience of the auditorium.	LaBonge: Hollywood was challenged when I first started with the city of Los Angeles. What did the whole city do? They build a subway system. And I'm proud that work has been done to bring the tourists.
02:22 Close-up, Stephen Box talks.	Box: But the people that come from around the world don't come to see condo complexes.
02:26 O'Grady talks.	O'Grady: People are not in the mood anymore to pay for big projects. Why? Because they keep hearing about all the fraud, about all the waste.
02:34 Box talks.	Box: I'd like to see it preserve the character and the personality of Hollywood.
02:38 O'Grady talks.	O'Grady: And I just wish that city council would have just listened to our letter, we could have saved ourselves all this money to put this measure on the ballot, and we could have libraries open again seven days a week.
2:47 LaBonge talks.	LaBonge: Working with library foundation, in collaboration 'cause that's how Tom LaBonge has always worked.
2:52 Box talks.	Box: So I'm voting yes on measure L, and the first thing I'll do when elected is make sure is that small print of cost recovery is removed.

<p>3:00 The flag of California Republic is swinging outside.</p>	<p>Sound of wind.</p> <p>Voice-over of Box: Mr O’Grady offers us a symbolic gesture...</p>
<p>3:05 Close-up of Patrick Pascal sitting in the audience of candidate forum.</p> <p>Close-up of Box.</p> <p>Wide shot of audience. Medium shot of Tom LaBonge.</p>	<p>Box: ...of cutting his salary in half, it would be meaningful if there would thirty five hundred council members willing to join him in that gesture. And mr LaBonge stands before you and asks for four more years.</p>
<p>3:18 Close-up of Box.</p> <p>Close-up of Pascal.</p> <p>Close-up of Box.</p> <p>Close-up: Box smiles.</p> <p>Close-up: Pascal smiling.</p> <p>Close-up: Box smiles,winks his eye.</p>	<p>Box: Imagine Titanic heading towards the iceberg. Mr O’Grady would run to the bridge and cut the captain’s salary in half and then throw half of the staff overboard. (audience laughs) Mr. LaBonge would say ‘give the captain some more time’ (audience laughs and applauds), and I stand before you committed to taking the wheel and turning this ship around.</p> <p>Somebody in the audience: Yeah! Go, Steve!</p> <p>(applauding)</p>
<p>3:59 Patrick Pascal shakes Stephen Box’s hand. Box laughs.</p>	<p>Patrick: You know, that closing, I think that old movie where the baseball player is up and he points to the field and out to the bleachers, and he just whack it. It was terrific. It was great all around. What do you think?</p> <p>Box: I never know. (Box fades out)</p>
<p>4:10 Wide shot of the street and the Box campaign office.</p>	<p>Box (inside the office): Okay, uh, are we doing the press release tonight?</p>
<p>4:17 Title: to be continued tomorrow - 4:21</p>	<p>Street sounds.</p>

The Race for L.A. Directed, shot, and edited by Jussi Jormanainen.

Third episode 3:58 - <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gcf8JHx15cI>

VIDEO	AUDIO
<p>00:00 Patrick Pascal walks out of the door of his house towards the garage.</p> <p>Sign on the garage door: Polling place.</p> <p>Close-up of Patrick in his office (interview).</p>	<p>Patrick: The other thing that's quite shocking to me about the fourth district is that since the district was founded in 1925, 86 years ago, no incumbent has ever lost.</p>
<p>00:15 Title: Election day</p>	<p>Street sounds.</p>
<p>00:17 Stephen Box and his wife Enci are both on the phone at same time in a small campaign office.</p>	<p>Enci and Stephen: ...I voted ... I'm calling because... (talking on top of each other)</p>
<p>00:28 Close-up of Stephen Box, his on the phone.</p>	<p>Box: Well, I'm a volunteer fire man, I have lived in council district four for fourteen years with my lovely wife Enci.</p>
<p>00:34 Silhouette of Enci talking on the phone.</p>	<p>Enci: Yes! Alright! That's all I wanted to hear.</p>
<p>00:38 Close-up of Box's phone.</p> <p>Close-up of Box talking on the phone.</p> <p>Medium shot of the office front door: people going in.</p>	<p>Box: And I've been busy working in the entertainment industry, but somewhat sidetracked by the fact that our city's budget is in the crisis, our streets are collapsing, and city council seem to think that they should be able to squeeze more money out of us and then deliver less services.</p>

<p>00:52 Medium shot of Box on the phone. He leans backwards and rubs his eyes.</p>	<p>Box: ...and also ask you to consider Stephen Box for city council, that's line number 35 on the ballot. If you have any questions about the campaign, the issues, my positions, if you call me in 323...</p>
<p>1:02 Patrick Pascal is voting.</p> <p>Close-up of Patrick in his office reading papers.</p>	<p>Sounds of polling place.</p> <p>Voice-over of Patrick: In my position, where we are often needing the support of the city to create a lot of the charity efforts that we make, where we need the support of the city councilmen, now I'm on the wrong list of councilman LaBonge's, if you will.</p>
<p>01:23 Close-up of Patrick.</p>	<p>Patrick: But in some point you have to stand for the principle.</p>
<p>01:25 Title: 9:08 pm</p> <p>Title:</p> <p>First results:</p> <p>LaBonge 62,76%</p> <p>O'Grady 24,41%</p> <p>Box 12,83%</p>	<p>Laughter.</p> <p>Voice-over of Patrick: This is very exciting, and I think we start to hear pretty quickly, right?</p> <p>Voice-over of Patrick: Well, I think there is such a small percentage of the total number. I don't think they have much meaning because, again...</p>
<p>01:38 Patrick standing outside the campaign office. People inside the office.</p>	<p>Patrick: I think that the absentee votes are often well skewed towards the incumbent and to the more conservative voters, if you will.</p>
<p>01:46 Establishing shot of Josef Bray-Ali's apartment building.</p>	<p>Voice-over of Josef: Where do we go from here?</p>
<p>01:48 Josef sitting by the computer.</p>	<p>Josef: I don't know. I don't know what's gonna happen because he has spend a lot of his time working on this.</p>

01:56 Patrick checking the computer screen at the campaign office.	Loud crowd talking.
02:02 Title: 11:22 pm Title: Results LaBonge 57,08% O'Grady 29,06% Box 13,86%	Loud crowd buzzing.
02:08 Stephen Box and Patrick Pascal in the campaign office. Patrick is leaving.	Box: Alright, good to see you, thanks again, thanks for all you did. Patrick: Hey! I'm doing. Voice-over of Patrick: I figure that when I wake up in the morning, we're going to see a very different picture. If the numbers are still, we'll face the reality and move from there.
02:25 Patrick outside the office.	Patrick: I think that's simple setting Stephen up for the next election in the district when councilman LaBonge must resign because of term limits.
02:34 Patrick walks away.	Street sounds.
02:37 Title: Midnight Title: Taco Tuesday ride arrives	Music, people talking.
02:41 Stephen box shakes hands with the big group of bicyclists. Somebody is holding a photo where Box is behind the presidential speaker podium.	Music on the street. Everybody's talking at the same time. Stephen: You make me cry.

<p>02:55 Stephen Box in the middle of the group, shouting to everybody (about 70 bicyclists).</p> <p>03:29 The bicyclists jump on their bikes again.</p>	<p>Stephen: Five years ago on a very lonely night Enci and I were riding home from Echo Park and we got run off the road by a Metro bus operator. No matter who we turned to, we heard 'no'. And we thought we were alone. And what you're demonstrating tonight, we're not alone. But our streets are safer because you ride, and use them. Thank you joining us, not just tonight, but every single night. So the last five years we've grown bigger and bolder and more powerful, and our streets are safer because of that.</p> <p>Voice-over of Josef: I think the biggest thing I have is fear...</p>
<p>03:37 Medium shot of Josef Bray-Ali by the computer.</p>	<p>Josef: ...that we have lost LaBonge's vote on so many different bike issues. Because this was the bike community, and allegedly we threw our full weight against this guy.</p>
<p>3:50 Title: Results (unofficial)</p> <p>LaBonge 55,09%</p> <p>O'Grady 30,93%</p> <p>Box 13,98% -03:58</p>	<p>Voice-over of Josef: Where do we go from here, I don't know.</p>

The experiment story put in to the model

The planning of documentary stories has a certain amount of predictive elements.

The planning does not mean that the journalist can interfere the situations and change the life of the character: the task is to know what to anticipate, shoot the best possible

footage, and edit the elements in the best possible way. Figure 1 shows how the events of the newsdoc were placed in to the newsdoc model when planning the story.

Newsdoc experiment
 The Race for L.A. - a story about passionate bicyclists
 and the city council election campaign

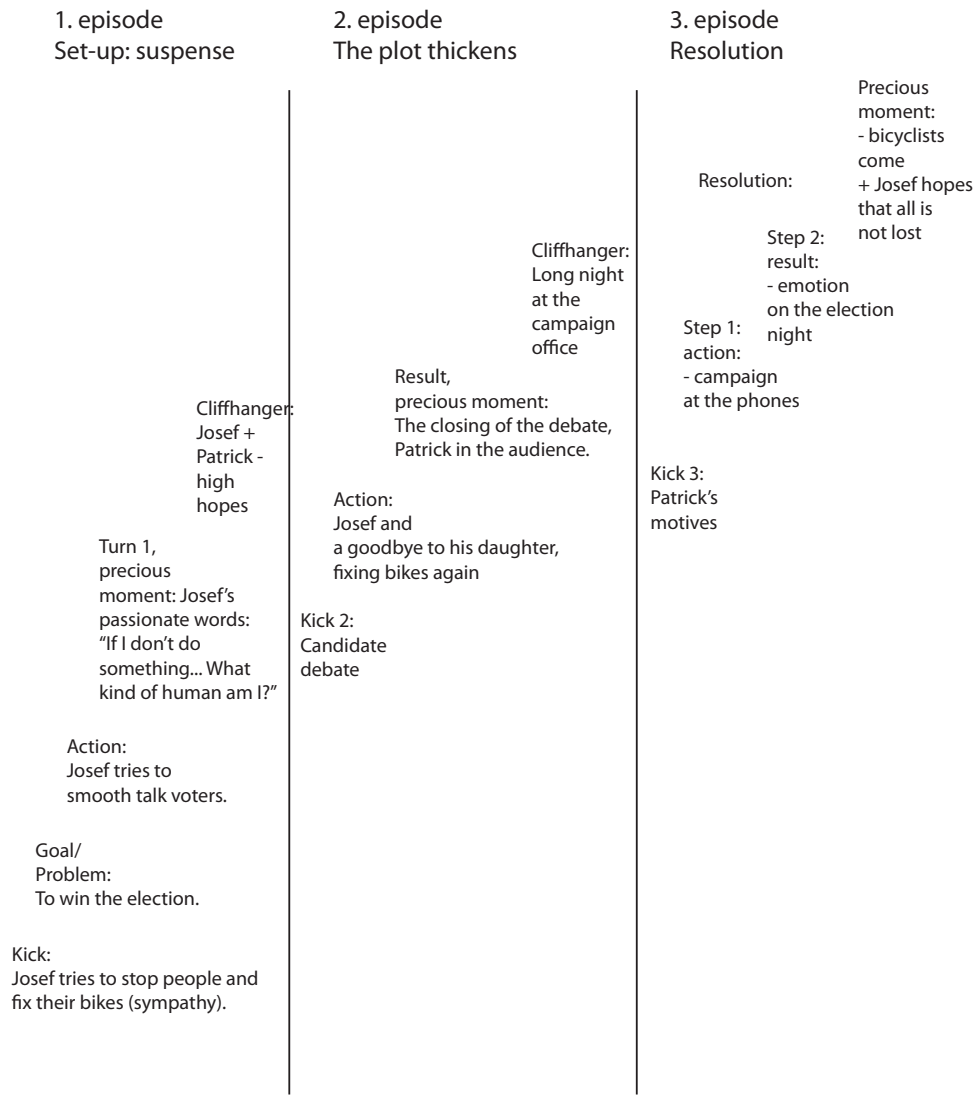


Figure 1. Newsdoc experiment

Another example of a case that would have made a good newsdoc is a story about a group of volunteers who recently counted the homeless population in Los Angeles over a three days and night period. A good main character would have been somebody who was doing the count for the first time. There were good qualities for a newsdoc: live action and a visually stimulating environment with a larger news theme in the background.

The homeless count had three visual steps for episodes. The first episode starts with the volunteer preparing to go out to the streets; the viewer hears his/hers motives and expectations. Then the volunteer meets the homeless population. The cliffhanger of the episode would have been the first impressions of the first night on the streets. The second episode would have covered the first night and the volunteer's reactions seeing the homeless situation – and the cliffhanger would have been thoughts upon the character's return home in the morning. The last episode would have shown the second night and the final night of the count: the long route on the streets, and then revealing the numbers alongside the volunteer's emotional reactions to the whole project.

Chapter Three: The Story Structure Step By Step

The newsdoc model

Figure 2 is the overall newsdoc structure; the plan is based on three episodes that are published daily.

Newsdocs template - a story in 3 episodes

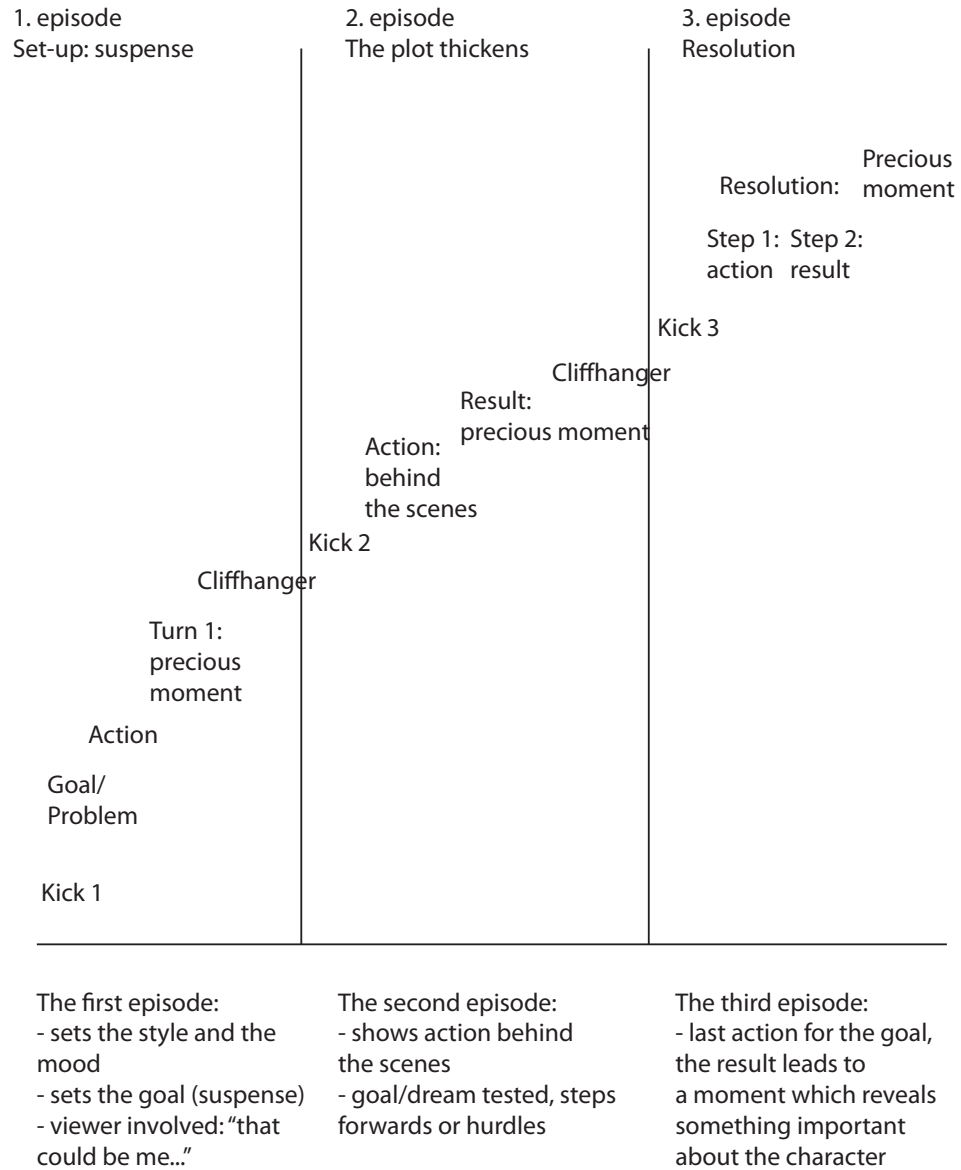


Figure 2. Newsdocs template - a story in 3 episodes

Episode one, set-up and suspense

In Figure 3 is the plan of the first episode in detail.

Newsdocs template: 1. episode in detail (1/3)

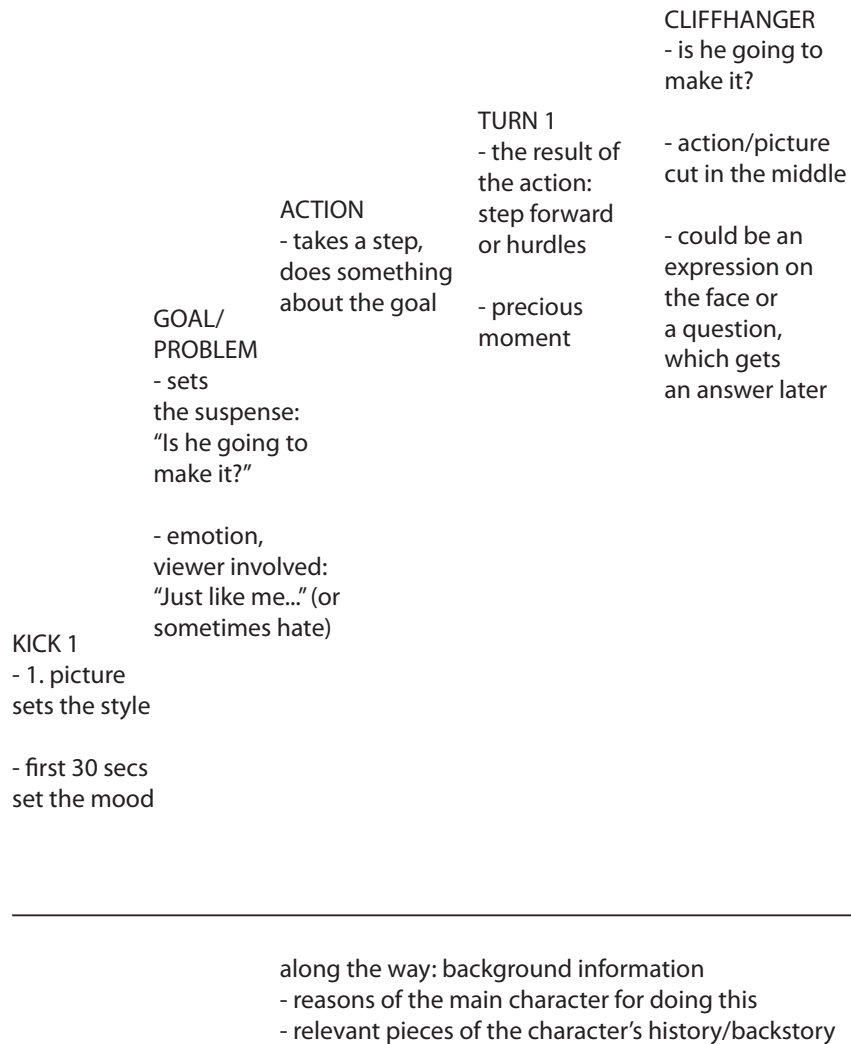


Figure 3. Newsdocs template: 1. episode in detail

Kick: The first picture of a story is important. It sets the style and the mood of the newsdoc. Usually it also introduces the main character.

Goal or problem, suspense: A newsdoc has to create suspense very quickly, because there has to be a reason why the viewer will watch this episode and come back for the following ones. Something must be at stake, something that keeps the viewer asking “What is going to happen next?” The main character has to have a goal in the story.

Bruce Block (2008, 255) writes in his book *The Visual Story* about the importance of the point-of-view in a story, and how the picture maker needs to define it: there is no good story without visual structure, and no visual structure if the picture maker does not decide how the audience should feel emotionally about the story and the characters.

Action: We know what the characters want, and now it is the time to show what they are ready to do about it. David Howard and Edward Mabley (1993, 44) write in *The Tools of Screenwriting* about the importance of the goal and actions of the main character for the viewer: “The more intensely he or she desires, the greater our concern.”

Turn 1: A good newsdoc has a lot of turns: the main character reacts to changes and new situations.

Precious moment: Usually a precious moment happens right before or after an important action. It can be the suspense before the action, the moment when things are still unclear. Or it can be the moment after the action, the emotional reaction to the success/failure. It is mostly like a time for a close-up. Block (2008, 10-11) writes about the visual structure, and how a good story and its important points need to be enforced with the visual choices, because audience's emotional reaction is based on the visual intensity.

The greater the contrast in a visual component, the more the visual intensity or dynamic increases. (Block 2008, 11)

Cliffhanger: Effective cliffhangers are essential for a newsdoc. The first episode has to end in a way that prompts the viewer to come back tomorrow. It can be a question the main character asks. It can be a picture cut away just before the moment we could have seen something important "behind the corner". The planning of the story structure brings out natural cliffhangers.

Episode two, the plot thickens

Figure 4 is a plan for the second episode in detail.

Newsdocs template: 2. episode in detail (2/3)

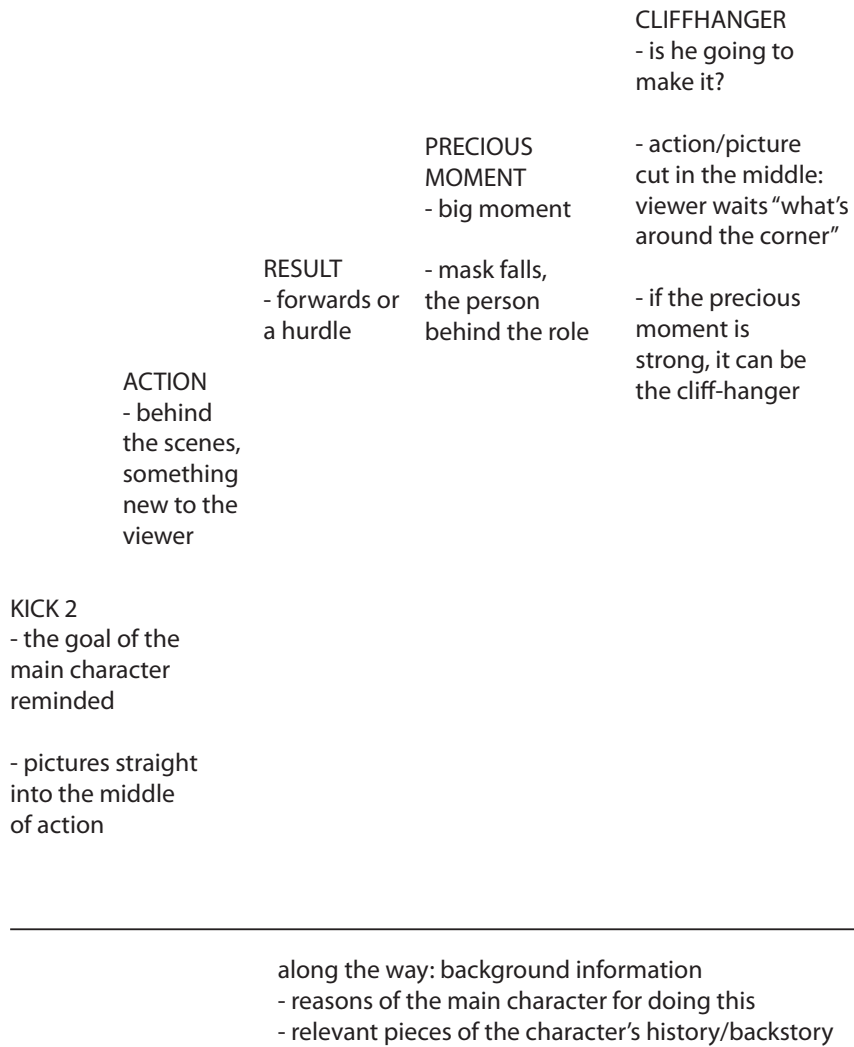


Figure 4. Newsdocs template: 2. episode in detail

Kick: The kick that starts the second episode is a natural continuation of the last picture of the first episode. In some clever way the story should remind the viewer about the goal and motivation of the character.

Action, behind the scenes: Newsdocs need situations that go behind the scenes, close to the characters of the story.

Result: This leads to the precious moment. These are the reactions after something important happens.

Cliffhanger: The viewer should be thinking “Is he going to make it? What happens next?”

Episode three, the resolution

Figure 5 is the third episode in detail.

Newsdocs template: 3. episode in detail (3/3)

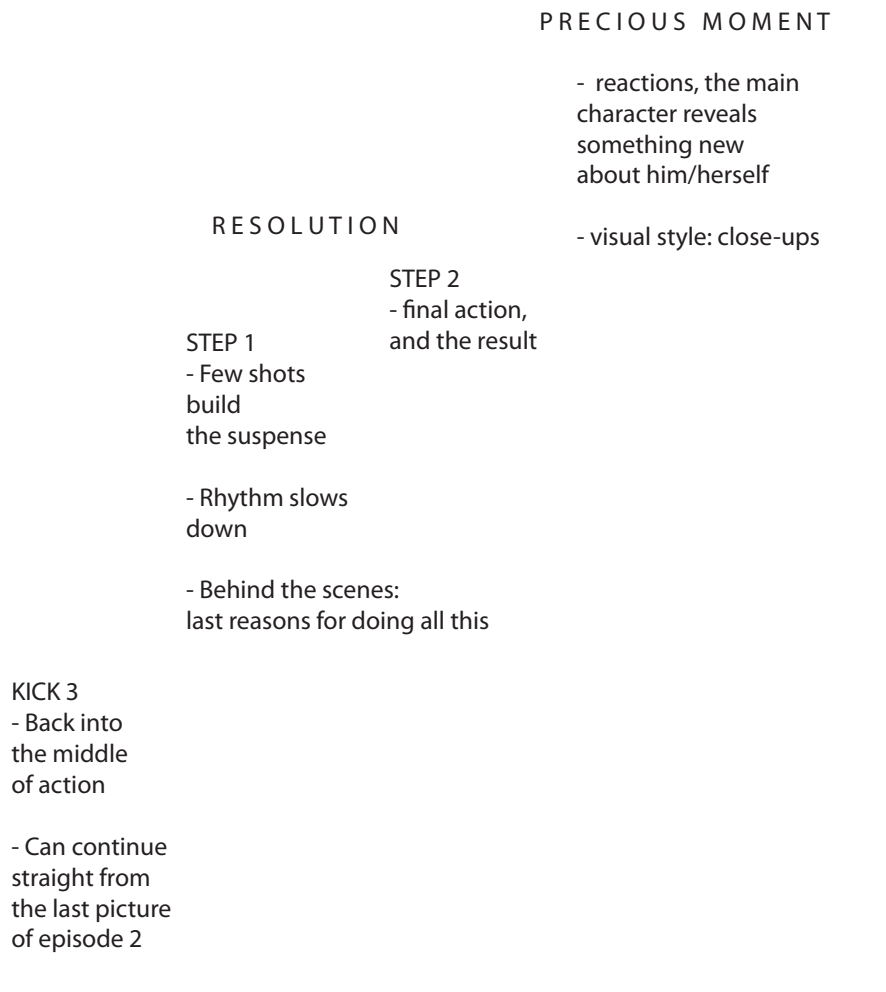


Figure 5. Newsdocs template: 3. episode in detail

Kick: The story goes straight into the action, straight back to the suspense.

Resolution, step 1: This is an important moment to build suspense. A few shots create a feeling of anticipation approaching the final moments. It could be a reminder of the goal and the reasons behind the story and the character.

Resolution, step 2: The goal/problem gets its resolution: the doctor delivers the news, the jury reveals its decision in the singing competition, Santa Claus leaves the last house and counts the money in a frozen car.

One of the leading story structure researchers, Robert McKee (1998, 304), describes the climax of a story, understood as the main character's final decision: "How the protagonist chooses here gives us the most penetrating view of his deep character, the ultimate expression of his humanity. This scene reveals the story's most important value." McKee writes about feature films, but the same idea is suitable for journalistic stories and their structure: good shots are good shots in any genre.

The precious moment: This is the reaction to the resolution of the story, the moment of realization. It can be as little as a sign of joy, a smile, a quiet moment, or any other reaction by the main character. Most likely it's close-up time. A good ending is a moment when the viewer realizes something about the big picture surrounding the small story.

More than three episodes if needed

A newsdoc of four or more episodes could be a story about rivalry between two persons or groups, and it could be possible to build a tension between two goals, and juxtapose conflicting dreams. A powerful strike, a long court battle or similar clash of interests could be an example for a story that could hold viewers' interest longer than three episodes.

The story structure is important, but the better the link to the current topic, the bigger the effect on the viewer will be. The link to a news event can be topical: a recession through the eyes of a struggling Santa Claus, or higher taxes through the daily life of a struggling car mechanic. The tie can be personal: an architect gets ready for the opening of the new, controversial music hall. A strike leader is fighting the factory bosses because his wife was laid-off.

Chapter Four: Conclusions

The goal of the newsdoc experiment was to make a story that takes the viewer deeper behind the mechanisms of local politics. It was clear that motivated people were good for the story: they show emotion and are relaxed in front of the camera.

Richard Koci Hernandez (2011) commented on the newsdoc experiment: “Solid shooting, story-telling and editing. Some really nice moments as well, like when you hear the little girl in the second video yell, ‘Hi, daddy’ and watch his reaction, just sweet and real.” I shot the story as a one-man crew, and with the newsdoc model it was easier to decide what kind of situations to shoot – and what kind of pictures to expect and try to capture.

What’s “new” about newsdocs? In the newsdoc about the election race, the news connection was quick: the last episode had footage from the election night and was published the following morning. The three documentary style videos on *The New York Times*’ site used a lot of reporter’s voice-over and none of them had a clear tie to a current news event. *Brooklyn Voodoo* was more of a timeless story, a collection of interviews with b-roll footage. In May, *The New York Times* had a story called *The Dry Season* (Seelye and Harris 2011). It was something along the lines of the newsdoc experiment: a visually rich story about a current problem, a flood in Oklahoma. But there were no clear main characters with consistent storylines through to story; the story was rather a collection of interviews.

The biggest difference is that the newsdoc about the city council election was a story with episodes and storyline: The characters had a situation in front of them, which they had to solve during the story. The camera followed the live action to its resolution: The point was to show people “doing” a lot and “telling” as little as possible. The story got close to its characters and presented an intimate view of their lives.

Episodic, daily publishing will hopefully keep the viewer on the site for the whole story - if it works with fiction series, why not in journalism? The production of the newsdoc showed that the endings of the episodes are important. Cliffhangers are important to bring the Internet users back to the site, but they are also crucial points for the story and dictate a lot of choices while shooting and editing.

Too often web videos are based solely on interviews, covered with b-roll. The people in the stories do not really do anything. With the newsdoc approach there has to be some live action to shoot, and situations unfold in the present tense. And if characters are highly motivated to do something about their situation, the footage is much better – because the characters are more easily immersed in the action and are less-likely to notice the camera.

A survey of documentary web sites such as *Discovery Channel*, *A&E*, *History Channel*, *HBO*, and *National Geographic* showed what kind of documentary

productions are released online. Most of the video clips on their sites are trailers, sneak peeks, and featurettes (*HBO's* term) about their TV shows. *PBS's Frontline* does good work with their feature-length documentaries online; they often have a connection to a current issue – like the *Fighting With Bin Laden* feature May 3, 2011. But the length and the magnitude of their work both diverge from the newsdoc model.

Drew (2010) wrote in *Columbia Journalism Review* about a visual style close to the newsdoc idea.

Bringing a viewer to the heart of the action, without a stand-up journalist explaining what ought to be clearly understandable through the images themselves, appeals to the raw, unfiltered ethos of the Internet. I believe that if nurtured and promoted, visual narratives could take their place alongside the social-media tools of blogs and tweets as a breakthrough form of journalism for the digital age. (Drew 2010)

High-quality visual storytelling should be perfect material for tweets, shared links, Facebook, and other online recommendations. Newsdocs can certainly be strong local story tools – engaging the community, lifting local characters into the spotlight: Josef Bray-Ali got a lot of positive feedback about cycling issues after appearing in this project's newsdoc.

“The reality is that someone is either going to watch your piece and tweet it or they are not. And if they don't, that's a failure for us. If someone watches one of our projects, and doesn't blog post it, put it on Facebook, tweet it, or send an email to

their buddy, if they don't do one of those four things, it's a failure to us", multimedia producer Brian Storm said while discussing interactivity from his independent company's viewpoint. (Storm 2011)

Newsdocs could be one tool for a news site to stand out from the masses when the site tries to have some unique material. The most important quality of the newsdocs is that they can make the world more understandable by showing emotional stories and precious moments. There is always a need for that.

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