

Exploratory Study on the Narrative Strategies and Creative Features of Micro-documentaries in the New Media Environment

Ruru Qian

Shaanxi Fashion Engineering University, Xi'an, 712046, China
lianda12138@163.com

Abstract: *As a form of image transmission, documentaries truly reflect people's lives and record the changes of society. In the era of great transformation brought about by new media, with the iterative update of communication media, the thinking and psychology of the audience are changing. An innovative form of documentary, the "micro-documentary," is increasingly receiving widespread attention. This paper comprehensively discusses the background of the rise of micro-documentaries in the new media environment, their communication effects, and their developmental advantages. Through in-depth analysis of outstanding micro-documentary works, it reveals the similarities and differences in the creative integration of micro-documentaries and new media. The paper provides a feasible theoretical basis and a reference for the creative practice of micro-documentaries.*

Keywords: *New Media Context; Micro-documentary; Characteristics of Micro-documentary*

1. Introduction

Micro-documentaries, a nascent form of documentary filmmaking, are increasingly gaining prominence in the era of information overload within the new media landscape. They act as a microscopic lens of the times, focusing on the nuances of life and capturing moments of social change, provoking contemplation about the real world through concise and powerful storytelling. This article delves into the rise of micro-documentaries in the context of new media, examining their background, communication effect, and creative characteristics. By analyzing outstanding micro-documentary works, it reveals the creative concepts that merge with new media and provides theoretical foundations and documentary references for their creative practice.

2. Concepts of New Media and Micro-documentaries

The concept of new media has emerged in the ever-evolving media landscape, representing a form of communication that harnesses advanced digital technology and network communication technology. This form of communication relies on the extensive coverage of the internet, the convenient connectivity of wireless communication networks, and the global reach of satellite communication, delivering a diverse range of information and comprehensive services to users through a variety of terminal devices such as personal computers, smartphones, and digital televisions. The rise of new media signifies the entry of information dissemination into a brand new era.

Looking back to 1967, Tony Goldmark, the director of the CBS Technology Institute and a key inventor of the NTSC television standard, published a groundbreaking plan. In this plan, he proposed the idea of developing electronic video recording products and named it "New Media." Goldmark's plan not only outlined a grand blueprint for the development of electronic video recording technology but also introduced the term "New Media" into the public consciousness, thereby initiating a new understanding and exploration of forms of information dissemination media. ^[1]Since then, the term "New Media" has become the proprietary noun for describing this emerging field of communication, symbolizing the innovation of technology and the infinite possibilities of media development.

The term "micro-documentary" inherently merges the dual attributes of "micro" and "documentary." The "micro" aspect not only refers to the reduction in physical size or the abbreviation of length, but more profoundly, it signifies the precision of content, the subtlety of details, as well as the depth and complexity of themes. This "micro" characteristic enables micro-documentaries, under

the constraint of limited duration, to convey content with high density and substantial information through a highly concise and compact narrative structure. The “documentary” component defines the essential nature of this artistic form, involving the direct extraction of visual images and audio materials from real life, and through the techniques of realism, it adheres to the principle of authenticity, committed to presenting an unprocessed real world. As an audio-visual art form, the core value of documentaries lies in their documentariness and testimoniality. By portraying real people, events, and environments, and using a language of non-fictional cinematography, documentaries reproduce the true face of life, uncover the deep structures behind social phenomena, and thereby stimulate critical thinking and emotional resonance in the audience. As a new branch within the documentary family, micro-documentaries not only inherit the documentary aesthetics and intellectual depth of traditional documentaries but also gain higher transmissibility due to their “micro” nature, making them more aligned with the information consumption patterns of the digital media era. They represent an innovative trend in the field of film and television art creation and a revitalizing force in the realm of self-media communication.^[2]

3. The Historical Development of Micro-documentaries

As an emerging art form, the development of micro-documentaries not only reflects technological advancements but also mirrors the changes in social culture. These representative works have not only innovated artistically but have also played a significant role in terms of dissemination and social impact.

Micro-documentaries can be traced back to the 1990s when the term “micro-documentary” first emerged. These documentaries are known for their short production cycles, low costs, and rapid spread. As an art form that adapts to the changes of the times, micro-documentaries keep pace with the era, capturing the nuances of life and the diversity of society through a delicate perspective, thus painting a portrait of the times. The essence of micro-documentaries lies in documentation; they are created using real life or real events as the material, with real people and real stories as the subject matter, undergoing artistic processing and presentation. Micro-documentaries employ journalistic and live recording methods to document snippets of contemporary life.^[3] They have evolved from traditional documentaries with the development and transformation of media, retaining all the characteristics and features of traditional documentaries, and are suitable for television, internet, mobile, and streaming media distribution, with a duration generally ranging from 5 to 25 minutes.

Certainly, as time progresses, the development of micro-documentaries and the deep integration with new media technologies have become increasingly intertwined. Driven by the rapid advancement of streaming media technologies such as the internet and smartphones, the cultural market has seen an unprecedented growth in demand for concise and powerful video content. This trend not only gave rise to the birth of micro-documentaries but also accelerated their pace of development. With their unique charm, micro-documentaries are capable of precisely capturing and vividly recreating historical moments, as well as real-time events and diverse stories. They play an irreplaceable role in recording the pulse of the times and conveying social information, thus occupying an extremely important position in contemporary society. The rise of micro-documentaries not only reflects the change in the way people access information but also embodies society’s pursuit of diversity in cultural expression forms. They have become an indispensable cultural phenomenon and a powerful force in communication in modern society.

The history of micro-documentaries is rooted in the dawn of cinema. Tracing back to 1895, the Lumière Brothers in France successfully produced a series of groundbreaking films such as “The Arrival of a Train at La Ciotat” and “Workers Leaving the Lumière Factory.” These works inherently possessed the characteristics of documentaries, signifying the formal birth of cinema as a tool for recording real life.^[4] Since then, documentaries have embarked on a long and splendid journey of evolution, transitioning from initial simple news reporting and live broadcasting forms, gradually developing and transforming into the format of micro-documentaries that are suited for television, the internet, mobile devices, and various streaming media platforms.

The essence of micro-documentaries lies in their indisputable authenticity. They use the everyday lives of ordinary people as their material and real-world events as their backdrop, employing artful craftsmanship and carefully arranged presentation techniques to not only capture the truth of the moment but also provoke deep thought and reflection on the essence of life. The existence of micro-documentaries not only enriches the diversity of documentary imagery but also broadens our

perspective on observing the world and understanding life. They are like the microscopes of our time, allowing us to more carefully examine every corner of society and feel the pulse of the era.

In 2019, with the broadcast of “40 Years on-Beijing Blooming with Us” micro-documentaries in China reached an important turning point in their development. The background for the creation of this work was to celebrate the 40th anniversary of China’s Reform and Opening-up, and it was meticulously crafted as a series of micro-documentaries. The series was jointly produced by the Beijing Municipal Government Information Office, Guangming Daily, and Guangming Net, aiming to comprehensively showcase the development trajectory and magnificent achievements of Beijing on the path of Reform and Opening-up through diverse perspectives and meaningful narrative techniques.[6] The work not only won the third prize in the international communication category of web specials at the 29th China News Award but also paved new paths and created opportunities for the future development of micro-documentaries. Through the successful practice of this work, micro-documentaries have gained further recognition and promotion in the development of thematic series in our country, becoming a new force in the application of self-media.

4. The creative characteristics of micro-documentaries

With the rapid progress of information technology and the advent of the 5G era, new opportunities have been brought to the development of industries such as the Internet, and a platform has been provided for the widespread dissemination of information. Faced with a diverse audience, the basic situation, natural conditions, economic background, and cultural level of the audience are different, and everyone is eager to obtain fresh information. This requires that micro-documentaries must be inclusive in topic selection and cover a wide range of topics to meet the reading needs of different audiences from multiple angles.[5]

Compared with the traditional documentary model, the recording form of micro-documentaries is much simpler, and the creativity, recording, and editing of micro-documentaries can be independent of the professional production of industry departments. Moreover, with the continuous development of the short video era, micro-documentaries have become one of the important ways for users to express their lives and record. Its main features are the realization of the theme and the display of timeliness.

4.1 Realization of Themes

The realization of themes refers to the perspective of micro-documentaries, which starts from the context of new media, making the narrative and opening more lifelike. Compared to documentaries with a broad perspective and comprehensive narrative, the design themes of micro-documentaries are closer to everyday life, resonating with the audience and thus more likely to trigger secondary promotion.

For example, “Three Hundred and Sixty Lines” exemplifies the characteristic of theme realization. This micro-documentary consists of ten episodes, each seven minutes long, telling the stories of ordinary people from all walks of life. [6] It uses easy-to-understand language and a natural approach to introduce and showcase various professions, including shooting interviews with people currently working in those professions. This allows the audience to clearly understand the differences between various occupations, providing guidance or reference for job seekers in society.

Another example is “Tianfang Micro-documentary: A Day in the Life of a Food Delivery Rider.” In this micro-documentary, the theme revolves around the work of food delivery riders, whom we encounter daily. It uses a large number of mobile and fast-paced shots to showcase the hard work and joys of the delivery riders’ family and work life.

4.2 Timeliness

Timeliness refers to the selection of themes that are more focused on current hot spots or groups, possessing immediacy and relevance. This includes topics such as festivals, popular issues, and focus on certain individuals or events. For example, the documentary “Last Evaluation” produced by CNN reveals the stories behind the K-POP industry. This documentary shows how a group of young girls are trained to become K-POP idols. The story describes their perseverance in training under the pressure and harsh conditions imposed by their management companies. The documentary particularly emphasizes timeliness because it addresses social phenomena and events that were occurring in the

Korean music scene at the time. In the documentary, these young girls undergo long periods of unpaid training, adhering to extremely strict dietary and exercise standards, and the film exposes the intense competition and harsh realities of the Korean music industry.

5. Narrative Characteristics of Micro-documentaries in the New Media Context

New media documentaries utilize digital technology and network platforms to showcase new experimental forms. They break through the limitations of time and space, allowing the audience to participate in the production and narrative process of the documentaries. This form is mainly manifested in establishing a first-person narrative perspective and setting a narrative structure with logical sequence.

5.1 Establishing a First-Person Narrative Perspective

First-person narrative refers to the method of narrating using the first-person perspective. Its advantage is that it gives the audience a sense of being there, making the story more engaging. The use of first-person narrative in micro-documentaries can give the audience a more authentic feeling, especially when the narrator is telling their own story, creating an immersive experience that breaks away from traditional documentary stereotypes. This makes the audience feel even more like they are part of the scene.

Additionally, due to the widespread use of new media, people are able to freely express their personal opinions on social platforms. This characteristic makes viewers more receptive to the first-person narrative style of micro-documentaries. At the same time, people can use cameras or smartphones to record their daily lives, thus taking on the role of the protagonist in the documentary, shifting the originally objective documentary mode to a more subjective artistic perspective. For example, "Earth Hour" is narrated from the first-person perspective of various animals. In the third episode, "Tiger," it opens with "I am a tiger" and goes on to describe the species of tigers, as well as their habits and living environment, urging humans through the narrative and presentation to protect the natural environment of the Earth.^[7]

5.2 Setting Up a Logical Sequence Narrative Structure

The organizational form of micro-documentary works often varies according to the needs of the narrative content and theme. Even for the same creator, changes in the narrative theme and content can lead to different organizational forms. Different narrative deconstructions can bring about different outcomes and goals and can resonate with the audience on a psychological level. In terms of narrative form, it can be categorized into two types: distinct narrative levels and fragmented structural thinking.

Distinct Narrative Levels: Micro-documentaries are derived from traditional documentaries, but in traditional recording methods, the sequence of beginning, development, climax, and ending is often used. Some micro-documentaries, however, continue the linear structure of documentaries by editing fragmented moments of life to achieve the purpose of overall narration and are often used to represent spatial narratives in brief storytelling. For example, in the documentary "The Forbidden City 100," the space of the Forbidden City is completely presented, transforming the concept of the entire Forbidden City through the movement of time and space into concrete historical details, thus achieving a moving and authentic effect. Then, there is a logical, step-by-step narrative, which is generally arranged according to the common understanding and logic of people, from shallow to deep, ultimately deepening our understanding of the topic.

The second is fragmented structural thinking. In micro-documentaries, the audience can intuitively perceive the development process of the documentary and gradually come to understand the beginning and end of the content. Particularly in the wave of new media development, people's online interaction has increased unprecedentedly, and they also have their own views on the perception and extension of beauty. Often, they will adjust the structural content of micro-documentaries based on their needs. As McLuhan emphasized in "Medium is the extension of man": "The rise and development of media have a significant impact on social structure and cultural forms. Different media will promote different social relations and organizational forms." Just as electronic media has promoted globalization and the fragmentation of society.

The emergence of micro-documentaries is a result of the diversification of documentaries under the

development of new media. In recent years, with the continuous development of the popularization of the internet and the democratization of self-media, more and more people are willing to showcase and experience the micro-video lifestyle through online platforms. According to the latest “2024 China Mobile Internet Core Trend Report” released by QuestMobile in our country, as of September 2024, the overall scale of the mobile internet has approached 1.25 billion, with the average monthly time per person reaching 164.7 hours. Both the young people in first and second-tier cities and the middle-aged and elderly in lower-tier markets have become the key force of “stabilizing and recovering.” The traffic of China’s mobile internet still maintains a steady growth trend, with a year-on-year increase of 1.7% in September 2024, reaching a scale of 1.244 billion.^[8]

Data from QuestMobile also shows that in September of the same year, the proportion of users watching live streams on the Douyin and Kuaishou APP platforms had reached 90.5% and 89.3%, respectively, a further increase from the same period last year. The monthly active user base of Douyin’s short drama mini-program had nearly reached 200 million, with a year-on-year increase of 91.0%.^[9] This demonstrates that the documentation and refinement of fragmented information are more reliant on the integration and conjunction of micro-documentaries with online APPs, making them more inclusive in the broader environment of new media. At the same time, a good micro-documentary video needs to pay more attention to the needs and understanding of different users, thereby achieving a realistic core and a rich form.

In this digital age, the professional development of micro-documentaries has been significantly shaped by the new media landscape. The rise of micro-documentaries reflects the adaptability and innovation of the documentary genre to the changing media consumption habits. With the widespread use of smartphones and the proliferation of social media platforms, micro-documentaries have become a powerful tool for storytelling, capturing the essence of contemporary life in concise and engaging formats.

The professionalization of micro-documentaries is evident in several aspects. Firstly, there is a growing emphasis on high-quality content production, with producers and filmmakers investing in storytelling techniques that are both informative and visually appealing. Secondly, the integration of interactive features within micro-documentaries allows for a more personalized and immersive viewing experience, catering to the diverse needs and preferences of the audience. Thirdly, the use of data analytics and audience feedback has enabled creators to refine their content, ensuring that it resonates with a broader audience while maintaining its core narrative.

Moreover, the success of micro-documentaries in the new media era is not just about the numbers; it’s about the impact and the ability to convey complex ideas in a succinct manner. A well-crafted micro-documentary not only meets the varying demands and comprehension levels of different users but also embodies a commitment to authenticity and richness in form. It is this dedication to professional excellence that ensures micro-documentaries continue to play a vital role in the evolving media ecosystem, bridging the gap between traditional storytelling and the digital age.

6. Conclusion

Micro-documentaries, as an emerging form of new media art, have played a significant role in documenting social development and disseminating humanistic spirit with their unique perspectives and forms of expression. They not only record the pulse of the times but also depict the myriad aspects of society with delicate brushstrokes. In the context of new media, micro-documentaries have won widespread acceptance and favor from both the academic community and the general public due to their convenience, interactivity, and broad reach. As a technical medium for information dissemination, micro-documentaries not only provide an effective channel for the public to screen and spread hot topics but also refine content and strengthen themes in an era overwhelmed with information, offering insights to guide public attention to social phenomena and thoughtful reflection. Meanwhile, through vivid audio-visual language, they lower the threshold for learning specialized knowledge, distilling complex social phenomena into easily comprehensible visual symbols, thus promoting social progress. This enables more people to participate in the discussion of social issues. In the future, micro-documentaries will continue to captivate with their unique charm, preserving more valuable memories and thoughts for our society.

References

- [1] Xilin Zou, Yuanyuan Zhong. *On the Utilitarian View in Documentary Creation* [J]. *Modern Communication: Journal of Communication University of China*, 2017(08): 106-108.
- [2] Kim Seong-hwa. *New Media Documentary Research* [J]. *Brecht and Modern Theatre*, 2020, (42):159-175
- [3] Jian Wu, Zhuo Wu. *International Journal of Education and Management*[J].*Academic Publishing House*,2021,6(2):178-185.
- [4] Jiuzhou Liu. *Analysis of the Characteristics of Micro-documentaries* [J]. *Journal of News Research*, 2017(04): 118.
- [5] Wenxin Qian. *New Media New Advertising – An Analysis of the New Forms of Advertising in the New Media Environment* [J]. *Journalism Lover*, 2009(01): 79-80.
- [6] Xiaoxi Li. *The Product of the New Era: An Analysis of the Concept of Micro-documentary* [J]. *Family of Drama*, 2018 (12): 77.
- [7] Xinyu Tan. *Micro-perspective on Micro-documentary Narrative Strategies: An Analysis of the Narrative Strategies of the Micro-documentary “The Forbidden City 100”* [J]. *Journalism Research*, 2020(15): 105-107.
- [8] Weiqiang Zhang. *Research on the Characteristics of Micro-documentaries in the New Media Era* [J]. *Media Forum*, 2019 (13): 19-20.
- [9] Xue Yan. *Exploration of Micro-documentary Creation in the New Media Era* [D]. Changchun: Jilin University of the Arts, 2018.