The Television Documentary

1950s-1970s
The coming of television

Documentary - profoundly affected by television

Before, 35 mm documentaries - released theatrically
    Also non-theatrical field for industrially-sponsored films
        educational films

After WWII – documentary began to slip – loses financial support
    no longer need for massive propaganda & indoctrination

But - new channel for distribution & exhibition opens up:
    TELEVISION
Television in Great Britain

Thanks to television – larger audiences ever for documentaries

Before WWII – experiments in telecasting
After WWII – expansion of commercial television

1946  Great Britain  BBC begins regular broadcasts
      Governmental organism
      Supported by tax on TV sets
      Non-commercial
      1953  -  Documentary Department

1955  Independent Television  ITV
      Runs programs produced by commercial companies
      e.g. Granada Television  Thames Television
British television documentaries

*World in Action*   Granada Television   Public affairs & doc series

*The World at War*  Thames Television   26-part series on WWII

*John Grierson Presents*  Scotish Television   weekly programs
Television in the United States

1948  Beginning of network television  Out of New York

By 1951  - coaxial cable & microwave relay connected all of U.S.

1951  

See It Now  w/ Edward R. Murrow & Fred Friendly
news & public affairs weekly series

NBC & CBS  produce their own documentaries
Later ABC

1953  Origins of Public Broadcasting Service  PBS
Non-commercial network  federally-funded
Sponsored, commissioned & purchased
documentaries  - domestic & British
Documentary Series

See It Now first regular documentary series CBS news magazine in *The March of Times* tradition (equivalent today, *60 Minutes*) weekly half-hour

Edward Murrow onscreen host & commentator Fred Friendly producer

1953 Format changes - only one story per show
**See It Now series**

1953-1958

Sponsored by Alcoa – Aluminum Company of America until 1955

Notable episodes:

“Christmas in Korea” 1953
“Argument in Indianapolis” 1953
“Segregation in Schools” 1954

Several shows on Senator McCarthy 1953-1954

Weekly half-hour series – later one hour ‘specials’
CBS Reports

Replaced *See It Now* 1959

Produced by Friendly w/Murrow on camera & narrator

Investigative reports

Notable episodes:

“The Population Explosion” 1959
“Harvest of Shame” 1960
“Hunger in America” 1968
“The Selling of the Pentagon” 1971
**Project XX series**

1954  NBC  Grew out of success of *Victory at Sea* compilation programs inspired by *Why We Fight* series

Recreated aspects of history of 20th century
Used existing footage & occasional reenactments

Notable episodes:

“Nightmare in Red”  1955
“The Twisted Cross”  1956
“The Real West”  1961
White Paper series

1960 NBC comparable to CBS See It Now & CBS Reports
current affairs & recent headlines

Notable episodes:

“The Death of Stalin” 1963
“Cuba: Bay of Pigs” 1964
Close Up!

ABC  Innovative in style - Direct Cinema approach
     Made possible by new technology
     fly-on-the-wall

Inspired by ABC 1960 “Primary” by Drew & Associates

Undirected sync-sound essays

Notable episodes:
   “Yanki No!” 1960
   “The Children Were Watching” 1960
   “Kenya” 1961
Producer David Wolper

Pioneered a different type of television documentary
Did not work for any of the networks
An eye towards ‘entertainment’

“The Race for Space” 1958

Produced documentaries – specials & documentary series for over forty years
60 Minutes

CBS  1968  Still running today
Produced by Don Hewitt
magazine format – news & public affairs

Brings documentary-like content & production methods into commercial television (like *The March of Time* earlier)

The format fits the medium
Several stories in each program
  investigative reporting
  personable on-camera reporters
  tight narrative structures
Characteristics of the television documentary

Shaped by the technological characteristics of television

- new way of distributing & exhibiting content
- new relationship w/audience - living-room instead of theater

Regarding content - 3 major types predominated 1950s-60s

1. Newsworthy subjects
   - major contribution of TV documentary
     - e.g. See It Now    CBS Reports
2. Historical compilation series
   *Project XX*

3. Human Interest series
   *Close Up!*

Also a kind of ‘entertainment’ documentary emerges in 1950s.

TV documentaries tend to maintain small-scale intimacy
Frequently, commentator is the stars & appears on camera
Stresses the illusion of ‘live’
Commentaries tend to be balanced
Extensive use of interview
In the context of a series – fixed times
Ability to call large audience to various subjects