

# 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* Scottish 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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