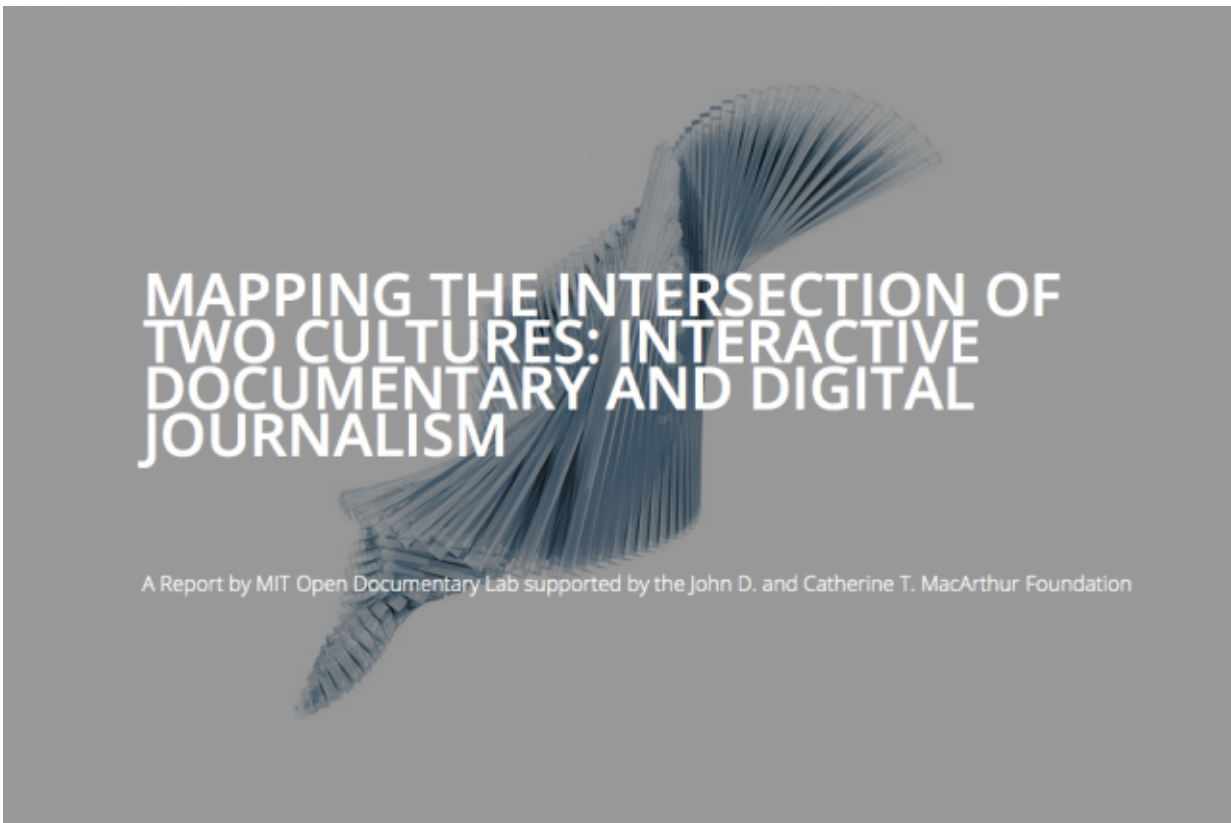


How interactive documentaries represent a new form of innovation in digital journalism

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From the advent of the printing press to the emergence of photography, radio, television, and now the Internet and mobile devices, journalists have always found ways to adapt to new technologies by changing the

way they tell stories and reach audiences. Interactive and participatory documentaries offer a new opportunity in that development. They provide immersive, visual, and mobile-friendly storytelling techniques; provoke creative collaborations across institutions, "desks" and with publics; and stimulate the use of often overlooked assets such as archives. By so doing, they provide an array of solutions for journalistic institutions that wish to reach a new generation of users and make use of today's technological developments.

These are the conclusions of a new MIT report—"Mapping the Intersection of Two Cultures: Interactive Documentary and Digital Journalism"—released this week by the MIT Open Documentary Lab and supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

Drawing from case studies from the *New York Times*, *The Guardian*, National Public Radio, *Frontline*, and others, the report represents the first thorough mapping of the ongoing convergence between interactive and participatory practices within digital journalism.

It "contextualizes and maps the views of the people who are leading change," write principal investigators William Uricchio, a professor of comparative media studies at MIT, and Sarah Wolozin, director of the MIT Open Documentary Lab. "Today's journalism is facing the same fragmented audiences that any other cultural form is facing, and it faces the same fierce competition from 'upstarts,'" Uricchio said. "But our report offers ways of keeping pace, strategies to enhance relevance, and sketches one of many futures for the form." Leaders featured in these case studies have similar ambitions, concerns, and, to some extent, organizational structures, but they are approaching the challenges of [digital journalism](#) with very different strategies, the authors say. These leaders are finding that "reorganizing the production pipeline and means of distribution, listening to and working together with audiences, partnering with other media organizations, and looking to internal assets

such as archives" provide the best ways to adapt to the digital age.

Among some of the report's findings:

- **Begin with the user:** Thinking about user experience, understanding user behavior, and being in dialogue with the intended public at the beginning of an interactive documentary or other journalistic project is fundamental to reaching and engaging with that public.
- **Let story determine form:** The story and materials should determine the storytelling techniques employed, and not vice-versa; interactivity and participation provide an expanded toolkit that can enhance clarity, involvement, meaning, and "spreadability," but they are not "one-size-fits-all" solutions.
- **Experiment and learn:** Interactive and participatory documentaries can provide "research and development" opportunities for journalism organizations, which may then adapt relevant tools, techniques, and experiences for their future work.
- **Collaborate across borders:** In an era when word, sound, and image flow together into one digital stream, media institutions fare better when they partner with like-valued organizations, form interdisciplinary teams, and co-create with their publics.
- **Shape conversations:** Interactivity and user participation can enable and inform the connection between audiences and sources, helping journalism to shape conversations in addition to defining truths.
- **Use archives creatively:** Legacy journalism organizations can make much better use of a defining asset—their archives—to build deep, interactive story environments, distinguishing their voices in a crowded news environment and empowering their users to explore how events and their coverage take shape.
- **Consider long-term impact:** A cost-benefit analysis of interactive and participatory storytelling in journalism settings should

include not only audience reach and impact, but also organizational innovation in the form of new teams, processes, and tools that can be integrated into other parts of the newsroom.

The authors conclude with the reminder that although the industry faces multiple pressures, it is also reaching new levels of excellence and impact, due in large part to the experiments and success outlined in these case studies. They argue that their insights provide "a scalable set of blueprints (and warnings) for organizations of all sizes."

More information: "Mapping the Intersection of Two Cultures: Interactive Documentary and Digital Journalism"
opendoclab.mit.edu/interactivejournalism

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