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Assignment: Write an academic style essay on your documentary production.

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Shiela Curran Bernard (2004) wrote that, “documentaries should do more than help viewers pass the time; they should demand their active engagement, challenging them to think about what they know, how they know it, and what more they might want to find out” (2004: 5). When we, as journalism students, began the production of the 24-minute documentary, *Wheel Turn*, our main goal was to break the stereotype associated with disabled people and show that disabled people lead productive and meaningful lives. Through this we hoped to challenge able-bodied people’s perceptions of disability and create an awareness by addressing common misconceptions of disabled people.

As documentary filmmakers we rely on facts to tell our stories, “we’re not free to invent plot points or character arcs ... instead [we] must find them in raw material of real life” (Bernard 2004: 1). Therefore our first task was to find characters for our documentary who would, through sharing their own life experiences on camera, enable us to fulfil our proposed story idea. Our first choice of character was Adrian Hubbard, having lived with a disability half his life he is very outspoken about issues of discrimination and equality. Having represented South Africa in the Paralympics and wheelchair basketball for numerous clubs he became our wheelchair basketball expert in the documentary. The documentary focused on the build up to a match between the Eastern Spears (Port Elizabeth) and the Border Brumbies (East London). Adrian was the coach and captain of the Eastern Spears so we intercut his story with that of the Border Brumbies captain, Siseko Mtamana. We were faced with issues of race and identity when contrasting these two characters - despite their disabilities, Adrian fits a typical white male identity and is a successful businessman and homeowner, whereas Siseko lives off a disability grant and rents his home. Contrasting two men’s stories equally from such different class backgrounds proved to be a challenge but Siseko did play for the stronger side and in the end his team won the match. We did not want to be accused of not being aware of race and gender issues therefore we attempted to counterbalance the lack of Black characters with more interview clips of Siseko and by introducing a distinct Black female voice. Deonette (Dee) Olivier is a national women’s league basketball player, she was disabled at an early age as was Siseko, hence their stories parallel each other, Dee wore prosthetics and Siseko wears a calliper therefore there is a link between their stories. There is also a link between the stories of Adrian and Maria Datnow who was paralysed much later in her life, both characters rely on wheelchairs for their mobility.

Wheel Turn deals with themes of identity, willpower, family, friendship, physicality, limb loss, sport and competitiveness. We used the documentary *MURDERBALL* as a frame of reference for our documentary and what we hoped to achieve. In *MURDERBALL* the producers argued that by portraying and

“emphasizing the universal elements in the story – sports rivalry and patriotism, relationships among fathers, sons, best friends, and lovers, the ecstasy of winning and the agony of losing the film enables viewers to identify with the ‘characters’ and their situations. As the people emerge, the wheelchairs recede” (*MURDERBALL* Producers).

Through exploring themes of family, friendship and sport we attempted to create a way for the able-bodied viewer to connect with and relate to the disabled character and view them not firstly as a disabled person but rather, firstly as a fellow human being who shares similar emotions and ideologies. Through this approach we attempted to “elevate the public’s moral consciousness and move it closer to discovering transcendental values of common good” (Drale 2004: 225).

Wheel Turn uses devices from a number of different documentary types. It has elements of an observational documentary as there is an attempt to observe lived life with minimum intervention from the television crew. *Wheel Turn* also reveals the individual human character in an ordinary life setting which is an indication of an observational documentary. The documentary also has slight elements of an interactive documentary type as in many of the interviews you can see that the character is answering a question, one particular example is when Deonette is buttering bread in the kitchen and talking about her passion for basketball. Lastly *Wheel Turn* has elements of the performative documentary type as the content is snippets of each character’s subjective experience of life as a disabled person and therefore they possess a specific perspective that is not that of the able-bodied viewer. This genre enables the character to speak for themselves as experts on disabled life.

In terms of our shooting style we attempted to follow a definite style when shooting in-depth interviews. We attempted to shoot the in-depth interviews at a 30 degree angle off the profile wide shot so that you can see the characters entire body, however when it came to Siseko’s interview he looked lost in the shot so there is a slight discrepancy between shot styles in the piece. We were advised not to cut the bottom of the wheelchairs from the frame when filming people in wheelchairs. When we originally proposed the treatment for *Wheel Turn* we had hoped for access to more than one camera so that we could get close-ups during the interview simultaneously.

In terms of the game we tried to build the hype around it as much as possible, which was proved a difficult task due to the lack of crowd at the final game. However, in the post-production the build up to the match was achieved through music and shots of the teams preparing for the game. In our initial edit draft we wanted to introduce Adrian at the start of the documentary sitting around the table with his family so that the viewer could not see that he was disabled however due dropout over footage we had to construct a different introduction sequence. In the introduction sequence the viewer is introduced to the fact that this is a disabled man almost immediately and this acts our hook. The stories of our four characters are intercut and the first three minutes of the documentary focus solely on their disabilities as the piece moves on the viewer is moved from the tragic stories of the characters, to their daily struggles as disabled people and how they overcome them. Wheelchair basketball in the true link between all the characters and it is introduced as the turning point in the piece, as it is introduced the pace picks up and the build up to the match begins. One of the biggest challenges with this 24-minute documentary was to be able to hold the viewers attention, the final product achieves this as it starts off slowly but the stories are compelling and hold one's attention to the introduction of the basketball.

As a group of three white students from middle-class backgrounds our identities influenced the construction of the documentary, we did not notice it whilst filming but when we came back to capture our footage we realised the discrepancy between the predominantly white Port Elizabeth (PE) team and the Black East London (EL) team unfortunately time and budget constraints could not afford us an opportunity to re-shoot the EL team. Looking back, it is obvious that as a crew we felt more comfortable in an environment similar to our own which is probably why we built such a good bond with the PE team mates, whereas in EL we were outside in a location for the entire shoot where our subjects spoke in their home language which differed from ours and this definitely made it more difficult to build a relationship with our subjects. However with our media theory knowledge on race and identity we were able to rectify our oversights in the editing process by discussing at length our edit layout and reworking sequences until they worked together. The production processes served as a big learning curb for me because as journalist's we are expected to step out of our comfort zones in order to represent our subjects objectively.

Ultimately *Wheel Turn* set out to document the lives of a group of wheelchair basketball players and show how through basketball they break the boundaries which

able-bodied people have ascribed to disabled people. The true tragedy of what has happened to their bodies is revealed early in the documentary but their acceptance of their situation and their will power to succeed runs throughout the documentary. This is evident in the first sound bite when Adrian says, "I decided pretty soon after I was injured that I just wanted to get mobile again so I taught myself really how to drive with hand controls...". The opening sound bite also shows Adrian's will to live a productive life a notion which is expressed throughout the piece and the documentary ultimately leaves the viewer questioning what a normal productive life is. The documentary ends with the two teams after the game shaking hands, yet in the end it was not about who won the game but rather having decent competition to play against and for a brief moment of court time being all equal in a world where able-bodies are the norm. In the production of *Wheel Turn* we set out to challenge the perception that disabled people can't lead productive and meaningful lives and through our amazing real-life characters stories I believe the final product of *Wheel Turn* achieves this goal.

References:

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Drale, C. 2004. "Communication Media in a Democratic Society". In Communication Law and Policy.

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