
The New Transformation of the Public Sphere

Discourse through Documentary

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This paper explores how feature film documentaries about corporate citizenship are becoming critical in defining the public interest and encouraging action and discourse among scholars and practitioners. The paper examines how independent documentaries on corporate citizenship, as well as Paramount Pictures' *An Inconvenient Truth*, can be seen as critical milestones in the history of corporate citizenship in the task of broadcasting the concepts of a common public sphere and a common public interest in our society and world. I connect Jürgen Habermas's discussion of the public sphere with documentaries, both independent and mass market, as a platform to enable critical discourse on the impact and social responsibility of corporations in our society. Leveraging this fundamental debate, I explore the necessity and landmark nature of documentaries in creating a call to action based on equipping citizens with the knowledge to influence and engage in good corporate citizenship and democracy. I propose that the degradation of mass television media in general has created a void which documentaries have begun to fill in creating an informed public.

- Corporate citizenship
- Documentaries
- Social change
- Mass media
- Jürgen Habermas
- Public interest
- Public sphere

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FILM AND TELEVISION HAVE A WAY OF CAPTURING A MOMENT IN TIME AND seemingly freezing it forever in our memories. Ask anyone where they were when they watched Princess Diana's 25-foot train at her wedding in St Paul's cathedral or where they watched the World Trade Center Towers fall on 11 September and they will most likely be able to tell you without a second thought.

Film and television are part of our culture, whether you grew up watching *Big Brother* or *Doctor Who*. But media can have a far greater impact on our lives as a platform for enabling critical discourse among citizens to advance the discussion of the public interest. With the increase in entertainment television news filling what used to be reserved for objective journalism, film documentaries have a significant role to play in giving collective voice to the dialogue of corporate citizenship and the responsibility of corporations to 'accrue fair returns for shareholders, but not at the expense of the legitimate interests of other stakeholders' (Corporation 20/20 2008). The long-term impact of the call-to-action corporate citizenship films, including *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room*, *Darwin's Nightmare*, *Roger and Me*, *Sicko*, *The Corporation*, *Super Size Me* and *An Inconvenient Truth*, has yet to be studied, as does the unique categorisation of these films as either a conduit for public outcry or a catalyst for action. However, while scholars would struggle with identifying causation between these films and changes in behaviour and policy (even McDonald's denies that *Super Size Me* had any impact on eliminating 'Super Size' options from its menu within a year of the film's debut), the investigation into corporate irresponsibility may not have happened if this information was left to the major television media outlets alone and not supplemented by these landmark documentaries.

The idea of a public sphere as the core method in creating a common public interest was first proposed by Jürgen Habermas in 1969; the public sphere served as a platform for 'rational-critical' debates focused on influencing those in government to operate in what citizens defined as 'the public interest'. The concept of 'the public interest' is critical in corporate citizenship; expectations of businesses are continuing to rise as NGOs and government agencies either lack the funds or the ability to make significant progress on social issues such as healthcare, poverty and the environment. This translates into a new social contract between corporations and the community, forcing leaders to re-evaluate *how* they deliver financial returns to investors. There are ample examples of organisations working in this new social contract: DHL's Disaster Response Team partners with local and federal agencies to avoid bottlenecks in distribution of relief efforts, something that would traditionally be the sole responsibility of government agencies. Anita Roddick, the founder of The Body Shop, began the vigorous campaign for human rights and trade justice, something once thought of as a government and NGO responsibility. All these efforts, while critical and moving by their own account, still need the backing and interest of social movements as well as public agreement on their importance and necessity in today's complex society. This is where the media and public sphere play a critical role in facilitating a sounding board for public discourse to develop a common definition of the public interest.

The complicating factor for organisations is their mixed role in society: by acting in the interest of social movements, some corporations have a participative voice in defining the public interest, as seen in how The Body Shop has initiated a significant campaign on behalf of fair trade and human rights around the world. Additionally, as organisations fill roles that have been traditionally the responsibility of governments, these corporations will be influenced by the definition of the public interest. Not only does this leave organisations with a complex web of responsibility from a growing number of stakeholders, but also, at the most simplistic level, organisations are being asked to have a greater and greater accountability towards finding a balance between operating in the company's interest and the public interest. This co-responsibility moves the

paradigm of corporate citizenship away from voluntary action to a joint effort of corporations and government to improve issues defined as critical in the public interest (see Scherer and Palazzo 2007). While a publicly traded, for-profit company's main interest has been defined by economists around the world, most clearly by Milton Friedman, as *make as much money as possible while conforming to the basic rules of the society*, the public interest and what constitutes the basic rules to which corporations are being held accountable are not only vaguely defined, but, at least recently, in a state of constant fluctuation.

Before moving on, it is important to note one of the most common arguments against corporate citizenship that the entire corporate citizenship effort is simply 'greenwashing' and, at best, enriched self-interest; organisations put on a good face to placate the public but continue to run business operations as usual. Nearly every S&P 500 company boasts efforts of governance, sustainability and community involvement, but merely saying a company is a good corporate citizen and actually being a good corporate citizen are not always in tune with one another. The irony of Enron's 2001 annual report (the corporation which was the subject of *The Smartest Guys in the Room*) which states that the company's values were *communication, respect, integrity and excellence* firmly demonstrates that actions are what count, not a public relations green-sheen. In general, outside the US, executives are either leading or being held to an even higher level of accountability. The UK, Netherlands, France, Sweden and Norway are among the growing number of countries requiring organisations to report on their social and environmental efforts in their annual reports. While the level of commitment and the discussion between enlightened self-interest and a more altruistic corporate citizenship is still in its formative years, most signs, even in a global economic recession, point to the growing role of corporate citizens to supplement and enhance a functioning democratic society.

Habermas and the public sphere

Originally written in 1969, and first translated into English in 1989, Jürgen Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* explores the evolution of the media, critical discourse and the public in the increasingly global, yet Westernised/Americanised, system of the media. Habermas's work is both continually critiqued (see Calhoun 1992) and utilised in a variety of contexts, including, but by no means limited to, cultural citizenship (Burgess *et al.* 2006), environmental knowledge (Elgert 2006) and Habermas's own account of *Religion in the Public Sphere* (2006b). The core concept in a functioning public sphere, according to Habermas, was the role of the bourgeois public sphere (*bürgerliche Öffentlichkeit*), which served as a platform for 'rational-critical' debates among the upper class in France¹ during the Enlightenment.²

1 Habermas not only used the French as a model, but also the German debates in private homes as well as the British societies which also engaged in critical discourse.

2 Before examining the importance of creating a new public sphere, I briefly address one of the core criticisms of Habermas's argument. One of the most basic assumptions and one of the most criticised aspects of the public sphere is the basis that the rational discourse was engaged in 'presupposing the equality of status, disregard(ing) status altogether' (Habermas 1989: 36). While Habermas admits this was an ideal not fully realised, the use of the Enlightenment is important from a feminist critique, as the public sphere during the Enlightenment was never open to all and did not disregard status (or gender) in society. While the discussion on how egalitarian the Enlightenment was should not be trivialised, it is important to note that Habermas's later work and other critics have defined the use of the Age of Enlightenment as a 'critical yardstick' or 'ideal' (Thompson 1995: 260) rather than a naive delusion of reality.

While this basis of the Enlightenment is one of the core criticisms of Habermas's theory, the structure of the public sphere held a place between civil society and the state, resulting in the creation of 'public opinion' through critical discourse. Habermas calls for active participation, not superficial participation, as a critical role in democracy, and the public sphere represented an act of critical communication and discourse rather than superficial discussion. More specifically, 'public debate was supposed to transform *volutas* into a *ratio* that in the public competition of private argument came into being as the consensus about what was practically necessary in the interest of all' (Habermas 1989: 83, original emphasis). The public sphere and public interest are integrally linked; the outputs of these critical debates were not collective opinions, but a shared opinion formed through discussion. Thus, public dialogue put aside the private interests of citizens, countering, contributing and influencing the direction of state power, as well as corporations, which can have an even greater influence on society than governing agencies. The one key component of communicative action is the importance of reflection and debate resulting in 'the discursive quality of the full processes of deliberation leading up to' (White 1995: 12) the constitutional process. Habermas claims that the 'colonisation' of the **lifeworld**, or the informal and non-commercialised domains of social life, by the *official systems* of the economy and state have led to a distortion of public life and politics. Again, the central component of his argument is the idea of public participation and reaching consensus through public dialogue rather than exercise of power. It is this reasoned argument, rather than the pursuit of personal (or corporate) goals, that drives the idea of public interest and common good; this critical debate is what creates the voice of the public interest. The rational discourse in the public sphere is strikingly similar to Dewey's thesis: both focus on the importance of 'citizen-to-citizen conversations that [are of] crucial significance in the development of deep democracy, in contrast to the expert-to-expert conversations that largely shape public policies in formal democracies today' (Green 1999: 83).

The critical component of the public sphere is the concept of a deliberative democracy: one in which there is critical analysis of democratic decisions and where social issues are based on the collective interest of the public. Discourse is inherently pluralist and interactive and the publication of popular or academic journal articles, or the release of a film, hardly represents the full range of information exchanges or collective learning opportunities. Social networks and blogs offer a tremendous opportunity for collective learning and information exchange. Like many journalists, *New York Times* writer and op-ed columnist Nicholas Kristof has 50,000 Facebook 'fans' with whom he can communicate instantly about his stories of genocide, slavery and poverty from around the world every day. Kristof shares his experiences immediately with these 'fans', and in turn these individuals can feel as if they are there with him and perhaps become equally outraged about the number of economic, social and political inequities around the world. While I by no means try to imply that documentaries or any form of communication can singlehandedly amplify and transmit the public interest, documentaries fill one gap in the public sphere left by overall cutbacks in investigative and informative journalism, and their part in providing relevant information to the public with which they can connect and collaborate on is critical.

It goes without saying that the discussion of Habermas and the public sphere within the limits of this paper is simply a foreword to the importance of social movements and the importance of social actors' discussion on the advancement of corporate citizenship and democracy. Calls to action and transformation in our society are not developed from the effort and actions of a single person, government or organisation, but from a cooperative effort undertaken in different organisations and institutions.

Mass television media versus documentaries

Through discussion, both written and verbal, the common good in the public sphere became consensus for the benefit of all; within today's corporate, laissez-faire, Western business-driven media television environment, this debate does not appear to happen. Rather, private interests become the 'common good', and few debates truly result in action. The media has often stood as a watchdog for the public interest, often being called the 'fourth estate', which dates back to the 19th century and refers to the media's ability to frame issues in society: traditionally, as an institution, it has significant impact and influence on what citizens deem to be important. Thomas Carlyle eloquently states the importance of the media in challenging the National Assembly during the French Revolution:

Alas, yes: Speculation, Philosophism, once the ornament and wealth of the saloon, will now coin itself into mere Practical Propositions, and circulate on street and highway, universally; with results! A Fourth Estate, of Able Editors, springs up; increases and multiplies; irrepressible, incalculable. New Printers, new Journals, and ever new (so prurient is the world), let our Three Hundred curb and consolidate as they can! Loustalot, under the wing of Prudhomme dull-blustering Printer, edits weekly his *Revolutions de Paris*; in an acrid, emphatic manner. Acrid, corrosive, as the spirit of sloes and copperas, is Marat, Friend of the People; struck already with the fact that the National Assembly, so full of Aristocrats, 'can do nothing', except dissolve itself, and make way for a better; that the Townhall Representatives are little other than babblers and imbeciles, if not even knaves. Poor is this man; squalid, and dwells in garrets; a man unlovely to the sense, outward and inward; a man forbid;- and is becoming fanatical, possessed with fixed-idea . . . The Three Hundred have summoned and will again summon Marat: but always he croaks forth answer sufficient; always he will defy them, or elude them; and endure no gag (Fielding and Sorensen 1989: 198).

Carlyle's comments on the significance of the media as an institution that can take on those in power and 'endure no gag' still holds true today. Unfortunately, in crisis-focused media that sensationalises news with fear and panic, there appears to be more in-depth reporting on stories about the latest controversy, be it in the entertainment, sports or political fields, than on the issues of real international and domestic significance. Documentaries therefore begin to play a vital role in society as traditional investigative reporting is often replaced with human interest stories, 'shock and awe' and 'news-bites' rather than in-depth news reporting. This was obvious in the 2004 US presidential election when a large portion of the campaign focused far more on whether Democratic candidate John Kerry was a 'flip-flopper' and on the number and severity of his war wounds suffered 30-plus years earlier rather than on the failing war in Iraq or lack of healthcare for millions of Americans. Documentaries, including *Sicko*, *Iraq in Fragments* and *Taxi to the Dark Side*, did the investigative reporting where many crisis-focused media outlets failed.

This phenomenon is not just limited to election years in the United States. During the first two weeks of September 2007, a number of critical events occurred: US presidential candidates Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama revealed their US\$110 billion healthcare plan and US\$90 billion tax plan, respectively, France said war with Iran is possible, a bank in Britain failed due to a run on withdrawals, and the US Federal Reserve cut interest rates by 0.50% to try to stop a recession. However, in conducting an informal review of news websites and news broadcast during that time-frame, the most covered stories were Britney Spears's lacklustre performance at the Video Music Awards and another arrest of O.J. Simpson. Michael Signer, a former foreign policy adviser for John Edwards's failed presidential campaign bid, made this observation:

The last year has thrown a dizzying array of foreign policy challenges at the United States. We deployed an additional 30,000 troops to Iraq. Venezuela's Hugo Chavez and Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad blustered their way across the world stage. Russian President Vladimir Putin flirted with a new cold war with Washington. Benazir Bhutto was assassinated in Pakistan.

And, of course, we all continue to live in the chilly shadow of 9/11.

You might imagine that such red-hot foreign policy issues, combined with a wide-open presidential election, would spark a journalistic fire so intense it would force candidates up into trees and out on limbs to defend their foreign policy positions.

But you'd be dreaming.

A few weeks ago, I concluded a 10-month stint as foreign policy adviser to former senator John Edwards's presidential campaign. During that time, he made a series of major foreign policy addresses. Last March, he gave a speech on global poverty. In May, he talked about strengthening US force structure and replacing the outmoded 'global war on terror' strategy. In September, there was a major speech on counterterrorism and intelligence, including a proposal for a new multilateral treaty organisation. In October, Edwards proposed a new diplomatic framework for Iran.

The reaction from the major news media? A big yawn. We struggled to get any coverage (Signer 2008: 3).

Since salacious events such as the Whitewater scandal, the questionable circumstances surrounding Princess Diana's death, and Monica Lewinsky's affair with US President Bill Clinton make for great controversy, it appears that news organisations are trying to always be ahead of the next conspiracy or scandal, perhaps even elevating a non-conspiracy or non-scandal into one. While some argue that the media should play the role of a watchdog of politics and act as the fourth branch of government (Gleason 1990; Waisbord 2000; Nelson *et al.* 2002; Thomas 2006; Schlachter 2009), in covering Britney Spears, rather than the failing economy, the watchdog appears to have turned into a docile lapdog. As a result of this failure by the crisis-focused television media to investigate and report on the most life-changing issues, documentaries then become more critical in encouraging information to be shared with the public. A number of factors, ranging from a shrinking group of corporations who control the majority of media outlets to increased competition from alternative sources for news and the Internet, have contributed to the media moving away from being an aggressive watchdog over topics of substance to becoming more interested in covering or starting arguments and presenting opinions as facts—or 'hunting in packs' (Blair 2007). As more opinion and talk show-like news programmes, which are cheaper to produce than edited news, are added to television broadcasts, the opportunity for the media to influence society through the presentation of opinion and not pure facts is increased; the facts are only obtained by concerned citizens who search out alternative or multiple news sources.

A correspondent giving a personal opinion as part of a panel discussion does not constitute newsgathering. Democracy was founded on the belief that ultimate power rests in an informed citizenry. Yet, if citizens are more informed about local murders and *American Idol's* latest controversy than the meaning of post-election violence in Kenya or the impact on the world of the Russian Presidential election, the informed citizen is fast becoming an endangered species.

Filling a gap in the public sphere

Different forms and representations of media saturate our lives and impact our senses nearly continuously, day in and day out. Media is arguably one of the most powerful forces that influence our action and inaction—sometimes consciously and other times unconsciously. Media affects how we represent individuals, groups, societies, govern-

ments, cultures and all kinds of phenomenon in our minds. Those who shape the mass media influence our personal, societal and cultural norms and qualities.

The debate over the media and its role in society is as old as the institution itself. However, with the introduction of instant news, the problems that society and the media encounter intensify at light speed. While no one solution will fix the problem, our society can, and must, embark on the path to solve this core issue. Documentaries have a unique opportunity to encourage debate and discussion, both written and verbal, among a diverse society.

Until recently, documentaries have traditionally been focused on wars, nature or the life of a specific individual or group, as represented by the Academy Award-winning documentaries over the past 60 years (Internet Movie Database, www.imdb.com, accessed 1 July 2008; *New York Times* 2008). While there has been a large volume of recently nominated feature documentaries focused on corporate citizenship and scandal (*Sicko*, *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room*, *Darwin's Nightmare* and *Super Size Me*), only one documentary on corporate scandal and workers rights has won the Academy Award: *Harlan County, U.S.A.* (1976), directed by Barbara Kopple. Through 2003, few documentaries had been selected for an Academy Award that focused on an ongoing event, and none focused on the idea of corporate citizenship, or lack thereof. The recent mass of documentaries focusing on poor choices made by corporations is taking the place of traditional investigative reporting once done by major news outlets, which are either no longer in business (newspapers) or have chosen to focus on crisis-reporting rather than informative content (television mass media). The evolution to mainstream documentaries critiquing corporate behaviour is something of an evolution in the film industry, primarily due to a greater variety in funding options of independent film-makers.

Corporate injustice feature documentaries, including *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room*, *Roger and Me*, *Sicko*, *The Corporation*, *Super Size Me* and *An Inconvenient Truth*, are a relatively new phenomenon, as this space has historically been filled by investigative journalism and, until recently, the most popular feature documentaries have by and large been left to human interest, war and social injustice, not corporate injustice. Historically, corporate sponsored docu-films such as *Louisiana Story* and *The Coca Cola Kid* have portrayed organisations such as Standard Oil and Coca-Cola in a positive light, significantly limiting the critical discussion and subject matter of any misdoings by corporations.³ The late film-maker Ogawa Shinsuke's pioneering approach to documentaries attempted to educate the public on critical issues facing members of society, and in turn attempted to help define a bridge between specialised public spheres and the public interest. *Red Persimmons*, directed by Xiaolian Peng, a student of Shinsuke's work, recorded not only the work of packaging persimmons in rural Japan, but also the impact of the insurmountable forces of modernisation on an agrarian way of life. This is a significant evolution, as highly awarded and distributed documentaries such as *Red Persimmons*, *An Inconvenient Truth*, *The Corporation* and *Super Size Me* have a unique opportunity to engage the global public by investigating the lasting impact our society will have on the Earth.

Paramount's *An Inconvenient Truth* notwithstanding, the ability of the crisis-focused mass media to play a critical role in increasing awareness and, at times, enforcing corporate citizenship is in question. While Habermas has not fully embraced the possibility of mass media as a forum for communication and discourse, he does question the role the media *may* be able to play in today's global and dispersed society. More specifically, he appears to question, or challenge, whether the mass media can move away

3 In these films, Standard Oil leaves behind a pristine environment and a rich Cajun family, and a Coca-Cola executive is smitten with a small-town girl—hardly issues that could be seen as taking on social movements or critically changing corporate actions.

from being purely a commercialised vehicle for advertising and public relations, and move into the role of providing information for rational, critical, discursive activity. Even in this expanded view of the public sphere more recently presented by Habermas, he is still an advocate of a 'self-regulating media system . . . in accordance to its own normative code' (Habermas 2006a: 19). In revisiting the concept of the public sphere in his more recent work, Habermas calls for the use of the mass media, as part of the public sphere, to challenge the private interests of corporate media 'to bring about changes in the spectrum of values, topics, and reasons channeled by external influences, to open it up in an innovative way, and to screen it critically' (Habermas 1992: 455). He is not alone in his critique of the public good as a non-factor in today's society. In a highly connected, wired-in global society, if the mainstream corporate media does not step up to encourage such discourse, it becomes the responsibility of independent film-makers and global-knowledge news organisations (such as the *New York Times* and the BBC) to move the discussion away from being attention-grabbing but trivial to significant and critical (Schlachter 2009).

Documentaries creating a call to action

Documentaries have long been used to remember and celebrate individuals whose lives may otherwise be forgotten by society. Until recently, most documentaries focus on telling the stories of individuals impacted by the Holocaust, apartheid, war tragedies or great battles, unexplainable murder, wrongly convicted defendants or unsolved crimes. However, since the fall of Enron and WorldCom, among other corporate scandals, Hollywood has taken notice of corporate malpractice by awarding films that expose poor citizenship such as *Super Size Me*, *Darwin's Nightmare*, *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room*, *Sicko* and *An Inconvenient Truth*, with best documentary film nominations from the Academy or major international film festivals, such as Cannes. The only topic to gain more nominations from Hollywood from 2004 to 2008 is the US-led war and occupation in Iraq. These films are not only a necessity in engaging and linking a diverse public in critical discourse, but come at a critical time in our society. While many news organisations tend to report every minor news story as a major crisis, these documentaries have moved the real crises into awareness and calls to action. As investigative journalism is pushed aside for a more profitable 'talking-head' format in mainstream television news, documentaries have taken on the role of acting as the public's investigative journalists in the corporate citizenship space.

Habermas argues that a 'world fashioned by the mass media is a public sphere in appearance only' (Habermas 1989: 171). However, documentaries, even those produced by the corporate media giants, can play a role in educating the public on critical issues, as Al Gore and Paramount Classics' *An Inconvenient Truth* has done. This is the call to action for corporations, both within the media and in industry, to embrace the idea of co-responsibility, especially in the area of partial or imperfect legal and moral issues in a global society. During the 2000 US election, climate change was barely on the election agenda despite growing evidence of human impact on the climate and the fact that the Kyoto Protocol was introduced only three years before the election. *An Inconvenient Truth* is the third most successful documentary in history, behind *March of the Penguins* and Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*. This demonstrates the power media can have in creating the platform for social actors to connect, communicate and convey to corporations and government critical issues and values in today's global society. Jürgen Habermas argued that a society without critical discourse and with an over-reliance on the mass media cannot function as a true democracy. With an independent channel for infor-

mation, citizens can think rationally, engage in critical discussions on the public good, and make informed decisions on difficult matters facing society. If many of the mass-media outlets, owned by and large by big corporate conglomerates, cannot provide such an outlet for public information, these landmark documentaries just may.

Can the public make informed decisions based on the news they receive today, be it through documentary or podcasts? Alternatively, is the media merely seeking publicity to raise ratings and increase advertising dollars, thus leading to greater corporate profits? A key differentiator is the concept of global knowledge versus crisis news. A media whose sole function is public relations and advertising cannot and does not encourage the critical discourse necessary in a democracy; a media, whether in newspapers, online news or investigative documentaries, that balances providing relevant, timely, objective and critical information with the interest of shareholders does provide a fundamental service to the public sphere. The same holds true with good corporate citizenship. A balance of shareholder interest, rather than enriching one's own self-interest, is imperative as the media's role in our society continues to grow.

Documentaries have always had the power to tell the untold story or the story of those forgotten. As mainstream news organisations move towards simply reporting on the news from the perspective of those in power (Schlachter 2009), the investigative journalism found in documentaries becomes critical. In 2002, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) found that the major nightly news shows in the US relied heavily on the majority opinion as expert sources.

In 2001, the voices of Washington's elite politicians were the dominant sources of opinion on the network evening news, making up one in three Americans (and more than one in four of all sources) who were quoted on all topics throughout the year. Of sources who had an identifiable partisan affiliation, 75 percent were Republican and only 24 percent Democrats. A mere 1 percent were third-party representatives or independents (Howard 2002).

While government sources are often the most knowledgeable sources after significant public events, relying only on these sources and not identifying and presenting sources with opposing or conflicting views from the government's position can create a sense of propaganda, rather than objective journalism.

The in-depth reporting that documentaries provide stands out as framing news stories through problem identification and knowledge frames that would appear to spur reflection on global problems by the audience. Conversely, many online and television media outlets tend to publish stories with a crisis-oriented frame that may in fact reduce responsiveness to global problems, by ignoring key issues around the world or by trivialising the stories (Schlachter 2009). Tying this framework to the discussion of corporate citizenship and *the public* is the question of whether or not the media helps create a vital community. These timely documentaries present stories in a way that *could* enable discussion and discourse around policies and events (i.e. world policies on climate change or awareness of questionable corporate practices). Taking this concept one step further, while documentary producers obviously have an opinionated position on a issue, one that engages them enough to make the effort to produce such a film, creating a knowledge-focused film rather than relying on pure emotions enables the public (if they so choose) to have an informed and critical discussion. On the other hand, the crisis-positioning corporate news media of today have already set the tone of the news (i.e. 'crisis'), thus telling the public what to think, and therefore not fulfilling the role of providing objective information to the public that would enable rational debate. In fact, as Habermas and others have theoretically contended, the critical debate has already happened in the newsroom, not in the public sphere. Personal interest stories appear to fail to deliver vital information to enable discussion and dilute what little value news organisations are providing. With the minimal time spent on any topic, they do little

more than create a passive audience with little information on which to debate or act as a society. Therefore, documentaries, now more than ever, have a critical responsibility in presenting a fully reasoned and documented argument and engaging the public in debate, either for or against the producers' opinions; a debate that is not encouraged by traditional and emerging news media outlets.

Conclusion

While this discussion was generated by the state of the United States television media and the contrast with the informative content of documentaries, it is not limited to a specific geography. With the influx of 24-hour news stations across the globe, there is no shortage of coverage for audiences to watch, but it appears that the news itself has become the news. With fewer and fewer companies controlling the majority of film, television, Internet, books and publishing, and music (Williams 2001), the continued revenue and profit push has created an atmosphere conducive to less journalistic reporting and more commentary from media correspondents. It is much cheaper for a media company to bring in news correspondents to talk about the issues in a central studio than to pay for someone to go to a region of interest and actually present the issues in a non-biased, non-opinionated way. This crisis-position framework of news with no substantive information to back up the crisis is at the centre of the public sphere transformation Habermas discusses; documentaries and global-knowledge news channels that seek to inform rather than elicit panic, must step up to fill the gap in reporting to ensure that social problems continue to have a voice and front position in public debate. Actors in the public sphere chart, filter, develop, coordinate and communicate social problems, needs and values (Habermas 1989). If the television mass media is not providing a feasible outlet to transmit the public needs, values and problems, it is then left to those in the media that provide a more global knowledge perspective. My concern is not that there is necessarily an overall failure to live up to an ideal in the media, although this is proving abundantly clear in US television media, but rather that only a few organisations have the power to singlehandedly accomplish what it would take: a coordinated effort from social movements, corporations and global-knowledge media organisations. But these sources are not enough and as newspapers go out of business more quickly than last season's platform shoes, others must step up to fill this gap. Organisations with outstanding citizenship programmes, such as Whole Foods Market, REI and The Body Shop, through words and action convey not just to shareholders but also to the public the importance of fixing the problems in our society. But even this is not enough. As no single corporation can take on such a significant role as voicing the values and needs in our global society, independent documentaries appear to be well positioned to fill the gap left by investigative journalism in television.

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Diary of Events

March–September 2010

24 March 2010 **New York City, USA**

FT Investing in a Sustainable Future

Annette Berry Tel: +1 212-641-6415 annette.berry@ft.com
www.ftconferences.com/csr2010

A selective listing of key conferences, seminars and exhibitions in the field of corporate responsibility

22–24 April 2010 **Beijing, China**

European Financial Management Symposium: Asian Finance

Changyun Wang, Renmin University of China, Beijing 100872, China
wangchy@ruc.edu.cn
www.efmaefm.org/oEFMSYMPOSIUM/China-2010/efm_sympo2010.shtml

27 April 2010 **Nottingham, UK**

Seventh Annual ICCSR Symposium

www.nottingham.ac.uk/business/iccsr

18–20 May 2010 **Pretoria South, Africa**

1st International Conference in Responsible Leadership: 'Developing the Next Generation Responsible Leaders'

Jo-Anne Adams-Underhill, Conference Organiser, Operations Officer: Centre for Responsible Leadership
jo-anne.adams@up.ac.za Tel: +27 12 420 4271 Cell: +27 84 929 0170 Fax: +27 86 546 9360
web.up.ac.za/crl

19–22 May 2010 **Rome, Italy**

EURAM 2010: 10th European Academy of Management Conference

www.euram2010.org/r/default.asp?ild=EGGMKK

28–30 May 2010 **Bonn, Germany**

Resilient Cities 2010:

1st World Congress on Cities and Adaptation to Climate Change

ICLEI bonn2010@iclei.org
www.iclei.org/bonn2010

22–24 September 2010 **Berlin, Germany**

4th International Conference on Corporate Social Responsibility

Joachim Schwalbach, Conference Organiser schwal@wiwi.hu-berlin.de
www.csr-hu-berlin.org