



BBC Three Documentaries

The aims of this Factsheet are to consider some examples of documentaries broadcast by BBC Three, considering:

- The institutional context of BBC Three
- The codes and conventions of the documentary form
- A discussion on the style of presentation used by some BBC Three documentaries.

Introduction to BBC Three

The BBC is the national public service broadcaster in the UK. It is funded by the required purchase of a licence that is paid by all UK adult citizens who own television sets and/or who access the BBC's online streaming service, iPlayer. The licence fee is set by the UK government and it is illegal to watch the BBC on TV or online without one. This method of funding allows the BBC to broadcast without having to use advertising to generate revenue. The BBC is, however, publically accountable for its output as it is funded through a compulsory payment. The BBC has a public service remit. That is, there are rules it has to abide by in terms of the types of programming it broadcasts. The BBC's initial remit to 'inform, educate and entertain' has been expanded over the years and it now has a broader remit now described as its five public purposes.

They are:

- To provide impartial news and information to help people understand and engage with the world around them (*to inform*)
- To support learning for people of all ages (*educate*)
- To show the most creative, highest quality and distinctive output and services (much of which will be *entertainment* output)
- To reflect, represent and serve the diverse communities of all of the United Kingdom's nations and regions and, in doing so, support the creative economy across the United Kingdom
- To reflect the United Kingdom, its culture and values to the world.

BBC Three is one of four broadcast television channels run by the BBC. Each channel has a distinct brand image and offers specific types of programming to its target audience.

BBC One: Initially broadcasting as The BBC Television Service in 1936, BBC One is the main, mainstream BBC channel that provides news and entertainment that aims to appeal to a broad and widespread audience. BBC One broadcasts factual and fictional programming including news, current affairs and documentaries as well as dramas and comedies. It broadcasts reality and variety programming and no one should feel excluded from BBC One's programming other than by the nature of their own personal taste.

BBC Two: Launched in 1964, BBC Two offers a wide range of more specialised programming that may have a less widespread appeal. Often shows that begin on BBC Two demonstrate that they can attract

a large audience and so can be moved to BBC One but, usually, programming on BBC Two attracts a smaller audience. The BBC Two remit says it aims to be a 'mixed genre channel' with a 'broad adult' appeal and its programming will offer 'depth and substance'. At its launch, BBC Two's remit was more focused on education whereas BBC One became the 'entertainment' channel.

BBC Four: Launched in 2002 as a digital only channel. Its remit was to offer programming that was an alternative to the mainstream and it has a focus on arts and music programming as well as offering in-depth documentaries on a range of diverse subjects.

BBC Three: Launched shortly after *BBC Four* in early 2003. It too was a digital channel and it identified its target audience as young people aged between 16 and 34 and BBC Three sought to offer 'innovative' programming to appeal to this group. Its aim as a channel was to attract and engage with younger audiences, utilise digital platforms and to help develop new UK 'talent'. The channel was to offer a range of different forms and genres of programming including factual and fictional programmes, dramas, comedies, reality shows and documentaries. BBC Three was available as a digital channel until 2016 when it became an online only channel. BBC Three can now be accessed via televisions, computers, tablets and phones via iPlayer or iPlayer apps. BBC Three still makes programming that follows traditional television formatting but it also offers shorter videos as standalone pieces or as episodes of a longer presentation. These shorter pieces are reflecting the impact of YouTube as a location for accessing video content. BBC Three has commissioned its own well received dramas and comedies including *Being Human*, *The Fades* and *In the Flesh*; *Bad Education*, *Some Girls* and *Josh*. It has also broadcast a wide range of documentaries – from light programming such as *Hotel of Mum and Dad* to fly-on-the-wall style documentaries such as *Junior Paramedics* and harder hitting documentaries including *Sex, Drugs and Murder: Life in the Red-Light Zone*.



Activity: Access the television listings on the BBC website. Identify how the programmes for BBC One, Two, Three and Four fit in with each channel's brand identity. What information does the TV schedule give you about the assumptions that are made about the target audience for each channel?

Documentaries: Codes and Conventions

A TV documentary is a factual programme that can be standalone or presented as a series. There is no specific format that a documentary has to follow, the shared characteristics across documentaries are that they usually:

180. BBC Three Documentaries

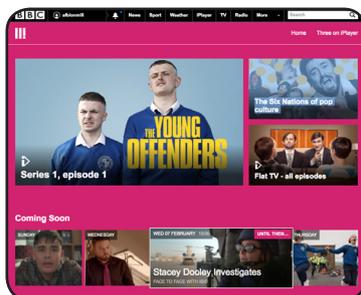
- Present an insight into real world events
- Follow a single story/develop a specific topic
- Offer a narrative structure that will help communicate the story clearly
- Use visuals to help tell the story.

From these basic conventions, documentary makers have many choices available to them in the way they present their story. Some of which include how they will use a narrator (via voiceover, on camera presenter, on screen text or other visual method of narration (e.g. animation)); how they will present interviews in their documentaries (as voiceovers, talking heads, on screen conversations, re-enactments/dramatic reconstructions, animations, etc.) Of course, there are many other creative decisions made in the production of a documentary including the choice of locations, the use of music and lighting as well as the way the camera and editing is used to construct the story. Many of these decisions will come from the subject matter and the content of the story but there are many creative choices that allow stories to be told in different ways.

One thing that is worth remembering when watching a documentary is that, despite the fact that it is based on real-life events, a documentary is only ever the presentation of an interpretation of those events. Documentaries are as constructed as any other media product with images, camera work, editing and music being used to create a specific effect. A documentary maker will have an agenda and a point of view s/he wishes to communicate and while a documentary may be honest in its presentation of facts and information, documentaries offer representations that are interpreted on screen and then interpreted again by the viewing audience. Documentaries select the images and information they wish to include and, so, cannot claim to be objectively true. At best a documentary is a version of the truth.

Examples Performative/Participatory Documentaries on BBC Three

BBC Three offer documentaries in a number of styles but they often use the performative and/or participatory styles to offer factual programming to their target audience. Documentaries that investigate specific social or political issues and feature presenters such as Stacey Dooley, Reggie Yates and Professor Green have become a staple part of the channel's factual output. Each offers documentaries that are intended to appeal to the BBC Three target audience and provide information and educational content in a way that will be engaging.



Stacey Dooley

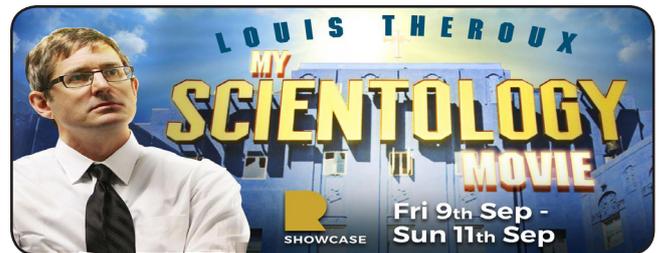
Stacey Dooley featured as a participant in a BBC Three documentary series called *Blood, Sweat and T-shirts* (2008) where she and other young people were taken to clothes manufacturing sweat shops in India to see where the clothes we buy in the West come from and the conditions they are produced in. The concept behind the show was to show 'typical' young people responding to the reality behind consumer products to inform the audience about sweat shop labour. Dooley was offered more factual programming work and has made

Some formal documentary styles are:

Performative Documentary – where the film maker is on screen and offers their personal, sometimes emotional viewpoint on the subject (Rich Hall documentaries are usually performative)

Observational Documentary – where the film maker remains behind the camera and narration is kept to a minimum so the audience is encouraged to watch the events and conversations (for example, Netflix's *Making a Murderer*)

Participatory Documentary – where the film maker becomes involved directly in the subject of the documentary (Louis Theroux has is often a participant in the stories he tells)



My Scientology Movie – a participatory documentary

Expository Documentary – where the audience is addressed directly by an authoritative voice that offers a distinct point of view (Adam Curtis's documentaries are expository)

Reflexive Documentaries – where the constructed nature of the documentary itself is pointed out (some of Louis Theroux's documentaries do this)

Poetic Documentaries – where the documentary maker wishes to communicate mood, tone and atmosphere rather than facts and information (poetics are used in Adam Curtis' documentaries, such as 'It Felt Like a Kiss', and the work of Charlie Lyne).

Not all documentaries will fit simply into one of these definitions and it is possible that one documentary may use elements of more than one of these styles.



many documentaries. Her documentaries have focused on topics that are assumed to resonate with young people including child labour, the sex and drug industries and domestic violence. She has travelled to many dangerous locations to report on criminal gangs and violent conflicts. She has engaged with controversial topics such as racism, abortion and attitudes to homosexuality.

Dooley appears on camera and engages with the subjects of her documentaries in a very personal and open way. She is often shown reacting to the people she is interviewing showing a great deal of sympathy and empathy – often responding emotionally with them as they retell their experiences. The audience follow Stacey as she explores her locations and she often speaks directly to camera explaining her own emotional responses to the audience. Stacey's youth and physical stature makes her appear non-threatening. This encourages

180. BBC Three Documentaries

subjects to open up to her about their experiences and emotions. When investigating a specific social issue, Dooley will often interview authority figures such as politicians or representatives of the police or military. She uses direct questioning techniques and often seeks to challenge the views and actions of these powerful figures.



Dooley is sometimes criticised for her emotional style and the lack of political analysis into the situations she investigates. Her method is to show the experiences of real people, often people who have limited power in society and may not often have an opportunity to be heard.

Reggie Yates

Yates' career began when he appeared as a child actor and performer. He appeared in *Grange Hill* amongst other things and went on to present children's TV as well as *Top of the Pops*. He has also worked as a DJ and appeared on reality TV shows. His first documentary work occurred as part of a comic relief presentation about life in Kenyan slums. This led to further documentary work which he combines with being a presenter as well as a writer and director.

He made two initial documentary series for BBC Three under the title *Reggie Yates' Extreme...* In the first series (2014) he visited South Africa and reported on the violence on the streets of Cape Town – specifically the dominance of knife crime. The second series was *Reggie Yates' Extreme Russia* (2015) which focused on the lives of young people in Russia looking at the rise of Russian Nationalism and the difficulties experienced by young gay people in a culture that is institutionally homophobic. A second episode looked at the way young Russian women were encouraged to compete for an opportunity to become a model. A third series *Reggie Yates' Extreme UK* (2015) focused on aspects of masculinity and sexual identity.

He made standalone documentaries on race issues in the US and another two series of films under the title *The Insider* (2016/17). He used the participatory method to tell the story of US prisons by living as an inmate and working as a guard. He also spent time living in a refugee camp in Iraq as well as living and working on a toxic waste dump in Ghana. The participatory method also integrated elements of performative documentary style as the audience were encouraged to understand the experiences of people in extreme situations from Yates' perspective and they were presented with his personal and emotional point of view. The intent is that this immersive style creates a more authentic understanding of the circumstances being reported on. Critics might argue that a wealthy British man who is temporarily in these environments cannot provide a viewpoint that is truly the same as those whose lives are being represented. The audience, however, receive an insight into situations that goes beyond simple observation of events. These documentaries are based on events rather than just emotions and the audience is able to engage with these experiences in a more visceral way by watching the presenter living through them.



A more observational style was used for the documentary based on an Aboriginal community in Wilcannia in Australia for the series *Reggie Yates: Hidden Australia* (2017). The documentary team were accused of unethical behaviour in the way events were edited and framed by the presenter for the episode *Black in the Outback*. The subjects were told that the filmmakers intended to tell a positive story about the community but the finished programme represented the community as one that has drug, alcohol and violence related problems. It was argued that, although the area had problems with poverty and unemployment, the documentary failed to show the positive aspects of the community and its work to help counter the economic issues facing some people. Yates was shown engaging with members of the community and the audience were encouraged to see the programme as being observational. Yates was present but did not make himself part of the story. However, several of his 'to camera' pieces commented judgementally on the amount of drinking and people's attitude to their own unemployment.

Professor Green

Professor Green (Stephen Manderson) is another documentary maker who uses similar styles in his documentaries to Dooley and Yates. Professor Green began his career as a rapper and has worked as an actor and presenter. His first documentary for BBC Three was both an exploration of a social issue as well as an insight into a known celebrity's private and emotional life. The 2015 documentary *Professor Green: Suicide and Me* investigated the rise in the number of male suicides in the UK but was also a personal and emotional exploration of the topic for the presenter whose father had killed himself when Manderson was 24 years old. His later documentaries were also based on topics he had a personal engagement with *Hidden and Homeless* and *Dangerous Dogs* were both broadcast in 2016. These were followed by documentaries on poverty in the UK, drugs legislation and *Working Class White Men* (2018).



His star identity as a white, working class rapper gives him an authenticity when discussing topics related to poverty, homelessness and working class life. His own experiences shape his interpretation of the issues he is presenting but his

knowledge of the issues are seen as trustworthy, as he is seen as someone who understands the lives shown in the documentaries. Like Stacey Dooley and Reggie Yates, Professor Green can make a direct connection with BBC Three's target audience and this adds to the impact of the stories that they tell.

Activity: How and why do these documentaries fit in with the brand values and identity of BBC Three? Consider the presentation styles of these documentary makers. Why might they appeal to the target audience of BBC Three?

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