DOCUMENTARY DIALOGUES: ESTABLISHING A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR
ANALYZING DOCUMENTARY FANDOM-FILMMAKER SOCIAL MEDIA
INTERACTION

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This dissertation looks at documentary and nonfiction fans: Who are they? Why do they watch? What types of conversations are held online? It provides a first step in building the foundation of nonfiction fandom scholarship, but also provides a step into the building of documentary scholarship.

This project grows out of an interest in both nonfiction and documentary media studies as well as an interest in how people interact with their fandom and media series of choice. Preliminary research showed little attention to nonfiction fandoms and yielded virtually no research on the topic. Documentary and nonfiction fans are either forgotten or deemed as unimportant to those studying media fandoms. But this project argues it is crucial to remember and to study this group of fans. They are carrying out a dialogue from a nonfiction film, about a topic that the filmmaker deemed important enough to produce a film. If fans of fictional media are important for merchandising and advertisement, should fans of nonfictional media be important too? Should their desire to learn the truth and not just be entertained be remembered and studied?

In the case of entertainment fare, programmers want to know about and stay connected with fans because of the commercial potential. Audience numbers equal ratings and affect ad rates. But what about nonfiction? Three different formats of documentaries, *Serial* (podcast), *Audrie & Daisy* (feature documentary, streaming), and *FRONLTINE’S The Choice 2016* (televised documentary), offer three case studies consisting of interviews of filmmakers and content analysis of tweets from each of the documentaries. In addition, a survey of *Serial* fans
was conducted to provide a deeper insight into one of the three case studies. These three case studies help identify how conversations from nonfiction fans vary across release platform and/or how multiple episodes might impact the interactivity of a fandom.

This study carves out a new research agenda into fan studies related to nonfiction media; expand research in producer/creator-consumer/audience interactions; develop a more complete portrait of nonfiction audience studies, including through social media; and contribute specific case studies that will serve as models and springboards for future research.
This dissertation is dedicated to everyone who has supported me over the past 28 years, and to my cat, Jenkins.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION: SOCIAL MEDIA CHANGES THE DOCUMENTARY CONNECTION

There are many reasons someone might watch or listen to a documentary: they want to be enlightened or educated about a subject, they like the director or producer, the documentary is very popular on social media, they are fans of the subject of the documentary (such as a biography of a celebrity), or they are fans or devotees of the documentary genre as a whole and enjoy engaging a variety of documentaries. No single reason is necessarily better than or preferable to another. Among the many reasons for seeking out documentary programming, though, one is quite similar to why people watch or listen to other programming—because they like the genre, much like someone watches Law and Order: SVU or NCIS because they like crime serials. This dissertation focuses on these particular fans—documentary fans. Who are they? Why do they watch? What types of conversations do they engage in online? And what is their communicative relationship with documentary creators? It provides a first step in defining a foundation of nonfiction fandom scholarship, but it also seeks to expand documentary scholarship by examining the impact of content on consumers. This study argues that although there is little-to-no scholarship on the topic of nonfiction fandoms, these fan groups have existed for as long nonfiction media have, and are similar to media fandoms (of fictional series). Furthermore, nonfiction fandom has seen a rise in visibility because of and by way of the Internet (Booth & Kelly, 2013).

Serial, a podcast spun off from This American Life (TAL), offers a telling example worthy of bringing attention to nonfiction fandoms. Serial brought to light something new in the realm of nonfiction media—an active, avid, and widespread fan base for documentary reporting. Word of mouth also suggested this audience was notable because of its visibility to others. The podcast
was co-created and co-produced by Sarah Koenig and Julie Snyder. *Serial*, which Koenig hosts, quickly became the most popular podcast on iTunes. Its first season featured a 12-episode breakdown of the murder of Hae Min Lee and the conviction of her ex-boyfriend, Adnan Sayed. It broke records for a podcast by *TAL* (Dredge, 2014; Vogt, 2015), debuting at number one on the iTunes U.S. podcast chart (iTunes Charts, 2016). *Serial’s* premiere season podcast reached five million streams or downloads, faster than any other had previously (Dredge, 2014). The program is often referenced in journalism and popular culture, as well as in spoofs by *Saturday Night Live!, The New Yorker*, and *Funny or Die*. The online news magazine *Slate* additionally produced its own weekly podcast about each episode of *Serial*. Some *Serial* listeners became so intrigued with the storyline that they kept the conversation going after the final episode of season one (Dean, 2015). Communities grew on social media sites like reddit and Facebook, which gave avid listeners a place to discuss the case and try to figure out the truth behind Hae Min Lee’s murder.

The phenomenon of *Serial* presents a complex organic event connecting audience consumers to producers through channels facilitated and energized by social media. It also raises interesting questions about modern media content, channels, and culture. This study addresses this phenomenon through case study, survey, and content analysis to argue that nonfiction fans play an active role in dictating what types of conversations are held in connection with and after a documentary is released.

Studies of media programming, including nonfiction reports, typically address listeners and viewers in terms of “audience” (Austin, 2012; De Rosa & Burgess, 2014; Hardie, 2008; Nichols, 2010). This study, however, seeks to investigate and analyze how active participants—who in entertainment media are commonly known as “fans”—have become a viable, discernible
entity for documentary/nonfiction material. In the case of *Serial* season one, the active conversation among fans, coupled with captivating storytelling by Koenig and Snyder, helped the podcast grow in popularity. The second season, which debuted in December 2015, covers Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl’s disappearance and captivity by the Taliban in eastern Afghanistan. It tells Bergdahl’s story and the stories of those involved in the search-and-rescue mission.

Because of socially mediated feedback, producers Koenig and Snyder have both become active in conversing with fans and audiences of the podcast. The pair has traveled the world delivering talks about the podcast, broadcast journalism, and interacting with fans in person and online. These interactions involving nonfiction producers and their audience and fans are what this project is about—documentary audiences, interactions between documentary producers and consumers, and documentary fandoms. The *Serial* fandom provides opportunity for researchers to look at the fandom around nonfiction media. As fans of *Serial* are recommended to other nonfiction podcasts (e.g., *Undisclosed*, which continues the discussion of *Serial*, *Criminal*, and *Sword and Scale*), fandoms are growing around this genre. As most fan studies focus on fictional media series (such as *Supernatural* or *Star Trek*), or artists and bands (such as The Beatles or One Direction), the growing base of nonfiction fandoms opens new questions within the field of fan studies. Questions about how, why, and whether nonfiction fans are important for producers and filmmakers to consider as they produce new documentaries.

Nonfiction fans are also important to understand in terms of the impact of documentary journalism and programming on the public sphere. Documentaries are by nature provocative and persuasive. Although many are entertaining, through intellectual and other stimulation, they are primarily intended to inform audiences so they can make informed decisions about their
societies. It is thus vital to the mission of documentary to delve further into the success, failure, and nature of documentary dialogues.

Breakthrough works on general fan studies were published in 1992 by Henry Jenkins (1992), Camille Bacon-Smith (1992), and Lisa A. Lewis (1992). Jenkins’s *Textual Poachers*, alongside Bacon-Smith’s *Enterprising Women* (1992), and Lewis’s edited collection, *The Adoring Audience* (1992), are seminal in the creation of media fan studies. Each expands the shared space and community vocabulary for media scholars to analyze fandoms. Other scholars who have expanded the field are Matt Hills, Kristina Busse, Paul Booth, Lincoln Geraghty, Francesca Coppa, and Mark Duffett. During the past twenty-five years, this new vein of research has grown and thrived as a discipline. With the creation of the *Journal of Fandom Studies* in 2013, scholars also have a dedicated outlet to publish their work.

Mark Duffett (2013) defines a fan as “a self-identified enthusiast, devotee or follower of a particular media genre, text, person or activity” (p. 293). A person can be a fan of anything or anyone, and participate in multiple fandoms simultaneously. Fans can choose to interact with other fans, with varying degrees of involvement. Some fans will take an original text and add to it with fan art or fan fiction, while others “lurk” and quietly consume the fan-created art or writing. There are websites (e.g., deviantart.com and archiveofourown.org), where fans can post contributions for other fans to admire, critique, and share. Tumblr and reddit are also popular websites for fans to congregate and interact, creating digitally linked communities. Fan communities are not a creation of the Internet, however; they existed long before its advent. Many communities still exist offline in the form of fan clubs, fan magazines, called “fanzines,” and other non-digital formats (although some fanzines have gone the digital route). Popular culture conventions, such as comic-cons, are also places for fans to gather in person and engage
in discussion, meet actors and actresses from different films and television shows, and enjoy being a part of a fan culture. Comic-cons have grown from conventions focusing on comics to conventions covering many different types of popular culture. Some focus on specific fandoms, for example *Supernatural*-specific cons, while others have a wider focus, for example the San Diego ComicCon. The San Diego ComicCon has become one of the largest events of the type, with stars and fans colliding to meet and talk over a shared media interest.

The burgeoning scholarship on the subject makes sense when considering the complexities of fans and fan communities amassing around current television shows and the availability of global online media channels. For example, BBC’s *Sherlock*, which stars Benedict Cumberbatch as Sherlock Holmes and Martin Freeman as John Watson, began airing in 2010. With just 15 episodes spread over four seasons, each season is relatively short, but each 90-minute episode is rich with material for fans to discuss and disassemble. Creators Mark Gatiss and Steven Moffat (also a writer on *Doctor Who*) observe the original writings of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle with slight modifications adapted to contemporary London. These close pairings, as well as Moffat’s popularity among the *Doctor Who* fandom, attract crossover audiences from different realms: fans of Doyle’s work, fans of Steven Moffat, fans of Cumberbatch and/or Freeman, and fans of crime/mystery shows. These various audiences merge in a larger collective, the BBC’s *Sherlock* fandom, which comprises several fan communities. These communities exist in digital and/or physical form, with each community differing from the next in terms of topics discussed, attitudes, and beliefs. We should also ask, however, whether nonfiction programming stimulates similar community connections?

Reddit, an online forum on any and all topics with an infinite number of subforums, called subreddits, has attracted more than 87,000 subscribers just to the subreddit r/Sherlock.
Discussions range from fan theories (e.g. how Sherlock survives falling from a building), to different versions of the theme song for the series, to interviews with the actors in the show. There is also a subreddit specifically for *Sherlock* fan fiction (r/Sherlock_fanfiction) with more than 1,600 subscribers, along with other *Sherlock*-specific subreddits. Each serves a different fan community, and an individual may belong to any or all subreddits. But there are also *Sherlock* fan communities on Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr, as well as offline fan communities. Although *Sherlock* is a fictional show, the complexity of its fandom and the scholarship on it offers a model and framework for analyzing popular nonfiction series like *Serial*. As the following literature review explains in fuller detail, fans of nonfiction media are often overlooked, especially before podcasts such as *Serial* became a success.

In the case of entertainment fare, programmers want to know about and stay connected with fans because of the commercial potential. Audience numbers correlate to ratings and affect ad rates. But what about for nonfiction? This dissertation research focuses on the interaction between documentary filmmakers and their audiences, using three different formats of documentary along with case studies consisting of interviews, surveys, and content analyses. These three methods will help identify how nonfiction fandoms vary across release platform and/or how multiple episodes might impact the interactivity of a fandom. This project grows out of an interest in both nonfiction and documentary media studies, as well as an interest in how people interact with their fandom and media series of choice. Preliminary research shows little attention to nonfiction fandoms, yielding virtually no research on the topic. Documentary and nonfiction fans apparently are overlooked, forgotten, or deemed unimportant to those studying media fandoms. But this project argues it is crucial to pay scholastic attention to and study this group of fans. They are carrying out a dialogue from a nonfiction film or program, about a topic
that the filmmaker deems important enough to produce as a coherent, purposeful film. If fans of
fictional media are important for merchandising and advertisement, fans of nonfictional media
should be considered equally important, because of their desire to learn the truth and not just be
entertained.

The lack of research is not the only reason why this topic should be examined, though. Today’s media producer is far less isolated or distant from the consumer than he or she was in
network television days. Fans and producers are engaging in what Jenkins (2006) calls the
“participatory culture.” Fans are writing, collaborating, and creating their own content for their
fandom, and producers are including these ideas into their series. Whether this is a positive or
negative development remains to be seen.

Nonfiction fans are not necessarily just about audience numbers; nonfiction and
documentary media typically have a purpose—to connect with an audience, persuade, educate,
and motivate or stimulate proactive involvement. In the past, it was harder for creators to
measure or gauge how their messages were received, except through television ratings, theatrical
ticket sales, or viewer mail. But social media opens channels for dialogue between creator and
consumer that provide information on these topics. Fan studies is thus essential to the nonfiction
media producers because of their need to have their messages heard, as well as to inspire action
in their fans and viewers. In addition, some nonfiction creators recognize the audience/ratings
component of a successful film, including economic and commercial successes. So just because
we are talking about nonfiction and documentary doesn’t mean profit motives differ from those
of entertainment fare and its audiences. This, then, raises yet other questions: What is the process
of documentary creator-consumer interaction? What does it mean? Why is it important in terms
of content and economics?
This research project delves into the tacit collaboration between nonfiction media producers and their fans and raises the following exploratory questions: Does this collaboration exist to the same extent it does in fictional media? How might it differ from other media fandoms? Who encompasses the fandom of nonfiction media? Do nonfiction-based fandoms behave differently from fiction-based fandoms? How do social media play into the interactions between the nonfiction filmmaker and the audience and/or fans? As chapter two reveals, these questions are all largely unanswered in the existing literature; therefore, we need to add new lines of research to two bodies of scholarship—nonfiction fan studies and audience interaction with nonfiction and documentary films, television, radio, and online-delivered media. What follows is a literature review of these key areas, refined research questions, methodology designed to probe these questions, and a set of case studies, each related to a different delivery medium and/or fandom. This study aspires to carve out a new research agenda into fan studies related to nonfiction media; expand research in producer/creator-consumer/audience interactions; develop a more complete portrait of nonfiction audience studies, including through social media; and contribute specific case studies that will serve as models and springboards for future research.
The subject and questions spawned by this study engage several areas of the literature. These include literature on documentary studies, literature on documentary studies that focuses specifically on audience response and interaction; fan and fandom studies, including fictional models that could be applicable to nonfiction media consumption; social media studies dealing with media fandoms in general and public affairs, journalism, or nonfiction media in particular; and literature dealing with analysis of producer/creator-to-consumer interplay or interactions—an extension of Stuart Hall’s encoding-decoding frameworks but with additional questions about what social media dialogues tell us about the relationship between creators and consumers.

**Historical-Critical Documentary Literature**


One of the common obstacles to scholarship on documentary is definition. Nonfiction film, before it was termed “documentary,” arrived coincident with the beginning of cinema and
before accidental discovery of special effects using double exposure and story editing techniques. Many early short films recorded real life events. The Lumière brothers’ 1895 one-minute film, *The Arrival of a Train* (at a train station), was so realistic, and film was such a new phenomenon, it was said the audience fled in fear thinking the train was going to charge them through the screen (Bluem, 1969). Films by pioneers such as the Lumière brothers, Robert Flaherty, and Dziga Vertov had a large impact on society because their subjects engaged real life. Flaherty’s 1922 film *Nanook of the North* is credited as the first English-language “documentary,” although the term itself was not coined until John Grierson, another aspiring filmmaker, employed it when writing about Flaherty’s 1926 *Moana* in *The New York Sun* on February 8, 1926 (McLane, 2012). Grierson first used the word as an adjective, not a noun as it is frequently used today, stating, “Of course, *Moana* being a visual account of events in the daily life of a Polynesian youth and his family, has documentary value” (McLane, 2012, p. 4). Gradually, the term evolved into a noun and is used today to describe a film that traditionally focuses on a single subject based in actuality, often concerning matters of public or social interest. Grierson’s definition of documentary as a “creative treatment of actuality” encapsulates all that a documentary was, is, and strives to be. Although it started as Grierson’s personal definition, it grew in popularity and is still accredited as the best essential definition of the nonfiction form (Aufderheide, 2007; Choi, 2009; Eitzen, 2005; McLane, 2012; Ward, 2005).

An important distinction regarding documentary is its connection to the real world at large. Many filmmakers made strides with technology and technique prior to Flaherty’s 1922 *Nanook of the North*. Film initially grew out of experiments with photography. It was discovered that if a person flips still pictures in succession fast enough, the subject in the pictures appeared to move. This led to technological discoveries in the late 1870s by Eadweard Muybridge, who
was fascinated with the movement of horses and who published *Animal Locomotion* (Barnouw, 1983). Muybridge placed a sequence of photos in a “magic lantern.” As it spun, the action of a horse jumping and galloping appeared to be flittering across the display. These experiments grounded photography and early film efforts in scientific pursuits, suggesting a form of *evidence* that could be used to solve problems.

The Lumières’ cinématographe thus had a significant impact on the history of film and especially nonfiction film, or what we call documentary. It is this essential quality of being directly connected to real events and individuals in real settings, as opposed to actors moving through a fictional scenario or in a studio, that accounts for documentary’s social power and ability to move and persuade audiences to change attitudes and even behavior. By the late 1890s, there was at least one cinématographe operator on every continent except Antarctica. This allowed people to experiment and to help add to the creation of film as an industry. The evolution of film, involving editing (credited to Edwin Porter), special effects (credited to Georges Méliès), lengthening of film time, and the creation of different types of shots (credited to D. W. Griffith), were all discovered, experimented with, and developed over the next twenty years (Ellis, 1990), leading to Flaherty’s adventure to the Arctic circle to record and create *Nanook of the North.*
In addition to the large body of historical literature on documentary origins, forms, and functions, there is another line of scholarship fixed on critical approaches in documentary studies. This includes arguments among documentary scholars about the definition and description of a documentary, as well as about the best format to use to convince an audience of one’s thesis. Nichols’s (1991) main argument is that a documentary cannot show truth, that it only represents reality. Nichols asserts that a documentary falls within one of six different modes of representation: expository, poetic, observational, interactive/participatory, reflexive, and performative (Nichols, 1991; Nichols, 2010). Each mode is, essentially—but not entirely, as Nichols claims they are all simultaneously available—a successor to the previous, making a genealogical timeline of documentaries, referred to as a family tree by Bruzzi. A documentary can reside in more than one mode, often taking from several to create a unique way to tell a story or argument. Nichols’s approach is a takeoff on Barnouw’s classifications, except Barnouw strives to survey the field and Nichols seems to prefer only a certain kind of documentary model.

Bruzzi (2006) rebukes Nichols’s (1991) framing, even doubling down on her critique in the second edition, a response to criticism after her first edition. Where she claims Nichols is conservative and exclusive, her own method and approach to documentaries and documentary studies have a broader view. Bruzzi argues the viewer understands the difficulties that arise within the medium and within the creation and storytelling of a film. She asserts that some aspects of documentary studies are more “straightforward” than some theorists would claim. Further clarifying, “a documentary will never be reality nor will it erase or invalidate that reality by being representational” (Bruzzi, 2006, p. 6). Bruzzi believes the viewer does not need reminders that a documentary “is a negotiation between reality on the one hand and image, interpretation and bias on the other” (p. 6).
Other works focus on histories of documentary film in specific countries or documentary film genres, while many articles on the subject are narrower, focusing on specific filmmakers or geographical regions of documentary film. Majumdar (2007) looks at the history of the three remaining Indian silent documentary films. He uses textual analyses to identify themes: the canon created from the surviving films, the ability to only partially read the films, the relationship between local and colonial cinema, and the different photographic styles used within the films. Deprez (2013) lays out the history of the impact of Grierson and the British film movement and the Films Division of India, ended in 1964 after the death of Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first prime minister after the country claimed independence. Stollery (2013) provides a history of Humphrey Jennings, which amounts to an outline of the history of British documentary.

These works are helpful in terms of understanding how academic and media communities perceive documentary offerings but offer little in terms of audience reactions or connections between creators and consumers. Some works, however, do reveal issues and concepts directly applicable to the present study, including how various minority audiences might or could view and interpret documentary material. Waldman and Walker (1999) examine documentaries from a feminist perspective. Part II in particular examines the filmmaker/subject compared to the self/other. Gloria Gibson’s (1999) chapter on the style of Michelle Parkerson highlights her ability to discuss and expose both personal and social identities of black women. Gibson argues for both theme and structure as a necessity to enhance black feminism. Each of Parkerson’s films focuses on a different woman, thematically telling her story with grace and artistry. The films are all different, as the women in each film have different lives, but Gibson shows how they are all similar due to women’s collective experiences of sexist, racist, and homophobic events. It is
Parkerson’s ability for same-but-different storytelling that provides both a sense of community and empowerment that helps shape the black documentary (Gibson, 1999).

Part III of Waldman and Walker considers “documentary returns.” The films in this section focus on women who are far from their ancestral home and want to either return to or learn more about their origins. Silvia Kratzer-Juilfs considers Turkish women exiles who emigrated to Germany to have better lives, despite wanting to return to Turkey. Deborah Lefkowitz self-reflects in her documentary, *Intervals of Silence: Being Jewish in Germany*, about the journey to her German-born husband’s familial hometown. There are many dichotomies throughout the film, such as experiences between Germany and the United States, male and female experiences, and the vast differences between World War II and the 1980s. The films addressed in part III connect with the audience—and thus the present study—through emotion and experience. The audience travels with the filmmaker and/or the subject of the film to the destination, learning along the way many of the same lessons the film’s subjects learn. The films allow the audience to live vicariously through the film’s subjects and remind us to consider the content of a documentary in understanding both the producer’s purpose and the viewer’s take-away.

**Literature on Documentary Audiences**

Does the connection between audience member and filmmaker subside once the film has ended? Does this connection continue through a different channel of communication, a more verbal channel? There are many ways for audiences to develop this connection. The visual rhetoric of the film is one of them.
Schowalter (2004) examines visual rhetoric of a documentary’s argument and how it communicates to and affects an audience. Looking at Ken Burns’s popular documentary series *The West*, Schowalter (2004) argues the images shown throughout the series help relieve the viewer of guilt and accountability of their ancestors. *The West* is an eight-part documentary series that aired on PBS in September 1996 produced by Ken Burns and directed by Stephen Ives. It provides a chronological history of America’s movement west, with each episode focusing on time frames spanning from before 1806 to 1914. It claims to tell the story of the West: the good, the bad, and the ugly. Telling the story of the west through photographs and imagery provides a vehicle to deliver a tumultuous history to viewers in a gentle and soothing way. Schowalter (2004) argues, however, that the visual rhetoric of the film, such as the lack of moving images (using panning and zooming over still photographs to illustrate movement), actually stimulates in the audience a feeling of distrust. Stating, “*The West* highlights not only the (im)possibility of representations of historical ‘truth’ but also the way in which this (un)truth becomes palatable. Burns’ film both satisfies our craving for the real and enables us to doubt its veracity” (Schowalter, 2004, p. 253). This foundational critique underpins how we should investigate any documentary, including those that connect strongly to audiences.

Schowalter (2004) argues this visual rhetoric can distract the viewer from what should be conveyed about the topic and thus presents a way to frame and inform audience reactions, whether repeat fans or one-time viewers. America’s push west was not an easy time absent death and struggle, but focusing only on still images with gentle narration, as *The West* does, romanticizes the past, a view that Schowalter (2004) claims makes those who the film indicts (white, Anglo-Saxon, middle class citizens), the crowd that most willingly views the film. In other words, it speaks *from* a dominant white perspective *to* the dominant white audience, instead
of presenting any critical reflection from the voices of those aggrieved or affected by the settlement history of the American west. Schowalter’s (2004) realization is important to documentary audience studies because it provides insights into how stories are told to attract and serve certain demographics. By using visual rhetoric to the filmmaker’s benefit, the audience of a film can be manipulated into believing, or not believing, arguments put forward by the filmmaker.

LaMarre and Landreville (2009) and Pouliot and Cowen (2007) analyze how audiences react to documentaries. LeMarre and Landreville (2009) examine a historical reenactment fiction film, *Hotel Rwanda*, and a FRONTLINE documentary film, *The Triumph of Evil*, to gauge audience’s understanding of the 1994 Rwandan genocide. They wanted to determine whether the type of film watched by the audience impacts the knowledge attained about a real issue. They found that although the audience usually gleaned more factual information from the documentary film, audiences from both stimulus groups showed interest and narrative engagement with the topic.

It is also important to consider to what extent viewers take what is presented to them in a documentary as truth. It is said that once a person reaches the age of seven, they are more likely to be able to distinguish between fiction and nonfiction films (Pouliot & Cowen, 2007), but this does not mean we look at the material given to us critically and distinguish the difference between Truth (with a capital “T”) and ideas that are presented as facts. Pouliot and Cowen (2007) found that adults are able to distinguish the difference between fictional and nonfictional films, and the participants had a higher level of perceived actuality when viewing documentaries. The authors suggest that when comparing documentaries to fictional films, if the viewer does not

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1 A colloquial phrase used to distinguish a “truth” that is widely held as a societal truth and not just something we believe individually; it is engrained in how we think, act, or feel about a specific topic.
have to suspend disbelief and can believe that what is shown is correct, the viewer will retain the information: “Fiction calls for suspension of disbelief about the reality status of the information; documentaries call for activation of belief in the reality of what is presented” (Pouliot & Cowen, 2007, p. 255). They continue,

When a spectator watches a documentary, a process similar to reality testing is activated such that the spectator compares the data in the film with what he knows or believes is the way reality manifests itself . . . documentaries are likely to involve more logical and rational processing and less emotional investment. 

(Pouliot & Cowen, 2007, p. 256)

Pouliot and Cowen’s (2007) study is used within LeMarre and Landreville’s (2009) analysis, where they consider the differences between documentaries and historical reenactment films. LeMarre and Landreville (2009) found that a documentary has the power, if not more power, to elicit emotions toward an event, compared to its historical reenactment counterpart. The study continues, “In addition, the discrete emotions that were aroused demonstrate that a documentary is certainly capable of eliciting strong, gut-wrenching emotions in the audience, thereby increasing interest and knowledge about important issues” (LeMarre & Landreville, 2009, p. 550). This was also reflected in Pouliot and Cowen’s (2007) study. This capability to raise awareness and interest is important when discussing the impact a misleading or stereotyped documentary can have on the public.

Pouliot and Cowen (2007) and LeMarre and Landreville’s (2009) studies are important in the current era of the documentary film. As streaming platforms seem to have made this genre more popular and more accessible, it is important for the director and producer to ask themselves what their audience and fans are retaining after viewing the film. This understanding can lead to
a more intense and impactful dialogue between filmmaker and audience member, leading to the audience member spreading awareness of the film on social media channels.

**Fan and Fandom Literature**

Some documentaries specifically critique movie cults and fandoms. These include: *Trekkies* (1997) and *Trekkies 2* (2004), which discuss the fandom around *Star Trek*; *Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of My Little Pony* (2012), which features adult and young adult men who enjoy the children’s show *My Little Pony*; *Done the Impossible* (2006), which highlights the fandom’s involvement in getting the movie wrap-up (*Serenity*) produced for Joss Whedon’s short-lived sci-fi series *Firefly*; and *The People vs. George Lucas* (2010) which explores the fans of George Lucas and the *Star Wars* franchise. It is interesting, however, that although there are many documentaries about fans and fandoms, there are few scholarly articles on the subject. Stanfill (2011) critiques documentaries about fandoms (and media as a whole) for often whitewashing and displaying fans as childish and abnormal. In one of a few studies on the documentary audience, Austin (2012) asked a series of questions to those who attended a documentary viewing. He sought out audience members from different places, including a movie theatre, a college classroom, and an online forum. Austin (2012) wanted to answer why audiences watched documentaries, how documentaries and their audiences changed as a result of the delivery technology, and how or whether attitudes of the audience had shifted after the viewing. By focusing on a few documentaries (i.e., *Être et Avoir, Capturing the Friedmans*, and a few others) as case studies, Austin (2012) was able to delve into specific films and discuss deep rather than broad themes. To do this, Austin (2012) uses a combination of surveys, discussions, and content analysis of the British website Mass Observation Archive.
Hills (2007) looks at fans of Michael Jackson in the UK documentary *Wacko about Jacko* (2005). Similar to Stanfill’s (2011) argument, Hills (2007) addresses how the film’s claim of giving voice to the fans and providing a platform for fans to explain their devotion to Michael Jackson, it nonetheless negatively portrays fans throughout the film. Schimpf (2015) looks at the Bronie fandom (*My Little Pony*). Although she looks beyond *Bronies: The Extremely Unexpected Adult Fans of My Little Pony*, Schimpf (2015) looks at how *Bronies* and other documentaries that focus on the Bronies fandom portray these fans. Also from a wider view, Bennett and Booth’s (2016) edited collection provides an analysis of media as a whole and investigates how fandom is portrayed in the media, including documentaries. These studies primarily look at documentaries about fandoms and/or at how fandoms are represented within documentaries, but not at the fans of documentaries themselves, as this study does.

In addition to studies that consider fans’ relationships to documentary content, others probe how fans or viewers identify with the material and/or its creators. This can be useful in terms of locating research models from entertainment that could be applied to the analysis of “dialogues” involving documentary filmmakers and “fans.” There is a growing body of literature on fan identity (Busse, 20019; Kustritz, 2015; Groene & Hettinger, 2015), fan interaction (Duffett, 2013), online fan communities in general (Booth, 2015), and fan communities’ sexism (Busse, 2013), hierarchies (Busse, 2013), and race and whiteness (Gatson & Reid, 2012; Young, 2014). Scholars have studied celebrity fans, fan clubs, and fans in popular culture for decades (Burks & Hopkins, 1970; Byrd, 1978; Moskowitz, 1954, 1990; Riesman & Riesman, 1952). Riesman and Riesman (1952) provide an introduction to thinking about the relationships between the audience, critics, and films. They recognize the importance of studying not just the impact a film can have on the audience, but also the relationship between the film and the audience. Byrd
(1978) compiles a list of 44 terms used within the *Star Trek* fandom, not specifically definitions relating to the series but to the fandom itself, providing definitions and explanations of words such as “crudzine” and “neofan.” Byrd (1978) analyzed letters to the editor and editorials in fanzines and discovered that language used within these letters focuses on three distinct areas of the fandom: conventions, publications, and fans themselves.

Cavicchi (2014) explores the history of fandom primarily through a music lens. He begins by asking questions and raising issues about the history of fans and fandom. He poignantly states that although “there were no fans before 1880,” there were “the fancy,” “devotees,” “lions” and “enthusiasts,” to name a few (p. 54). Cavicchi (2014) reflects on how scholars writing about fandom today have significantly shaped the way we understand the history of fans. He reflects on how he discusses the history of fans with his students, who are often perplexed about how fandoms existed before the Internet. This reflection has resulted in a seemingly disheartening realization for Cavicchi: fanzines, fan conventions, and fan mail are among the foundational past, while online fan communities, specifically fan communities about mediated content, are taking over what we now know and think of as fandoms. But Cavicchi (2014) calls for fandom scholars to look further, and to look outside of mediated content, saying, Although much of what we call “fandom” is clearly mediated, I worry about the extent to which those of us who study fandom are missing behavior in areas not generally in the orbit of the mass media . . . which might point to a longer history trajectory that includes the nineteenth and even the eighteenth century. (p. 53)

Cavicchi (2014) takes this sentiment and discusses how music fandoms developed, using known historical figures, such as the poet Walt Whitman, to discuss the impact music had on individuals and their enthusiasm for the world of music. He hesitantly uses a disease as a
metaphor to help illuminate the development of “fan.” Cavicchi (2014) argues there are two ways to think about disease: one is to claim that a disease does not exist until we agree that it does and the second is that a disease exists in some form before we can think and talk about it—once it is “named.” Due to the way fan scholars study and discuss fandom, sometimes as a label to identify individuals but also as a way to describe an action made by an individual, Cavicchi (2014) uses the disease-identification metaphor to discuss fandom, stating,

> The history of fandom, then, poses challenges to those posed by the history of disease in light of changing processes of diagnosis: it likewise entails identifying, connecting, and interpreting a discrete circumstance over time, which has itself existed as the result of repeated identifying, connecting, and interpreting. (p. 55)

Cavicchi (2014) concludes by beseeching scholars to conduct more research on the history of fandom: “The only way I see the historicizing of fandom proceeding with any legitimacy is through individual research or pre-1900 audience practices in all their diversity as part of a much larger scholarly project of comparison, conversation, and collaboration” (p. 70). His call is not alone. The history of fandom, prior to 1990, is limited. This also suggests we need to begin to develop a history of nonfiction fandom, regardless of how we label “fans,” and to consider as yet unnamed fan conditions.

Fandoms are cultures with the “members” being fans. They have norms and customs that are specific to their fandom (sometimes even only specific to a splinter fandom). Jenkins (1992) posits these cultures borrow from history and other cultures to create their own, negotiating the “‘borderlands’ between mass culture and everyday life” (p. 3). It is not unusual for one culture to borrow from other cultures, but fandoms are unique in that a fandom cannot exist without cultural interaction; nobody lives entirely in a fandom. In fact, one can argue that any Internet
culture requires interpersonal or intercultural interaction, regardless of being part of a fandom, support group, or any other culture found online. Users enter these virtual cultures, while also physically and simultaneously occupying separate cultures.

Fan cultures can also fragment and scatter. They exist in every corner of the world with fans of all backgrounds assembling to discuss one main interest: their fandom. Consequently, fan cultures are often heterogeneous, often sharing similar values and assumptions about common issues. For example, Joss Whedon is a fervent supporter of equality of human and women’s rights and active in the nonprofit organization, Equality Now. Many Joss Whedon fan communities highlight his involvement, share his speeches, and encourage other members of the fandom to support causes Whedon supports, even rallying to host fundraisers and spread awareness of the cause. This is of obvious value in exploring the persuasive force of documentary fandoms.

Fandoms are diverse, and yet they can also be uniform. They are a strange and complicated culture, with each community having different rules and customs. But as new fans find a series and fans find new communities to join, they bring with them new (and potentially competing) backgrounds, theories, and questions. Because of this, fan culture is ever changing, continuously responding to outside factors and new individuals to the culture. A key question for the present study is how this materializes among fans of documentary programming.

Recent analyses seek to legitimize scholastic studies of “fandom,” especially via social media. Jenkins’s seminal work, *Textual Poachers* (1992) paved the way for other scholars looking to media fandoms to help explore and explain various phenomena. The term “aca-fan,” which is embraced by many to describe themselves as an ACAademic and a FAN, is under fire as a potential form of bias when researching and discussing fandoms. However, others, including
Jenkins, see it as a necessity to help all those—the scholar and the reader—understand where the author places themself. In an interview with Suzanne Scott in the 20th anniversary release of *Textual Poachers*, Jenkins responds to discussions about coining the term aca-fan:

> There are at least three things at stake in the use of the aca-fan concept: the acknowledgement of our own personal stakes in the forms of popular culture we study, the accountability of the ethnographer to the communities we study, and the sense of membership or affiliation with the populations at the heart of our research. (Scott, 2013, xiii)

Although Jenkins had not yet used the term in *Textual Poachers* (1992), he writes that as an academic he has access to literature, theories, and other items that help him critique and discuss fandoms and media. But, he also immerses himself as a member of the fandoms about which he writes. He has developed best approaches to the study of fandom, interpretations of what lingo means, and the history of fandoms. Jenkins responds to critics claiming there is a bias because of his immersion:

> My account exists in a constant movement between these two levels of understanding which are not necessarily in conflict but are also not necessarily in perfect alignment. If this account is not overtly autobiographical in that it pulls back from recounting my own experiences in favor of speaking within and about a larger community of fans, it is nevertheless deeply personal. (Jenkins 1992, p. 5)

The distinction of the aca-fan is important for researchers who must understand their roles within a community. Fandoms can be difficult to understand from an outsider view, because of certain lingo, arguments, and criticisms that might be lost. Having an insider view, Jenkins (1992) proposes, allows the researcher to speak about something with more emphasis and from a
perspective that affords the researcher a deeper understanding of the culture. In the case of
documentary fan communities, or avid followers, the singular nature of each film, program, or
digital podcast or webcast further complicates our understanding of these shared communities.
Without the immersion modeled by Jenkins, research conclusions would be highly limited in
scope.

But Jonathan Gray sees the term differently, stating, “Ultimately, it’s unclear how each
half – the aca and the fan – is commenting on the other half” (Gray, 2011, para. 2). Gray (2011)
elaborates, there doesn’t seem to be any more conjoined phrases in academia (industry +
academic). So is the creation of the term, “acafan” prestigious or elitist? Does it actually do
anything? Still dissenting, but for a different reason, Anne Jamison sees an issue with the phrase
due to the order of the words. Many fan scholars are fans first then later become academics,
especially younger academics (personal communication, June 26, 2016). For her, having “aca-
first is the issue, not the empty phrasing that Gray (2011) opposes. Gray (2011) does not see the
need for the phrase, although others do. Jamison and Gray’s (2011) dissenting voices are not
alone, but those who advocate for the word are also prevalent. This kind of academic discussion
both informs and raises questions about how we conceive of fans of documentary programming,
including scholars who are drawn to nonfiction programming. We are all drawn to our interests,
including the selection of scholastic pursuits. The discussion about “aca-fan” and fandom studies
points to the need to expand our understanding of fan groups, including for documentary
material on film, television, and online, to be able to distinguish the “fan” as the consumer or
audience from the creator of the message, and also to be clear about the scholar’s perspective
brought to bear on the material. These “concepts” need to be addressed and will be discussed
later in this study, even if sidestepping the appropriateness of a term like “aca-fan.”
Since *Textual Poachers* (1992), fan studies has become an attractive area sparking a prolific output focused on entertainment or fictional fare. But there is a discernible lack of literature on documentary or nonfiction fandoms (outside of reality television shows\(^2\)). Sports attracts a large fandom, but it is often seen as a subgenre from media fandom (Schimmel, Harrington, & Bielby, 2007). In some instances, there are scholarly works on a particular *genre* of nonfiction (e.g., true crime). Despite the richness of this literature in both areas of this project, fan studies and documentary studies, there is very little crossover. Searching EBSCOHost using the keywords “documentary fandom” produced 114 results, most of which focus on documentaries about fans, how fans of an artist responded to a biographical documentary, or on fandoms in general (not relating to documentaries). Searching with the keywords “documentary fandom” (with quotation marks) on Google Scholar yielded six results, none of which was focused on this project’s topic. After discussing this project with leading fan scholars Henry Jenkins and Paul Booth, and scouring various literature databases, it has become apparent there is a definite gap in the literature on documentary audience and fandom.

What makes this realization more potent, though, is the nature of documentary expressions in general—they are typically designed to reach, persuade, motivate, or inspire consumers to change minds or even act on behalf of pressing social issues. While the longstanding connection tying audience ratings to advertising, ticket-sale, and other streams of revenues to entertainment fare is an obvious economic or financial issue, the ties that bind documentary creators to potential audience actors is at least as important and worthy of academic study. This project thus strives to create a space for a new area of foundational literature to fill this gap and provide a first look at how documentary fandoms are created and sustained even after a documentary becomes “old news.”

The paucity of literature on nonfiction fandom introduces a conundrum involving the term “fan” in documentary contexts. As explained in Chapter 1, Duffett (2013) defines a fan as “a self-identified enthusiast, devotee or follower of a particular media genre, text, person or activity” (p. 293), which aptly fits devoted audience members of documentary and nonfiction media. However, the terminology raises questions of sensitivity regarding documentary treatments. Similar to how a person who believes in feminist ideals might reject the term “feminist,” a documentary enthusiast might feel uncomfortable with the label “fan,” especially if the report is about a somber or difficult topic (e.g. rape among high school girls). When describing someone as a fan of a documentary, are we saying that person is a fan of the topic? Of the story told within the documentary? Of the genre in general? Someone can appreciate or be enthusiastic toward a topic being discussed in a thoughtful manner—thus meeting Duffett’s definition—and even participate in several “fannish” activities and still reject the label “fan.” At this stage of research development the term “documentary fan” understandably becomes muddy. It can be read as if a person is a fan of the way an issue is discussed, as in presentational style or argument structure (e.g., they are a fan of how the issue of rape is discussed). But it could also be read that the person is a fan or supporter of the issue (e.g., control of human-induced climate change). As the field of documentary fandom studies develops, the terminology requires a set of parallel questions: Is there a term that encapsulates the idea of “fan” that works better for documentary and nonfiction fandoms? Adherent? Advocate? Buff? Enthusiast? Devotee? Disciple? Follower? Patron? This is an area that needs further research and analysis; however, given the absence of literature on nonfiction fandom contrasted with the burgeoning field of fan/fandom studies, it is reasonable to position this exploratory research within the realm of
fan/fandom literature and defer deeper explication of the unit of analysis until its contours emerge more distinctly. Furthermore, in light of the focus of this study on dialogues involving documentary producers and consumers and their comparison to similar dialogues and channels involving entertainment producers and consumers, it is appropriate to associate documentary/nonfiction fandom with media fandom. This study will henceforth refer to documentary consumers as “fans.”

Social Media Communities

This dissertation is using social media as a means to access documentary fans. Although primarily looking at Twitter due to logistical ease, all of the major platforms provide places for fans to communicate with each other and with the directors(s) of films. These platforms are essential for documentary filmmakers to consider when advertising and interacting online. Although this study concentrates primarily on the Twitter platform, the following discussion will be useful when determining and carrying out future studies on the topic of documentary fandom.

Social media sites have provided some of the larger platforms for fans and communities to congregate. Sites such as Facebook and reddit allow users to create an infinite number of communities, such as Groups on Facebook or subreddits on reddit, and users are allowed to join any number of communities. On Twitter and Tumblr, users tag each post with a hashtag (#) so others can find their posts. It was not the emergence of social media channels that started online fan communities, though. They have been accessible online since the 1980s. After the creation of email in 1971 by Ray Tomlinson of Bolt, Beranek, and Newman, the contractors that developed the ARPANET (which evolved into the Internet), various online communities followed. Listservers, or Listservs, emerged as early as 1975, allowing one person to email many recipients
quickly. Small, technical communities formed throughout the 1970s. It was not until 1985 that the first non-technical online community appeared—the Whole Earth ‘Lectronic Link (WELL) (Preece, Maloney-Krichmar, & Abras, 2003). Rheingold (2000) participated in the WELL from its early days and recalls, “Norms were established, challenged, changed, reestablished, rechallenged, in a kind of speeded-up social evolution” (p. xvi). The WELL grew to 8,000 members by 1993 (Rheingold, 2000). After the WELL, many communities and new ways to communicate virtually followed. After the World Wide Web was released in 1991, communities of likeminded users created online gaming, and the technology continues to evolve (Preece et al., 2003).

The first social networking site (SNS) was SixDegrees.com. This site allowed users to create profiles and connect with others. During the demise of SixDegrees.com in 2000, several other SNSs were created, and several of them are still in use. MySpace and LinkedIn were started in 2003; reddit, Bebo, and YouTube in 2005; and, although it was created in 2004, Facebook allowed everyone access to its site in 2006 (boyd & Ellison, 2007). The evolution of SNSs created a host of options for individuals to become members of many different digitally connected communities.

As the literature shows, the focus on social media history covers many other topics besides documentary or nonfiction programs. Although online communities have existed since the 1970s, this study looks specifically at social network sites (SNS), which boyd and Ellison (2007) define as,

web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom
they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and
those made by others within the system. (p. 211)

Although some distinguish social media from social network sites, the terms are often used interchangeably. This study will use “social media” to refer to these platforms. In 2015 76% of American Internet users involved themselves with social media, which results in about 65% of all American adults (Perrin, 2015). This is particularly important, and suitable, to studies of documentary audiences and fan communities, as nonfiction reports typically address adults.

Facebook

Famously founded in 2004 by Mark Zuckerberg in his dorm room at Harvard University, Facebook is the most used social media site in America, with 71% of online adults using it, compared to 28% who use LinkedIn and Pinterest, tied for second place in 2014 (Duggan, Ellison, Lampe, Lenhart, & Madden, 2015). Facebook provided a place for university students to gather and connect through digital media with other students. Starting off with just a few universities, it soon expanded, allowing others with .edu email addresses to set up accounts and create networks within their universities. In 2006, Facebook opened its site to the general public, allowing any person with an email address to open an account. This created an opportunity for high school students (and younger), as well as those who did not attend college, to connect with each other. Users can create free accounts, allowing them to reveal a profile with as much or as little information as they wish to share. Users are then encouraged to “find friends,” or connect people they know—such as school pals, relatives, coworkers, or even strangers, known as “friending.” These connections are mutually exclusive, meaning both sides have to want to be friends to connect. Although the user can set different privacy settings, being a friend with
someone generally means you can see a user’s photos, posts, and other items in the profile. The connection also allows someone to post on another friend’s wall or “tag” them in a picture.

Since its creation, Facebook has continued to add content and channel options, such as Facebook Messenger, which allows users to message others in real time, and “Like” buttons, which allow users to click a “like” button on a photo or post from another user (this feature was upgraded in March 2016 to express other emotions, such as “wow,” “haha,” “love,” “sad,” and “angry”). It has also created platforms for developers to host interactive games on the site and create corresponding mobile phone applications, such as Candy Crush. Users are invited to “like” pages for businesses or musicians and are invited to participate in groups such as online garage sales. Facebook has created a place for likeminded individuals to congregate and discuss politics, get news, watch videos, share complaints, vent emotions, and have conversations.

Considering the public-service nature of many documentaries, Facebook provides a dynamic and interesting medium for discussing and assessing the impact of a nonfiction report. A study by Pew Research Center in 2014 found that almost half of American adults (48%) got their news from Facebook in a week, with other sites being Yahoo News (24%), Google News (22%), YouTube (14%), Twitter (9%), Google Plus (4%), and LinkedIn (3%). For reference, in the same survey 49% of respondents stated they got their news from local TV (Mitchell, Gottfried, Kiley, & Matsa, 2014).

There is a divide, however, among different demographic groups in how a user participates on Facebook. The same Pew Research Center study (Mitchell, Gottfried, Kiley, & Matsa, 2014) suggests that a user’s political view might have an impact on the amount of political news gathered on different social media sites. This study found that the more politically conservative the user, the more likeminded friends the user has, creating a political news
“bubble,” with 47% consistently conservative participants having likeminded friends, versus 32% consistently liberal (with varying numbers in between). These studies suggest why and how Facebook can be a place to argue about mediated subjects. It is also widely used as a platform for advertisers and as a place to connect media producers to their viewers or customers, creators to fans, and news agencies to subscribers. This marks a significant social change compared to viewer mail through U.S. post or other traditional feedback channels. Again, for matters of public, global, human, and cultural interest, which includes most documentaries, Facebook offers an intriguing site of study in 21st-century communications.

**Twitter**

Twitter is the primary social media platform discussed in this study. Twitter was founded by Biz Stone and Jack Dorsey in 2006 as a platform where, in a maximum of 140 characters, users post thoughts, comments, links to articles, and pictures to their followers. These posts are called “tweets.” Jack Dorsey sent the first tweet on March 21, 2006, a picture drawn on a piece of notebook paper of a mock-up of Twitter. Unlike Facebook, Twitter followers are neither mutually inclusive nor exclusive. A user can follow someone on Twitter without the other account following back. This creates a Twitter economy and social hierarchy of the number of followers a user has compared to the number of accounts the user follows (Anger & Kittl, 2011). The more followers a user has, the more interested people are in that particular Twitter account. User A can share a tweet from User B, called a “retweet,” which allows the followers of User A to see and interact with the tweet from User B. The number of retweets or “likes” indicates popularity and interest in that tweet, but not necessarily in that user.
The hashtag (#) was born on Twitter in August 2007. The system congregates all public tweets using the same hashtag into one timeline (e.g., #TheAvengers or #NCA2016 will collect all tweets related to the movie The Avengers or the National Communication Association 2016 convention, respectively, regardless of whether the user follows that account). This creates opportunities for conferences, public gatherings, or social movements to use an official hashtag to help attendees and participants connect with others or for television series programmers to facilitate a forum for fans to congregate and discuss characters, actors, story arcs, and episodes. The hashtag has become a common reference in society, with Facebook using the hashtag for congregating posts and people using it to further explain an emotion of a tweet or Facebook post (e.g., #Blessed, #SoAngry, #Hungry), or in everyday life (as mocked and exaggerated in a video by Jimmy Fallon and Justin Timberlake on The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon, in which they are having an in-person and offline conversation while using hashtags every few words by using their pointer and middle finger on both hands to make a hashtag\(^3\)). According to a Pew Research Center study, 20% of the American adult population is on Twitter (23% of adult Internet users), with younger adults in the majority. The same study states 32% of Internet users ages 18-29 are on Twitter (Duggan, 2015).

With approximately 320 million users globally, Twitter is useful for spreading ideas, with Twitter’s mission being, “To give everyone the power to create and share ideas and information instantly, without barriers” (‘Twitter Company’, 2016). Consequently, Twitter has been influential in many social protests in the United States and globally. It is heavily credited for helping maintain group communication in 2009 in Tehran, Iran, during an uprising after the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. Tehran authorities had shut down universities, blocked cellphone transmissions and access to many social networking sites, and later blocked text-

\(^3\) For the full video featuring Fallon and Timberlake, see here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=57dzaMaouXA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=57dzaMaouXA)
messaging services (Worth & Fathi, 2009). Social networking sites may have been blocked, but that did not stop people from finding ways around the blockade. Many posted on Twitter new IP addresses to access the Internet, and many social networking sites helped those in Iran access sites through different channels. During the second week of the protest, videos surfaced on Facebook and Twitter and made news in America. The influence of social media played such an important role in the Iranian protests and had such a strong impact, the U.S. State Department asked Twitter to postpone a scheduled maintenance on its site (Levinson, 2009; Gladwell, 2010) to facilitate Iranian protesters remaining connected to the outside world. Commenting on this action, Mark Pfeifle, a former national security advisor, stated, “Without Twitter, the people of Iran would not have felt empowered and confident to stand up for freedom and democracy” (Gladwell, 2010, para. 7). Parr (2009) states social media helped Iranians communicate with each other and the outside world, and it helped people better understand and identify with Iranians. Social media carried thousands of firsthand accounts from people on the streets at these protests. It created “a direct line of accessible information to us” (Parr, 2009), but social media has also changed the way people protest and get involved with causes close to their hearts, or sometimes, politics.

Twitter and social media in general were popular platforms for the 2016 U.S. presidential election. Pundits had dubbed the 2008 campaign the “Facebook Election,” due to the majority of Internet-using voters getting their information from Facebook (Smith, 2009). The 2016 election cycle has been dubbed the “Social Media Election,” due to the inclusion of other social media platforms, primarily Twitter, for information (Bellstrom, 2015; McCabe, 2015). Hillary Clinton’s campaign spent about $30 million during “the homestretch” on digital ads (Lapowsky, 2016) and it was estimated that all candidates combined would spend more than one half billion dollars for
digital media targeting voters through various social media platforms, including Twitter (Lapowsky, 2015).

Twitter is an easy platform for media producers to stay connected with their audiences. Filmmaker Michael Moore is very active with his audience on Twitter. He often retweets and encourages his Twitter followers to contact their House or Senate representatives to try and instigate change. Moore also publicizes his films and media appearances via Twitter. When news broke about the Flint, Michigan water crisis, Moore, a Flint native, was very vocal about the issues and systemic problems that led to the crisis. Moore continues to engage his followers about issues involving systemic problems, including the Black Lives Matter movement. With the release of his new film Where to Invade Next, in 2016 Moore continues to be a loud voice of his causes. The use of Twitter is just one way filmmakers can use the platform to discuss and engage an audience of nonfiction media, which is why it is the dominant focus of this study.

Tumblr

Tumblr is a website known as a place for “gifs” (graphic interface formats, used for images that are animated, often from popular media), jokes, and brief posts. Founded by David Karp in 2007, Tumblr is also known for microblogging. According to its website, “Tumblr is so easy to use that it’s hard to explain” (“Tumblr”, 2016). There are more than 300 million different blogs, and, as of April, 2016, 555 million active users on Tumblr (Statista, 2016). In November 2015, Statista (2015) reported Tumblr had 230 million active users—more than double active users in less than a year.

Users create an account, which allows them to create one or more blogs and follow others. These posts congregate on a user’s “dashboard.” Users often create blogs with different
subjects for each series of posts, such as one for their involvement in the *Doctor Who* fandom and one for their love of food. If a person likes something, they can reblog it and add a comment, or not, to a specific blog. Users “curate” their blogs by adding and creating original content or by reblogging what other users create (or what others reblog). Users can also indicate they enjoy something by clicking a heart-shaped icon on the post. Although a user can have multiple blogs, all of the blogs the user follows appear in his or her dashboard, *not* separated out by blog. This allows users to see and share all posts from all blogs. For example, if a user follows a *Doctor Who* blog because of their *Doctor Who* fandom-related blog, but the post relates to a different blog the user curates about food, then that *Doctor Who* post can be shared on the blog about food. This crossover contributes to the blending and expansion of audiences.

Those unfamiliar with the social media jargon should understand that these channels provide a kind of easy multiplication of audience networks. For users, their inputs involve larger numbers in their cohort; for media programmers, this amasses a larger audience network to be targeted for publicity about a series or revenue-generating advertisements. The key concept of note is the blending of massive global networks. For many fans and fandoms, Tumblr is a prime location to discuss and connect with other fans. There are countless blogs on any fandom, from *The Addams Family* to *Zoolander*. Tumblr allows fans to congregate and share favorite quotes, scenes, and facts about a series. Individuals can be fans of multiple subjects, which allows for crossover fandoms, such as one each for fans of and *Supernatural, Doctor Who*, and *Sherlock*. This specific crossover fandom, often referred to as *SuperWhoLock*, is popular on Tumblr and other social media platforms, having subreddits and Facebook groups for the same group of fans.

However, for fans, especially for younger fans, Tumblr is the place to be. There are Tumblr blogs that look at Tumblr posts and analyze discussions. One of them, Fandometrics,
analyzes conversations held on Tumblr and any other actions (e.g., searches) on a weekly basis and ranks fandom popularity based on the number of posts. They sort each fandom into categories (television, movies, music, celebrities, video games, and other “web stuff”) and rank the top 20, including whether a topic fell or rose from the week prior. It captures as much of a discussion as possible related to a fandom, for instance in relation to the CW’s *Supernatural*, Tumblr uses “supernatural” and “spn” as headings. They update their rankings each Monday at 6pm Eastern time. This proves to be a valuable tool for media researchers (Karkanias, 2014).

During season two of *Serial*, the production team used Tumblr heavily to expand upon each episode. By posting pictures and maps, the audience of the podcast could better understand a region of the world they might not be familiar with. These additional resources help the audience fully grasp Sgt. Bergdahl’s story. By using Tumblr, fans of the show were also able to reblog posts to their own blogs, thus spreading information and facilitating discussions about the show across Tumblr. These discussions are sometimes cataloged on the original post (depending on how it was shared), allowing the producers of *Serial* to see what fans are saying, including those who do not follow *Serial*’s blog (see Figure 1: Tumblr Reblog Visualization).
Figure 1: Tumblr Reblog Visualization

Figure 1: Tumblr Reblog Visualization depicts how Tumblr Labs, using a “collection of experiments,” is trying to improve users’ experiences. Users have the option to turn on or off any of these “experiments.” This experiment in particular allows a user to view the reblog network of any post on their dashboard, not just their own posts. A yellow dot indicates the original post, with larger dots primarily indicating influence (i.e., the bigger the dot, the more influence), but this is not exact.

This specific visualization is one of FRONTLINE’s posts from September 2016 about voter ID laws within the United States. Below is a picture of the post (which was a video) and a picture of sample reblogs (any activity on a post—favorite, reblog, or comment—is called a
“note”) (Figure 2: FRONTLINE’s Original Post and Figure 3: Notes list for FRONTLINE’s Post in Figure 2). The little collection of four circles in the bottom right of the post is the icon to click to see the visualization. Upon clicking the four circles, the user can click on individual spokes and see the username and how “deep” their connection is from the original posting. This visualization is clearly helpful for any director or social media manager to see who their influencers are (if it is not them) and who is interested in their posts. It can help them improve their online presence to ensure dialogue between fan and director, and between fans.
REQUIRING VOTERS TO BRING SOME FORM OF IDENTIFICATION TO THE POLLS

Watch our 1-minute explainer on voter ID laws and how they might impact #Election2016.

Source: pbs.org

219 notes

Figure 2: *FRONTLINE*’s Original Post
Figure 3: Notes list for FRONTLINE’s Post in Figure 2
reddit is an open source, user-generated content forum where any person can participate in conversations about any topic. Affectionately referred to as “the front page of the Internet” by popular sources such as Mashable, The Nerdist, and even in reddit’s own advertising, reddit is an online community that features an infinite number of communities, called subreddits (referred to as “/r/” or “r/” with the name of the subreddit following). Although not analyzed in this project, it was used to distribute the survey. As of March 2017, there are more than 140,000 active subreddits on reddit (D. Chow, personal communication, March 21, 2017), focusing on topics that cover popular culture, world news, jokes, and thoughts individuals have while in the shower. As of March 2017, reddit is home to more than 280 million unique users (some of these are also throw-away accounts) from 235 different countries[^4] with 8 billion monthly page views (“About reddit,” 2017; D. Chow, personal communication, March 15, 2017).

A free account allows users to comment and create posts, although any individual can view the post (with or without creating an account). After establishing enough “karma” (credit attributed to a user’s account after commenting on and creating content), any member of reddit can create a subreddit on any topic. (On June 10, 2015, reddit chose to strengthen their anti-harassment guidelines and banned a few subreddits devoted to ridiculing others and encouraging hate speech toward individuals of certain demographics.) Creators can choose the privacy designation of the subreddit (public, restricted, private) and limit the type of submissions users can post, as well as many other options. Although reddit is based within the United States, it does not require that a post be written in English (“About reddit,” 2016).

[^4]: reddit counts some locations (including territories such as Puerto Rico) as their own country. This explains the discrepancy in number of countries in the world versus number of countries represented on reddit. There are 193 United Nations recognized countries and North Korea, making 194 countries (“Overview UN,” 2017).
In some subreddits, users are able to assign themselves “flair” to denote something specific to that subreddit. Flair can indicate whether the user thinks someone has committed a murder in a crime series (e.g., “Undecided” or “Guilty” for the podcast, *Serial*) or the number of miles separating a couple involved in a long-distance relationship. This is an indication of the depth or specificity of.reddit users in relation to particular subjects. A flair appears any time a user posts in a specific subreddit and can be changed, or removed, by the user at any time. The user can decide what they want their flair to be, although some subreddit rules are stricter than others on what a flair can say. A flair is neither mandatory nor universally used, meaning the flair used in /r/serialpodcast is (most likely) not the same as /r/LongDistance. The flair does not carry over from subreddit to subreddit; it stays in place on the original subreddit and the user can have multiple flairs across reddit. The flair can help establish credibility when posting, which could be important in terms of veracity related to documentary comments. It can also create a community among fans within subreddits. Users can detect a connection with other users based on their flair. Private messages are allowed on reddit, enabling users to connect on a subreddit and take their conversations elsewhere. Flair can be one way for users to identify and converse with like-minded individuals, or individuals with opposing viewpoints, opening the door for off-subreddit conversations.

Users are also able to have as many usernames as they wish. Some users choose to have a different username for each topic they choose or for a type of response they want, or they may create “throw away” usernames for a specific post they do not want linked to them (often used once and then deleted). All posts a user comments on or initiates show on the user’s profile, allowing other individuals to see what they have posted. Although it is uncommon to disclose

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5 Some users like to have different personae per their username. For example, a user with the username SHOUTSJOKES might comment in all caps when posting jokes as comments but might have a second username such as DebbieDowner where they post comments that are depressing or unfortunate.
personal information about the user in posts, the throwaway username provides an extra layer of anonymity. Creating different usernames, either for multiple uses or a singular use, allows the user to maintain a certain identity on their profile.

Each subreddit consists of its own rules and cultures, many of which are unwritten and learned only through interaction and observation (called “lurking”) in different subreddits. These rules (such as anonymity and vague details) and cultures create a welcoming environment for many users. Although many of the customs within the subreddits are learned or acquired, reddit has a set of core values that the creators, designers, and developers hold when making decisions concerning the site as a whole: remember the human (be authentic and mindful of the human being on the other side), give people voices (create a safe space for all ideas and viewpoints), respect anonymity and privacy (people have the right to disclose, or not disclose, as much information as they choose), embrace experimentation (be open to new suggestions), make deliberate decisions (have an end goal in mind when making decisions), be doers (build for the better), and “the spirit of Lambeosaurus embiggens us all,” which is to say that work “is better when you’re having fun” (“Values,” 2016). This last value captures the essence of reddit. Some of the subreddits are more serious than others, while some are infused with sarcasm and humor. Some subreddits are utilized as a place to share funny images or stories, while others are a place to vent, rant, or ask advice.

One of the better known subreddits is r/AMA. AMA stands for “ask me anything” and is a place where users of all walks of life can host conversations at a specific time. These AMA posts range from an average teenager to major celebrities. It may prove to be of particular importance to documentary fan studies. In 2014, Gabriela Cowperthwaite, the director of the documentary Blackfish about Sea World trainer deaths by trained orcas held in captivity, hosted
an AMA to answer any and all questions from her audience. She answered questions pertaining to the production of the film or how someone can get involved. Using reddit and hosting an AMA is a very easy and quick way for filmmakers to interact with their audience. They can answer questions or go deeper about an issue (without a text-limit constraint, as with Twitter). It’s a place where audience members can also interact. Although Twitter is used in this study for data collection, reddit is still pertinent to the discussion about documentary and nonfiction fandom. It is a site of ample discussion for both fans and directors to talk, lurk, and connect with other fans.

**Social Media and Documentary Dialogues**

Since 1922, documentary has developed from a fledgling film genre into a more journalistic venture, a form of persuasion, an artistic expression, and a way to educate viewers about cultures and events. The documentary has changed history and instigated social change. Interactions between documentary filmmakers and their audiences, though, were limited largely to accounts of face-to-face interviews published in journals, magazines, or through occasional letters. The tools of social media have revolutionized this association between creator and consumer, providing a channel to change the way we have conversations that documentarians intend to instigate among their consumers. The increased ability to pose a question about a film and/or subject has created new opportunities for filmmakers to connect with their audiences, fans, and to engage with documentary creators and scholars to analyze their dialogues. To understand this new phenomenon in documentary and fandom studies, this project employs representative cases for investigation and analysis.
CHAPTER 3: WHERE TO START? DOCUMENTARY CASE STUDY SELECTION

There is a wide range of documentary offerings worthy of analysis. These include feature-length documentary films released in theaters or at film festivals; documentaries on broadcast (free over-the-air) television, such as on PBS or a commercial network; documentaries presented to cable television subscribers, such as the CNN series on The Sixties; documentaries presented by premium pay cable networks, such as HBO or Showtime; documentaries distributed by online subscription media services, such as Netflix or Amazon Prime; academic documentaries presented at conferences; radio documentaries broadcast over airwaves; podcasts or radio documentaries that are accessible through the internet; online documentaries on YouTube, Vimeo, and other Internet video providers. In addition to this variety of documentary delivery channels, there are differences worthy of study among types of documentary audiences. These might include film buffs; viewers of traditional broadcast documentaries who might respond to the network by letter or, more recently, by posting an online comment; broad, general audiences typical of legacy models of documentary delivery for which the topic appeals to a cross-section of the populace, such as food safety or health-care policy; viewers who frequently communicate through various social media sites, such as Facebook, Twitter, or reddit; narrowly defined audiences affected by a specific topic, such as bullying, discrimination, or assault; or diverse audiences intrigued by intellectual, entertainment, or some other type of media gratification.

Time, resources, and common dissertation-scheduling constraints inhibit the ability to analyze all such documentaries, series, channels, and audiences. Furthermore, the paucity of literature devoted to studying nonfiction fandoms/audiences in terms of dialogues with producers/creators requires imposing reasonable specifications on how to draw samples for
fleshing out foundations of scholarship on documentary dialogues. Therefore choices need to be made.

Although no categories for selection exist yet, this project had to start somewhere. There is a need, and a want, to include a manageable range of audiences, channels, and demographic groups. Future studies might employ different selection criteria. One prominent historical channel of documentary delivery is broadcast television. Commercial broadcast networks and later independent public television stations originally shouldered this duty. Since the early 1980s, public television, in particular PBS, has carried the lion’s share of free original documentary programming offered to broadcast audiences. It is therefore important to include a broadcast component in this study of producer-audience communications.

The Internet provides on-demand access to what was formerly a rigidly scheduled and delivered documentary channel via radio or television. Many audiences have shown interest in consuming nonfiction content via Internet delivery channels. These include online viewings at network websites, YouTube or Vimeo delivery of documentary programming, webcast radio, one-off podcasts, and ongoing podcasts. Because of the podcast delivery channel and the nature of podcast consumption via Internet or digital-based delivery, it seems appropriate to analyze a serialized nonfiction podcast that spans several installments and involves the audience in a direct and somewhat constant feedback to the series producers.

Netflix and other streaming services have grown in popularity and accessibility as one-in-seven Americans are “cutting the cord” and cite having access to Netflix and alternative ways to view television as the overwhelming reason (Horrigan & Duggan, 2015). The platforms are also increasingly producing their own material instead of relying on already created media. These

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6 “Cutting the cord” refers to a household who chooses to eliminate cable packages from their home entertainment options. Most who choose to do this, do so because of the redundancy of streaming services and broadcast cable. Streaming services such as Hulu allows people to watch current television.
platforms are becoming noticed with many films, serialized shows, and documentaries being nominated and winning Golden Globes, Academy Awards, and other international awards. Including a documentary produced and streamed on one of these platforms seems vital to capturing a variety of audiences across age groups.

It also seems important to consider the dialogue between a targeted audience and the documentary producers. While many audience groups are served by documentary treatments that focus primarily on their individualized issues, for the purpose of this study it seems equally important to tap into an audience that is most likely to use digital media to “respond” to or “engage” the issue, the documentary producer, and the community of people involved with or affected by the issue.

Given these exploratory parameters, this study targets three case studies: *The Choice 2016*, an episode from *FRONTLINE* (broadcast television); a journalistic style weekly series; season one of *This American Life*’s popular podcast, *Serial* (online podcast); and a feature length documentary on sexual assault and cyber-bullying among teenagers, *Audrie & Daisy* (feature documentary film available through Netflix). This selection addresses three different delivery channels, series and one-off programs, a range of subjects and styles, and service to a wide range of different audience groups. Other examples could also suffice, but as this study intends to serve as a foundational approach that will generate depth and range in future studies, these documentaries cover sufficiently important delivery methods and groups.

**FRONTLINE: The Choice 2016—A Broadcast Documentary**

PBS’s documentary series *FRONTLINE* has been on air and producing public information in long-form documentary serving the American public since 1983. *FRONTLINE*’s
DOCUMENTARY DIALOGUES

archive includes more than 500 (typically) hour-long films on topics that include the death of a princess, the money financing political campaigns, and issues regarding best medical practices. Some of these wide-ranging topics are reported by independent filmmakers, others are produced by award-winning staff filmmakers and journalists. After more than 30 seasons, FRONTLINE is not showing any signs of slowing down, as evidenced by the creation of Frontline/World in 2002 as an occasional spin-off series. Frontline/World airs four to five times a year typically showcasing three stories per episode. This additional series allows stories to be told across various media platforms, as well as allowing stories to reach the viewer in a more timely fashion compared to the production cycle of a long-form documentary.

Since the early 2000s, FRONTLINE has been streaming full versions of their films online. Today, more than 200 documentaries are available for instant viewing on their website and YouTube channel for free. The documentaries, as well as additional footage and interviews, are also posted on their YouTube channel. Recent documentary topics range from the war on terror to the abuse of prescription drugs or the use of social media and technology by youth. Each documentary provides additional material, much of it on its website, frontline.org: extra interviews, related videos, supplemental articles, data reports, interactive features, and other material. Over the past few years, FRONTLINE has actively tried to interact with their audience on social media, even attracting new audience members on these platforms. The filmmakers, and often other experts on the subject, live tweet episodes as they premiere on PBS, usually on Tuesday evenings. Live tweeting, the act of tweeting comments and questions while watching, attending, or reading a movie, event, or book, allows for interaction between the audience and the filmmaker and/or subject expert. Tweeters use the hashtag, #Frontline and/or a designated
themed hashtag (e.g. #TheChoicePBS) to connect and interact with other audience members and the filmmakers.

FRONTLINE reaches audiences on different platforms. During their traditional broadcast, a new film attracts approximately 2.5 million viewers, two-thirds of whom are aged 55 and older. However, more than 70% of their website audience is aged 18-49 (Owen, 2016). The team also started including documentary shorts on Facebook, some of which are Facebook-first and later turned into full-length films for broadcast. On the Monday after the Paris terrorist attacks on November 13, 2015, FRONTLINE published a short film called School of ISIS. This film, which reached 93 million individuals, was viewed more than 22 million times (Owen, 2016) just on Facebook. After the team started including videos on Facebook, they saw a dramatic rise in their website traffic. “We’re seeing people coming from Facebook to our website; the referring traffic is huge, and it’s only getting bigger,” Pam Johnston, FRONTLINE’s senior director of audience development, told Neiman Lab (Owen, 2016, para. 22). Because of the multiple ways to watch FRONTLINE episodes (including live broadcast, delayed viewing on a DVR, and streaming online for free on different platforms), they are actually seeing an increase in the number of people who view the films. This shift, or development, in the way people watch their films has also grown due to FRONTLINE journalists’ increasing interest in their audience. Johnston said,

Five years ago, no one at FRONTLINE focused on, talked about, or necessarily cared about an audience. It was mission-driven, and the content was created because these stories needed to be told. How and when these stories reached their audience was for other people to worry about – certainly not the makers and the journalists here at FRONTLINE. (Owen, 2016, para. 16)
This shift in how and why filmmakers are starting to think fully about their audience is integral to this dissertation. A documentary’s message is important to broadcast but can be more effective if a dialogue is created around it.

*FRONTLINE* aired an episode on September 27, 2016 called *The Choice 2016*. *FRONTLINE* has been airing *The Choice* series every four years since 1988. The quadrennial documentary focuses on the lives of the two major party candidates prior to the presidential election. The 2016 documentary was produced by Michael Kirk, a veteran filmmaker for *FRONTLINE*. Kirk has produced more than 200 films for national television, including over 35 films for *FRONTLINE*. He has been involved with *FRONTLINE* since its conception in 1983 and has won several awards, including four George Foster Peabody Awards and fourteen Emmys.

*The Choice* dwells not on the candidates’ platforms and political leanings but on their lives. It invites friends and authors to provide insights into Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump’s backstories; their ups, their downs, their hobbies, what motivates their beliefs. It alternates between the two candidates, spending a few minutes on Trump and the next few on Clinton at parallel times in their lives. It demonstrates the stark differences between their lives. There is criticism and praise for this film. Some critics claim the film is biased toward Clinton, others say that it produces a fair look into both candidates. On October 28, 2016, *FRONTLINE* tweeted that this had become their most-watched episode of the decade.

Social media was especially important in the 2016 presidential election. In January 2016, 44% of U.S. adults reported using social media to learn about the election, which exceeds local and national print newspapers (Pew Research Center, 2016). *The Choice 2016* aired on September 27, 2016, after a weekend of heavy conversation about Trump’s attitudes toward women and one day after the first presidential debate between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump.
where the topic on respect for women was raised). Social media played an important part in the 2016 presidential election, as reflected in the comments and discussion for this film.

*FRONTLINE* appeals to a general audience and has established a track record with audience interactions and web/social media. Because of the varying topics, this series provides a unique look into the way a topic can impact the audience. The specific episode chosen, *The Choice 2016*, attracted a larger audience due to the presidential race topic. It was the most watched *FRONTLINE* documentary of the past decade (@frontlinepbs, 2016). It is a representative example of a traditional broadcast documentary and for exploring its relationship with the audience and dialogue involving creator and consumer.

**Serial—A Podcast Documentary**

*Serial* is a podcast co-produced and co-created by Sarah Koenig and Julie Snyder, both of NPR’s *This American Life*. Similar to a radio documentary, which is delivered via over-the-air broadcast, a podcast is an audio report (it can be video, but then is normally referred to as a “vidcast”) available only through online channels. The chief difference is that a radio documentary broadcasts from one location or station to many receivers simultaneously. A podcast is available on demand through a point-to-point delivery system, either Wi-Fi, satellite transmission, or data transmission. As Smith (2001) argues, the length, audience, format, and story told are not the components that make up a documentary (radio or otherwise). Instead, a radio documentary harnesses “moments recorded on tape in which the story unfolds in front of the listener . . . events play out in real time” (Smith, 2001, p. 6). *Serial* does this by inviting the listener along for the ride of the story.
There are two seasons of *Serial*, with a third one in pre-production. Season one tells the story of Adnan Syed and the murder of his ex-girlfriend Hae Min Lee in 1999 in Baltimore, Maryland. Syed was convicted and is serving a prison sentence for the murder, but the podcast pokes holes in the case against him and questions whether he was given a fair trial or his attorney was negligent. Syed was awarded a chance to appeal the decision and to reopen his trial in February 2016.

Season two of *Serial* is about Sergeant Bowe Bergdahl and his disappearance and capture by the Taliban in eastern Afghanistan in 2009. After his rescue in 2014, Bergdahl faced scrutiny from the American public for walking off his base and wasting the precious time and resources of fellow soldiers trying to locate him and his captors. Bergdahl was framed by many as a traitor, including Donald Trump on his campaign trail, and is awaiting a court-martial trial (set to begin August 8, 2017).

Koenig and Snyder attempt to tell the whole story with interviews and information about the area and culture. Season two attracted a different type of audience than season one. Locker (2016) argues that due to the absence of cliffhangers, the absence of important artifacts that add to the story (e.g. the “Nisha call” or the long discussion about a phone booth at Best Buy), and the lack of a murder mystery (which Netflix’s *Making a Murderer* provided concurrently to season two), Sgt. Bergdhal’s story did not attract the same audience as season one. Koenig, in an interview also expressed a reason, stating, “So much of the story of Season 1 was about us. There was a lot of coverage about, ‘What is this? Have you heard it?’ We’re not a new story anymore” (Koblin, 2016, para. 13).

*Serial* came into existence when Sarah Koenig and Julie Snyder approached their boss, Ira Glass of *This American Life*, with the idea of continuing a story week-to-week. *This
American Life features everyday stories but often several topics in a weekly episode, usually fitting a theme. Serial’s ability to continue a story across multiple episodes allows for deeper investigation and storytelling. The name “serial” refers to the serialized nature of how the story unfolds, not to a serial killer, as the first season’s topic suggests.

Koenig does not merely recite facts; she tells a story, emphasizes certain ideas, and opens doors for listeners to enter and experience the story in their own way. The time spent researching Serial stories helps distinguish this radio style of documentary from a time-bound news feature (Smith, 2001). Koenig spends many months researching before starting to record episodes and continues research as new people are willing to talk and new information surfaces (Yurcaba, 2014). Midway through season two, Koenig and her team started releasing episodes biweekly instead of weekly to allow the team more time to complete thorough research between episodes (Koblin, 2016).

Both seasons feature Koenig narrating, explaining, working out issues, and interviewing different people relating to each season’s story. It draws the audience member in as she works out issues from episode to episode, answering—and asking—many questions the audience might also have. Her storytelling is not a claim of proof. Instead, Koenig explores different angles of a story the audience might have heard (in the case of season two) or are only learning about for the first time upon listening (season one). It rewards those who are close listeners by building upon what has been said and on smaller details in earlier episodes. Much like a serialized television series, one cannot miss an episode of the podcast without missing critical details.

Serial is streamed and can be downloaded on several different platforms: iTunes, Serial’s website (serialpodcast.org), Pandora (starting with season two), and other websites where fans
have posted episodes. It is important to note someone cannot accidentally tune into an episode on the radio and pick up the thread of the story; it requires deliberate online listening.

Although radio documentaries are not the most popular form of documentary, with most of them being on public radio (Smith, 2001), *Serial* seemed to break that mold, being discussed in popular culture (with skits on *Saturday Night Live!, College Humor*, and being referenced in shows such as Netflix’s *Bojack Horseman*) and being funded, primarily by donations, for (at least) two additional seasons. Although the audience size shrank for season two (Koblin, 2016), the fan base is still there, with much discussion and contention on r/serialpodcast and in popular culture. The subreddit, r/serialpodcast, started as early as October 2014. As of September 24, 2016, it has 51,821 subscribers who post pictures, questions, comments, and articles relating to all things *Serial*. The most upvoted post of all time (meaning users have found it to be the most useful post in the subreddit) is a link to an interview (outside of the *Serial* production) with Jay Wilds, a key witness against, and casual friend of, Adnan Syed. Posted on December 29, 2014, the Wilds interview has 1,861 points and 3,013 comments. After six months, a post on reddit is archived, which does not allow users to vote or to add comments to the thread.

This study focuses on season one (featuring Adnan Syed) of *Serial*, due to the overwhelming popularity for the season, but also because season one prompted the start of the *Serial* fandom. Although there are different reasons to cover season two, focusing on one season at a time allows for a deeper and more conclusive discussion about the *Serial* fandom. From this point on in the dissertation, when the *Serial* fandom is mentioned, it is only referring to season one and the story of Adnan Syed (unless otherwise noted).

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7 An exact date was not available. Earliest post found was October 16, 2014, less than two weeks after the first episode of *Serial* was released (October 3, 2014).
8 Points come from a formula of how many users upvote a post versus downvote a post. The more upvotes a post gets, the higher it moves on the list of posts and vice versa.
Listeners often treat *Serial* like they would a fictional drama or major television event, discussing it with their friends and colleagues the next day and urging people to refrain from spoilers. It is not uncommon for people to binge-listen to the podcast after learning about the series. Amidst season one, Stephanie Merry (2014) wrote in the *Washington Post* that audiences are treating and interacting with *Serial* in ways that it has “blossomed into a minor watercooler event, spawning the kind of multimedia chatter and analysis that often surrounds a prestigious HBO drama” (para. 4). This reaction is an interesting phenomenon, as very few other nonfiction events draw this type of reaction (Super Bowl and award shows are among the few), let alone a podcast. For fans, asking the characters in their favorite show about an action is normally impossible. But with *Serial*, all of the characters are real, allowing for fans to speculate, to ask questions, and to participate voyeuristically and vicariously. But, are fans forgetting the real-life impact of this show? Asking the blunt question—is *Serial* journalism or entertainment?—Merry (2014) turns to Rabia Chaudry, an attorney and childhood friend of Adnan Syed, and the person who originally approached Sarah Koenig about an investigative story on the case. Chaudry is convinced of Syed’s innocence and released a book, *Adnan’s Story: The Search for Truth and Justice After* *Serial*, which focuses on the fuller story of Adnan and the murder of Hae Min Lee. After being emotionally tied to this case for so long, Chaudry found herself involved in discussion boards, the subreddit, and her own blog after each episode, further explaining and answering questions. However, this activity did not last long; seeing it as unhealthy and emotionally exhausting, she stopped after just a few episodes. She did not stop blogging about the show or the case, but stopped interacting heavily with social media around the case.

However, after a particularly unremarkable, less-than-exciting episode, Chaudry lashed out on those who were calling the episode boring and not entertaining. She was disappointed that
people glossed over the exciting news that The Innocence Project had taken Syed’s case. In reference to this post, Chaudry told Merry, “I just want people to be respectful of the fact that it's not like the latest episode of ’True Detective.’ And dismissing it as, 'I was kind of bored?' You have to elevate the conversation a bit more” (Merry, 2014, para. 30). In a different interview about her book, but in relation to this same topic of entertainment versus journalism, Chaudry says, “But the thing is, without the entertainment value, we wouldn’t have the attention we needed on the case. So it was a necessary kind of challenge. We had to have the attention, and we had to have the entertainment value” (Fitzpatrick, 2016, para. 15). This kind of interactive dynamic points to the value of analyzing documentary dialogues and coming to terms with how audiences perceive the producer’s intent and message.

This discussion of fannish activities about a nonfiction series lies at the crux of this dissertation. The fans of Serial are keeping the investigation and discussion going. They are digging up and crowdsourcing information. Durrani, Gotkin, and Laughlin (2015) state part of the popularity of and addiction to Serial is because of how well it fits into the true crime genre, asking the important question, “did he do it?” This simple question drives Koenig and her fans to try to find the truth by talking to each other, by reading and rereading materials, and by posting questions online.

Due to the large fandom and the amount of conversation that revolves around Serial, this documentary was chosen for the survey portion of this dissertation. The survey was disseminated to fans via reddit, Twitter, Facebook, and through Listservs. The survey method is addressed in chapter four and the results of the survey are discussed in chapter seven.
Released in 2016, *Audrie & Daisy* is a 98-minute feature documentary that premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in 2016 and was later picked up by Netflix. The film focuses on two teenage high school girls, Audrie Pott and Daisy Coleman, from different parts of the United States. Each was sexually assaulted by classmates after a night of drinking. After the assault, pictures and/or videos taken by their attackers surfaced online and were spread virally among their peers and the country. Both girls were called liars and fakers, with Daisy having physical threats and assaults against her and her family (including having their house set on fire). The film focuses on the girls’ stories and how the reaction on social media impacted their lives. Audrie committed suicide ten days after her assault and after relentless bullying following her assault in 2012. Her parents share her story.

As part of a settlement for the wrongful death of Audrie Pott, the two boys who were charged agreed to sit down with directors Bonnie Cohen and Jon Shenk for a 45 minute on-tape interview for the film. Due to law that protects the identity of minors in sexual assault cases, Cohen and Shenk converted the boys’ interviews through animation and changed their appearances. This allowed for facial expressions to still be seen without the identity of the boys being revealed. To appeal to a younger demographic, the film used other on-screen animations—including tweets showing up in white letters in the foreground, typing on Facebook chat screens, and drawings of a night’s event. In one of the more impactful moments, the film ends with Daisy and other survivors addressing the press about their sexual assaults. This flashes to a black screen where the words “Audrie & Daisy” appear, along with other victims’ names preceded by an ampersand (e.g., “& Delaney”) layering on top of each other. The last one reads “&,” indicating
that if this is not stopped, it could happen again. A few facts about sexual assault appear on the last screen before the credits. It ends in a combination of somber, uplifting, and inspiring tones.

_Audrie & Daisy_ is directed by Bonni Cohen and Jon Shenk, known for their work on documentaries such as _The Island President_ (2011) and _The Rape of Europa_ (2006). In their director’s statement for _Audrie & Daisy_, the pair explain that as social media is becoming more prevalent in the public sphere for shaming classmates, friends, and acquaintances, the stories of these two girls needed to be told. _Audrie & Daisy_ premiered at the Sundance Film Festival on January 25, 2016, and was acquired by Netflix, where it was released on the streaming platform on September 23, 2016. The film has received a combination of raves and criticisms, the latter mainly due to the lack of depth about the stories of Audrie and Daisy. In a review of the film, Erbland (2016) wishes Cohen and Shenk would have probed more deeply into how the sheriff’s department handled Daisy’s case. Erbland also criticizes the directors for primarily focusing on Daisy’s story, and not clearly linking both eponymous stories, even though they are so similar. The tragedy, Erbland notes, is this film could have a true impact on the audience, through ample discussion of social media, of the stories, and of deeper investigation and connection of the two stories. But Erbland (2016) ends her critique saying, “There’s more than enough story to tell here, maybe too much for just one film, no matter how well-meaning it may be” (para. 10).

As a result of a partnership with Netflix, the film is free for community screenings across the country. This has allowed organizations and universities to host screenings of a film that would normally require a licensing fee. Cohen and Shenk are hopeful the film will start a new discussion about sexual assaults among teenagers, with Cohen saying they hope the film “can help really drive the conversations that need to start happening” (Westcott, 2016, para. 15).
Audrie & Daisy emerged about a year after The Hunting Ground was released, a documentary about sexual assaults on college campuses. That film follows two women, Annie Clark and Andrea Pino, who were both sexually assaulted while students at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. Although sexually assaulted at different points in their undergraduate careers and a few years apart, the two women started a movement on their campus. After learning that it seemed the university was failing to report sexual assaults, the pair took their case to the Department of Education, initiating a lawsuit against the university. The duo then started reaching out to other universities and finding students who had similar experiences. As the community grew, so did their momentum. Victims organized protests, gave speeches, and held meetings with U.S. Senators to try and create change and to hold universities accountable. The Hunting Ground started conversations and civic dialogue and action, which is a common goal for nonfiction creators. Although the film was released in 2015, Clark and Pino have been campaigning and raising awareness since 2013. President Barack Obama and Vice President Joe Biden started a national initiative in the fall of 2014 called “It’s On Us” to encourage universities to start changing the culture and conversation about sexual assaults on campuses. Because of this movement, more universities are hosting bystander intervention trainings and holding discussions about sexual assault (including the researcher’s institution). Several universities, corporations, including the NCAA and several of the athletic conferences, and nonprofit organizations have signed onto this campaign to turn the conversation from it’s on you to protect yourself to it’s on us to stop sexual assault and violence. This change in language might sound subtle, but its aim is actually substantial: to change rape culture from “you have to protect yourself” to “don’t commit sexual assault.”
Both films address sexual assault against women, at high school and college when most women are likely to be victims of sexual assault (Breiding, 2014). Although both films are current, *Audrie & Daisy* is more recent and the social media trail fresher. Because of this and because the subject also involves a different kind of audience demographic compared to a *FRONTLINE* broadcast documentary or the adult-themed material on *Serial*, *Audrie & Daisy* was chosen to include in this dissertation. It also delivers an important message: sexual assault can happen to anyone, by anyone, at any time—even in high school. As seen in Daisy Coleman’s case, the victim is often blamed and/or disbelieved. With the addition of social media, this harassment can target the victim directly, causing an increase in stress, depression, humiliation, and/or anxiety. Given this impact, Cohen and Shenk want their audience to talk about how to react in situations where a sexual assault has happened, how to intervene before a sexual assault happens, and the effect of their words on those around them—even in instances outside of sexual assault. “Kids feel a lot of pressure not to rat out their friends. We have to get in there and start these conversations about where behavior needs to change,” (Lanz, 2016, para. 25) said Cohen in an interview. The film does focus on high school sexual assaults, but the message is important for all to hear.

This topic lends itself to having active discussions on social media. Some are bouts for frustration, such as annoyance and anger with the county sheriff in Daisy Coleman’s case, and others are messages of understanding and support. These are indicative of the kind of dialogues we typically expect a documentary to initiate.
Channels of Discourse

Documentarians want to share information and often want to provoke or call attention to the need for change. This mission lends itself to audiences having active conversations online and in person. Primarily using Twitter, but taking into consideration Facebook, Tumblr, and reddit, this project assesses whether these conversations differ across documentary formats (television journalism, podcast, or feature film).

Because so little scholarship exists on nonfiction fandoms, it seems initially appropriate to try to examine larger swaths rather than narrowly defined subgroups. Although each of the chosen documentaries is on a different topic (politics, murder, and sexual assault), the subject of each film is intertwined with the study of dialogue and connections. It is more important to try to understand different kinds of audiences balanced against what can reasonably be accomplished in a dissertation framework. The project wants to use these case studies to provide examples of the conversations held. To that end, one social media platform (Twitter) for each documentary is analyzed to shed light on these topics. Twitter was chosen because each of the documentaries has a healthy conversation pattern on the platform and because the medium facilitates data collection.

This project also considers it important to engage social media users whose behavior suggests they will be involved in future dialogues. Although constantly morphing, social media has a large impact on how and what we discuss, especially within politics (Smith, Rainie, Himelboim, & Shneiderman, 2014). Recognizing the way people talk online about documentaries can lead to better understanding of how to better reach out and engage a film’s audience and fan-base. Social media is also inseparable from millennials (Botterill, Bredin, & Dun, 2015), who use it to share information and emotions about their lives. Social media and its
use as a conduit for calls to action makes it viable for producers and directors to connect with audience/fans. Therefore, of the many choices, this study selects a large, general audience, a dedicated following, and a niche or narrow demographic.
CHAPTER 4: RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND METHODS

This project’s overall question considers the nature of documentary dialogues between makers and consumers and the profile of documentary/nonfiction fans or fandoms, which will be addressed in Chapter 9 (Discussion) and Chapter 10 (The Complexity of Documentary Dialogues: Limitations, Conclusions, and Future Research), which follow. It explores a new question in media studies research: what are the broad contours of documentary dialogues with fandoms that will form the foundation for future research on interactions involving producer and consumer? Building from existing literature on documentary and fandom studies, this chapter articulates each method for generating evidence and data and the relationship of each to Research Questions. The research questions and methods analyze three discrete components of the umbrella question: program exemplars, audience composition, and the nature of dialogues involving producers and the audience, refined as follows (see Table 1: Research Questions and Method Used at end of this chapter to see application of method[s] to each research question):

RQ 1) What are the characteristics of common documentary types (formats) and delivery channels reflected in three broadly representative case studies?

RQ 2) Who comprises the audience of a documentary?

RQ 2a) How do documentary filmmakers and/or social media managers interact with audiences on social media platforms?

RQ 3) What motivates members of the audience to post questions or comments on social media?

RQ 3a) Do they expect a response? If so, from whom?

RQ 4) What types of conversations are held on social media channels about documentaries?

RQ 5) In what type of fannish activities do documentary fans participate?
Research Methods

The method for documentary and documentary-channel analysis is case study, as explained in Chapter 3: Where to Start? Documentary Case Study Selection. There is a wide range of documentary offerings worthy of analysis, including theatrical films; broadcast, cable, or premium television documentaries; online documentaries streamed through sites like Netflix or Amazon Prime; and independent documentaries, especially those produced by underrepresented groups, such as Women Make Movies. In addition to this variety of delivery channels, there are differences worthy of study among types of audiences. These include traditional viewers of broadcast documentaries who might respond to a network by letter or by posting an online comment; general audiences typical of legacy models of documentary delivery, for which the topic appeals to a cross-section of the populace; viewers who communicate through social media sites; narrowly defined audiences affected by a specific topic, such as bullying, discrimination, or assault; or diverse audiences intrigued by intellectual, entertainment, or some other type of media gratification.

Because there are no existing models of scholarship examining documentary fandoms, choices have been made. One prominent historical channel of documentary delivery is broadcast television. Commercial broadcast networks and later independent public television stations originally shouldered this duty. Since the early 1980s, public television, in particular PBS, has carried the lion’s share of free original documentary journalism programming offered to broadcast audiences. It is therefore important to include a broadcast component in this study of producer-audience communications. The Internet provides on-demand access to what was formerly a rigidly scheduled and delivered documentary channel via radio or television. Many audiences have shown interest in consuming nonfiction content via Internet delivery channels.
These include online viewings at network websites, YouTube or Vimeo delivery of documentary programming, webcast radio, one-off podcasts, and ongoing podcasts. A representative example of a nonfiction, serialized podcast is the NPR series *Serial*. The first season of *Serial* addresses a crime and questions about the investigation and outcome. Because of the podcast delivery channel and the nature of podcast consumption via Internet or digital-based delivery, it is appropriate to analyze a serialized nonfiction podcast that spans several installments and involves the audience in direct, ongoing feedback to the series producers.

The two examples cited immediately above concern general audiences. But it also seems important to consider the dialogue between a targeted audience and documentary producers. While many audience groups are served by documentary treatments that focus primarily on their individualized issues, for the purpose of this study it is equally important to tap into an audience that is most likely to use digital media to “respond” to or “engage” the issue, the documentary producer, and the community of people involved with or affected by the issue.

Given these parameters, this study targets three case studies: *The Choice 2016*, an episode from *FRONTLINE* (broadcast television, produced by Jim Gilmore and Gabrielle Schonder, et al.), a journalistic style weekly series; season one of *This American Life*’s popular podcast, *Serial* (online podcast, produced by Sarah Koenig and Julie Snyder); and a feature documentary on sexual assault among teenagers and cyber-bullying, *Audrie & Daisy* (feature documentary film available through Netflix, produced by Bonni Cohen and Jon Shenk). This selection addresses three different delivery channels, series and one-off programs, a range of common subjects and styles, and includes male and female producers. The case studies comprise descriptive analysis with a focus on content and textual analysis of audience and fan discussion on Twitter related to the documentaries (see Appendix G: In-Depth Documentary Summaries).
The fandoms chosen align with the three case studies to determine whether the types of conversations held differ across types of documentary. Fans and audience members were identified through major hashtags for each documentary. A time-period of 30 days after the initial release of each documentary was chosen to collect content. This ensures similarity of post-viewing enthusiasm, but also allows for the calendar timing to be different for each documentary. Each entry is coded and/or analyzed in terms of the subject and emotion of the post. This reveals whether different fandoms produce different types (not specifically topics) of conversations.

As this project is multi-faceted, the various research questions require different modes of analysis: documentary case studies, analysis of audience reactions to documentaries, analysis of audience attitudes regarding documentaries, and interviews with documentary filmmakers/producers. The method for examining these case studies is historical-critical analysis involving intensive viewing, close-readings, and comparison to existing documentary models.

Given the interactive nature of contemporary digital communication, the best method for assessing audience reactions is the combination of textual and content analysis of online comments, in this case tweets on Twitter. A survey instrument, including collection of demographic data, was deployed to profile Serial fan attitudes regarding documentaries, in general and also across the case studies. Finally, to get to the source of the filmmaker/producer’s intent, interviews engage in dialogue with the creators and social media managers to assess not only the intended message of each, but also the expectations and understandings regarding feedback from audiences.
As explained in Chapter 3: Where to Start? Documentary Case Study Selection, this study analyzes three documentary cases: *The Choice 2016*, *Serial*, and *Audrie & Daisy*. The historical foundations for studying documentaries appear in Chapter 2: Foundational Literature and Social Media Review. These sources include definitions of documentary forms, functions, and methods. In addition, each documentary was viewed multiple times and analyzed to facilitate “close readings,” detailed critiques placed in both historical contexts of programs and cultural contexts of issues. This method also involves identifying and articulating program themes (an outline of key points), description of the filmmaker/producer’s intended purpose, assessment of how well that goal is realized through the execution, and detailed comments/statements derived from the film/program and analyzed using standard historical-critical methods, such as those published in *Methods of Historical Analysis in Electronic Media* (Godfrey, 2006), *Film History: Theory and Practice* (Allen & Gomery, 1985), or critical works, such as *Feminist Documentary* (Waldman & Walker, 1999).

*Content Analysis of Audience Reactions (Tweets): Coding Scheme*

The researcher’s immersion into different platforms for several documentaries revealed several topical themes. As a test case, examples were taken from the 2016 documentary *Before the Flood*, to identify topics discussed among fans and audiences on Twitter. The documentary follows Leonardo DiCaprio as he discusses climate change issues with scientists, activists, and world leaders. The film, directed by Fisher Stevens, was released on October 21, 2016. After being immersed on Twitter using #BeforeTheFlood, specific topical themes emerged and were used to establish a coding scheme for the three documentaries in this study.
A codebook was created to specify data collection. In it are full descriptions of each of the different topic and emotion categories. It also outlines the coding process for each coder, as well as a start-to-finish timeline for the data collection part of this study. A full list of the themes employed in this study are available in the codebook (in Appendix A: Codebook). Representative examples follow:

- **Specific Film Statement question:** the user posts a question about a specific statement from the film.
  

- **Filmmaker/producer comment-negative:** the user posts a comment about the filmmaker or producer that indicates a negative or discouraging response
  
  Example: Can't wait to see #BeforetheFlood so I can buy future beach front property.

  Another leftist celeb pushing false info. What else is new?

- **Political comment-positive:** the user posts a comment that is political in nature and indicates a positive or encouraging response
  
  Example: Hats off to @JerryBrownGov fighting Climate Change! #trumpclueless #BeforeTheFlood #itsreality
Fans and audience members were identified through major hashtags for each documentary. A time period of 30 days after the initial release of each documentary was chosen to collect content. This ensures similarity of post-viewing/listening enthusiasm, but also allows for the calendar timing to be different for each documentary, thus placing responses in time-bound context.

Data Collection

The researcher used Netlytic, an open source data scraper, to gather data from Twitter for *The Choice 2016* and *Audrie & Daisy*. Tweet data for *Serial* were collected manually, using #serial and #serialpodcast, from October 3, 2014 through November 2, 2014. The advanced search function on Twitter identified tweets for the time-period and hashtags cited. The researcher manually selected, copied, and pasted each tweet from the search results into an Excel file, thus capturing the tweet copy, Twitter handle (username), and date. This was done manually because the tweets are more than two years old, making it difficult to find a Twitter scraper that retroactively pulls data. Due to the inclusion of the Halloween celebration within the time period, #serial produced many irrelevant tweets relating to serial murder Halloween costumes, as well as advertisements for other serialized television shows. The researcher removed irrelevant tweets, which yielded a very small sample. Because of this, the researcher added #serialpodcast tweets to increase the sample, using the same collection method as was used for #serial.

#TheChoicePBS was used to gather tweets for *The Choice 2016 (FRONTLINE)* ranging from September 27, 2016 through October 26, 2016. Both of the hashtags #StopTheShame and
#AudrieAndDaisy were used for *Audrie & Daisy*, with data collected from September 23, 2016 through October 22, 2016. These hashtags were heavily advertised as official links to the film.

For *The Choice 2016* and *Audrie & Daisy*, information was gathered including Twitter handle, location, user’s profile biography, and location of user; however, this information was not used in any final report, especially because it was not gathered for *Serial*. Netlytic’s data produced jumbled letters and symbols for emojis and the researcher’s technology did not allow for copying and pasting of emojis; therefore, emojis were not copied or involved in the data. Coders were instructed to search the original tweet for emojis during the coding process to ensure extraction of the correct theme and emotion.

Tweets were collected starting with the day the documentary was released and for the following 30 days. This allowed for different time periods for each of the documentaries (although two of them overlapped). Even though *Serial* is still an active fandom and tweets are being generated (as there is an additional season and anticipation of a third season), the traffic has slowed compared to what it was when it was initially released.

During the time of the *Audrie & Daisy* collection, a video featuring then-presidential nominee Donald Trump was released showing him speaking about how he exerted his celebrity status to grab women and kiss them, along with other statements of sexual entitlement. He also made derogatory and inappropriate comments about a previous Miss Universe contestant. From these two instances, the hashtag #StopTheShame was used by Trump opponents to call him out on his actions. Although a related topic, these tweets (and any other irrelevant tweets) were removed from the sample unless linked to the documentary. For the other two documentaries, any tweet that was not related to the documentary was removed from the coding sample. This is to ensure a valid representation of the fandom without a skewed view from irrelevant tweets.
Retweets were also removed from the coding sample to avoid duplication of messages. However, in 2015, Twitter introduced the ability to quote a tweet and add a personal message. These tweets were retained in the sample, as they added to the discussion. For *Serial* and *Audrie & Daisy*, some tweets used both hashtags. The duplicate tweets were removed from the final sample to avoid redundancy.

Lastly, tweets in a language other than English were removed. Although a translation service could be used, it is very possible the translation would deliver a different meaning from what was initially intended. As all three documentaries were produced and initially released in the United States, the removal of non-English tweets does not harm the sample.

After the collection of tweets from each documentary, the researcher scrubbed them to remove irrelevant tweets and retweets. A representative sample was determined using a sample calculator (http://www.surveysystem.com/sscalc.htm). The tweets were then organized by date and time sent within each documentary sample, to allow for integration for the two case study documentaries that had multiple hashtags. Each tweet was given a numerical ID code starting at one (1) and proceeding sequentially upward. The researcher then used https://www.randomizer.org to generate a list of random numbers relating to the sample size for each sample. These tweets were pulled and gathered on another worksheet for each documentary. Each sample was isolated when distributed to coders to ensure no confusion on which tweets were included in the coding process.

_Coder Training and Intercoder Reliability_

Two people coded the tweets for this project, the researcher and one other research assistant (a doctoral student). The researcher trained the other coder and revised the codebook
until the coders were satisfied and in agreement with the coding process and reliability. The coders completed the remainder of the coding independently and without conference. Although the second coder knew the scope of the project, that person did not know the specific research questions, thus minimizing bias while coding. After both coders completed all coding, the lead researcher combined results and tested for intercoder reliability. For intercoder reliability, the two coders gathered and compared the results from the coded tweets. The pair then discussed the disagreements to see if they were true disagreement or just a miscode. After the completion of this step, the intercoder reliability was determined and is available in Chapter 6: The Fans and Audience Speak: Analysis of Tweets.

**Procedure for Completing the Quantitative Content Analysis**

For the quantitative coding portion of this project, coders were given access to the same Qualtrics survey. For each individual tweet, the coder filled out the survey to identify the theme(s) of the tweet. The coders were invited to visit links in the tweet if needed to clarify meaning. After training, coders parted and coded independently. The Qualtrics survey asks for the coder to select, copy, and paste the tweet into the survey, list which coder is coding the tweet (to prevent duplication), mark whether it is a comment, question, or both, and then proceed to answer questions that relate to the comment and/or question. At the end of the survey, a box is provided in case the coder needs to add a note. After all applicable questions were answered, the coder clicked “submit” and repeated the process for subsequent tweets. It is possible a tweet fit more than one category. Coders were instructed to mark all categories that apply.

After both coders completed all coding, this researcher combined results and tested for intercoder reliability. The coding was used to explore four content areas: about the topic, the
documentary’s content, the filmmaker/producer, and any political discussion. A user’s expressed emotions were also explored within 28 categories (noted below). The data collected helped 1) understand viewer responses to the film and filmmaker, and 2) understand what motivated users to reveal their emotions. This is an indication of the extent to which the audience is reacting to the film and thus helps explain the types of dialogue involving fan and producer.

*Emotional Coding Categories of Social Media Comments or Questions*

The first round of coding aimed to capture the *type* of statement or question posted. In the second round, the *emotion* of the post was captured. Because emotions are not necessarily obvious and are often implied through tweets, the coding for this section is subjective and better served by textual analysis using a qualitative approach. To aid in being precise and consistent in the assessment of these tweets, it is necessary to define key categories of emotions that reveal the nature of documentary dialogues with the producer. The emotions categories were taken from Liew, Turtle, and Liddy’s (2016) EmoTweet-28 metric. The 28 emotions, plus a 29th “none,” are used to capture a wide range of emotion in tweets from each documentary. The definitions for each category are operationalized by Liew, Turtle, and Liddy (2016) and are available within the codebook (Appendix A: Codebook).

Two coders were used to code tweets to find thematic patterns. However, only the lead researcher coded the tweets for emotions, to avoid introducing contradictions into the study. These two sections are used in tandem to identify the types of dialogues and the feelings emoted through text.
Each entry was coded twice—once in terms of the theme(s) and once related to the emotion(s) of the post. This helps reveal what types (not specifically topics) of conversations are held in each fandom.

The examples cited immediately above concern general audiences, but it is also crucial to consider the dialogue between a targeted audience and the documentary producers. While many audience groups are served by documentary treatments that focus primarily on their individualized issues, for the purpose of this study it is vital to profile an audience that is most likely to use digital media to “respond” to or “engage” the issue, the documentary producer, or the community of people involved with or affected by an issue. The three case studies comprise descriptive analysis with a focus on content and textual analysis of audience and fan discussion on Twitter related to the documentaries.

Survey

A survey was designed to focus on one of the three fandoms. *Serial* was chosen, as it has the largest fandom of the three and has been an established fandom for more than two years. The fandom is also accessible on social media platforms, such as reddit and Twitter. After receiving exempt status from the researcher’s Institutional Review Board, the survey, which was created using Qualtrics, was disseminated to fans of *Serial* who had either asked a question or posted a comment about the series on social media. The survey (Appendix B: Survey for *Serial* Documentary Dialogues) was launched on November 19, 2016 and closed on January 31, 2017. The survey was posted on relevant subreddits (i.e. r/serialpodcast and r/serialpodcastorigins), Tumblr, Facebook, and on Twitter using appropriate hashtags (e.g., #serial, #adnansyed, and #haeminlee). The survey was also sent out to a few Listservs relevant to the topic.
The purpose of the survey was to gather information from fans and not just rely on content analysis of tweets. The survey asks the participant to recall a time they asked a question or posted a comment and to identify what type of question or comment it was, what social media platform it was posted on, whether they expected a response, if they received a response (and from whom), and if the conversation continued. These data were then analyzed and used in conjunction with the content analysis data to form an argument, which is discussed in Chapter 9: Discussion.

Using built-in logic, the survey was designed so that when the participant answered “no” to the first question (whether they had posted/asked something on the internet about *Serial*) or “no” to the informed consent, the participant was routed to the end of the survey. Except for the informed consent agreement, participants were not required to answer any of the questions. Logic was also used to direct the participant to either answer survey questions about posting a comment or a question, depending on what they marked earlier in the survey. The survey ended with three open-ended questions asking the participant why they would want to interact with the director, what message(s) they thought the director was trying to convey in the documentary, and their opinions on the increased ability to interact with directors via social media. The demographics section blends closed- and open-ended questions to allow for participants to enter gender identity, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. On average, the survey took five minutes to complete and participants were notified they could stop at any point.

The survey had 291 participants with 53 participants completing the entire survey (meaning they filled in demographic questions). One hundred thirty-five responses were removed from the final number because they either marked they had not posted a question or comment or did not continue after marking “agree” to the informed consent; 71 responses were
removed because they had not completed anything after answering which season they had posted about; and three responses were removed because the participant had posted/asked about something relating to season two of *Serial*. The results of the survey are discussed in Chapter 7: Vox Populi: Survey Results.

**Filmmaker Interviews**

To answer the remainder of RQ 2a, three documentary filmmakers were interviewed via WebEx, an online video conferencing program that allows audio and video recording. These interviews were semi-structured, audio and video recorded, and transcribed using the beta software, SpeedScriber. The filmmakers were contacted by email and asked to participate in an interview that would take no longer than 60 minutes. The filmmakers are not associated with any of the three documentary case studies, but can add to the wider discussion of how documentary filmmakers interact with their audience. Two individuals from *FRONTLINE*, one current and one former employee who work(ed) with the social media and digital platforms for the show, were also interviewed, allowing for insight into the mindset of those promoting documentaries (who are not the directors).

**Associating Research Questions and Methods**

We can now associate research questions with appropriate methods (Table 1: Research Questions and Method Used).

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9 The lists of baseline interview questions for filmmakers and individuals at *FRONLITNE* are available in Appendices E and F, respectively.
Table 1: Research Questions and Method Used

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<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Methods</th>
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<tr>
<td>RQ 1) What are the characteristics of common documentary types (formats) and delivery channels reflected in three broadly representative case studies?</td>
<td>Historical-Critical Analysis</td>
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<tr>
<td>RQ 2) Who comprises the audience of a documentary?</td>
<td>Survey of Serial fans</td>
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<td>RQ 2a) How do documentary filmmakers and/or social media managers interact with audiences on social media platforms?</td>
<td>Interview with filmmakers/social media managers; Content analysis of tweets</td>
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<td>RQ 3) What motivates members of the audience to post questions or comments on social media?</td>
<td>Survey of Serial fans</td>
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<td>RQ 3a) Do they expect a response? If so, from whom?</td>
<td>Survey of Serial fans</td>
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<td>RQ 4) What types of conversations are held on social media channels about documentaries?</td>
<td>Content Analysis of tweets</td>
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<td>RQ 5) In what type of fannish activities do documentary fans participate?</td>
<td>Content Analysis of tweets</td>
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CHAPTER 5: CONTENT MATTERS: HISTORICAL-CRITICAL ANALYSES

This chapter expands the close analysis of each documentary case. It is important to not only understand what each documentary is about, but also to understand where it fits within a broader context. Analyses will begin with FRONTLINE’s The Choice 2016, followed by Serial, and Audrie & Daisy. Expanded content description for each program appears in Appendix G: In-Depth Documentary Summaries.

The Choice 2016

The Choice 2016 is just shy of a two-hour long documentary. It aired on September 27, 2016 and as the premiere of FRONTLINE season 35. It is a conventional expository journalistic documentary in terms of length, use of interviews, and use of narration to present the exposé of the two major party candidates, Democrat Hillary Clinton and Republican Donald Trump. The documentary’s goal is to inform the viewer of the backgrounds and personalities of Clinton and Trump. Although some viewers would argue that the documentary is biased toward Clinton or toward Trump, the FRONTLINE approach strives to remain neutral and just report findings. Producer Michael Kirk’s The Choice 2016 is no different. The documentary tells the stories of Clinton and Trump, alternating between candidates. It features several friends, biographers, and experts knowledgeable about each of the candidates. Although political controversy is common related to a documentary on this topic, this program (as typical of the FRONTLINE The Choice series), concentrates on fact-based exposition that reveals the personal stories, experiences, and qualifications of the two candidates to reveal their values and help the audience assess how each might govern, rather than pushing a particular political agenda. The documentary comprises nine acts, each one outlining similar points in the lifetime of each candidate. The time devoted to each
candidate is fairly split with 25 pages of transcript dialogue for each candidate; one candidate does not dominate the documentary.

Through these nine acts, *The Choice 2016* meets its goals: to inform viewers of the person behind the politician. Although it mentions a few of Clinton’s political actions, it does not focus on the platform of either candidate, allowing the viewer a different look at the candidates. For some, the person is more important than the politician and vice versa for other individuals. Because of this, *The Choice* is an important documentary that *FRONTLINE* produces every four years.

Michael Kirk, the director of *The Choice 2016*, has been directing *The Choice* series every election year since the 2000 election between George W. Bush and Al Gore. Kirk has also regularly directed or produced documentaries for *FRONTLINE* since 1984. This particular documentary is not different in style, cadence, or journalistic approach from his other documentaries. *The Choice* wants its viewers and audience members to engage the documentary, using it to help them figure out whom they will vote for in the 2016 U.S. Presidential election. It is clearly aimed at civic responsibility.

Supplemental interviews and information appear on *FRONTLINE*’s website, which allows for additional, and shorter, information to be shared across social media and with other audience members. *The Choice 2016* does not appear to have its own social media accounts, but *FRONTLINE* does and actively pushed the episode over their channels in the weeks leading up to the election on November 8, 2016. On Facebook, *FRONTLINE* has more than 1,337,000 likes and the Twitter account has just under 260,000 followers. *FRONTLINE*’s YouTube channel only has 959 subscribers, but the episode has been viewed more than 724,000 times. *FRONTLINE* also has a presence on Tumblr, but follower numbers are not visible.
In terms of critical analysis, *The Choice 2016* is primarily a functional, informational public service report. It is not critical of power, per se. For instance, it does not challenge the dominance of a two-party system, largely based on capitalistic norms. By presenting a balanced, objective recitation comparing one candidate to the other, it unwittingly endorses the conventional electoral process, including the exclusion of minor party candidates from the discussion, and thus accepts the national logic without critique. The program is critical of certain aspects of each candidate’s personality and background, by virtue of reporting negative characteristics, such as Trump’s adoption of attorney Roy Cohn’s belligerent methods and Clinton’s tendency to self-promote despite being secretive. Because of the reliance on evidence, facts, and expert testimony, the program tries to steer clear from favoring one candidate over the other. It is favorable from a feminist perspective in placing Clinton on the same national stage as Trump. The treatment can be viewed as a positive development for women’s rights and place in the public sphere.

From an economic-critical view, some might view the tawdry results of Trump’s business dealings as a criticism of capitalism, especially as a Machiavellian blood sport, compared to Clinton’s public service record on important matters, such as the Watergate hearings and national health care reform. There is a sense that the program leans toward the underserved and criticizes unethical business practices, so in some ways the program does present a critical slant of the political economy under capitalism and a slight nod to more principles of collective social benefit and the value of debate in the public sphere.

To be fair, the program is a kind of “buyer’s guide” or “voter’s guide” for the upcoming election, meaning its mission is largely informational and not critical. Throughout documentary journalism history, there have been many programs that present voter “guides” and also some
that question the efficacy of the U.S. electoral process: *Election Year in Averageton* (Salem, NJ), and *Choosing a Candidate* (both NBC, 1964); *The Woman’s Touch in Politics* (ABC, 1964); *The Presidency: A Splendid Mystery* (CBS, 1964); *CBS Reports: Campaign, American Style*, image building, computerization, and public relations influences (1968); *ABC News Inquiry: The Hand that Rocks the Ballot Box*, (women, 1972); *Two Days to Go*, (CBS update, 1972); *The Presidential Election—What’s It All About?* (CBS, 1976); *Is This the Way to Nominate a President?* (CBS, 1980); *NBC Reports: Is There a Better Way?*, questions media coverage, financing, and the nominating process (1980); *Campaign Countdown: The Hidden Message*, advertising and racism (CBS, 1988); *The '88 Vote: One Week Away*, (ABC, 1988); *Campaign Countdown: Is This any Way to Elect a President?* (NBC, 1988). The FRONTLINE series premiered in 1983 and weighed in on presidential elections in the second season: *So You Want to Be President* (1984); *The Choice* (1988); and repeated in subsequent presidential election years.

Critical history shows that documentary journalism has been a traditional form of voter education for decades on network commercial and public television. Some documentary reports have critiqued or questioned the process, including some of the capitalistic/economic influences on elections, in this case, *The Choice 2016* is similar to other voter guides focused exclusively on the Democratic and Republican Party candidates.

**Serial**

*Serial* premiered on *This American Life (TAL)*, as a weekly show on National Public Radio (NPR). *TAL* is produced in collaboration with Chicago Public Media. People are able to hear the show thanks to the Public Radio Exchange (PRX). Each week, the show is broadcast to
more than 500 stations and attracts about 2.2 million listeners with an additional 2.5 million people downloading each episode as a podcast (“About Us”). Each episode develops a theme featuring different but related stories. Ira Glass, the host of the show, is also referenced in popular culture for this role. In 2014, *Serial* was initially a spin-off, establishing season one and ultimately becoming its own show following the submission of fan donations. *Serial, TAL,* and a new show, *S-Town,* are interconnected by staff members who work on multiple shows.

The name “*Serial*” comes from the weekly storytelling of the same story advanced over several episodes, much like a serialized television series. Host and co-director Sarah Koenig wanted to tell a story differently from what normally happens on *TAL.* To do this, Koenig pitched the story of Adnan Syed and the murder of his ex-girlfriend, Hae Min Lee. Koenig had written about the downfall of a Baltimore lawyer while working at *The Baltimore Sun.* She was approached by Rabia Chaudry, who had remembered Koenig’s reporting. Chaudry asked Koenig to reopen the case of her brother’s friend, who had had the same lawyer and lost his case. Koenig and her team set out to research and piece together the story. Episode one was released before they knew how the story would end. They updated the story week-by-week and adapted to and included audience- and fan-delivered information into the show. A fan base emerged, inspiring digital sleuths to try to figure out whether Adnan killed his ex-girlfriend or if anyone knew something pertinent.

Although the use of the podcast channel for *Serial* is new, the serialized documentary is not unlike some previous documentaries, of both serialized and non-serialized endeavors. In terms of documentary history, the impact both seasons of the podcast have had on the real-life stories is similar to Errol Morris’s *The Thin Blue Line,* which actually led to the reversal of the death-penalty conviction of one of the individuals in the documentary. Michael Apted’s *Seven*
Up documentary series follows a group of British children (and later adults) and produces a report about their lives every seven years. Apted began when the children were seven years old. Although a different type of serialized documentary (since there is a much longer wait in between episodes), the concept is similar: tell the continuing story of the same people over several documentary episodes. PBS’s 1973 series, An American Family, is another historical benchmark of an unfolding observation having an unknown outcome.

In terms of historical-critical analysis of Serial, then, the form and format are not particularly unique. Like other crime-related documentaries, Serial asks questions about institutional justice. In terms of personal relationships, Serial, like An American Family, probes the interpersonal interactions of humans trapped in complex, deeply personal matters (domestic abuse/murder; divorce). The podcast delivery channel does distinguish Serial from other historical forms, but this was true for radio and television as well, when they were new media. Therefore, while we can critique Serial against other investigations of institutions, it is unremarkable in this respect. What emerges significantly in Serial in historical-critical terms, is the interactions of audience with creators and the impact on the changing nature of the content.

HBO’s The Jinx (2015) and Netflix’s Making a Murderer (2015) are also prime examples of a serialized documentary using a very similar treatment as Serial. All three focus on one story, primarily about one person, and each episode discusses and dissects arguments and convictions. The Jinx is a six-episode documentary series about Robert Durst, the heir to the Seymour Durst real estate wealth. The documentary investigates the 1982 disappearance of Kathie Durst, Robert’s first wife, the 2001 death of his Galveston, Texas neighbor Morris Black, and the 2000 death of Durst’s close friend Susan Berman. Durst volunteered to be interviewed for the documentary series and during the program accidentally tells the world that he committed the
crimes. After the wrap-up of the last interview, Durst goes to the bathroom, mumbling to himself about having “killed them all, of course,” not knowing his microphone was still picking up audio. Durst was ultimately arrested on March 14, 2015 in New Orleans on a first-degree murder warrant, the day before the sixth and final episode of the series was to debut, the episode in which the audience hears the accidental confession.

*Making a Murderer* tells the story of Steven Avery, who was convicted of sexual assault and attempted murder of Penny Beernsten. Avery was exonerated in 2003 using DNA evidence after serving 18 years in prison. However, he was later arrested in 2005 for the murder of Teresa Halbach. His nephew, Brendan Dassey, was also charged for the crime. The series was filmed over a period of ten years and follows the arrest, prosecution, and conviction of Dassey. Using interviews, footage, and police information, the documentary calls into question the cases of both Avery and Dassey. Fans also followed suit and signed a petition asking President Obama to pardon Avery before his presidency ended. The petition attracted more than 128,000 signatures, but Obama did not have authority to grant a pardon for a state-level court ruling. Dassey’s conviction was overturned on August 12, 2016, but his release was blocked on November 17, 2016, due to an appeal. Avery is still in jail.

*Serial* season one predates *The Jinx* and *Making a Murderer*. All three attracted a fan base, with *Making a Murderer* having a more boisterous and visible fan base than *The Jinx*. *The Jinx* and *Making a Murderer* documentary series have subreddits, but *Making a Murderer* has a considerably larger group of fans subscribed to the subreddit (more than 60,000) than *The Jinx* (just under 2,500). This could be because *The Jinx* appeared on HBO, which is only offered as a
premium channel or as an added expense (HBONow\(^\text{10}\) plans are $14.99/month), meaning there is a limited group of people who have access to the show. One can argue Netflix has the same issue, but Netflix is less expensive (plans starting at $7.99/month) than HBONow and it has a much larger catalogue of options. Secondly, and probably most important, *The Jinx* has two important milestones, once when Durst confesses at the end of the series and again as Durst is captured and put on trial. Fans can argue about whether Durst did the crimes, but the case has a more clear-cut ending than *Making a Murderer*, which ends in a question and a case that is still unfolding and ever changing.

Although the podcast aspect of *Serial* is new, the form of serialized documentary investigation is not without precedent. One key distinction is the social media fan component. Because of the popularity and visibility of *Serial*, the other series were talked about in tandem with *Serial*, comparing and contrasting each series. Netflix has a new documentary series set to premiere on May 19, 2017 called *The Keepers*, about an unsolved murder of a nun, Sister Cathy Cesnik, in Baltimore in 1969 and the apparent cover-up by the Catholic Church. Due to the serialized nature of this documentary, it is comparable to the aforementioned three documentaries.

But each of these documentaries prompts criticisms and questions relating to the authenticity and ethics of reporting, or not reporting, facts in each case. This emerges from the tweets and survey responses for *Serial* (discussed in Chapters 6 and 7, respectively), but also in relation to *The Jinx* and *Making a Murderer*. Critics claim that the documentary directors purposefully leave out information pertaining to each of the cases to help advance their argument and hold the audience in suspense, a clear marketing/audience ploy. Where this critique can be

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\(^{10}\) HBO cable subscribers can watch HBO at any time on multiple different devices through an app named HBOGo. Individuals who do not have the cable subscription can pay for an a la carte option named HBONow which gives them access to the same programming without being able to watch it through their cable provider.
made of most documentaries and directors’ choices for including—or not including—
information, critics of these series are particularly annoyed due to the matter-of-fact way the
information is presented.

This criticism is apparent within the Serial fandom. Koenig and her team set out to probe
questions about the crime, not to prove whether Adnan Syed killed Hae Min Lee. What bothers
fans of Serial is the way the show purposefully omits information about how Hae Min Lee died:
manual strangulation likely caused by domestic violence, something the series very lightly
discusses in connection with Adnan’s possessiveness and for the most part ignores. There is also
criticism of how Serial suggests information to new witnesses, such as Asia McClain, who even
in the podcast says, “I would not have remembered if not for the show.” Asia’s testimony, that
she saw Adnan at the library at the time of the murder, is crucial in the case for Adnan’s appeal.
Some critics felt that the story did not go anywhere, that it floundered and did not need twelve
episodes. In fact, the series does not end with a hard “this is what happened”; it ends with more
questions. Others, such as Simons (2014), disliked the storytelling, saying that Koenig was only
discussing the meticulousness of her research throughout the series, “The whole thing was so
smug, so petty, so low-brow, so plodding and voyeuristic and self-indulgent, that it set one’s
teeth on edge” (para. 10). The ongoing nature of Serial’s content in an era of immediate feedback
amplifies the importance of Serial as a case study. It is by design a work in progress, in which
the creators are engaged with the audience and object. It is akin to letting the audience share in
the kneading of the dough versus serving them a slice of bread already baked.

Even Rabia Chaudry, who initiated contact with Koenig about the case, was disappointed
in how the show handled information and how the series ended: “Serial was not what I expected.
It was also not what I wanted” (para. 1). But, Chaudry continues: “I can’t lie. I haven’t always
been happy with Koenig’s reporting, with her not drawing hard and fast conclusions about issues and people. I wanted Koenig’s judgment, but in most cases she refused, or wasn’t able, to give it. I wanted her to be an advocate for Adnan, but she couldn’t be” (Chaudry, 2014, para. 3).

Although saddened that Adnan is not exonerated, Chaudry understands that Koenig was not necessarily going to find the piece of evidence that would exonerate Adnan, but when Koenig tells Chaudry this in a final interview, Chaudry nevertheless “felt like a failure” (Chaudry, 2014, para. 7).

Koenig was merely reporting Adnan’s story (Gross, 2014). She did not set out to exonerate or to prove Adnan’s guilt, contrary to what Chaudry had hoped. Koenig did not know where the story would take her and the Serial team; she was simply reporting week-to-week new information she and her team had discovered. This makes this type of storytelling unique—not knowing where it will end, but still releasing a product to the public. It makes it difficult for fans to get to the end and for there not to be a denouement, like a pretty bow on top of a package.

Prior to the final episode, Funny or Die released a video featuring a Sarah Koenig look-a-like struggling with the final episode and trying to figure out who killed Hae Min Lee. Ultimately the faux character lashes out at the audience and walks out. It then features the Sarah Koenig/Adnan Syed characters on the phone with “Sarah” in jail for the murder.

Because the series was a podcast, it was not constricted to any timeframe requirements and allowed the podcast to have programs of varying length from 28 to 56 minutes, instead of having to fill a designated time slot (aside from the first episode which aired on TAL). This allows documentary producers to follow the story and report as much or as little information as collected. This makes it more like a film documentary rather than a traditional broadcast documentary.
All criticism, jokes, and parodies aside, the *Serial* team met their goal: they wanted to report a story and did, accomplishing their goal through a series of twelve episodes of differing lengths, summarized in Appendix G: In-Depth Documentary Summaries.

The twelve episodes visit and revisit various stories and facts about the murder of Hae Min Lee. Using police and court recordings, interviews with Adnan Syed, friends of Hae and Adnan’s, and Adnan’s family, Koenig lays out what she knows and believes. She invites the listeners along for the ride, asking questions that audience members have, talking directly to the audience with phrases like, “To remind you,” and explaining complicated legal or technical language. She makes this story accessible, and that, along with the mystery aspect, is a large reason why fans hooked onto this series. More than two years later, there still is not a firm answer, or really any answer (aside from Adnan’s original conviction), and the discussion continues online.

*This American Life* gambled on this series, but half way through season one, the series had garnered sufficient funding from fans to finance seasons two and three. The series now has a spin-off called, *S-Town*, and they are looking forward to season three (although the subject has yet to be announced). The documentary has impacted the case for Adnan, who is trying to get a retrial for the murder. It has gathered the support of the Innocence Project for Adnan and has given voice to Adnan to tell his story. These outcomes, although different, are similar to Errol Morris’s *The Thin Blue Line*, which led to the overturned conviction of Randall Adams and his eventual freedom. Documentaries have power, and if used responsibly, can impact a person’s life in beneficial ways. Stylistically a key distinction with regard to *Serial* is the producers’ transparency as authors who involve themselves in the case, the series, and the dialogue with fans.
This series also raises broad social questions about the criminal justice system. It raises questions about the justice regarding someone who has been in jail since 2000 for a murder they claim not to have committed. Can we trust our system? Was Adnan given a fair trial? If not, why is he having such a hard time getting a retrial? The Innocence Project exists because Adnan is not the only person to (perhaps) be wrongfully convicted; it is common enough to warrant a network of lawyers who help these individuals. This suggests that this story of the wrongfully convicted would appeal to a large group of people and that many of us can empathize with Adnan and his family with the issue, while also sympathizing with the family of Hae Min Lee for their loss.

Koenig and her team won a George Foster Peabody Award in 2015 for *Serial*, the first Peabody Award for a podcast (Rosen, 2015). The team has traveled the country hosting question-and-answer sessions, having discussions about journalism and podcasting, and inspiring spin-offs of the show—both fictional and nonfictional. *Serial* is on the major social media platforms, which helps further the conversation for fans. On Facebook, *Serial* has more than 423,000 likes and more than 319,000 followers, 22,400 followers on Instagram, and has a presence on Tumblr (Tumblr does not reveal followers to the public). As shown, it is a particularly good case study for exploring the contours and concepts involved in documentary dialogues involving creators and consumers. Finally, it reveals how in the age of social media it is essential to consider the effect of the channel of discourse, its influence on content, and finally its effect on culture.

**Audrie & Daisy**

*Audrie & Daisy*, released on Netflix September 23, 2016, is a documentary about sexual assault affecting high school teenagers. It primarily follows the stories of Audrie Pott and Daisy
Coleman, but other survivors’ stories are also included. The documentary is a commentary on the role social media play in a teen’s life, especially after something traumatic happens, such as a sexual assault. It showcases the common and strong tendency for others to blame the victim instead of looking more closely at the actions of those who commit assaults. Lastly, it shows how survivors can come together to support and lift up one another. Narration is never used and the only time text appears on screen is a list of sexual assault facts at the end of the film.

This documentary is both highly personal and issue-based, arguing that society needs to change and that sexual assault can be stopped. It develops this thesis through six acts using a combination of interviews and animation (to disguise the identity of those interviewed). The first act tells the story of Audrie, her sexual assault, and the resulting bullying she experienced. Some of Audrie’s male classmates used an ink marker to draw on Audrie’s body while she was drunk and unconscious. One of the boys penetrated Audrie’s vagina with his finger while she was unconscious. The attackers took pictures and spread them around school. Audrie was devastated by this invasion of her privacy. Ten days after the assault Audrie Pott hanged herself from the shower in her home.

The documentary had a release date and articles written about the film leading up to and after its release on Netflix. Because it was acquired by Netflix, the company started advertising the documentary on its platforms as a large banner in the days leading up to its release. All of this media attention created enough hype around the documentary that a dialogue developed on Twitter and other social media in the following days. More articles were released and the national organization It’s On Us promoted the documentary to its followers and members. Netflix also offered free screenings of the films to places of education for their population. (BGSU’s chapter of It’s On Us hosted a screening of the film.)
There have been several other documentaries that focus on sexual assault. For example, *It Happened Here* and *The Hunting Ground* came out in 2015 and critiqued universities’ responses to sexual assaults on campus. *The Invisible War* (directed by Kirby Dirk, who also directed *The Hunting Ground*), was released in 2012 and looks at sexual assault in the U.S. military. But *Audrie & Daisy* provides a fresh and sobering look at sexual assault among teenagers and how social media and technology are now being used to complicate situations and bully victims. Using the film’s hashtags, several sexual assault survivors shared their own stories on Twitter and other social media, furthering the conversation and amplifying the proof that there is still a long way to go in terms of educating everyone about sexual assault. Survivors were interacting with each other and interacting with Daisy Coleman on Twitter and creating a digital community of support. Although possible without the film, this documentary created an opportunity for survivors to connect and tell their stories, something this dissertation is keenly interested in; if this documentary can create this community, then other documentaries have the ability as well.

Whereas the experience with *Serial* reflected a kind of ongoing conversation between the director and viewer, the case of *Audrie & Daisy* illustrates the networking potential beyond the film itself. In other words, in addition to exploring dialogues involving the encoder and decoder, we should also consider dialogues fostered within the community of viewers and their sub-networks.

*Audrie & Daisy* has social media accounts on all of the major platforms, as well as a robust website featuring information about how to contact elected officials, support for survivors, and additional information and facts. At the time of this writing, the film has just under 21,000 likes on Facebook, more than 4,700 followers on Twitter, and more than 2,300 followers on Instagram. Searching the documentary on Tumblr and YouTube reveals posts from people
sharing their thoughts to people sharing the trailer and pictures and videos of singer Tori Amos and other individuals from the documentary. Although not a particularly large social media footprint, the conversation online is rampant.

**Chapter Conclusion**

This chapter provides historical-critical analyses of the three documentaries for this study. It is beneficial for audience members and directors alike to understand where in history a documentary is situated. It helps directors understand how their audience might react to the documentary, allowing for insight into how to best communicate with their audience and fans. For example, the directors of *Making a Murderer* could have looked to the reaction to *Serial* and anticipated the boisterous fandom. For audience members and fans, knowing where the documentary is situated in history, both in documentary form and in content, helps further explain decisions made by directors and can clarify the content. These insights can impact how the audience talks back and/or about the documentary. It allows them access to begin conversations outside the reign of the documentary, but on the broader topic. For example, audience members of *Audrie & Daisy* begin by viewing the documentary. Once interested in the topic, they branch out to other documentaries about the topic, where their conversations begin to turn from one documentary, to the broader issue at hand, pulling in resources from other documentaries and other research. This expands the conversation and allows for a deeper conversation, including audience members, fans, and directors.
CHAPTER 6: THE FANS AND AUDIENCE SPEAK: ANALYSIS OF TWEETS

This researcher collected tweets for the 30 days following the initial release of each of the documentaries. Audience response data for *Audrie & Daisy* and *FRONTLINE’s The Choice 2016 (The Choice)* were collected using the open-source program Netlytic. *Serial’s* tweets were identified using Twitter’s advanced search feature and collected manually, selecting and copying Twitter handle, date, and tweet text into an Excel spreadsheet. Hashtags were used to collect audience input for each film (#AudrieAndDaisy, #StopTheShame, #TheChoicePBS, #Serial, and #SerialPodcast) to aid in the collection of tweets. Irrelevant tweets (e.g. #Serial had tweets about serial killers not related to the podcast), in a language other than English, and retweets (that were not quoted), were removed from the sample. A sample at 95% confidence interval was determined for each set of tweets and transferred to a clean Excel file with tabs accompanying each documentary.

Two coders used this Excel workbook and met to discuss terms and the codebook. Each coder then independently coded every tweet using a Qualtrics form (Appendix C: Qualtrics Coding for Themes) to determine the theme of the tweet and whether it included a question, comment, or both. The results were collated and the two coders met a second time to determine the source of any disagreement or if a consensus could be reached. Intercoder reliability was 97% for *Serial*, 99% for *Audrie & Daisy*, and 99% for *The Choice*. The project leader then took these same tweets and individually coded them for emotions using Liew and Turtle’s (2016) EmoTweet-28 metric of emotions. The emotions and operationalized definitions are included within the codebook in Appendix A: Codebook. Coding results were then determined for themes and emotions. For both coding schemes, coders were instructed to mark all that apply, meaning
tweets could contain multiple topics, both questions and comments, and/or positive, neutral, and negative sentiments.

Across all three documentaries, there were consistently more comments than questions within tweets. Below are the results for each documentary. It should be noted that any handles in tweets that are not associated with the documentary (i.e., @FrontlinePBS, @Netflix, et cetera) or celebrities/public figures (i.e., @RealDonaldTrump [Donald Trump], @divadaisy2015 [Daisy], et cetera) are removed to protect the anonymity of the user. This honored an ethical rather than legal imperative. Tweets collected were public and therefore able to be found and seen without owning an account on Twitter. Human Subjects Review Board approval was not required. However, when conducting research, the Association of Internet Researchers (AOIR) recommends carefully weighing the implications of using data without consent from an author. Because authors were not contacted, and because the removal of handles does not change the meaning of the tweet, it was decided to remove identifying information from the examples within this dissertation. Emojis are not included; they appeared as jumbled text in Netlytic (e.g., ðŸ˜`). It was not possible to select, copy, and paste emojis or to analyze them. They were, however, identified during the coding process and considered when coding.

**FRONTLINE: The Choice 2016**

*The Choice 2016* aired September 27, 2016, one day after the first U.S. presidential debate between the major party candidates for the 2016 presidential election and shortly after the news-reporting, leaked video of then-presidential nominee Donald Trump speaking candidly about “grabbing women by the pussy” and using his stardom to force himself on women. The top six emotions of the film are not surprising, given the nature of the documentary topic, the
biographic approach to Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, the top question category, and the top two comment categories.

The original sample used for coding themes comprised 311 tweets. However, after deleting tweets that were disagreed upon and tweets that had no matches after coding, 306 tweets were used for analysis of themes. The most common category of questions were those about a specific statement (any specific statement) in the documentary. This primarily involved people asking for clarification about a specific statement, such as,

- “Didn't #TheChoicePBS made [sic] it clear Drumpf\textsuperscript{11} NEVER forgives? At least that's what it seemed to me. Only concern is himself.”

Some of the tweets were more questions of disbelief than confusion, such as,

- “Wait, what? NYMA students' sense of the world was built on their idealization of Hugh Hefner & the Playboy lifestyle? #TheChoicePBS.”

Neutral/Positive Comments: The two dominant topic statements were neutral and positive comments about the documentary content. Tweets for the neutral category include statements such as,

- “#thechoicepbs ‘and Clarence Thomas never said a word.’”

Some tweets are simple statements about the documentary:

- “15 minutes to #TheChoicePBS on the West Coast.”

\textsuperscript{11} John Oliver, host of the weekly late night show on HBO, \textit{Last Week Tonight}, at one point encouraged people to use Donald Trump’s old family name that was changed at time of U.S. entry. “Drumpf” is that original name.
Lastly, some of the neutral statements are comments about remembering when things happened:

- “I remember watching the Bill and Hillary interview after the Gennifer Flowers affair. #AwkwardConversation. Watching #TheChoicePBS.”

*Positive Comments:* Most tweets praised FRONTLINE for the documentary and/or the content. Tweets include,

- “Bravo, @frontlinepbs! #TheChoicePBS was so revealing! [https://t.co/nadG2x8rM3](https://t.co/nadG2x8rM3)”
- “Highly recommend everyone watch @frontlinepbs #TheChoicePBS to learn more about BOTH Clinton and Trump. #Election2016 (Watch online too).”

Some of the positive tweets were specific to facts about a candidate:

- “@HillaryClinton has been fighting the injustice battle her entire adult life! Not ISIS! #TheChoicePBS”
- “I love the Trump showmanship! Lol #TheChoicePBS.”

*Emotions:* The “emotions” sample comprised 325 tweets. The top six emotions expressed about *The Choice 2016* are: anger (11.38%), admiration (11.08%), gratitude (6.46%), amusement (6.46%), curiosity (4.62%), and sadness (4.62%). Forty percent of the tweets coded as “none,” the highest of all three documentaries. For anger, some tweets targeted a candidate, for example,

- “I wish @HillaryClinton would have stayed home and baked cookies we'd all be better off especially 4 brave Americans #Benghazi #TheChoicePBS.”
Some of the anger was toward *FRONTLINE*, claiming they were biased:

- “#TheChoicePBS Inaccurate reporting on #Trump bankruptcy filings, Trump Sr., his marriages & misrepresentated [sic] candidacy speech & #Trump org.”

*Admiration:* Similar to the split in types of anger, admiration was also divided between *FRONTLINE* or a candidate. One example of admiration of the program is,

- “This @frontlinepbs is fantastic - finally some accurate reporting on who our candidates really are & how they came to be #TheChoicePBS.”

For admiration toward a candidate:

- “My kinda [sic] lady, ‘they don't have french bread, they don't have brie.’
  
  #TheChoicePBS.”

Gratitude is similar to the idea of admiration, however these tweets were primarily toward *FRONTLINE*. One tweet showing gratitude is:

- “@frontlinepbs thanks for #TheChoicePBS. Every voter should watch.”

Others are similar in tone.

*Curiosity:* Curiosity tweets primarily reflected people struggling with something someone had done. One tweet was concerned about the lack of tough questions from current journalists:
“Where was THAT Matt Lauer interviewer recently? No softballs there #TheChoicePBS.”

Others were more about the candidates, such as,

“Geez... I remember how bad Bill was to her & Chelsea. Sad moment in America. Can't see how you can criticize #Hillary for it. #TheChoicePBS.”

Sadness: Lastly, sadness was primarily focused on the state of the nation after such a tough election season and for the possibility of the opposing candidate winning. One such tweet is:

“Watching #TheChoicePBS makes me think it should be retitled #AnAmericanTragedy.”

But some tweets were in relation to something someone had done, such as,

“Obama releasing him [sic] birth certificate just to appease Trump still saddens me to this day. @frontlinepbs #thechoicepbs.”

As mentioned above, these emotions and themes are not surprising in the wider realm of the topic of the documentary. Elections are challenging for most people, but the 2016 election seemed particularly divisive—both on social media and in real life. The results of the content analysis for The Choice 2016 indicate a divide in reaction to the documentary. The anger directed at both candidates, as well as toward FRONTLINE, demonstrates the documentary cast a wide net on its audience, probably wider than their other documentaries. The six emotions run
the gamut from happy and positive to sad and negative. The sample includes tweets that comment on the civility of the audience (specifically the lack of trolls), on the gratitude toward *FRONLINE* for having produced this piece, to people calling the documentary “fake news.”

**Serial**

*Serial* garnered largely positive Twitter responses. The first two episodes were immediately available on October 3, 2014, with episodes being released each Thursday for the subsequent ten weeks (skipping Thanksgiving week). The final episode was released on December 18, 2014. The tweet collection covered the release of the first six episodes of the series. Preliminary sample for themes comprised 322 tweets. However, with the deletion of tweets with no match after coding and 11 disagreed upon tweets, there were 308 tweets for analysis of themes. As previously done with *The Choice 2016*, the top question category, two top comment categories, and the top five emotions will be discussed. This will provide a snapshot of the *Serial* fandom on Twitter.

Overwhelmingly, the top question category derived from the documentary content, from asking a logistical question about the documentary, such as.

- “isn't here [sic] a new episode to listen to yet? Waiting is for the birds! ;) #serialpodcast”

...to asking whether people are listening to the podcast, e.g.:

- “you are listening to #serialpodcast right? Any doubt pot dealer Jay killed the girl?”
Of the three documentary cases, *Serial* attracted the most questions asked (58 tweets with questions), but still far behind the number of tweeted comments.

Neutral/Positive Comments: The top two comments themes were again about the documentary content—both neutral (62 tweets) and positive (197 tweets). Similar to *The Choice 2016*, most of the neutral tweets were simply people quoting moments from the show, such as,

> “There's a shrimp sale at the Crab Crib! #serial”

Some simply stated they are listening/starting the podcast. The positive tweets about documentary content were mainly about how much listeners enjoyed the documentary or about humorous anecdotes from the series. One sample tweet (which is also positive toward the director) is:

> “@serial all I could think about when I woke up this AM was when I could listen to the new #serial! <3 Sarah Koenig.”

There are several tweets from individuals saying they are “obsessed” with or “addicted” to the series, some delaying sleep and other needed actions to listen to the podcast.

Emotions: Because the top comments trended positive, it is no surprise the top five emotions are more positive than those reported for the other two documentaries. The emotions sample included 323 tweets. The top five were: fascination (19.81%), curiosity (13.31%), admiration (12.38%), excitement (8.98%), and confidence (7.43%). “None” comprised 15.79%. All five of these are more positive in terms of emotion, which is an interesting outcome. Similar
to the positive comments, the fascination, admiration, and excitement tweets all reflect enjoyment of the series.

*Fascination/Admiration/Excitement:* For fascination, a sample tweet is:

- “Podcast alert! #serialpodcast by the makers of #thisamericallife is fascinating and addictive!”

Admiration includes expressions of “love” within the tweets, toward the series or Sarah Koenig:

- “Crushing hard on Sarah Koenig. #serial.”

Excitement includes anticipation for the next episode or general enthusiasm for the series:

- “Really looking forward to listen the new Serial podcast episode today!
  #serialpodcast #excited.”

*Curiosity/Confidence:* The other two categories, curiosity and confidence, differ a bit. For curiosity, people are interested in something—either about logistics about the podcast or about something within the storytelling. An example of being curious about something within the story:

- “Jay's gotta be lying, right? #serial”

A typical tweet that is more about the episode itself and less about the story that will unfold is:

- “It's Thursday, where is #Serial?!”
Confidence comes into play when people are tweeting about fan theories or stating as fact that person X committed the murder. One sample tweet is:

- “If anyone is at fault here, besides Jay (because let’s be real...), it’s Adnan’s lawyer! She didn’t do *anything*! #serialpodcast #serial.”

But there are also examples of confidence, saying *Serial* is the best podcast ever.

The top five emotions of *Serial* demonstrate the Twitter audience is overwhelmingly pleased with the series. They are excited to participate in the fandom and are eager to spread the word about the series. Unlike *The Choice*, most of the emotions are toward the podcast, not necessarily to the characters in the documentary. Fans do not express anger that Adnan did or did not do something; they react to the story as told. This is very different from the other two documentary case studies. What is hard to say, though, is whether this is due to the platform (audio versus visual), the topic discussed (election versus rape and murder), or if there is another factor. One result is categorical: *Serial*’s Twitter fans love to talk, they love to voice their opinions and argue with other fans. This will be discussed in Chapter 7: Vox Populi: Survey Results about survey results.

**Audrie & Daisy**

*Audrie & Daisy* premiered at the Sundance Film Festival on January 25, 2016 and went to Netflix on September 23, 2016. There were 340 tweets in the sample for thematic coding; however, after removing contentious tweets and tweets that had no match after coding, 327 tweets were used for thematic analysis, the largest of all samples. The top question category, two top comment categories, and the top five emotions will be discussed in the following paragraphs.
Questions: There were 22 tweets that contained questions. The most common question topic was about a specific statement (any specific statement) within the documentary, although most were directed at different statements from Sheriff Darren White of Nodaway County in Missouri (the Sheriff who handled Daisy Coleman’s rape case). One example of these tweets is:

- “How the fuck is this guy the sheriff of Maryville?! He is victim blaming and defending the rapists. I am disgusted. #AudrieAndDaisy.”

The only other category example (within the sample) of a non-Sheriff related question is...

- “#AudrieandDaisy he literally confessed to raping the 14 year old. Why wasn't he held accountable?”

. . .which is in relation to one of the boys involved in the rape of Audrie Pott. The Sheriff is particularly aggravating to anyone who watches the documentary. His views are problematic, and the documentary clearly demonstrates this.

Positive/Negative Tweets: The top two comments are polar opposites of the same category: the top comment category is positive tweets about the documentary content (137 tweets). The second category is negative tweets about the documentary content (124 tweets). Many positive tweets reflect appreciation for the documentary and the gratitude they have in Audrie and Daisy’s stories being shared. One sample tweet is:

- “#AudrieandDaisy is a very important documentary that everyone should watch, and expose their teenaged children to.”
The positive tweets often encourage others to watch the film and discuss the importance of the film being shown to people of all ages, not just teenagers. They also include tweets of inspiration, such as,

- “just watched #audrieanddaisy bless you for reaching out to help other survivors. You're an inspiration. Keep doing what you do.”

The negative tweets featured sarcasm, but also lashed out at the rapists, as well as at the Sheriff:

- “the lack of remorse and accountability shown by some of these boys is frightening [sic]! #AudrieandDaisy.”
- “#audrieanddaisy has me in tears. people are so fucking disgusting. this world is so sick.”

*Emotions: Audrie & Daisy* triggered a spectrum of emotions. Although there were emotions that were not represented (such as jealousy or boredom), *Audrie & Daisy* had the smallest number of no-emotion tweets of the three documentaries (15.43%). There was a total of 350 tweets in the sample for emotions. The top five emotion categories are: anger (36.86%), inspiration (19.14%), sadness (14.29%), admiration (9.43%), and hate (6.86%).

*Anger:* Anger is pointed mainly at Sheriff White, the rapists, and the situation of the film. One sample tweet demonstrating anger is:

- “The sheriff in #AudrieandDaisy. Omg\(^{12}\) the rubbish coming out of his mouth. He has two young daughters ffs.\(^{13}\) So angry.”

---

\(^{12}\) OMG=oh my god  
\(^{13}\) FFS=for fuck’s sake
Anger in relation to a documentary is a nuanced issue. Some anger may be considered a positive response—meaning the documentary intends to agitate the audience, so if they are, then it is doing its job. But some anger can be directed at the documentary itself when it is not trying to provoke anger. In the instance of this film, the anger can be seen as positive anger because the film is doing its job—highlighting the absurdities of the situation and bringing attention to rape culture. One example of this is:

- “This #AudrieandDaisy documentary is pissing me off. Rape is not okay.”

*Inspiration:* The second emotion, inspiration, is aimed at the women whose stories are told within the documentary. Many people are inspired by their resolve and willing to tell their story to a national audience:

- “#AudrieandDaisy is as inspirational as it is infuriating. So much respect for the brave girls behind this documentary.”

Some tweets inspire the tweeter to do something else, such as:

- “Also, watching #AudrieandDaisy has me dying to read #TheFemaleoftheSpecies by @MindyMcGinnis. stoptheshame.”

*Sadness:* Sadness, the third emotion, is nuanced in similar ways to how anger is shaded. Some sadness can be considered good, as the film is not meant to be a happy; it is a somber, thought-provoking documentary. An example of a tweet containing sadness is:

- “I watched #AudrieandDaisy at work today!! I was sobbing at my desk! It is one of the most heartbreaking things I've ever see [sic]!”
“Everyone NEEDS to watch Audrie and Daisy on Netflix! I'm actually sitting here crying. #eyeopening #AudrieandDaisy.”

**Admiration:** The fourth emotion, admiration, also follows a similar line:

“@divadaisy2015 you are so powerful, strong, and talented. Solidarity sister. #foraudrie #AudrieandDaisy.”

**Hatred:** Lastly, hate often appears in tandem with tweets showing anger, but also disgust. Most of the tweets are also pointed at the Sheriff as well. One such tweet is:

“The SHERIFF IN THIS DOCUMENTARY IS A DISGUSTING P.O.S! I hope ur daughters never have to go through that! #audrieanddaisy.”

Some of the tweets featuring hate are pointed at rape culture as well, with one stating:

“If you do anything please watch @AudrieandDaisy The shame given to rape victims is disgusting #StopTheShame #RapeIsRape.”

Unlike *Serial*, a lot of the emotion expressed toward *Audrie & Daisy* is pointed at the people within the documentary—the medium (i.e. film) is not part of tweeters’ considerations when expressing themselves. They are talking both at and to different individuals in the film. The film is designed to be both infuriating and inspiring, and these emotions are validated by the tweets. It is clear the message the directors wanted to get across found its target.
Chapter Conclusion

This chapter exemplifies the different themes and emotions for each of the three documentary case studies. It showcases how each film had different types of questions, comments, and emotions and how *Serial* differs in reaction and discussion from the other two documentaries. The author argues this is not because of the way the documentary is delivered, but because of the topic of the documentary and the ability for fans to separate themselves from the story and withdraw from the outcomes. The following chapter looks further into the *Serial* fandom and helps provide some insight into its uniqueness.
The survey for this project targeted fans of *Serial* and was administered on various social media accounts. It was posted on Facebook, Twitter, and Tumblr using targeted hashtags (e.g. #Serial, #AdnanSyed, #SarahKoenig). It was posted on reddit in the subreddits r/serialpodcast (posted twice) and r/serialpodcastorigins (posted once). It was also sent to individuals associated with documentary studies and documentary festivals requesting distribution to members, although the author is unsure whether individuals forwarded the survey. The posts asked people to complete the survey if they were age 18 or older and had posted a “comment” or asked a “question” about *Serial* on a social media platform (hereafter SMComment, for social media comment, or SMQuestion, for social media question). Following the offer of an informed consent instrument, the survey probed whether the participant had posted a SMComment or asked a SMQuestion and on which platforms. If they had not posted either, they were routed to the end of the survey. Respondents who continued were then invited to focus their responses on either one SMComment or one SMQuestion for the remainder of the survey. The survey posed predominantly closed-ended questions about the instance, with a few open-ended questions asking for clarification or thoughts about social media today. The survey requested demographic information to be entered at the end. Aside from the informed consent, none of the questions was required and participants were alerted they could discontinue the survey at any time.

The survey was open from November 19, 2016 through January 31, 2017 and received 291 total responses. One hundred thirty-five (135) reported “no” to posting a SMComment or asking a SMQuestion. Seventeen (17) respondents stopped answering after the first question. Of the 291 total responses, 152 were removed from the sample. The analysis that follows addresses
the 139 responses reported to have posted either a SMComment or SMQuestion. Of those, 117 posted a comment; 22 posted a question.

Participants were overwhelmingly white (75%), straight (75%), and female (61%). Ages varied, with participants ranging from 18-64, but 40% of the participants were aged 25-34. Participants were asked to indicate on which social media platforms they had posted a SMComment or SMQuestion. They were instructed to answer all applicable items (meaning overall, not in relation to the one example they were asked to consider for the majority of the survey). Of all major platforms, reddit was the most productive site for the Serial fandom with 92% of respondents saying they had posted a SMQuestion or SMComment on the platform (see Table 2: Use of Social Media Platform by Participants for the breakdown of responses). This could be due to the large number of survey responses gathered from the site. But this is also an interesting find. With only 7% of U.S. adults using the site (Barthel, Stocking, Holcomb, & Mitchell, 2016), reddit is far behind Facebook and Twitter in terms of use.

Table 2: Use of Social Media Platform by Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social media platform</th>
<th>Number marked/number of respondents</th>
<th>Percentage of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>reddit</td>
<td>128/139</td>
<td>92%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facebook</td>
<td>40/139</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter</td>
<td>26/139</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tumblr</td>
<td>5/139</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7/139</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
After answering about social media posts, participants were instructed to focus on either a single question or comment for the remainder of the survey. It was far more likely for a user to post a SMComment than ask a SMQuestion. Eighty-four percent posted a SMComment, while only 16% posted a SMQuestion. It should be noted that although only 16% of the population marked that they asked a question, it does not mean that those who proceeded with a comment in mind (84%) had not also asked a question. In the paragraphs that follow, analyses will be split between those who asked a question and those who posted a comment. It will then be synthesized and discussed in Chapter 9: Discussion.

**SMQuestions**

Of the 139 respondents considered, 22 reported posting a SMQuestion, but the responses concerning questions should still be considered in the wider realm of the *Serial* fandom. Unfortunately, however, not all responses were filled in, with only 15 of the 22 SMQuestion participants reporting on what type of SMQuestion they asked on social media. Of the 15 SMQuestions reported, 7 (47%) were about a person appearing within the documentary (e.g. a question pertaining to Adnan or Jay); 5 (33%) were about the topic of the documentary (e.g. the murder of Hae Min Lee); and 3 (20%) asked how to get involved with the issue (e.g. how to help Adnan or Jay).

Out of all 22 responses, twelve people (80%) did not expect a response, but 13 (87%) actually did receive a response to their SMQuestion, and the conversation continued after having a response for ten people (46%). It is interesting that although people did not expect a response, they still tweeted, Facebooked, posted on reddit, or wrote an entry on Tumblr. What is unknown (in this instance) is the extent and nature of the conversation. Was it just an additional comment?
An answer? Did it develop into a long thread? Whether it encouraged the poster to continue communicating on a particular social media platform? This is an area for further research.

The nature of SMQuestions varied, but when asked why a respondent had asked a question, many of the responses were related to wanting clarification. One person wanted to antagonize the opposing viewpoint (including a “haha” in the response), while another assumed everyone else knew more than the poster did and was “interested in asking people what they thought” about their ideas relating to the series.

**SMComments**

SMComments were overwhelmingly the largest category of responses from the survey 117/139 (84%). Similar to SMQuestions, most people, 65/117 (56%) did not expect a response, but many 47/117 (40%) did receive a response, and of the 117 SMComments posted, 35/117 (30%) ended up involved in continuing conversations. However, these lower numbers are due to skipped questions by respondents; they do not accurately show the number of responses and continued conversations. In terms of documentary dialogues, this is a particularly intriguing finding worthy of further investigation.

Given the larger sample of SMComments versus SMQuestions, there was more variety in topics covered within comments, with the topic of the documentary (e.g. Adnan’s innocence) having the largest slice of the pie, at 35/117 (30%). One person reported commenting because it was a conversation they often had in offline life and wanted to include it in their online life as well. Another person simply wanted an opinion to be heard. Some felt compelled to add a comment, saying they needed to correct someone or argue with a point made. One person on the list said none of their friends listened to *Serial*, so their only outlet was the online community.
This is probably a common sentiment, but again it reveals a potentially rich avenue for future research in how social media dialogues expand one’s range of interpersonal contacts beyond face-to-face circles.

Some individuals said they posted because they felt they needed to express concern about the journalistic integrity of the piece as weak, misreported, or purposefully omitting information. For example, one person said they posted a comment because, “Adnan is clearly guilty, and there’s a PR campaign to get him out of prison that will go to any length to make that happen.”

These responses suggest that although people are engaged in the documentary podcast, they do not necessarily believe in the facts of the report. They are engaged, but not from a journalistic perspective. In terms of documentary dialogues, this suggests audience members are engaged with the material but not because they accept it as a source of empirical evidence. Something else, the narrative structure, the topic, the delivery channel, etc., is attracting the listener.

Serial’s Message(s)

A classic model of communication (the Shannon-Weaver model) once viewed content as being transmitted directly from a sender through a channel to a receiver, but modern social science rejects this simplistic scheme. All manner of variables act upon any message, especially one generated for a mass audience, to affect not only how the sender “encodes” content, but also how a receiver “decodes” the same content. This is the essence of Stuart Hall’s encoding/decoding model (Hall, 1980). In this model, Person A encodes and sends a specific message in a way that makes sense to themselves and, hopefully, to their audience. Person B, who is the audience, receives that message and decodes it in a way that makes the most sense to them. Sometimes this aligns, and other times it does not. In face-to-face dialogues, there are
many factors that impact both ends of the encoding/decoding process, such as nonverbal communication cues and other contextual information within the conversation. Still, the researcher is required to deduce intent from these kinds of unspoken cues. Social media comments and questions offer an entry point to assess what a “decoder” is thinking or feeling, and possibly how they are “encoding” subsequent posts.

Message creators, in the present case documentary filmmakers, also have myriad reasons for developing nonfiction programming. Collaborating producers add another variable—the influence of each creator as well as the synergy resulting from the partnership. Context matters, as reflected in *Serial*’s airing during Halloween, which infuses “serial killer” themes into a holiday tradition, or the scandal erupting from Donald Trump’s misogyny during election 2016. And also in the case of *Serial*, being a podcast meant some listeners consumed the message simultaneously while others did so individually, again each in his or her own context. The reason the Shannon-Weaver model has fallen from grace is that it fails to account for the organismic nature of communication. In terms of documentary dialogues, the single message, the program or report, can be interpreted myriad ways. Some documentary producers and creators see their work as a way to engage audiences into civic action. But others regard documentary as a form of expression, less a matter of “dialogue” and more like a message sent by a creator to be consumed as desired but without further explanation. The survey results of this study, coupled with the social media analysis, begin to provide a sense of the complexity of documentary dialogues.

In the case of *Serial*, the Koenig team utilized social media to help facilitate their storytelling and message delivery in multiple ways (in addition to its use as a promotion tool). Having official Tumblr, Twitter, and Facebook accounts helped them clarify, respond, and share additional information. It aided the team in determining how a message was received and
whether they needed to adapt their storytelling or clarify something in a subsequent episode. Social media provided channels for the audience to communicate, and in some sense collaborate, with the Koenig team. Some audience input affected subsequent episodes (such as a conversation that happened with Hae’s boyfriend Don at the time of her murder, who reached out to Koenig after having listened to the podcast). This is a breakthrough development for documentary communication.

Participants on the survey were asked what they thought the basic point Koenig was trying to convey to the audience. Responses loosely fall into four categories: the podcast was simply an entertaining story, it was something relating to the justice system, it discussed the subjectivity of truth, or it was simply a telling of Adnan Syed’s story. Each category seems to break the bonds of the surface title. A few individuals shared interesting insights into changes in Serial’s message throughout the series. One person said, “I felt that at first the message was the witness memory is unreliable. By the end I felt it was about the journalist’s own doubts.” Another person argued that Serial struggled with their message: “I think Serial struggled a little with what it was trying to do, but the overall impression I was left with was how crime convictions are not certainties, but probabilities and a close examination of the probable often creates doubt. Whether that doubt is reasonable or not is another issue.”

Although these insights can fit into one of the four categories discussed below, they are important to think about separately as it shows the audience is aware of changing messages throughout a series. The “entertaining story” category encompasses both positive and negative aspects. Some people seemed okay with this, usually saying something akin to, “I think they were trying to tell an entertaining story.” Others were more divisive and/or skeptical, “A good story is more important than uncovering the truth”; and “I think they were communicating an
entertaining story I would consume so they could receive ad revenue.” [As a *TAL*/NPR spin-off, the program was commercial free.]

Comments about the justice system boiled down to people thinking the show was trying to convey the flaws and unfair treatment of Adnan Syed during his trial to expose general problems in the criminal justice system. Some of these included statements like, “Something seemed amiss about the trial, and that another trial is needed. The lack of any forensics alone demands another trial”; and “The criminal justice system in our country is significantly flawed, and how human bias and opinion can significantly impact the lives of others.”

The last part of this response leads to another facet of justice system responses: that some individuals thought *Serial* was about the bias or flawed memory of eyewitness accounts. Another statement relating to this point is, “The nature of memory is flawed and susceptible to influence.”

These statements are not unusual within the documentary genre. Errol Morris’s *The Thin Blue Line* (1988) specifically deals with the unintentional tricks memory can play on someone—many different people can witness the same event and come away with different stories. One point that has been interesting to observe throughout this study is the variety of ideas listeners take from hearing the story. Similar to how someone can witness something and pick up and retain different parts, people can listen to *Serial* and come to different conclusions. This discussion of subjectivity of memory leads into the third category: the subjectivity of truth. Some of this category can blend with part of the previous category, but they are still separate. These include responses like, “Truth is not merely a set of facts”; and “Guilt is relative and contested.”

The last category determined from the survey responses relates to a simple retelling of Adnan’s story. These ranged from positive comments (toward Adnan), such as, “A young man was imprisoned for a murder that he might not have committed,” to a more negative comment,
like, “That Adnan (and probably Jay) were involved in the murder of Hae Min Lee.” Individuals within the subreddits for *Serial* run the gamut as to whether they believe Adnan is innocent or guilty, so these bookends are not surprising. But this might be the closest to what Koenig tried to convey. In an interview with *Fresh Air*’s Terry Gross in December 2014, shortly after the final episode of season one, Koenig said she was merely trying to report on and reopen a murder case. She, “wanted it to feel like a live thing . . . a *vital* thing in the sense of the word of being a living thing – as we went. And we were still reporting last week for the final episode” (Gross, 2014, para. 5, emphasis in original). Koenig also told Gross that she tried to stay away from comments and stories due to having a thin skin, which echoed comments among her fans on the subreddit. Although she stayed away from the subreddit and other media in relation to the podcast, Koenig paid attention to her fans, recognizing their energy in the lead up to season two. As evidenced in episodes in the second half of season one, there were some conversations and individuals who stepped forward after listening to the podcast, although they were not merely fans, but also individuals who were in high school or knew Hae and/or Adnan. Fans’ voices were incorporated outside of the podcast, with Koenig’s recognition of them during her speaking tour and in the Innocence Project’s case on Adnan Syed.

**Why Communicate with the Director?**

Fans have a keen desire to communicate with their favorite creative artists, musicians, actors, and directors (Booth, 2010; Chin, 2013). With the advent of social media, this is now easier than ever. Some fans on reddit and other major hubs for *Serial* are no different. However, there is a fair share of individuals who reported they did not want to interact with the director, or never expect to. Following are three main categories from the survey responses that further
explain this result: people who want to engage the director and have a discussion, people with questions who want to better understand something, and people with no interest in interacting with the director. In all categories, some reasons are very pointed and divisive such as, “To ask her why she doesn’t give credit to others.”

*People Who Want to Engage the Director*

The types of responses collected within the “discussion” category range across types pertaining to the desire to communicate with Koenig. Some people want to “raise awareness for ethical questions in true crime podcasts,” while others want to talk to Koenig and her team so they can “know their opinions, but also I would like to meet them and see if I can discern any bias they may have.” Some people simply want to discuss the series with her and learn about her thoughts outside of the podcast.

*People with Questions*

The second category that closely ties to discussion is the category of those asking questions to better understand points made or issues raised within the podcast. Responses for this group range from asking about how the podcast was recorded, what parts were left on the cutting room floor, to “dig more into the details,” and to better one’s understanding of the podcast and the story it told.

*People with No Interest in Interacting*

Lastly, there were quite a few who either did not want to or did not see the point in directing any of their questions or comments toward the director. As mentioned, some cited the
fact that Koenig was outspoken about not looking at discussions. Others were offended due to
the way the story was reported, charging that Koenig “sacrificed journalism for entertainment.”
Some simply did not have any desire to contact the directors. One person who identified as a
“producer,” said they wouldn’t want to be “inundated with the same question 500 times [or] all
the negative commentary, but I’d definitely keep an eye on the posts. Thousands of minds are
better than one.” This is both a combination of not only wanting to post, but also understanding
the benefits of reading posts from a director’s point of view. Overall, many of the reasons people
stated they wanted to communicate with the director align with why people said they posted a
Social Media Comment or Social Media Question on Twitter. It would appear that although
people may not necessarily want to reach the director with their thoughts and questions, they still
feel an urge to share. This raises questions about whether an individual seeks to engage a
documentary director or merely wants to communicate and possibly be acknowledged within the
social media community.

Two-Way Communication: Audience’s View

The final open-ended question within the survey is a continuation of the previous section
but delves more into the two-way communication the audience can now have with the directors,
rather than the subject of their questions. It tries to explore the core question of the desire and
amount of involvement people want. Participants were asked to explain what this two-way
communication means as a member of a documentary audience. Three main categories emerged:
the formation of community and ability to continue discussion, the option to have a conversation
with the director, and opposite of these: they wanted nothing but to voice their thoughts.
Overwhelmingly, people were looking forward most to the ability to form a community and continue discussions even after the completion of an episode, or ultimately the season. The first season of *Serial* aired in the fall of 2014, wrapping up in December 2014, yet conversations about season one are still happening on reddit and other platforms. Searching #serialpodcast on Twitter produces relevant and recent tweets about season one (and subsequent season two and the spin-off, *S-Town*). Although Koenig and the *Serial* team aren’t actively posting on Tumblr, people are still blogging and reblogging original content. Along these lines, one person responded that these online communities offer, “Greater longevity of the subject. . . . I still follow more than a year after *Serial* ended and am still following with interest details of the case. I’ve never had this level of immersion in a documentary before.” This last point—about immersion—is important. This immersion and the communities formed on these platforms are integral to the continuation of a fandom. One person said, “You’re not a member of the audience, you’re a member of the community and are all going through it together. The first thing I do now when I start a new podcast now is follow everyone on Twitter.” This particular person has enjoyed the experience so much in the *Serial* community that they now mimic their involvement with other podcasts, which is something fans of fiction do as well (usually at differing levels of engagement). This practice is growing the reality of the nonfiction fandom.

*Having a Conversation with the Director*

The second category of responses was the ability to have a conversation with or offer feedback to the director. This category ranges from positive feedback, congratulating them and wanting additional information, to criticizing them and hoping directors see their comments and
change/adapt the program. In other words, the respondents are seeking entrée into the documentary production process. One person’s response mixed praise with criticism, saying, “getting feedback for stuff like this is important. And feedback on social media sties is direct, uncensored, and personal, so it should give the authors some idea of what they’re doing right, and what they’re not.” The two-way communication on social media offers the ability for individuals at all levels to express, to listen, and to experience the fandom, which in turn can help or hurt the product fans enjoy. It allows fans the ability to ask the questions and to “interact with directors/producers as well, which allows us behind the scenes and to also interact in a way that did not exist prior to social media.” But there are critics of this ability to have a discussion. Some don’t like feeling watched by “the powers that be,” while others simply don’t expect or believe they will ever have communication with the director. Some quoted Sarah Koenig’s aversion to social media; others just doubted the ability to have communication with the director in general. Some labeled the Serial “fandom” as being different, with one person saying, “I think the sort of ‘fandom’ if you will is less about dialogue with the author or subject and more about interaudience interaction.” This concept of interaudience interaction specifically acknowledges how most fandoms communicate, grow, and develop through involvement with other fans. This suggests that fans of nonfiction and documentary behave the same way as fans of fictional media.

It’s clear that this two-way communication is not going away soon. Documentaries (i.e. One Day on Earth and Life in a Day), are using their audiences to contribute, podcasts like Serial are using their fans to help solve crimes and address issues, and FRONTLINE and Audrie & Daisy both intentionally engage their audiences on different platforms to further discussion on the topic and educate society. Every new communication technology has its critics, and this new
ability to communicate back and forth on social media with directors is no different. But early indications suggest the infusion of social media into documentary dialogues can be viewed as a good thing, as a way to grow an audience and fan-base, and as a way to further distribute the message that is being conveyed.
CHAPTER 8: DOCUMENTARY ENCODING: FILMMAKER/SOCIAL MEDIA MANAGER INTERVIEWS

This researcher interviewed three filmmakers and two FRONTLINE digital and social media editors for this project:

- Eric Murphy, *Traficant: The Congressman of Crimetown (Traficant)* (2016)
- Sarah Moughty, former Digital Media Editor, FRONTLINE
- Pam Johnston, Senior Director of Audience Development, FRONTLINE

Each person was contacted individually via email and asked to participate in the project. An overview of the topic was presented to them prior to the interview, but questions were not.

Because of geographic distance, all interviews were conducted either by phone, WebEx, or Skype. With consent, all were audio recorded; two were video recorded in addition to audio. The interviews lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. The three filmmakers had the same base set of questions with some filmmaker-specific questions. The two individuals from FRONTLINE had the same base set of questions as well.

*Squee! The Fangirl Documentary (Squee!)* (2017), by Hansi Oppenheimer, is a web-series about fangirls for fangirls. The first, and as of this writing the only, published episode explains the term “fangirl,” connotations of the word, and how women are reclaiming the label. Oppenheimer has additional episodes planned and in production about race and gender in fandoms, specifically relating to fangirls. Although Oppenheimer said her target audience was
other fangirls, there is still a level of general education that can appeal to and inform a wider audience. Oppenheimer originally planned to produce a feature length documentary, but quickly realized the amount of material could not be addressed in a single film. She doesn’t have a planned end for the series and hopes to continue until discussions about the topic are exhausted. Her series has been selected for screenings by various ComicCons and popular culture conferences.

Jeanie Finlay has produced and directed several films over the years, including *Goth Cruise* (2008), *Sound It Out* (2011), *The Great Hip Hop Hoax* (2013), and *Orion: The Man Who Would Be King* (2015). Her newest film, *Orion: The Man Who Would Be King*, was the primary film discussed during the interview, although others are referenced throughout the discussion. The film looks at the life and career of the character known as Orion, enacted by Jimmy Ellis, who arrived on the scene after Elvis Presley. His voice and style of music were similar, if not identical, to Elvis. Ellis’s stage name “Orion” comes from the novel *Orion* by Gail Brewer-Giorgio, and it became his performance persona. Orion wore a mask in his performances and public appearances, begging the question, who is the man behind the mask? Finlay explores the story of Orion: his career, fame, and ultimate murder. The documentary also explores the origin of the “Elvis is Alive” myth, linking it to Orion as an intentional gambit.

Eric Murphy’s *Traficant: The Congressman of Crimetown (Traficant)* (2016), uses a combination of archival footage and interviews to explore the rise and fall of Representative Jim Traficant of Youngstown, Ohio. Murphy grew up in the Northeast region of Ohio, as did several individuals in the documentary, some notable such as actor Ed O’Neill and boxer Ray “Boom Boom” Mancini. Murphy said that he did not necessarily have an audience or message in mind
but hoped his audience took away a story about a unique individual (Traficant) from a unique place (Youngstown, Ohio).

Sarah Moughty and Pam Johnston were the two individuals interviewed from FRONTLINE. Moughty is the former Digital Editor of FRONTLINE; Johnston is the current Senior Director of Audience Development. Moughty formerly oversaw the editorial and production of content on all FRONTLINE digital platforms, while Johnston’s team works more closely with social media.

These five interviews produced two main themes: the importance of crowdfunding in building an audience, and audience engagement through social media. The FRONTLINE interviews also reflected the importance of knowing and understanding how audiences differ across platforms.

The term “crowdsourcing” refers to the act of soliciting anything from a crowd: help/aid, information, monetary funds, pictures, videos, et cetera. “Crowdfunding” is a narrower form of crowdsourcing, asking a crowd to donate money to a particular goal. However, the act of soliciting donations to finance a film is also a form of advertising and promotion. In addition, the model creates a literal and figurative “buy-in” on the part of potential audience members. This is not unlike the fervent fan base that exists in Green Bay, Wisconsin, where the professional football team, the Green Bay Packers, is owned by individual fans. The proprietary nature of the fan relationship reputedly fuels intense commitment to the Packers fan base. In the case of crowdfunded documentaries, the process affords the opportunity for “fans” to not only express an interest in the film, topic, and/or filmmakers’ output, but also to own a stake in the property, which means they are more likely to view the final program and also to share (promote) its existence with others in their networks. Although the process is not malevolent in its goals, it
effects a kind of “subversive” networking to operate under the radar of mainstream, institutional, authoritarian enterprises. This is an as yet unexplored aspect of crowdfunding and documentary media.

Crowdfunding to Build an Audience

It was clear from all of the interviews that crowdfunding is an essential tool used by documentary directors to develop and engage an audience early in the process. Although there were differences in the platform each director favored, all agree that social media is essential in developing a fan base and consistent audience base.

Each filmmaker coincidentally used crowdfunding to finance their latest films. Crowdfunding taps into the fans and audiences of “grassroots creative projects” to amass monetary backing and support (Bennett, Chin, & Jones, 2014). Most often, these campaigns are filtered through a website or platform, such as Kickstarter or GoFundMe. Other sites are available, and each of the three documentary filmmakers used a different platform. Oppenheimer used IndieGoGo to fund her series and has since used Patreon to host her web-series, and as a channel to request donations from viewers to watch the webisode. Finlay used GoFundMe to fund Orion and Sound It Out. When Finlay created Sound It Out (which was one of the first crowdfunded films in the UK), Kickstarter was unavailable outside of the United States, so she chose GoFundMe. She continued with the same service when funding Orion. After the initial release of Orion, Finlay also used a service called Thunderclap, which used social media accounts for willing individuals to broadcast information to large groups simultaneously about the documentary. Murphy had two different Kickstarter campaigns to help fund Traficant. He also released the film first on the online video service Vimeo, which accepted payment for
viewing. (This is more akin to purchasing a ticket to view the film and is not considered crowdfunding).

The filmmakers all seemed to agree that although crowdfunding is laborious, it helps create an audience even before the film is created/released. This engaged audience might then follow directors to another project, as was the case for Finlay, who used IndieGoGo for two different documentaries, one subsequent to the other. Finlay found that some of the individuals who backed Sound It Out in 2011 also backed her 2015 project, Orion, because they appreciated her previous work. Finlay and her creative team also used the Orion crowdfunding to demonstrate audience strength in the film to attain additional funding from government entities, such as BBC’s Storyville.

Crowdfunding is an interesting way to build an audience before a documentary is released. Murphy sees crowdfunding as a way to engage his audience early, which he sees as integral to filmmaking, stating, “I think when you’re growing an audience on social media as a doc filmmaker you should start as early as possible so you’re engaging the audience . . . from the beginning.” He sees this early and ongoing audience engagement similarly to how Finlay uses her audience information—as leverage for future funding and distribution. Murphy argues, “the more you can engage an audience, the more leverage you’re going to have when it comes to negotiating [distribution deals].”

Documentaries are not the only places where people are taking the crowdfunding route. Director Rob Thomas famously used Kickstarter in 2013 to (very successfully) fund a Veronica Mars movie, a CW network television show that was cancelled in 2007. The fan-backed film was funded (within 8 hours of starting), filmed, and later released in theatres and video-on-demand in March 2014.
But not all campaigns are successful. Kickstarter is an all-or-nothing deal, meaning if the goal is unmet, none of the money is released to the (in this case) director. Kickstarter is also synonymous with rewards for each “level” of funding—the more a person gives, the better the reward(s). Some of these might be a social media shout-out (for a low monetary level) or a signed copy of the DVD when the film is released (for a medium monetary level) or a one-on-one Skype chat with the director (for a higher monetary level). Platforms such as IndieGoGo and GoFundMe are guaranteed to deliver whatever money is raised. Even if the goal is not met, the director can still acquire partial monetary aid. Rewards are options with IndieGoGo and GoFundMe, and several campaigns offer no rewards. Hansi Oppenheimer used GoFundMe, but ultimately felt uncomfortable, stating: “I’m really not a fan of asking people for money without being able to offer them anything. Yeah, it just feels like begging, it doesn’t feel good.” She is much more comfortable with Patreon, which asks for people to donate prior to watching. She feels that people are buying the ability to watch the webisode instead of donating money to the project. Although useful, crowdfunding is not the only way the three directors connected with their audience on a digital platform.

**Audience Engagement Through Social Media**

The second theme that dominated the interviews was how Twitter and other social media platforms were used to start discussions with and inform, and connect to fans and audiences. All three directors use at least Facebook and Twitter. Finlay uses Instagram, and Oppenheimer uses Tumblr and Instagram in addition to Facebook and Twitter. *FRONTLINE* is present on all of the major social media platforms (which will be discussed in detail below). Although each favored one platform over others, they all agreed it was important to have some digital footprint. The
three films *Squee!*, *Orion*, and *Traficant* each have a Facebook page created specifically for the film, but they also have an accompanying director page.

Although each of Finlay’s films has its own social media profile, the director sees it as more important to having her own personal Twitter as the go-to handle for her audience, stating, “it’s sort of better that people associate films with me rather than just the film.” She acknowledges that each of her films attracts a different audience, meaning it can be hard to keep up with personalized tweets for each film, especially after she has moved on to another film. (This also alludes to the unique nature of documentary programming. Although there are generic characteristics that associate documentaries into a group, in fact each is so individualized that it becomes complex not only to classify documentaries for study, but also to assume that a documentary by a particular director will also attract an audience to the next film by the same director. In terms of nonfiction fandoms, this raises questions about whether the fandoms revolve around the personality of the director, the film, or some other combination of factors.) Unlike Finlay, Oppenheimer uses Twitter and Instagram as both personal and branded platforms for *Squee*. In her mind, the topic and her identity are so intertwined, it’s hard to find a distinction between the two. Reflecting on this, Oppenheimer states: “It’s kind of like the project really . . . is kind of me. It’s not really separate from me because I am a fangirl and I go to cons [popular culture conventions]. And I do all those things. So it’s kind of hard to separate.” She does recognize, however, that as her project grows she will need to develop a division separating *Squee!* from her professional persona.

To help with this division, Finlay hired an intern to help manage social media for the release of *Orion*. The team used film-specific hashtags to engage their audience and encourage the creation and submission of photographs. #IAmOrion and #MyOrion were used by audiences
to submit pictures of themselves donning masks or sharing stories about their connection to Orion and his music. The team then retweeted and interacted with these responses, even displaying a gallery of picture submissions on the Orion website. When someone backed Orion on IndieGoGo, Finlay and her team publicly thanked that person on Facebook and Twitter and tried to interact with each person, adding a layer of intimacy. (This action is not unlike the actions taken by many public broadcasting member drives. Often when someone donates, that person is thanked on air or in a publication.) The commitment is time-consuming, but social media has also been an outlet for Finlay to brand herself as a filmmaker and to connect with people she feels she wouldn’t have been able to reach otherwise: “I think sometimes people forget that you know in amongst all the trolls and the trash that social media is all . . . made up of real people. So sometimes it’s just a way of making a connection.” (This raises another interesting question worthy of exploration and regarding how documentary dialogues and fandoms are not universally supportive. There is a range of attitudes and personalities represented within nonfiction fandoms. Given the generally positive or altruistic intent involved in documentary expression, the reasons that trigger the appearance of trolls or rejecters are as important as the reasons a film or filmmaker invites praise.) These connections range from fans of hers to well-known names, such as Colin Hanks (son of actor Tom Hanks), and Jon Wurster (drummer from the American indie rock band Superchunk). Murphy also has a similar sentiment regarding social media, citing the accessibility of spreading the word about himself and his film, saying, “that’s a huge plus for social media and oftentimes it’s very immediate you know, someone watches it, they’re going to tweet about it.” This immediate response that Murphy points to is common among live-tweeters—tweeting during the actual viewing—especially among viewers who watch something alone (Schirra, Sun, & Bentley, 2014).

14 To view some of the submissions, visit: http://www.orionthemovie.com/myorion/.
Finlay teamed with Dr. Judith Aston, Co-founder of i-Docs and Senior Lecturer in Filmmaking and Creative Media at the University of the West of England to build and study the audience of *Orion*. Aston wrote a summary of the approach to the creation of *Orion*, their study, and attention paid to their audience. Aston explains “wraparound filmmaking,” a term the pair coined during the documentary making process, defined as “moving beyond the creation of story extensions which sit alongside a film towards creating interventions which are integral to the mechanics of the film’s actual making and viewing” (p. 7). Although similar to the idea of Jenkins’s transmedia—defined as, “Stories that unfold across multiple media platforms, with each medium making distinctive contributions to our understanding of the world, a more integrated approach to franchise development than models based on urtexts and ancillary products” (Jenkins, 2008, p. 336)—wraparound filmmaking also veers from Jenkins’s concept. Wraparound filmmaking specifically strives to create new avenues for audience members to get involved before and after viewing the documentary (such as the two aforementioned hashtags). “We want to make cinema going a memorable live event and to find ways to build audience engagement from pre-production right through to distribution.” Aston continues,

> We want audiences to become invested in the story by allowing them to make their own creative interventions, whether by advising on subject matter and story, by sourcing and creating content, or by participating in events around the film’s screening. (p. 6)

Not all elements of Finlay and Aston’s use of wraparound filmmaking were digital. The team did not want to have an entirely digital interaction and intentionally had other non-Internet, physical activities to engage the audience (e.g. the creation of masks or the inclusion of Orion impersonators before screenings). This intentional engagement is a prime example of how directors use social media avenues to connect and build a fan-base, which is helpful and integral
to a successful career. But these activities also indicate how documentary directors actively seek to control how they “encode” their films with cues during the pre-building of audiences.

**FRONTLINE’ s Use of Social Media**

The use of social media differs for a larger, more established, institutional documentary series. Many of the actions taken by Sarah Moughty and her (former) team and Pam Johnston and her team are important considerations for filmmakers of any documentary feature, podcast, or serial.

At FRONTLINE, the Digital Media, Editorial and Audience Development teams work together closely and are very intentional in how they use various social media platforms and what they post on the website. Although each person in Johnston’s five-member team is trained on all platforms, there is one primary person for each platform put in charge of cadence, language, and content on that particular social media channel. For each episode that is live-tweeted, a person is assigned to work on a script based on the film and surrounding information—a key example of “encoding”—in the weeks leading to the premiere. The person then live tweets the episode (the tweets are not scheduled) on the night of the premiere. They frequently invite a person associated with and/or knowledgeable about the subject matter to live tweet as well. These individuals have not seen the film prior to its broadcast (meaning tweets are spontaneous reactions—of both “decoding” and then “encoding”).

Johnston said the goal of her team is to drive people to view the film and to engage in the subject, whether that is through social media, live broadcast, FRONTLINE’s interactive website, or through podcast/audio options. They want to offer a variety of ways their fans can access journalistic content in whichever way(s) they desire. Johnston states that the goal is “figuring out
how to grow our audience, how to identify our audience, and connect our journalism with audiences everywhere.” Social media is thus essential.

*FRONTLINE* also had created a variety of unique channels, including all of the major social media platforms (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube). Moughty argues that, “We’re public media and we should be where people are gathered.” They see the point of social media presence as a way to alert their audiences of the stories being broadcasted and encourage them to watch the full film or read a longer report of the subject. Johnston sees social media as an “entry point.” Each documentary has a relevant and special hashtag, based on the documentary title, that is associated with each tweet, allowing for audiences and fans to look to/back at a collection of tweets. *FRONTLINE*’s team retweets and interacts with viewer tweets during the episode. This interaction, what Johnston calls an “experience,” allows for an increased engagement between audiences and *FRONTLINE*’s social media team, possibly driving audiences to become fans (and future contributors to *FRONTLINE* or public television) and thus return on a more regular basis to the series.

Part of *FRONTLINE*’s success is their understanding of their audiences on different social media platforms. As already discussed, all five members know each platform, but there is one primary person assigned to each platform. Johnston and her team are cognizant of the differing audiences on the different platforms. Facebook has the largest community for *FRONTLINE*, with (as of writing) 1.3 million followers. These individuals, according to Johnston, are a broad net of viewers and people of all ages and occupations. However, Twitter, which has a smaller net of people (259,000 followers as of writing), has a more precise group. Johnston states these individuals are primarily journalists or individuals who “care particularly deeply about one particular thread of reporting that we do . . . So these people care much more
about like getting into the nitty gritty, in the weeds of our reporting.” She continues, these individuals have a different “news appetite” than those on Facebook. Johnston explains further: “it’s different and that’s okay. That’s actually great. It allows us to be more thoughtful and creative about our voice and style and cadence.” They are more detailed on Twitter than they are on Facebook, and why is an important thing for any director to understand. It is more than just knowing your audience; it is knowing how to interact with your audience on each individual social media platform. This revelation again expands our understanding of nonfiction/documentary fandoms and documentary dialogues, because it parses out differences among different kinds of viewers and their needs. This will inform future research questions about the specific needs of viewers depending on social media platform.

With the addition of social media into the mixture of audience outreach for any and all directors who wish to utilize the platforms, the traditional one-way communication has greatly expanded and been replaced by possible two-way communication, as well as community-based communication. Fans can now reach each other through their social media accounts to their favorite actors or directors to comment, ask questions, or just simply to interact at varying levels with that person and other fans. Directors have to decide to what extent and how they are going to interact with their audiences. For FRONTLINE, both Johnston and Moughty agree that this two-way communication ability hasn’t changed or altered their reporting; their goal is to still have solid journalistic pieces that try to answer questions, not confirm answers. But, that’s not to say that they don’t consider their audience when deciding what films to produce or how they advertise the films. Johnston states, “we are not audience led when it comes to what kind of content we’re going to report on but audience-kind-of reinforced.” Meaning, FRONTLINE chooses stories that they think need to be told and considers multiple sources of information,
including their audience interests. Both Johnston and Moughty state that the interaction on social media between *FRONTLINE* and their audience has been amazing. Social media allows for a rapid spread of information—real, accurate, misleading, and fake—and this rapid spread is a great benefit to a journalistic venture such as *FRONTLINE*. Johnston loves that *FRONTLINE*’s fans can reach out to her team at any time on any platform and know that there is a possibility of reaching back. Moughty agrees, saying the live tweeting and interaction on Twitter has given people “an opportunity to have a conversation that, you know, that really didn’t exist before—whether it was, you know, with our filmmaker or with somebody else that was featured in the film.” Johnston adds,

> It has changed our world amazingly and quickly and I think . . . to be able to get that information, to be able to have these conversations, and to be able to have access to not only media organizations, but people in power, is incredible and important. . . . there’s never been a more incredible or exciting time to be in media. . . . I think it’s an exciting space and social [media] has made that even more exciting, right? We all have a voice that can be heard.

Not only have audiences been able to connect with *FRONTLINE*, but they also connect with each other. Moughty cites an example of a group of fans who watched an episode and wanted to help the subject of the film. They formed an online community (Moughty thinks on Facebook), contacted the film subject, and tried to help and support his legal battles. This action is not unlike the community that formed shortly after the start of *Serial* back in 2014 (and actively continues today). In effect, then, the simple “dialogue” involving documentary filmmakers and their audiences, and the nature of documentary fandoms, must be expanded to another concentric circle of people who are inspired to act by virtue of the dialogue. From a
documentary perspective, this seems to represent the epitome of documentary expression—to take a subject of import and interest, express it in documentary form, share it with an audience, and engage and inspire the audience to act to resolve the issue. It would seem to offer the ideal form of persuasive communication that obliterates the simplistic, dated Shannon-Weaver sender/receiver interpretation.

Chapter Conclusion

The information gleaned from Moughty and Johnston is important for film directors (of fictional and nonfictional ventures) to consider when setting up social media for their film(s). They need to know not only who their fans are, but also how they want or intend to interact with them, what platform(s) their fans are on, if the type of fan differs between platforms (as it does for FRONTLINE), and the type of language and topics shared on the social media platforms.

Information shared by Oppenheimer, Finlay, and Murphy is pertinent and poignant in a time of growing social media and what seems to be a new golden age for documentary in the Internet/Social Media era. But unlike the previous golden age of broadcast documentaries, defined largely by program quality and number of programs aired, in this case there are indications that the larger number of documentary filmmakers afforded by accessible digital media technology and online delivery channels is amplified by virtue of indications of actual connections to audiences, the expansion of fandoms for nonfiction programming, and a willingness to engage and get involved in resolving issues of the public sphere. It is important for directors to understand what message they are trying to get across and acknowledge the message that is getting across to their audience. When these do not align, it is important for the director to evaluate their social media presence and adapt their language to the desired message. Social
media is more than just posting a few times a day or week. It is a constant negotiation between director and audience as written messages can quickly get misinterpreted or construed for a different meaning. It is dialogue.

The next chapter will synthesize the information and results from the different methods. It will connect this project to the wider fan studies literature and discuss the implications of this study.
CHAPTER 9: DISCUSSION

This project has analyzed tweets for three documentary cases and analyzed how fans and audience members for each documentary react to and report on documentary topics and the emotions that accompany these discussions. This dissertation has surveyed responses by *Serial* fans and analyzed how and why fans communicated online. This study has also engaged in interviews with three documentary filmmakers and two *FRONTLINE* social media/web professionals. These interviews were particularly useful in providing insight into how directors and social media managers try to communicate with their audiences. This chapter will now synthesize this information related to the dialogues established by creators and consumers of documentary material. Because of the paucity of literature on fan and fandoms pertaining to nonfiction genres, this chapter presents an initial conceptual framework for future fan studies literature. How can we take what is now known about documentary fans and audiences and provide insight for documentary filmmakers to improve their outreach? How can we assess how audiences decode documentary films, television programs, and online podcasts to better understand issues and topics? These questions tread new ground in some areas of fandom/documentary studies, while clarifying and expanding other aspects of the existing literature. The hope is that this chapter and dissertation will trigger a new research vein fueling more examinations about documentary fans and audiences and how they compare to those for fictional media.

**Social Media Channels and Encoding/Decoding**

The results of this study seem particularly applicable to Stuart Hall’s theory of message encoding and decoding (Hall, 1980). The theory indicates that the encoding and decoding of a
documentary message are impacted by multiple factors of the communicative process, including one’s life experiences, knowledge, and ability to read/comprehend messages. In the case of documentary messages, Hall’s theory can be applied to look at how audiences decode a message and then act on it. For example, what Koenig knows about Baltimore and the murder of Hae Min Lee is encoded into the episodes of *Serial*. However, if the receiver (the audience) is unaware or does not understand something about the situation—or if they understand it different from how Koenig intended—Koenig’s message can be decoded variously depending on the consumer. This interpretation is then subsequently “encoded/decoded” further as an individual talks, reacts, and approaches the remainder of the series or communicates with others, creating a situation that can lead to substantially different readings of the story. To many, this is a matter of common sense—our culture, our experiences, our education, and so forth affect how we interpret another’s expressions. However, because of social media and the ability to capture and/or survey viewer reactions to documentary messages, the evidence reveals in fact that Koenig was expressing her understanding of the situation and that her viewers understood it differently. This helps explain why someone can listen to the same twelve episodes of *Serial* and come away with a different interpretation compared to someone else—Adnan is guilty. No, he’s innocent!

Listeners come to the series having different understandings of Baltimore, Muslim families, life in the 1990s, and technology. Because podcast listeners decode Koenig’s storytelling in their own way, and not always in concert with Koenig’s intent, we also gain an understanding of why it is difficult to solve seemingly intractable problems in the criminal justice system. Even in a context such as law, which is defined by legal codes, misunderstandings and varied interpretations predominate. The analysis of this particular
documentary series, then, sheds light on challenges to the public sphere in terms of justice for an individual, Adnan Syed or Hae Min Lee, but also for society at large.

But our own decoding is not the only place where interpretation occurs. It starts when we first listen, watch, or read something, but it continues to be affected the more we read, talk, or consume information about the message. Decoding is more than a one-time act; it is an ongoing, fluid process that is constantly shifting and adapting to new information we have gathered. In the case of *Serial*, several spin-off podcasts emerged by listeners wanting to discuss each week’s episode. Fan communities created subreddits and other online aids for fans to discuss and consume relevant information about Adnan and the murder. This further information impacts our worldview and how we interpret future information. But this study also shows that Koenig’s encoding adapted as she received information and insight from her audience, engaged in dialogue with fan questions, and learned more about the situation. The social media channel for documentary dialogues reveals not a stagnant expression but instead an ever-changing, evolving “dialogue” involving creators and consumers.

Documentary makers vary in their goals, whether to express an idea and leave interpretation up to the audience, intentionally motivate the audience to act, or engage in a dialogue with audiences and urge them to interact. This is something that all documentary directors consider, but it can be difficult to figure out how best to deliver their message in an accessible way—as we often do not know how we are encoding and someone else is decoding an expression. If a documentary message is important enough to spend weeks or months creating, it seems equally important to consider ways to ensure that the message received at least fulfills the program’s thesis. Given the tools of social media and the way they are deeply embedded in promoting a particular film or project, it seems illogical for documentary makers not to try to
collect and process the feedback audience members or fans provide. With the advent of social media, filmmakers have the ability to now look at what their audiences are saying and determine if audiences are decoding the thesis as intended. And as this study shows, at least some members of audiences want that ability to engage the director to provide feedback or to ask questions about their desired media. They know how easy it is for directors to look at the information within forums and hashtags and expect them to do so.

Themes and Emotions

The themes and emotions differ across the three documentary cases. *Serial* fans are less disturbed than those of *Audrie & Daisy* and *The Choice 2016*, and this makes sense. Although the topic of *Serial* is murder, it does not seem to impact the fan base in the same way *Audrie & Daisy* and *The Choice 2016* do. The events that unfold in *Serial* affect a small micro-population: the friends and families of the individuals within the podcast. *The Choice 2016* was produced because of the U.S. presidential election—the information, the people in the documentary, and the stories told, impact the entire nation and affect other countries in the world. Its fans are primed to pay more attention to it; they’re invested at more than an entertainment level, at an emotional and political level as well. *Audrie & Daisy* is similar to *The Choice 2016* in emotional and well-being ties to the topic. Sexual assault is an issue on college campuses and worldwide at all age levels and it can happen to anyone. The tweets demonstrate anger, frustration, and hatred toward this threat—viewers were angry at the situation in the documentary, but they were also angry because it happens all the time; this documentary is not really a unique, one-off story. The outcomes of the content analysis are intriguing and more diverse than originally expected.
However, in terms of emotion and themes, the platform on which the documentary is provided does not impact the emotional categories—it is the topic that does.

Another point where Serial differs from the other two documentary cases is also in regards to the mentioning of the director. The Choice 2016 never mentions Michael Kirk, the director of the documentary, and Audrie & Daisy rarely mention directors, Bonni Cohen and Jon Shenk. (When they are mentioned it is because one or both directors will be at a screening for a discussion.) This may be in connection with fans’ constant connection with Koenig, since she is both the series host and the co-director. It might be different if Koenig were only one or the other—e.g., only the director and not the host. Would the fan base still connect with her, tweet at her, tweet about her, and in general assess her reporting and conjectures throughout their discussions? Because this is hypothetical, it is hard to fully explore, but this would be an area for further research. What is the effect on the fans and audience when the director is also a prominent voice in the documentary?

In regards to Audrie & Daisy and The Choice 2016, both directors, aside from their names being associated with the film, are almost nonexistent in the films (the directors of Audrie & Daisy are sometimes heard but never seen during interviews with Audrie Pott’s rapists). Fans of both tweet at the channel or program when the documentary is seen: Netflix for Audrie & Daisy, and FRONTLINE and/or PBS for The Choice 2016. FRONTLINE actually plans for this result. Because of the large number of directors they have in a given season and the variety in topics, it would be very difficult to connect their fan base with a particular director (although at times the director or producer is often the lead reporter appearing on camera).
How Do Documentary and Fiction Fandoms Differ?

The behavior of the *Serial* fandom does not seem to differ from other fandoms. It has motivated a group of fans to create a place to communicate (both digitally and offline), it has fanart and fanfiction, it has fan theories, it has schisms and arguments within the communities (even causing splinter communities to form), and it holds its director in both good and bad lights (depending on one’s opinion). Some people idolize Koenig, while others think her journalism is of questionable credibility or that she sacrificed ethics in reporting this story. These actions, thoughts, and discussions are typical of any media fandom—as Jenkins and others reveal in their studies of fiction/entertainment fan groups. The only difference in the case of *Serial* is that it is nonfiction. The characters are real. The murder did happen. When viewers come up with fan theories, they are hypothesizing about a real event and the actions of a real person. Yet this does not seem to impede or alter the fannish activities. One person responded to this idea in the survey, saying, “the entertaining element of the story [in *Serial*] meant that people sometimes didn’t treat it like an actual event that affected real people.” Another person said, “[Season] 1 of *Serial* ended such a long time ago, but the opening of dialogue means people are still looking into Adnan’s case, and the cases of others in similar situations. It can have a real impact on real lives.”

It is easy to forget that it is a real-life thing, or that the characters are real while listening to the podcast. This is perpetuated within the fan communities, as people talk about these individuals in callous ways, possibly continuing to forget the realness of the story, or especially the genuine human factor. In terms of documentary programming, this may be cause for concern. The documentary director typically owes allegiance to “truth,” or at least “actuality.” If viewers

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15 For a pretty epic example of fanfiction about *Serial*, see this cross-fandom piece on *Serial* and *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*: https://archiveofourown.org/works/8085280?view_adult=true
dissociate the real human factor from a documentary and instead respond only in terms of the entertainment value, and if viewers begin to abuse or malign the people involved in the story, this suggests the documentary is having a negative impact. An analogy could be related to the physicians’ credo, first do no harm. If a documentary results in viewers “harming” victims or subjects, that is an issue of dialogue that undercuts the nonfiction, public sphere value of the message.

As we compare the fandom of *Serial* to a wider net of documentary fandoms, one thing to consider is what type of fannish activities fans are participating in, not because a person has to complete Fannish Activity X to be considered a fan, but because it helps define the fandom. Each fandom and fan community has a distinct personality and demographics. The fannish activities performed can help identify the make-up of the fan community. This can help a director figure out how to reach his or her fans and how best to design and create their digital footprints.

Managing social media requires a lot of work. If a director’s preferred demographic is not on Twitter, there is no good reason to put effort into that platform. It is better for a director to spend time in places that will connect with or serve their fandom, unless the director is using a new platform to attract more fans.

The creators of *Serial* know this. They know their fandom, where they live, what they like, and how to reach them. With the recent release of their spin-off series, *S-Town*, *Serial* pushed the series on their own social media platforms, even though the spin-off has its own distinct channels. Similar, but still incredibly different, *S-Town* tells the story of a man named John B. McLemore. It starts as a murder mystery in McLemore’s hometown, Woodstock, Alabama, which he nicknames “Shit Town.” The series has seven episodes which, unlike *Serial*, were all dropped at once on March 28, 2017. This created a promotional buzz around the series,

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16 *S-Town* is short for “Shit Town.” The “S” is not in connection with *Serial*. 
as people were finishing the episodes at different intervals, unlike *Serial*, which forced listeners to stay tuned from week to week. Andrew Kuklewicz, who works for Public Radio Exchange (PRX) and has worked in collaboration with *This American Life*, states that in terms of downloading, “If a *Serial* episode was a mountain peak, then *S-Town* was the Himalayas” (Kuklewicz, 2017, para. 10). He reports the initial audience traffic of *S-Town* quadrupled *Serial’s*. The fandom from *Serial* definitely transferred over to *S-Town* even though it featured a different host (Brian Reed), a different story (less murder mystery and more narrated essay), fewer episodes (seven instead of twelve), and released differently (all at once—although this was primarily a positive). Fans followed and transferred over due to the large number of discussions on both r/serialpodcast and r/serialpodcastorigins. *S-Town* has its own subreddits, r/stownpodcast and r/stownpodcastorigins. The impact of *S-Town* is unknown as of this writing, but comparisons between *Serial* fans and *S-Town* fans could yield rich ore for future research. This study also shows, however, that the *Serial* fandom exists, it is loud, and it garners attention, which is something other documentary directors are likely to observe.

As individuals start to become fans of documentaries, they develop fannish activities that carry over to other media: nonfiction or fiction. There was an example of this in a survey respondent who stated the first thing he/she would do when starting a new podcast is follow everyone involved with the podcast on Twitter and other social media platforms. This is significant on a several levels. First, they are becoming immersed with those involved on Twitter and starting and engaging in conversations with directors and individuals from the podcast. Second, they are honing their own practice and habits of fannish activities and solidifying themselves as fans of that genre.
After examining the *Serial* fandom and tweets, the discussion of fans can be transferred to other types of nonfiction (similar to popular prime-time television show providing a lead-in to the next show for a given night). It should be noted that although fans were not specifically identified for *The Choice 2016* and *Audrie & Daisy*, there are fans among the tweets that were collected and analyzed. Based on the analysis of tweets, but also looking at the social media presence for these two films, it is clear that fans do exist for these films and that they behave in similar ways to *Serial*, reinforcing the conclusion that nonfiction and documentary fandoms do not specifically behave differently from fans of fiction media.

There are some differences in the implications of the fannish activities in which fans participate, however. For example, fanfiction (often shortened to “fanfic”) is a common way for fans to continue or alter stories through text. These stories are often written and published online by fans for other fans to read and comment. It can further a fandom after a series is completed, or it can allow fans to change a story to fit their desired outcome. Fanfiction for *Serial*, although fictional and hypothetical, can have real life implications. But this does not stop individuals from writing fanfiction about documentaries and other real life individuals. In fact, there is an entire genre of fan fiction called real person fanfiction (RPF). The main characteristic of RPF is that it is fanfiction written about a real person, but it can also be about a fictional place or story. During and after the 2016 U.S. presidential election there were versions of Hillary Clinton RPF hitting the Internet. There is also RPF for many, if not all, U.S. presidents in history (Zimmerman, 2014).

RPF differs from documentary fanfiction in the way that it is written and categorized by the author. For example, on a popular fanfiction website, ArchiveOfOurOwn.org (AO3), there is fanfiction on the 1975 Maysles Brothers documentary *Grey Gardens*. Authors are able to
categorize, tag, and add information to each of their fanfics. This specific piece,\textsuperscript{17} posted on July 15, 2013, is tagged specifically to the \textit{Grey Gardens} fandom. Its characters are listed as Big Edie, Little Edie, Edith Beale, and Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. Although all of these individuals are real, and the piece can be categorized as RPF, it should also be categorized as documentary fanfic due to its categorization to the fandom. What is noteworthy is the additional tagging. If the author had only tagged the individuals, then it would have only been RPF. Although this is the only \textit{Grey Gardens} piece currently posted on AO3, there is \textit{Grey Gardens} fanfiction available on other websites, both personal blogs and other fanfiction websites. The creation of documentary-specific fanfiction is important, as this and fanart are visible examples of fannish activities, therefore reinforcing the conclusion that documentary fans behave similarly to fiction fans.

\textsuperscript{17} To read this piece, see here: \url{http://archiveofourown.org/works/884734}
This study establishes the foundational facets of documentary/fandom scholarship. It expands studies or analyses of “audience” to also include “fans.” Contrary to the concept of “audience” as a typically static receiver, fans or fandoms are dynamic listeners, who receive and share with others, and feed back ideas to documentary creators. In addition to broadening documentary/fandom studies, this research reveals the new paradigm for documentary filmmakers trying to understand why some actions are taken when interacting on social media and others are not. Using exploratory methods, this dissertation offers a platform not only for an individual research agenda in nonfiction audience/fandom studies, but also to expand others’ scholarship on documentary fandoms. It utilizes four different research methods: historical-critical analysis to imbed each documentary into context to further discussion of each case, its topic, and its respective fandoms; content analysis of tweets for each documentary; a survey of fans; and interviews with social media managers and documentary filmmakers. This chapter synthesizes the outcome of these methods to conclude that documentary dialogues are complex and fluid interactions that correspond to the life cycles of individual plants (documentaries) and their ecosystems (documentary genres and fandoms). The chapter acknowledges limitations affecting this study, its conclusions, and agendas for future research.

Limitations

The survey for Serial had a small sample—and even smaller sample of those who filled out the entire instrument. Although the survey did not intend to be used to generalize the audience or fans’ reactions, the importance of how audiences respond to documentary films,
television programs, and online podcasts requires a larger sample to be able to articulate finer detail with regard to the audience. Secondly, due to the way tweets were collected and sorted for the three documentaries, human actions may have introduced some errors. Tweets for *Serial* were manually collected and transferred to an Excel spreadsheet. Although done carefully, it is possible some tweets were missed, mis-copied, or duplicated. Tweets for all three documentaries were manually sorted and scrubbed for duplicates, irrelevant tweets, and non-English tweets. Also carefully done, there were some irrelevant tweets and non-English tweets that slipped through and were in the final coding sample, not coded but just skipped. Tweets were also not removed that were promotional tweets from *FRONTLINE* and *Audrie & Daisy*. As this study looked at how fans and audiences interacted on Twitter, these should have been removed from the sample. A future study will benefit from a stricter protocol for handling tweets to minimize errors of omission and commission.

Lastly, the study included interviews with three documentary filmmakers who were not associated with the case studies. While their insights were invaluable, it would have been better for the study to include interviews with directors of the case studies. This will likely prove to be a perennial problem for academic research. Unless and until documentary directors appreciate the value of documentary dialogue research, they will have ample reasons to spend their time on creating rather than talking about their programs. In cases in which the documentary production is substantial enough to have a separate promotions and/or social media component, this will improve scholarly exchanges, but it will also likely result in bigger-budget, more institutional films being represented by directors instead of independent, small-budget documentary films that can also have tremendous impact.
Conclusions

Tweets were analyzed for each of the three documentaries for themes and emotions. Each documentary differed in both categories, but *Serial* tweets were more positive than for the other two documentaries. The top question topic for *The Choice* related to questions about a specific statement in the film. The topic comment related to neutral comments about the documentary. For emotions, the top six emotions (due to ties in percentages) were (in order from highest to lowest number of tweets): anger, admiration, amusement, gratitude, curiosity, and sadness. For *Serial*, the top question category was related to questions about the documentary as a whole. For comments, most were positive about the documentary. Emotions were (in order from highest to lowest): fascination, curiosity, admiration, excitement, and confidence. Lastly, for *Audrie & Daisy*, the most asked question related to specific statements within the documentary. The most posted comment was a positive comment toward the film. The film featured a range of emotions (in order): anger, inspiration, sadness, admiration, and hate. These differences in themes and emotions were determined to be impacted by the topic of the documentary and less about the platform through which the documentary was delivered.

The interviews with the three documentary filmmakers and two individuals from *FRONTLINE* proved to be invaluable and added much to the discussion of documentary fandoms. Three major themes arose from the interviews, two pertaining to the filmmakers and one to *FRONTLINE*. For filmmakers, crowdfunding to build an audience and engaging with an audience on social media were the two themes. Each of the three documentary filmmakers had used some sort of crowdfunding to help fund all or some portion of their film. They found these platforms to be useful to build an audience and to keep them engaged throughout the making of the film and carry them along to a new documentary. The directors also all heavily used social
media to continue to engage their audiences and fans, who were either captured during
crowdfunding or through the screening of the film. Each director favors a different platform, but
all use the major platforms and all have both accounts for themselves and for the documentary.

The third theme discussed FRONTLINE’s impressive use and understanding of social
media for their brand. The social media team is made up of five individuals and a director. Each
person is cross-trained between platforms, but specializes in one platform. The brand live tweets
new episodes and pulls in voices of their fans and experts to further discussions on the topic
discussed. They purposefully strive to connect their audiences not to the director of that week’s
episode but to the brand. The director’s branding comes into play when doing media interviews.
They believe that due to the public media nature of FRONTLINE, they should be where the
people are, and that is precisely where they are.

The survey disseminated to Serial fans also proved to be incredibly useful to understand
what fans asked and why they posted a question or comment to social media about the
documentary. It demonstrated that fans of Serial do not behave differently from fans of other
media genres. This is an important outcome of this study, as it provides justification to continue
study on documentary fandoms.

**Research Question Results**

The research questions for this project were answered through varying ways. Table 3:
Research Questions and Answers outlines the research question and the answer. However,
following is also a brief explanation of the results for each research question (and sub-question).

*Research Question 1.* Each documentary was delivered through a different platform.
However, to answer RQ1, the characteristics of three different documentaries are very similar.
They all have a goal to meet and they all want to reach out to and engage their audience. That being said, the platform delivered does impact the audience reached. FRONTLINE uses PBS to broadcast, allowing free access to their documentaries—both on television and online. Serial opts for a podcast format, allowing flexibility in time as well as a different type of story to be told. Audrie & Daisy chose Netflix to reach their targeted audience: social media-connected youth. The chosen platform was purposeful, but the way the directors constructed their arguments did not change between platforms.

Research Questions 2 and 2a. The researcher chose to deliver a survey to fans of Serial due to the size and longevity of its fandom. Every documentary attracts a different audience, but knowing what demographics are for Serial can help future documentarians who want to create a project on a related topic. Serial attracted primarily those who are white, women, and ages 18-44. It is also known through this survey, but also through context analysis of tweets, that the directors for Serial did not necessarily interact online with their fans. For some fans, this was okay, for they didn’t want to interact with Koenig. But many fans did; they wanted clarification on something or to share their own theories. For The Choice, although the director, Michael Kirk, did not interact directly with the audience, FRONTLINE did so often and effectively. This was similar with Audrie & Daisy.

Research Questions 3 and 3a. It is also known from the Serial fan survey that fans asked questions or posted comments for different reasons. Some simply wanted to state their opinion, some wanted to hear others’ thoughts on their theories, and some wanted to argue against or correct someone’s statement. Most individuals posting, according to the survey, did not expect a response, although most did receive a response. If they did receive a response, most said the conversation continued, which is beneficial for a fandom and fan community to stay afloat.
Research Question 4. The types of conversations held online vary for each documentary. There is not one general answer to this question. Serial-related topics were generally more positive and uplifting; The Choice and Audrie & Daisy were more pessimistic, angry, and sad. It is argued this result is based more on the topic of the documentary than on the platform through which the documentary was posted.

Research Question 5. Documentary fans participate in the same activities as fans of fictional media fandoms. Documentary fans talk and argue online and offline, they write fanfiction, they create fanart, and they proselytize the documentary to everyone. This is a very exciting outcome of this project, as it justifies a further look into documentary fans.

Aside from the finding that documentary fans do not behave differently from other media fans, there are other important aspects to remember. First, conversations around documentaries are no longer limited to one side, they do not revolve around the antiquated Shannon-Weaver communication model of a sender and a receiver. Instead, conversations are circular, allowing for feedback to be given back to the director through mediated channels. This allows for a to-and-fro conversation that can alter future documentaries and/or conversations held.

Secondly, Stuart Hall’s theory of encoding and decoding becomes multifaceted when applied to dialogues online. Each time a fan participates in an online conversation their decoding of the original message might change. However, with the ability to talk with the director, the decode process is mitigated, providing the opportunity for fans to take away a definitive meaning.

Lastly, the Serial fandom is of particular interest due to its popularity and popular culture saturation. It begs the question of why serialized documentary series (including series like The Jinx and Making a Murderer) garner such a fanatic following compared to other documentaries?
Is it the murder mystery aspect of the series? Or is it due to a connection of a serialized reality television show? If the latter, this is something to pay attention to. Documentary scholars tend to separate out reality television from documentary, even though they have similar origins. If part of the popularity of *Serial*, and other serialized documentaries, is due to its likeness to a serialized reality television show, then documentary scholars need to look closer at the impact of reality television might have on the documentary form.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RQ 1) What are the characteristics of common documentary types (formats) and delivery channels reflected in three broadly representative case studies?</td>
<td>Docs all behave the same. Platform doesn’t impact response, but does impact audience reach.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ 2) Who comprises the audience of a documentary?</td>
<td>Audiences differ between docs; Serial fans are white, heterosexual, &amp; women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ 2a) How do documentary filmmakers and/or social media managers interact with audiences on social media platforms?</td>
<td>Varies; Need to know audience &amp; their use of SM to best reach &amp; interact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ 3) What motivates members of the audience to post questions or comments on social media?</td>
<td>Various reasons: they want to argue, clarify, ask for clarification, share their thoughts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ 3a) Do they expect a response? If so, from whom?</td>
<td>No, but they do receive responses from various people. Discussions continue.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ 4) What types of conversations are held on social media channels about documentaries?</td>
<td>Varies by documentary and seems to be affected by the nature of the topic.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RQ 5) In what type of fannish activities do documentary fans participate?</td>
<td>Documentary and nonfiction fans do not behave differently from other media fandoms.</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Future Research

There are several areas where future research can and should be conducted. With the release of *S-Town* in late March 2017, it would be fascinating to compare the fans’ reactions to the series and to that of season one of *Serial*. Also, depending on the topic of *Serial* season three, it would also be interesting to follow fans throughout the three seasons, more of a longitudinal study to assess whether fans for each season differ. Do they act/tweet/discuss similarly? At what point are the fans introduced to *Serial*, and do they then listen to the other seasons? *Serial* is one of the first big nonfiction fandoms, and it seems wise to remain attentive.

*FRONTLINE* will likely produce a 2020 version of *The Choice* (perhaps also directed by Michael Kirk, as he has done the last four versions). Because of the long lead time, it may be possible to develop empirical collection instruments, as well as open-ended qualitative observations and interviews, to be in position to measure with great breadth both the nature of *The Choice*’s audience, but also a fuller profile of the dialogues involving the director, the *FRONTLINE* channel, social media managers, and the audience. Because of the important civic function provided by this particular documentary series, this seems to be a particularly important research goal, and possibly one that could attract research funding or sponsorship. The momentum gathered during the 2016 presidential election will hypothetically reoccur in 2020, which provides a unique opportunity to study how fans and audience members react to the documentary and to Kirk’s vision of the documentary series. One thing to keep in mind, though, is the inevitable and rapidly changing landscape of media and social media channels.

Another project for future research would be to analyze documentary topics across social media platforms. The ease of gathering data from various social media platforms affected choices of documentaries for this project. It was sometimes difficult to pinpoint the exact reasons
for some of the differences. By using the same topic on different platforms, these differences could fully be identified and explored.

Live tweeting is a growing practice and a kind of thermometer for taking the temperature of viewers at particular program intervals. A case study or focus group involving the measurement and profiling of live tweeting could identify hot-button issues involving the director’s expression and also the live interactions of other tweeters. Comparing nonfiction live tweeting to live tweeting for a fictional movie would advance distinctions and/or similarities between the two kinds of fandoms. This researcher would likely hypothesize that the way a person live tweets a movie, by commenting on what is happening, differs from the way a person live tweets a documentary, by tweeting their thoughts and reactions to the documentary. This difference could clarify an area in which fans might differ, but without rejecting the conclusion that documentary fans are as important to study as other media fiction fans.

The most important aspect of this study with regard to future research is its insistence that documentary and nonfiction fans and fandoms deserve scholastic attention to further explicate similarities and differences across fiction and nonfiction fandoms. If they are unique, we need to know how and why. If they are similar, we need to understand the role of fandoms for nonfiction and documentary programming in terms of civic life. The public sphere provides a hopeful space for dialogue about matters of public interest, which is the essence of the documentary idea. The data offered by social media and the concept of fans and fandoms afford a particularly revealing tool to tap into the public sphere to gauge the integrity of social and cultural ideals. This study is certainly not the last word on the subject, but it confidently delivers a solid foundation to begin that investigation of documentary dialogues within the public sphere.
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Thematic Coding Categories of Social Media Comments or Questions

For consistency, I will use the same categories across all three documentary case studies. Having immersed myself in different platforms for several documentaries, the following topical themes emerged. As a test case, examples are taken from Before the Flood, a 2016 documentary that follows Leonardo DiCaprio as he discusses climate change issues with scientists, activists, and world leaders. The film, directed by Fisher Stevens, was released on October 21, 2016. The examples were collected from public users on Twitter using the official film hashtag, #BeforeTheFlood.

- **Specific Film Statement question**: the user posts a question about a specific statement from the film.


- **Documentary Topic question**: the user posts a question about the film’s topic or subject.

  Example: What does a warming Arctic mean for the rest of the planet?

  http://ln.is/8A7Hj #BeforeTheFlood by #NatGeo via @c0nvey

- **Documentary-specific question**: the user posts a question about the film (that is not related to the production of it).
• **Filmmaker/producer question**: the user posts a question about the filmmaker or directed to the filmmaker/producer.

Example: My god, how in the hell must @LeoDiCaprio feel after trump's coup? I can't even imagine after seeing #BeforetheFlood what he thinks.

Example: Hey @LeoDiCaprio saw #BeforetheFlood wondering what was the carbon foot print wasted on this pseudoscience? #hypocrites

Example: @LeoDiCaprio @PMOIndia Why don't u mention the population crisis in India which necessitates burning of cheap coal? #BeforeTheFlood

• **Documentary production question**: the user posts a question about the production process of the documentary.

Example: Does anyone know how on Earth could it be that a global-concern documentary doesn't have Spanish subtitles available?

:-( #BeforetheFlood

• **Political question**: the user posts a question that is political in nature.

Example: Watching #BeforetheFlood when will world leaders and big corporations take this seriously? Well done @LeoDiCaprio for fighting this fight

• **Documentary topic comment-positive**: the user posts a comment about the topic or subject of the documentary that indicates a positive or encouraging response.
Example: One of the most crucial films to see right now.

Stream #BeforetheFlood for free! Tune in. Get informed. Take action.

https://www.beforetheflood.com/screenings

- **Documentary topic comment-neutral**: the user posts a comment about the topic or subject of the documentary that indicates neither a positive nor negative response

  Example: After watching #BeforetheFlood in class I shared @MonicaArayaTica's #TEDTalk on ridding our dependence fossil fuels

- **Documentary topic comment-negative**: the user posts a comment about the topic or subject of the documentary that indicates a negative or discouraging response

  Example: #BeforetheFlood @LeoDiCaprio this is the most stupid or fishy tale from the masters of hoaxes and scams

- **Documentary content-positive**: the user posts a comment about the film (that is not related to the production of the film) that indicates a positive or encouraging response

  Example: @LeoDiCaprio @NatGeoChannel Man! I appreciate the cause you are standing for. Just watched #BeforeTheFlood and you literally nailed it

- **Documentary content-neutral**: the user posts a comment about the documentary (that is not related to the production of the film) that indicates neither a positive nor negative response.

- **Documentary content-negative**: the user posts a comment about the documentary (that is not related to the production of the film) that indicates a negative or discouraging response
  
  Example: #Boycott #BeforeTheFlood movie w/ @LeoDiCaprio Fake #climatechange movie coming out! Mr. Hillary LOVER!! #MAGA #Trump #TrumpTrain

- **Filmmaker/producer comment-positive**: the user posts a comment about the filmmaker/producer or the film-production process that indicates a positive or encouraging response
  
  Example: Leo's voice is so captivating, he's inspiring and this documentary is life changing #alsolatetothisparty #beforetheflood
  
  Example: @LeoDiCaprio watched #beforetheflood and am enthralled. Honest, sincere and beautifully shot. Thank you.

- **Filmmaker/producer comment-neutral**: the user posts a comment about the filmmaker or producer that indicates neither a positive nor negative response
  
  Example: Watching @BeforeTheFlood_, teach me something @LeoDiCaprio - educate me #globalwarming #BeforetheFlood
  
  Example: Hi @LeoDiCaprio we planted 1000 trees. #BeforeTheFlood
• **Filmmaker/producer comment-negative**: the user posts a comment about the filmmaker or producer that indicates a negative or discouraging response

  Example: Can't wait to see #BeforetheFlood so I can buy future beach front property.
  Another leftist celeb pushing false info. What else is new?

• **Political comment-Positive**: the user posts a comment that is political in nature and indicates a positive or encouraging response

  Example: Hats off to @JerryBrownGov fighting Climate Change! #trumpclueless
  #BeforetheFlood #itsreality

• **Political comment-Neutral**: the user posts a comment that is political in nature and indicates neither a positive nor negative response.

  Example: Will it inspire #climateaction? http://wp.me/p80FpH-HZ #BeforetheFlood

• **Political comment-Negative**: the user posts a comment that is political in nature and indicates a negative or discouraging response.

  Example: Forecast: Not good. Getting worse. And we're all f***** if governments don't act now. #climatechange #BeforetheFlood

Posts are to be categorized into however many themes each tweet fits. For example, if the post includes a comment and a question, both will be marked. Each post will fit into at least one theme from each category (type of post and emotion of post).
Examples of how a tweet will be coded for themes:


Thematic Categories: Statement comment-positive; Filmmaker comment-positive

Tweet: #BeforetheFlood @LeoDiCaprio this is the most stupid or fishy tale from the masters of hoaxes and scams

Thematic Categories: Statement comment-negative; Topic comment-negative; Political comment-negative

Content Analysis Process (for both Quantitative and then Qualitative processes)

1) Coders are given access to the same Qualtrics survey (to identify themes, not emotions).
2) Coders are also emailed identical documents with the sampled tweets for each documentary.
3) Coders meet to discuss execution of coding.
4) Codebook is revised until all are satisfied and fully understand each category.
5) Coders train together and test for reliability to ensure understanding of process.
6) Coders then separate and code individually each tweet from the sample for all three documentaries.
7) Coder opens the Qualtrics survey, copies and pastes the tweet in to the Qualtrics survey. The coder reads the tweet and then answers all applicable questions for the tweet. The coder then clicks “submit.”
8) The coder then moves on to the next tweet, repeating the same process for each tweet until all

tweets for each documentary have been coded.

9) Once coding is finished for a documentary, the coder notifies the researcher of completion.

10) Once the researcher has notified the researcher of completion for all three documentaries, the
coder’s involvement ends.

11) At this point, the researcher alone (without a second coder) repeats the process for each tweet
using a separate Qualtrics survey focusing on the emotions expressed in each tweet.

Although this analysis involves different questions, the process of coding remains the same.

**Emotional Coding Categories of Social Media Comments or Questions**

The following emotions are taken from Liew, Turtle, and Liddy’s (2016) EmoTweet-28
categories. The following 28 emotions, plus a 29th “none,” are used to capture the full range of
emotion in tweets from each documentary. The definitions for each category are operationalized
by Liew and Turtle (2016).

EmoTweet-28:

1) **Admiration**: Someone or something regarded as impressive or worthy of respect. Honoring or
looking up to someone.

2) **Amusement**: State of finding something funny or entertaining.

3) **Anger**: Feeling of disappointment, displeasure, dissatisfaction, annoyance, frustration,
hostility or rage caused by the non-fulfillment of one's hopes/expectations or about an
undesirable event.

4) **Boredom**: Feeling dull, uninterested or left without anything in particular to do.

5) **Confidence**: Feeling of self-assurance arising from one's appreciation of one's own abilities or
qualities. Feeling one can trust or rely on someone or something.
6) **Curiosity**: Strong desire to know or learn something.

7) **Desperation**: Feeling complete loss of hope or despair, typically one that results in rash or extreme behavior. Suffering or driven by great need or distress.

8) **Doubt**: State of being bewildered, confused, uncertain or unclear about something. Having mixed feelings about someone or something. Feeling of distrust, suspicion or one cannot rely on someone or something.

9) **Excitement**: Feeling great enthusiasm and anticipation in considering some expected or longed-for good event.

10) **Exhaustion**: State of physical or mental fatigue or feeling tired.

11) **Fascination**: State of being fascinated, amazed or interested in something. Feeling of great wonder or awe.

12) **Fear**: Feeling caused by the belief that someone or something is dangerous, likely to cause pain, or a threat. Feeling dread or anticipate with great apprehension or fear. Feeling anxious or worried over actual or potential problems.

13) **Gratitude**: State of being thankful or readiness to show appreciation for and to return kindness.

14) **Happiness**: Feeling pleased, satisfied, happy or delighted about a desirable event.

15) **Hate**: Feeling of dislike, distaste or aversion towards a person, event or thing. Feeling of disgust or profound disapproval aroused by something unpleasant or offensive.

16) **Hope**: Feeling of expectation and desire for a certain event to happen or grounds for believing something good will happen.

17) **Indifference**: Lack of interest, concern, or sympathy.

18) **Inspiration**: Feeling that makes someone want to do something or that gives someone an idea about what to do or create.

19) **Jealousy**: Feeling or showing envy of someone or their achievements and advantages. Feeling or showing suspicion of someone’s unfaithfulness in a relationship.

20) **Longing**: Yearning for or missing someone or something that one cannot have or cannot get easily. Feeling nostalgic, sentimental longing or wistful affection for the past, typically for a period or place with personal associations.

21) **Love**: Feeling of affection or natural liking towards another person, event or thing.
22) **Pride**: Deep pleasure derived from one's own achievements, the achievements of those with whom one is closely associated, or from qualities or possessions that are widely admired.

23) **Regret**: Feeling remorse or repentance over something that has happened or has been done. Feeling guilty of having done wrong or failed in an obligation.

24) **Relaxed**: Feeling calm, at ease. Relief following release from anxiety or distress.

25) **Sadness**: Feeling of loss, helplessness or sorrow for own misfortune.

26) **Shame**: Humiliation or embarrassment caused by the consciousness of wrong or foolish behavior. Feeling uncomfortable or awkward in a situation.

27) **Surprise**: Unexpected or astonishing event, fact or thing. Sudden shocking event or experience.

28) **Sympathy**: Feeling of pity and sorrow for someone else's misfortune. Feeling empathy and expressing the ability to understand and share the feelings of another.

29) **None**: No emotion

Examples of how a tweet will be coded for emotions:

Tweet: *Thank you @LeoDiCaprio for shedding more light on #climatechange. Just watched #BeforeTheFlood. Stunning. Shocking. Frightening. Inspiring.*

Emotional Categories: Gratitude, Fear, Hope, Inspiration

Tweet: *#BeforetheFlood @LeoDiCaprio this is the most stupid or fishy tale from the masters of hoaxes and scams*

Emotional Category: Anger

Tweet: *Now watching #BeforetheFlood*

Emotional Category: None
APPENDIX B: SURVEY FOR SERIAL DOCUMENTARY DIALOGUES

In this survey, you will be asked to answer a series of questions about your interactions on a social media site for a documentary. The entire process should take no more than 15 minutes. The purpose of this study is to investigate how audience members interact with documentary filmmakers and the nature of their conversations. The results of this study will contribute to the growing field of fan and fandom studies.

Your participation is voluntary. You may refuse to participate in this study or withdraw your consent at any time without penalty. Whether you decide to participate or not, it will not affect any relationship you may have with BGSU and your related information will not be affected in any way either. You must be at least 18 years old to participate in this study.

Your answers on this survey will be kept confidential in a secure database. If you wish to participate in an interview, you will be asked to provide your email address at the end of the survey. Your email address will never be shared or be attached to the responses you provide. The results of the study will probably be published. However, no articles related to the gathered data will contain identifying material.

The data collected for this study will be retained for 5 years before its destruction. It is recommended that you use a personal computer to participate in this study, as some employers may use tracking software. It is also recommended that you do not leave the study open if using a public computer or a computer others may have access to, and that you clear your computer’s browser cache and page history after completing the survey.

There are no risks involved in participating in this study beyond those experienced in normal daily life.

I would be pleased to answer any questions you may have involving the study. You may contact me, Julia E. Largent (jlargen@bgsu.edu), with questions about the study, or my advisor Dr. Thomas A. Mascaro (419-372-8349, mascaro@bgsu.edu). If you have questions about the conduct of this study and/or your rights as a participant, you may also contact the Human Subjects Review Board (HSRB) at Bowling Green State University (phone: 419-372-7716, email: hsrb@bgsu.edu).

I have been informed of the purposes, risks and benefits of this study. I have had the opportunity to have all my questions answered and I have been informed that my participation is completely voluntary. I agree to participate in this research.

By clicking “Agree,” I acknowledge that I have been informed of the above and give my consent to participate in the study.

☐ Agree (1)
☐ Disagree (2)

If “Disagree” Is Selected, Then Skip To End of Survey
Note: For the purpose of this survey the term "director" refers to the person having the most authority over the focus of the film or program, regardless of whether this person was the film director, podcast director, or television director.

This survey will focus entirely on NPR's podcast, Serial. Please consider your interactions with this podcast throughout the remainder of this survey.

Referring to a social media site for Serial, have you asked a question or posted a comment on the site?

- Yes (1)
- No (2)

If “No” Is Selected, Then Skip To End of Survey

On what social media site did you ask a question or post a comment? Check all that apply.

- Facebook (1)
- Twitter (2)
- Tumblr (3)
- reddit (4)
- Other (5) ____________________

If you have posted multiple questions or comments, please consider one question or comment for the remainder of this survey.

Did you ask a question or post a comment?

- I asked a question (1)
- I posted a comment (2)

Which season does your question or comment refer to?

- Season 1 (Adnan Syed) (1)
- Season 2 (Bowe Bergdahl) (2)
- The podcast in general (3)

Display This Question:

If “If you have posted multiple questions or comments, please consider one for the remainder of this survey. Did you post a question or a comment? I asked a question” Is Selected

What was the nature of the question you asked?

Please select the category(s) that best fits your post.

- I asked a question about the documentary topic (1)
- I asked a question about someone who appeared in the documentary (2)
- I asked a question about how to get involved with the issue addressed in the documentary (3)
- I asked a question about the director (or producer) of the documentary (4)
- I asked a question about something else (5) ____________________
Display This Question:
If “If you have posted multiple questions or comments, please consider one for the remainder of this survey. Did you post a question or a comment? I asked a question” Is Selected
Why did you ask the question?

Display This Question:
If “If you have posted multiple questions or comments, please consider one for the remainder of this survey. Did you post a question or a comment? I posted a comment” Is Selected
What was the nature of comment you posted? Please select the category(s) that best fits your post.
- I posted a negative comment about the quality of the documentary (1)
- I posted a positive comment about the quality of the documentary (2)
- I posted a comment about the documentary topic (3)
- I posted a comment about someone who appeared in the documentary (4)
- I posted a comment about the director (or producer) of the documentary (5)
- I posted a comment about something else (6) ____________________

Display This Question:
If “If you have posted multiple questions or comments, please consider one for the remainder of this survey. Did you post a question or a comment? I posted a comment” Is Selected
Why did you post the comment?

Did you expect a response from the director (or producer) of the documentary?
- Definitely yes (1)
- Probably yes (2)
- Probably not (3)
- Definitely not (4)

Did you receive a response? If so, from whom?
- Yes, I received a response from an audience member (1)
- Yes, I received a response from the director (or producer) of the documentary (2)
- Yes, I received a response from someone on the documentary publicity team (3)
- Yes, I received a response from someone else (4)______________________
- Yes, but I don't know who replied (5)
- No, I did not receive a response (6)
Display This Question:

If “Did you receive a response from someone? If so, from whom? No, I did not receive a response” Is Not Selected

Did the response lead to a conversation or did the conversation end after the response?

- Yes, the conversation continued (1)
- No, the conversation ended (2)

Referring to Serial, what is the most significant reason you would like to be able to communicate directly with a documentary director (or producer)?

Referring to Serial, what basic point do you think the director (or producer) was trying to convey to you as a member of the audience?

We are accustomed to viewing television and film documentaries as one-way statements from the director (or producer) to the audience with little to no chance for dialogue. Social media sites for some documentaries give us the opportunity to respond to the program or director (or producer). Explain briefly what this means to you as a member of a documentary audience.

What is your age?

- 18-24 (1)
- 25-34 (2)
- 35-44 (3)
- 45-54 (4)
- 55-64 (5)
- 65+ (6)

What is your sexual orientation?

What is your gender identity?

What is your ethnicity?

What is your highest education level?

- Less than high school (1)
- High school diploma or equivalent (2)
- Some college, no college degree (3)
- Some graduate or postsecondary college, no graduate degree (4)
- Postsecondary non-degree award (5)
- Associate's degree (6)
- Bachelor's degree (7)
- Master's degree (8)
- Specialist degree (9)
- Doctoral or professional degree (10)
Which of the following statements about occupational status best applies to you?

- Not working at the moment (1)
- Part-time or hourly work (2)
- Part-time work (15-34 hours per week) (3)
- Full-time work (4)
- On temporary leave (5)
- In training (6)
- Graduate student (7)
- Student (8)
- Retired (9)
APPENDIX C: QUALTRICS CODING FOR THEMES

Who are you?
- Shanna (1)
- Julia (2)
- Recoded with both (3)

Paste tweet here.

Is the tweet a question or a comment (or both)?
- Question (1)
- Comment (2)

(If tweet contains a question) Mark each category the tweet fits.
- Question about a specific statement in the documentary (1)
- Question about the topic of the documentary (2)
- Question about the documentary (3)
- Question about the filmmaker/producer (4)
- Question about the process of making the documentary (5)
- Question that is political in nature (6)

(If tweet contains a comment) For each category that applies to the comment, mark if it expresses a positive, neutral, or negative meaning.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comment category</th>
<th>Positive (1)</th>
<th>Neutral (2)</th>
<th>Negative (3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Comment about a topic (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment about the documentary content (2)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment about the filmmaker/producer (3)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comment that is political (4)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comments from coder about the tweet
Dissertation Tweet Coding-Emotions

Paste tweet here.

Does the tweet show emotion? (only mark "yes" if only one emotion is present, mark "multiple emotions" if tweet has multiple emotions.)

- Yes
- No
- Multiple emotions

Please select the emotion(s) of the tweet. If there are no emotions present, select "none".

- Admiration
- Amusement
- Anger
- Boredom
- Confidence
- Curiosity
- Desperation
- Doubt
- Excitement
- Exhaustion
- Fascination
- Fear
- Gratitude
- Happiness
- Hate
- Hope
- Indifference
- Inspiration
- Jealousy
- Longing
- Love
- Pride
- Regret
- Relaxed
- Sadness
- Shame
- Surprise
- Sympathy
- None

Comments from coder about the tweet
APPENDIX E: BASE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR FILMMAKERS

1. Can you tell me about [documentary]?
2. What inspired you to make the film?
3. Why did you decide to use crowdfunding for the web series? Why that specific platform?
4. What social media accounts do you have relating to this project?
   4.1. Can you tell me the names of the pages?
5. What is your ultimate goal of having a social media presence for your film?
6. How often do you post on social media?
7. Do you have a favorite social media platform? Why?
8. Have you been trained on how to market on social media?
   8.1. If so, what type of training have you participated in?
   8.2. If so, was this before or after you started posting on social media?
9. Do you have a social media strategy?
10. Can you provide a sample topic that you might post about on the page?
11. Do you post to engage and to start conversations or do you post to spread information?
   11.1. Can you provide an example of this?
12. What types of conversations are most common among the followers on your page(s)?
13. What do you find difficult about starting and sustaining conversations on social media?
14. What is something that surprised you from having a presence on social media?
15. Has having a presence on social media impacted how you approach conversations about the film?
   15.1. If so, how?
16. What do you think attracts your audience to the documentary?
17. Were you trying to attract a specific audience demographic? If so, what demographic?

18. What message are you trying to convey to your audience? What do you want them to take away?

19. We are accustomed to viewing television and film documentaries as one-way statements from the director (or producer) to the audience with little to no chance for dialogue. Social media sites for some documentaries give us the opportunity to respond to the program or director (or producer). Explain briefly what this means to you as a documentary director.
APPENDIX F: BASE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR FRONTLINE

1. Can you tell me about your [previous] role at FRONTLINE?

2. What do you see as Frontline’s role in society?

3. What is the ultimate goal of having a social media presence for FRONTLINE?

4. How often does the digital team post on social media?

5. How are hashtags chosen for each film?

6. How is it decided who will live tweet during episodes?

7. Is there a social media platform that is favored over the others?

8. Is there a difference in what you post on Facebook and Twitter?

9. Do you post to engage and to start conversations or do you post to spread information?

10. What do you find difficult about starting and sustaining conversations on social media?

11. What is something that surprised you from having a presence on social media?

12. The four most popular emotions of tweets relating to The Choice 2016 are (in order) Anger, Admiration, Amusement, and Gratitude. Do these emotions surprise you? Why or why not?

13. What do you think attracts your audience to FRONTLINE?

14. We are accustomed to viewing television and film documentaries as one-way statements from the director (or producer) to the audience with little to no chance for dialogue. Social media sites for some documentaries give us the opportunity to respond to the program or director (or producer).
**FRONTLINE’s The Choice 2016**

Act One introduces the competing motivations for the two candidates. It starts with Donald Trump accepting the Republican nomination for President of the United States, juxtaposed with footage of President Obama’s public roasting of Trump at the 2011 White House Correspondent’s dinner, where Obama ridiculed Trump’s “birther” movement, demanding Obama’s birth certificate and claiming that Obama was not born in the United States. It lays out the argument that this moment, Obama’s humiliation of Trump, is part of what motivates Trump to seek the presidency. The coverage transitions to Hillary Clinton, showing an interview of her when her husband, Bill Clinton, was first elected governor of Arkansas in 1979. It talks about Hillary’s uncommon First Lady characteristics: she was not a native to Arkansas, had her own career, kept her maiden name, did not have children, and was educated at “liberal eastern universities.” Bill Clinton lost reelection and Hillary felt responsible, ultimately rebranding herself and taking her husband’s last name, becoming Hillary Rodham Clinton. At the conclusion of the first act, the title screen “The Choice 2016” appears and FRONTLINE formally thanks financial supporters.

Act Two contrasts Clinton and Trump’s childhoods. It begins with Trump’s childhood and his relationship with his father and his family. Trump was a troubled child, prompting his father to send Trump to “the toughest boarding school he could find, the New York Military Academy.” Here Trump thrived, winning medals, doing well in sports, and even being dubbed “Ladies’ Man” in the school yearbook. By contrast, Clinton’s childhood in a Chicago suburb profiles the verbal abuse she experienced as a child from both parents. Gail Sheehy, author of *Hillary’s Choice*, states that she thinks Hillary’s “penchant for secrecy and privacy began” at this
young age as a result of sexism and adversity. Hearing Martin Luther King, Jr. speak in
downtown Chicago, was a transformative moment for Clinton’s worldview.

Act Three reviews transitions into college and early adult life and thus establishes
significant personal influences on the values of each candidate. It focuses first on Trump’s
graduation from the Wharton School of Finance and Commerce and then following his father’s
footsteps in the family business. His brother died at a young age due to alcohol consumption, and
this profoundly impacted Trump. Clinton’s section begins with the announcement that Martin
Luther King, Jr. had been killed, which had a major impact on Clinton while a student at
Wellesley College. Clinton and her best friend decided to attend the Democratic National
Convention in Chicago in 1968, which was at the height of the anti-Vietnam War protests.
Clinton was chosen as Wellesley College’s first student commencement speaker. Clinton’s
speech fired back at Senator Edward Brooke, a Republican Senator from Massachusetts who
derided Vietnam War protesters. Clinton’s fame from this speech made her a national celebrity,
including a profile in *Life* magazine. Clinton rides her ambition into law school at Yale
University, with classmates Robert Reich, Clarence Thomas, and Bill Clinton. Bill and Hillary’s
relationship is discussed only briefly.

Act Four focuses on the candidates’ lives after the start of their careers, noting the
difference between Trump’s take-no-prisoners ethic versus Clinton’s belief in evidence and
justice. It begins with Trump’s investments in Manhattan real estate and alliance with Roy Cohn
as a mentor. Cohn, a New York lawyer, gained popularity during the McCarthy hearings as a
brutal aid and friend to McCarthy. Those interviewed in the documentary eviscerate Cohn. Marie
Brenner of *Vanity Fair* says: Cohn “humiliated people. He made up things. He had no morals.
You couldn’t even say that he had the moral of a snake. He had no morals. He had no moral
center.” As a mentor to Trump, it appeared that he had passed much of this scorched-earth approach onto Trump. When Trump and his father were sued for discriminating against black potential renters, Cohn defended Trump by making Trump and his father the victims. Although he lost the suit, Trump declared victory, something Cohn instilled in him as well.

Clinton worked with the Watergate Committee early in her career, where she was trained in the importance of secrecy. She failed the Washington, D.C. bar exam, keeping it a secret, but passed in Arkansas. She saw this as a sign, moving to Arkansas to be with Bill Clinton and later marrying. At this point, she decided to stand by Bill as he pursued his political career.

Act Five continues a look into the candidates’ progress toward recent accomplishments and well-known highlights of their careers in the face of major personal setbacks. Trump’s section begins with the building of the first Trump Tower in New York City. Buoyed by his first success as Trump Tower opens, Trump continued to purchase and invest in real estate, but he began to feel isolation from “old money” within New York and a profound loneliness “at the top.” This act covers Trump’s meeting and marriage to Ivana Zelnickova, before transitioning to Clinton. The visual transition features a campaign ad of Bill Clinton’s gubernatorial candidacy in Arkansas, his wife’s official name change to Hillary Rodham Clinton, and the announcement of Bill Clinton running for U.S. President. But this excitement comes crashing down when Gennifer Flowers comes forward to reveal a twelve-year affair with Bill Clinton. Although Hillary stands by her husband’s side throughout the candidacy, she avoids the topic until a 60 Minutes interview, where the couple is seen on screen talking about the affair. This interview helped boost Bill Clinton’s poll numbers and propelled him the Democratic nomination.

Act Six reflects on the major obstacles for each candidate despite being at the peak of their careers. At this point Trump is a household name, appearing on covers of numerous
magazines and in various television shows. He buys casinos, hotels, a yacht, and even an airline.

It was as early as the late 1980s that someone in Portsmouth, New Hampshire began urging Trump to run for president. Although he doesn’t run in 1988, Trump does begin to get involved in politics, using politically charged public statements to lash out against the five black youths, known as the Central Park Five, who were convicted of raping a jogger in Central Park. Trump calls for the reinstatement of the death penalty in a full-page ad in *The New York Times* but refuses to apologize after the five are released and exonerated.

With Bill Clinton inaugurated as the U.S. President, Hillary becomes the new First Lady. She also becomes involved in her husband’s political agenda, being appointed as chair of a task force on national health reform. This attracts both excitement and attacks, with commentary from news organizations and private citizens questioning the involvement of the First Lady in political policy. Hillary goes on the road to avoid attacks from Washington, but also to gain support for the health care plan, but the animosity becomes worse, and the attacks personal. The Democrats’ losses in the 1994 mid-term elections caused Bill Clinton to shift some of his political views to a more conservative viewpoint when on the road for re-election. It was also decided that Hillary would lower her profile in the White House and transition into a more “traditional” First Lady role.

Act Seven answers the question about how each candidate has addressed and dealt with personal and public troubles. For Trump, this section begins looking at the downfall of his marriage to Ivana, saying Trump had been involved with another woman, Marla Maples. Trump and Ivana divorced, and the publicity that followed was mostly negative. But this did not bother Trump, who subscribes to the “all publicity is good publicity” theory. During his downfall, he buys the Taj Mahal gambling establishment in Atlantic City. Financial advisors and experts
criticized Trump, who parried the criticism and fired one of his financial analysts, Marvin Roffman. However, as Roffman and others predicted, the casino did not do well. Other investments also turned downward. Trump blamed other people for the problems, never himself. However, the banks decided the properties were worth more with the Trump brand attached than without. They worked with Trump and gave him a $450,000 monthly allowance to promote the Trump brand.

Hillary Clinton’s nemesis was her husband’s infamous affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky. Hillary again stands by her husband’s side and vows that everything is okay in their marriage, and that Bill had not been involved in the alleged affair. But, this was proven wrong. Those interviewed explain how Hillary handed the aftermath of the public announcement.

Act Eight highlights the line of succession from personal rebounds after hardships into a run for the presidency. Trump recovers from his failed experiment in Atlantic City and begins to sell shares for the Trump Organization on the New York Stock Exchange. He begins to realize his celebrity status and product endorsements sell and make money. He starts The Apprentice, a reality game show in which he portrays an executive encouraging fierce competition among participants, fires the losers, and anoints the winner, ostensibly to become an apprentice to the master businessman. After the start of this show, Trump begins to envision himself running for president. He views his television audience of The Apprentice as possible voters.

As the Clinton-Lewinsky saga continues, Hillary begins to imagine running for one of the U.S. Senate seats in New York. She became the first senator who was also a First Lady. She became a fierce fighter for neglected, unheard citizens and realizes her next political move, after
being a senator, is to vie for the U.S. presidency. When she loses the nomination in 2008, Hillary Clinton looks ahead to 2016.

The ninth and final act jumps from the 2008 election to 2016 and sets up the viewer’s final choice. Trump reignites the Birther Movement, the unfounded charge questioning Barack Obama’s U.S. citizenship. As it appeared that Trump was going to announce his presidential candidacy, Obama released his birth certificate, amidst Trump’s live speech on national television. Obama and others had hoped that would resolve the issue for Trump and that he would fade away, but he didn’t. The Clinton segment reviews her appointment as Secretary of State in the Obama administration. This was a political move; she wanted to run for president again in 2016. But she had issues with the position, including difficulty staying in Obama’s good graces. Clinton proposed to Obama that America team with other leaders to take out the Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi. After his death, though, Libya tumbled in chaos, ultimately leading to the Benghazi attack that killed a U.S. ambassador and which haunted her during the 2016 election. The revelation about her private email servers also became a larger issue. Hillary Clinton, however, pursued her ambitions and ultimately gained the Democratic nomination.

The documentary ends with a bit of commentary on Trump’s announcement. The last shot are mugshots of Clinton and Trump, in black and white and side-by-side, with the narrator saying, “America faces a choice between two candidates who have spent decades in the public eye, symbols of a bitterly divided country. Both have life stories that led them to this moment. Now the nation will decide between them.”
The first episode, named “The Alibi,” introduces the story. It aired first on This American Life October 3, 2014 and was uploaded to the podcast stream the same day. Aside from a quick introduction to what the show is, it begins with Sarah Koenig asking the audience if they can remember what they did “last Wednesday,” if they know exactly where they were, every person they talked to, every small detail of the day. She then asks the audience to imagine remembering back ten years. To prove just how difficult this is, she asks her teenage nephew and his friends what they did on a specific date. She then plays clips from them countering each other’s statements and then second-guessing their original statements. This device sets up the explanation of the disappearance of Hae Min Lee and Koenig introduces each of the main people Koenig will be discussing throughout the series. This episode also features an interview with Rabia Chaudry and an introduction of Adnan. Koenig summarizes different stories about what happened with Hae Min Lee and Adnan Syed and then fully commits the series to focus on Adnan Syed, who happens to be Muslim. The title of the episode comes from the large discussion about Asia McLain and Adnan’s alibi: does he have one? Why did no one ever contact Asia McLain during the original trial? Asia claims to have seen Adnan in the public library across the street from a high school during the time of the murder, but some of the details of her memory of this day (i.e. the first snowfall of the year) proved to be incorrect. Koenig spends time finding Asia, her boyfriend (at the time of the murder), and her boyfriend’s friend to see if they remember seeing Adnan at the library. This episode runs just under 54 minutes.

“The Breakup” (#2, October 3, 2014, 37 minutes) continues the podcast series. The purpose of the episode is to establish Hae and Adnan’s relationship, how they had to keep it secret, and then ultimately, their breakup. The couple had an on-again-off-again relationship, but
the final breakup led mutual friends to give conflicting observations of Adnan: some said he was okay with it, others said he was angry with it (with some saying Adnan said he would kill Hae).

“Leakin Park” (#3, October 10, 2014, 28 minutes), explains where and how Hae Min Lee’s body was found. Another suspect, who Koenig names Mr. S, is introduced as the person who found and reported Hae Min Lee’s body in Leakin Park, a reputedly sketchy locale that is also featured in David Simon’s (HBO series) The Wire. Leakin Park, which most locals pronounce “Lincoln,” is, as a local citizen states in the podcast, a place that “While you’re digging in Leakin Park to bury your body, you’re going to find somebody else’s.” According to Koenig, since 1946, there have been at least 68 bodies found in Leakin Park (although this number is probably low according to Koenig). Podcast listeners learn Mr. S is a maintenance worker at a local high school. Listeners hear his voice on a police tape explaining how he found the body. He was on his way back from his house to the high school and pulled over to the edge of the park to relieve himself. He walks about 127 feet (later measured by the police) into the woods to pee when he looks down and finds a body. Mr. S was considered a suspect for a short time due to inconsistencies and confusion about his story. He had a record of streaking and other indecent exposure charges. Eventually, however, Mr. S is ruled out and the police return to Adnan as a suspect. The episode, just under 28 minutes, is the shortest of the season.

“Inconsistencies” (#4, October 16, 2014, 34 minutes) focuses on Jay and Jen (Jay’s close friend) and how their stories change between police interviews. It also presents Adnan’s cell phone records from January 13, 1999 (the day Hae went missing). This episode features a lot of police interview recordings and includes Jay naming Adnan as the person who killed Hae. After reviewing Adnan’s cell phone records, the police discover six phone calls to Jen, which then leads the police to her door. Jen’s initial interview is pretty empty, but her second one is more
detailed. She recounts the details given to her by Jay, that Jay saw Hae’s body in the trunk and that he buried her in Leakin Park (with the help of a second person). After this interview, the police quickly question Jay, whose story is very similar to Jen’s, except one minor detail: where Hae’s car is located. Jay leads the police to the car and the police get a warrant for Adnan’s arrest. But as the police continue to interview Jay, his story changes, primarily regarding where Adnan allegedly showed Jay Hae’s body in the trunk of his car. At one point, it is a local convenience store; at another point, it is the parking lot of a Best Buy. The detectives confront Jay with the inconsistencies but ultimately it does not affect their investigation. This bothers many fans and propels a theory that the police fed information to Jay and/or Jay knows what really happened and Adnan had nothing to do with it.¹⁸

“Route Talk, (#5, October 23, 2014, 43 minutes), provides an in-depth description of the timeline and route of the murder. Using information from cellphone records and Jay’s story to recreate the afternoon, co-producers Koenig and Dana Chivvis drive the route (twice), recreating the timeline—from the high school, to Best Buy, to Leakin Park, and all parts in between. The pair was able to duplicate part of the timeline—between the school and Best Buy—though everything had to be done without any stops. But once the pair started the drive to Patapsko Valley State Park, where Jay says he and Adnan smoked weed after the murder and before the burial, they realized “the timeline had some problems.” This episode includes one of the fan-favorite lines by Chivvis, “There’s a shrimp sale at the Crab Crib!” to which Koenig quips, “Sometimes I think Dana [Chivvis] isn’t listening to me.” This episode also introduces the “Nisha call” found on the call logs Koenig and fans never quite come to terms with. This phone

¹⁸ To see a post talking about this subject on reddit, see u/competition_smile’s (2014) post. The first comment has links to other posts within the subreddit discussing the same theory.
call is used by the state as part of the case against Adnan. The episode ends with discussion about phone records and cell phone towers.

Halfway into the podcast series, it becomes clear how the audience is involved with the subject, questions about evidence, and the organismic nature of this particular format. “The Case Against Adnan Syed” (#6, October 30, 2014, 44 minutes) was directly countered in the next week’s episode. Six summarizes the state of Maryland’s very convincing case against Adnan. Koenig revisits all of the information discussed thus far pointing to Adnan’s guilt, and then details issues that give her pause. She also introduces new evidence, including an interview with a woman whose younger brother claimed to have been shown a dead body in the back of a car belonging to their neighbor, who she thinks was named Adnan. However, the younger brother denied this. The episode ends with a generally confused Koenig.

“The Opposite of the Prosecution” (#7, November 6, 2014, 33 minutes), showcased a conversation with Deirdre Enright, Director of Investigation for the Innocence Project at the University of Virginia School of Law. The Innocence Project is a non-profit organization that works to “exonerate the innocent who have been wrongly convicted” (“About: Our Work”). They test or retest DNA evidence. The Innocence Project also works to improve and reform the criminal justice system and support those who are released after being wrongfully convicted. Episode seven raises significant doubts about Adnan’s conviction. Koenig had given Enright all of her notes on the case and then recorded her discussion with her. Enright believes the state’s case is weak and encourages Koenig to keep asking questions and looking at the evidence from all angles. Enright ends the conversation by asking Koenig if she wants the Innocence Project to look into Adnan’s case. Koenig says yes.
This episode is especially revelatory in terms of documentary dialogues. Many fans did not like it. It also caused Rabia Chaudry to lash out about the credibility of the series, saying, “Basically everyone is really disturbed that their precious time was wasted with the irrelevant detail of THE INNOCENCE PROJECT TAKING THE CASE [sic]” (Merry, 2014, para. 29). Chaudry wanted people to remember that the story and case being discussed were real, not an episode of True Detective; that the outcome of the case would affect real people and their lives. The discussion veered into the workings of the Innocence Project criminal justice system without being tied directly to the series focus. Although the episode provided, uplifting news for those who believe Adnan is innocent, the fans wanted more story and less talk.

“The Deal with Jay” (#8, November 13, 2014, 44 minutes), looks at Jay’s role in the conviction, looks closer at Jay’s character, using testimony from his friends, and considers why the jury convicted Adnan. Koenig and Julie Snyder tried to interview Jay or communicate with him by email, but he ultimately declined to be interviewed for the series. The episode starts with a discussion with one of the jurors about how Jay persuaded the jury. The juror regards Jay as someone people could depend on when things go awry. Koenig then continues to discuss how the state used Jay as a pillar in the case and how Adnan’s lawyer countered this strategy. Why did Jay help Adnan? Why did people believe him? What about the inconsistencies from the police interviews? Koenig elaborates on these inconsistencies using statements by detectives, experts, and friends (to whom Jay had relayed the story), and also considered whether they really mattered in the case.

In “To Be Suspected” (#9, November 20, 2014, 48 minutes), Koenig revisits the Best Buy location and the alleged phone call from Adnan to Jay from a pay phone at Best Buy. But no one can confirm, nor can they remember, a pay phone at that Best Buy in 1999. This important
detail is crucial to the argument that Adnan called Jay asking him to come to Best Buy to pick him up and whether Hae’s body was in the trunk of her car in the parking lot. Another witness, Hae’s friend Summer, comes forward in the episode saying that Hae could not have been killed at the time the state says because she had a conversation with Hae sometime between 2:30-2:45 pm (the state says Hae was killed at 2:36 pm). Koenig then turns to Adnan to hear his story of the questioning, arrest, trial, and sentencing. She also looks at his life post-sentencing and his life in prison. Koenig starts to lean firmly into the “Adnan is innocent” camp, despite the “Nisha Call” or anything else that is damning toward Adnan.

In “The Best Defense is a Good Defense” (#10, December 4, 2014, 42 minutes), Koenig addresses jury selection for the trial. She talks about the desire to weed out individuals who could not be impartial to those of Muslim faith. Adnan’s mother, in an interview with Koenig in the podcast, says she believes that some of the issues involving the police were affected by anti-Muslim sentiments. Koenig is skeptical, but she’s willing to allow that an issue of this nature might be dormant in those involved. The prosecution did not want Adnan to qualify for bail. They argued the Muslim community, both stateside and in Pakistan, would help Adnan flee but Koenig is quick to point out that Adnan is not Pakistani, that he is American with Pakistani heritage. She spends time at the top of the podcast to discuss possible racial biases within the court. The prosecution never described the murder of Hae as an “honor killing,” but the approach used skirted the line. Koenig, through her reporting, did notice hints of Muslim stereotypes within interviews from teachers and friends. Koenig interviews some of the jurors about the trial and how Adnan’s religion and culture played into the defense and the prosecution. Adnan’s lawyer, Cristina Gutierrez, knew his Muslim religion would be brought up. She spent a lot of time at the beginning of the trial explaining Islam, Pakistan, and other related topics. Koenig
questions whether Gutierrez messed up. She also begins to question Gutierrez’s competency during Adnan’s trial. Adnan’s first trial was a mistrial, but a poll of the jury suggested it was leaning toward acquitting Adnan. Obviously the second trial had a different outcome. Koenig was not alone questioning the lawyer’s skill. Chaudry also has issues with Gutierrez, although she believed the trial was thrown on purpose. Adnan’s mother talked about some sketchy monetary issues that arose toward the end of the trial. Adnan’s only issue with Gutierrez was the fact she did not seek out Asia McLain. Gutierrez also never sought a plea deal, which Adnan wanted. About a year after Adnan’s trial, Gutierrez’s career collapsed due to an ongoing illness. (She was ultimately disbarred.)

Koenig also calls into question why Jay had been assigned a lawyer. It appears that the state had given Jay a lawyer, claiming he was being charged with accessory to murder after the fact. Jay was not on trial; he was a key witness in the state’s case. Gutierrez questions this, as this is atypical, and claims Jay’s lawyer can be seen as a benefit, which the defense should have known about before the second trial. The judge, although agreeing with Gutierrez, allowed it, saying that Jay’s testimony did not seem to be impacted by the lawyer.

In the penultimate episode, “Rumors” (#11, December 11, 2014, 42 minutes), Koenig summarizes different conversations she had with people over the previous weeks since the beginning of the series. These conversations were with people who knew Adnan growing up, mostly from the Muslim community, with most saying that Koenig did not actually know Adnan well enough to make judgments. Koenig explores the facts around the rumors and interviews Adnan for further discussion about the rumors. Koenig also explores the possibility that Adnan simply does not remember killing Hae, that the memory of this event has been forced out of his mind. To discuss this phenomenon, Koenig turns to Charles Ewing, a psychologist and an expert
who has evaluated thousands of criminals. Koenig ultimately discerns that Adnan isn’t a psychopath, but she still remains unsure of what happened to Hae.

The long anticipated final episode is titled “What We Know” (#12, December 18, 2014, 56 minutes). The episode, which many had hoped would either exonerate or help convict Adnan, only raised more questions. Koenig spends program time revisiting questions about Hae’s boyfriend Don at the time of her murder. Don was quickly dropped as a suspect but is someone series fans constantly question. Koenig was finally able to sit down and talk with Don, although none of it was recorded. Koenig reports her findings from the interview. Koenig also interviews Josh, a co-worker of Jay’s. Josh’s interview gives Koenig and listeners an inside view into Jay and his mindset during the investigation. Josh said that Jay was legitimately afraid during this time, even asking Josh to keep him company at work, citing his fear of a van across the street from the video store where they worked.

Koenig reviews everything, revisits lingering questions, and invites the Innocence Project (introduced in episode seven) to announce they will be petitioning to test the DNA evidence found on Hae’s body. Koenig discloses that if she were on the jury, and with the information she has discussed, she would vote to acquit Adnan, but still has lingering doubts about Adnan and Hae’s murder.

**Audrie & Daisy**

Act One primarily features comments by Audrie’s parents and her best friend, Amanda Le, who tells Audrie’s story and what happened on the evening of the assault. Audrie’s parents filed a wrongful death suit against the boys (whose names are not released due to being minors). Directors Bonni Cohen and Jon Shenk were given access to the boys for a 45-minute interview.

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19 To see a post talking about this subject on reddit, see u/WholockedinNightVale’s (2016) post.
The directors used the audio, but animated the interviews and changed their appearances. These animations depict facial expressions while masking the identity of those interviewed. The same technique was used for footage of trial depositions for the case.

Act Two transitions from Audrie to Daisy’s story by employing the story of Delaney Henderson. Delaney is another victim of sexual assault and has since become an advocate for survivors. She did not report her assault and later found out that another woman was assaulted by the same individual. Delaney’s story is similar to both Audrie and Daisy’s: she was sexually assaulted by two individuals while in high school, she was bullied and harassed in the months following, even being advised by the county’s District Attorney to relocate. Delaney wanted to reach out to Audrie after hearing her story but was too late. The film then begins to transition to Daisy Coleman with Delaney sending a message of hope and support to Daisy on Facebook Messenger.

Act Three features Daisy Coleman. Her story is the longest segment of the film. It features Daisy, Daisy’s mother, Daisy’s best friend Paige Parkhurst (who was also assaulted on the same night), and Daisy’s brother recounting the story of Daisy and Paige’s sexual assault and the events of the night. It also features Darren White, Sheriff of Nodaway County (where Daisy lived during the assault). Sheriff White becomes the target of much hatred from fans and viewers of the documentary (as discussed in chapter six) due to his comments on Daisy’s case. White said, “Nothing that occurred that night ever rose to the level of the elements of the crime of rape,” and “Girls have as much culpability in this world as boys do. So everybody has to take their part of it.”

Daisy and Paige’s assaults occurred on the same night. These best friends decided to try alcohol together while at Daisy’s house. According to Daisy and Paige’s story, the girls were
drunk and decided to go to a schoolmate’s house, a senior class boy who is also friends with Daisy’s oldest brother. As a freshman, being invited to a senior boy’s house was cool, in the eyes of Daisy. The girls were picked up by Matthew Barnett (the grandson of former Missouri state representative, Rex Barnett). They and a few other friends shimmied through Barnett’s basement window. Paige was taken into a bedroom by another boy, and Daisy remained in the main area and continued to drink with the boys. At one point Daisy, on the edge of consciousness, was taken into Barnett’s room where Barnett proceeded to have sexual intercourse with Daisy. The girls were later dropped off at Daisy’s house. Paige was coherent enough to go inside. The boys had told her they would sit with Daisy until she came to, but Daisy’s mother, Melinda Coleman, found her daughter incoherent on the front lawn, with her hair frozen to the ground. Daisy was taken to the hospital, a rape kit was executed, and an investigation started. It was later reported that the rape had been recorded and the recording shared with others, although this fact remains contested. Sheriff White’s team could not retrieve the deleted video and said that because the video was deleted, no one could have seen the video and anyone who said they had was lying. Offenders and the community began to threaten the safety of Daisy and her family, and later burned their house down. The family moved back to Albany, Missouri, where they lived prior to coming to Maryville, Missouri, after the death of Daisy’s father in a car wreck. Daisy’s story attracted national attention, which transitions to Act Four.

The fourth act addresses the national attention that was given to Daisy’s experience. Representatives from national media traveled to Maryville, and reported Daisy’s story through national outlets. Sheriff White and the town’s mayor (at the time), Jim Fall, both lashed out at the national media attention. White said that Daisy and her family were “harpooning” the case. The mayor of Maryville expressed his annoyance at being on the national radar for a sexual assault
case, instead of as a popular fishing destination. When the rape charge was dropped against Matthew Barnett, the hacktivist group Anonymous stepped in to support Daisy and pressure prosecutors to continue to seek justice. Barnett was not charged with rape, but he did plead guilty to child endangerment (a misdemeanor) on January 9, 2014. The boy who assaulted Paige was charged soon after the initial assault, instead of being dragged out as in Daisy’s case.

The absence of justice for Daisy and the ongoing cyber bullying led her into dark times, which is discussed in Act Five. Flashes of Facebook and Twitter updates are shown on the screen, accompanied by pictures of Daisy, her blonde hair now died black and wearing piercings and tattoos. Daisy’s oldest brother Charlie and her mother recount Daisy’s several suicide attempts and the difficult times that followed the assault. However, Daisy worked her way through, ultimately connecting with Delaney and beginning the road of healing, together with other sexual assault survivors.

In Act Six the documentary crew follows Daisy as she travels to Washington, DC to meet other survivors, where she tattoos semicolons on each of them—a sign used by several support groups signaling that their story is not over, has only paused, and will continue. The group of survivors then gathers with Angela Rose, a sexual assault survivor advocate, to tell their stories and connect with each other. It ends with a national press conference in which each of the girls speaks. The film then follows Daisy as she graduates high school and transitions back to Audrie’s story as her best friend, Amanda, delivers an honorary degree to Audrie. The screen then flashes to black, followed by the names “Audrie & Daisy” and then a list of other survivors’ names overlaying one another, each preceded by an ampersand (e.g., &Delaney and &Jane_Doe). A few facts about sexual assault among teenagers are presented and the credits

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20 It is illegal to disclose the names of minor sexual assault victims and of those accused. The names of the survivors included are displayed because of their choice to be in the documentary.
are displayed, while an original song composed for the documentary by Tori Amos, called “Flicker,” is played.