

Discovery Campus Special
THAT'S DOCUTAINMENT!
3 & 4 May 2008 – Munich, Germany

[Subsequently Published in Discovery Handbook 2008.](#)

SATURDAY 3 MAY 2008

10.00 a.m. - 10.30 a.m.

WHAT'S DOCUTAINMENT?

- Prof. John Corner University of Liverpool, UK
- Moderator: Rudy Buttignol

John Corner	<p>Yes fine, thanks Rudy! I am very pleased to be here and to try to start what will be a fascinating two days looking at the way in which this strange hybrid beast called docutainment has developed and where it might be going. I think that, first of all, some questions of definition would be useful, even though lots of people, when they look at the quite long history of docutainment, find it difficult to get real clarity into the line or, as I say, the lineage. Lots of different phrases have been used to describe this area. The one I actually like most is the one that I think was certainly circulating in the BBC more than ten years ago, and was probably circulating elsewhere too: 'popular factual entertainment.' That is a nice way of placing it in a pretty broadly encompassing framework. Of course, the biggest, most widely used label has probably been 'reality television,' which nowadays holds so many different varieties. 'Docu soap' is certainly, in Europe, another category, and then there is docutainment, which brings the two words 'entertainment' and 'documentary' together. When we asked, "what is new about mixing factual with entertainment," a quick answer would be, "nothing." Right from the early days of documentary filmmaking some directors worked with a strong sense of the need to be entertaining, and therefore the mix is not, by itself, original. What happened is that - partly as a result of changes in the TV industry internationally, and, I think, also because, as a result of changes in what audiences want - the documentary entertainment mix has been strengthened and become more widespread as an area of production for the last few years, and certainly for the last fifteen years or the last ten years in many countries. Part of the definition that I thought that I would go with, just as an opener, is 'a range of series formats.' They are mostly series formats that mix observational approaches but not always. It is kind of interesting the way in which entertainment recipes often rely extensively on features of observationalism with content and design features to produce entertainment-based programming from reality materials. I think it is worth emphasizing 'entertainment-based,' because if you look at the disputes - and I know the dispute in Britain well and I know it quite well in Norway and Denmark - they are often based on the idea that the new formats are entertainment-based. That there is entertainment in them does not seem so controversial, but, if they are entertainment grounded, all sorts of conflict starts to open up in TV culture, particularly from the more established documentary producers. What seems to be at issue is a shift of generic base. The main lines of development - I mean a lot of you know more about this than I do - are interesting to track, I think, from the 60s, 70s and 80s. It starts to happen a lot there up until the 90s. I think the first big line of development comes from what I call the action route. These are formats in which action is primary and it is not surprising, therefore, that police and emergency service series are key parts of the development here. The action route is still with us in a wide variety of styles, and I think it will remain with us; there is a lot going for it. The second route - which took off pretty quickly in Britain but also elsewhere - is the looking at daily life route. This is a</p>
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way of doing docutainment that focuses not so much on action but on stories, or occupational routines or, perhaps, even on private lives. In a way, this shadows more closely the soap opera. The third area, which I put up there, is what I call the game route and this has been a big one over the past ten years and, certainly, over the last five. The game route involves narratives of competing and testing – including, most recently of course, of talent. Types of talent are being tested against competition for an outcome: maybe a place in a musical or whatever. This requires the production team to think about the control settings of places and times and, of course, also involves audience participation, which is a crucial part of new recipes. If you look at these routes, across time you see that there is a kind of cycle of novelty – “Wow, this is a new programme!” - then familiarity - “Let us do it another time but, this time, let us have violins instead of pianos; let us have traffic wardens rather than policemen.” It goes from the kind of revision with the basic recipe being more or less the same, all the way through to replacement - an attempt to say “This form is dead. The audience do not want any more this kind of thing. Let us try and think of something very different,” which is often a very hard thing to do. If you look at the origin... You can go all over this in terms of argument but I just put a few down here. Since we are here in Munich, I thought it would be good to start with Germany's *File Number X Unsolved*, a few episodes of which I saw in 1967. I thought it was really a remarkably strong bit of docutainment based on crime, which was soon picked up by other countries and they also had their own brands of crime series. *Crimewatch UK* did not start until 1987 and it was huge and the BBC was surprised by its success. NBC's *Mystery* and, in 1989, Fox's *Cops*, as well as *Rescue 911* on CBS and *America's Most Wanted*, became very big indeed. In 1992 in Britain, BBC's *999* was a huge shift, causing a massive amount of debate about standards in the BBC. I wrote sympathetically about it in a book in 1995 and lots of academic colleagues attacked me for being soft on this really rather dangerous new form of television. I was a bit of a fan of *999*, I have to say. The more I got to talk to the team, mostly on the phone, the more I enjoyed it. The European soap opera template did not quite take on in America. There is *Driving School*. What an idea! How original can you get! “Let us go with the driving instructor and see the kind of fun he has with some of the people he tries to teach to drive.” It was a huge success and so was *Vets in Practice* in the same year. “Let us follow some vets through their training; imagine all the fun with animals you are going to pick up on.” Then there was *Castaway*, which was not the first of the format but we now know the format pretty well. You take a group of people from different spheres of life, they may not get on together and you put them in a strange environment where they are challenged to live together and do things in a non-modern way. There is a very interesting mix of facts that you can play about with and you can grow the idea of it in different ways. It still has a very strong pull on audiences. There were earlier formats too. I put up there Paul Watson. Paul Watson hates being seen as the granddaddy of British reality TV; he keeps on saying that he does not want to be regarded like that, most recently at the BAFTA awards ceremony two weeks ago in London. In fact, *The Family* (1974) is quite interesting to show to students as an example of a TV-series that mixes, intentionally or not - I suspect intentionally - a documentary observationalism with strong entertainment ingredients. It did pick up, of course, from the previous year's American series *An American Family*. Watson was not picking up on that consciously because at the time he had not seen it but was actually developing his own project. By the way, *The Family* went down well with audiences

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and lots of people wrote about it. If you actually look back at what people were saying - like some critics were saying, "Hey, this is really interesting. We started to watch as if it were a real life soap opera," - you get some sense of another part of the recipe coming together there. In fact, Watson himself then changed the recipe many years later in the series about an Australian family, *Sylvania Waters*, in which the entertainment factor was much stronger and the rhythms of shooting and cutting were very different. *Sylvania Waters* was definitely a series that was made to be entertaining; there is no doubt about that.

A lot of the people in the room know a lot more than I do about the TV business and TV culture. You will hear about that in the sessions to come and I am looking forward to that. It is pretty clear that docutainment in most national settings comes about, among other things, as a result of intensive competition within the audiovisual industry. Although you can get quite expensive docutainment projects, there is also no doubt that - originally and for a long time and still - relative cheapness against other formats was a factor in the commissioning of docusoap-series. You can see this if you look at the BBC and ITV network in Britain. Along with that relative cheapness of production went a real ability to engage audiences, to get popular audiences, to get better audiences during peak time, and to get far better audiences than conventional documentary formats ever got. Even for people working within documentary conventionally, the idea of hitting audiences this big - maybe four or five times the size of the audience they would get in any documentary series - was obviously very tempting. I would certainly appreciate that. A second point I have noted here as a bullet point, is that, of course, there was a lot going on in TV culture in the 90s and 80s about generic mixing, about experimenting more intensively with programme styles and formats and, particularly, mixing dramatic styles with documentary styles and bringing different ideas together. I think that this coincided with, and was to some extent possibly even driven by, changes in popular taste - and here I can only really talk about Great Britain. There was a new interest in the ordinary, in seeing the ordinary on television, seeing ordinary people on television, even if the ordinary people were policemen in a murder squad. One part of the mix was that if you got the ordinary mixed with the extraordinary, the ordinary became extraordinary. There was a series that I have got an enormous amount of time for - mainly because I live in Liverpool. It was called *Hotel* and showed life in a Liverpool hotel, but it showed both its ordinary moments and some of the extraordinary things that happen almost every day when you are running a big hotel. You could have seen that before it went out and could have said, "this is going to be a hit." It has got just the right mix - it has just the right mix of extraordinary things happening, ordinary people talking and enjoying each others' company and exchanging jokes, and it connects with audiences in a very strong way. There is just a little bit of voice-over - which most docutainment formats have found they cannot do without - just to get the links across time.

Well, I am on time now. I just want to hit the button, which will be picked up later on in the day and tomorrow, about the ethics of popular factual entertainment. I do think that there has been quite a big debate in many countries about just what the ethics of docutainment are. Here the pull of documentary values has been very strong and you can either say, "Good, documentary values are important. They are a little bit hard to define but they are absolutely important and they should be kept up. Anyone who

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wants to stray away from them should know that they are doing that." Or, on the other hand, you can say, "Documentary values have actually acted to limit what is on television in many countries. They are really rather conservative. They have several biases which they do not acknowledge and anything that goes towards upsetting them a bit, by giving them a bit of a shock or subverting them, is quite good news." You do not have to take these two polar views as there is quite a lot of debate in between. As you probably know, in Britain a few years ago, docutainment was really quite controversial. I remember going to the Sheffield International Documentary Festival, probably about seven or eight years ago, and coming across some fiery exchanges between the pro and anti docutainment lobby. I have got a quote here from Paul Watson about docu-soap: "I despair of what is happening for this rash of docu soaps, reality television, some of the very worst of programme-making today. This is television at its cheapest and laziest, fobbing off viewers with something not much better than moving wallpaper." (*laughter*) As the years have gone by, Paul Watson has got slightly stronger in his opinions about docu-soap. (*laughter*) At the same event, I think, Chris Tyrrell, who was then at the BBC, did a kind of measured defence of the docu-soap project and said that factual programmes had been taught a lot by the docu-soap. "If you look at some of the classic documentaries we have made, they are bloody boring," he said. "We commanded post-watershed graveyards slots. We were not challenged enough to reach a bigger audience, and now we are." This is the sort of bracing shock-therapy approach to it. Of course, quite a lot of younger producers at these events do not want to be dragged into that old-style argument; they are just happy doing docutainment projects without any guilt and without feeling the need to shout down the old-style documentary. Nevertheless, some issues remain and they will come up later. One issue is the relationships with participants. Is docutainment more likely to exploit people than other kinds of television? That is perhaps hard to do given the exploitation record of television as a whole. What about those issues of staging and of performance that keep coming into the frame? We know that documentary cannot really do what it wants to do without a certain amount of staging, however you define that. But isn't it the case that - in the need to produce programmes fast with highly intensive moments of interaction - many docutainment formats have actually overmanaged what is in front of the camera, to a degree that really does question factual ethics? Then, finally - and this is really an old established view but still let us keep going for a bit - what about the obligation of providing public knowledge? Doesn't television, in some of its modes at least, have some obligation towards public knowledge? Even in its entertaining mode, doesn't it still retain some commitment to using factual material to advance public knowledge? How is that play-off achieved? Which proportion of entertainment to knowledge is acceptable? Do we want to see knowledge virtually driven out into the margins in mainstream television?

I will finish with a "where to next?" which I have got no answer to. I am actually looking forward to seeing what people come up with. Clearly, there are going to be further connections with web culture. Thinking about how to get your programme idea and connect it up with what is happening on the web, if you can, is, sometimes, a bit desperate and difficult but is now necessary. To do that is very important and we are going to see - as web develops in most countries - new combinations and quite exciting combinations, a consequence of which will be increased interactivity. And the

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	<p>web is not the only source of interactivity, of course, but it does allow a much higher degree of interactivity than older channels or formats did. We are also going to see - and this is my final point - hybrid developments. We are going to see people attempting to say, "let us take this idea and see what happens when we mix it with another programme type." We are going to see different types of mix - we have seen a lot already. Being original is desperately difficult in many national settings - I am sure many of you agree with me on that - but we are inevitably going to see a drive towards a freshening up of tired formats – some of which will still last, I think. We are also going to see a premium - an economic and cultural premium - on thinking up sharp new format ideas. Despite lots of newspapers occasionally saying, "docutainment is dead, it is the end of reality TV, BBC reality output is bottoming out," it is not. It is going to remain, for quite a long time, as quite a central part of most television schedules. Thank you. (<i>applause</i>)</p>
<p>Rudy Buttignol</p>	<p>Thanks John. This is a good provocative start. We have a few minutes for questions. Are there any questions for John? I just have a couple, myself, John. I would like to start off with the question 'Where to next?' Being a television addict myself, a lot of docutainment for me seems like going back to the future because we really have come back to the beginnings of television. Television in its first days - and in North America we have a lot of television all day, every day - was going back to the game shows and musical variety shows. I remember that twenty years ago people said that the variety show is dead on prime time, and the game show is dead on prime time, and then it came back. For me, <i>American Idol</i> or <i>Pop Idol</i> goes back to the variety show and <i>Survivor</i> and <i>Big Brother</i> are good examples of the game show.</p>
<p>John Corner</p>	<p>Yes. They are - that is true - but there are differences. Nowadays you can go into the dressing room; you can hear the anxious comments in front of the camera before they go and do their bit. Then, afterwards, you can see their disappointment when they are interviewed about how they feel about being knocked out. You get inside personal space in a way that is very documentary-like. This is not at all like the older formats. They just could not do that, could they?</p>
<p>Rudy Buttignol</p>	<p>Right. I also have another question. You asked about values in your piece - what kinds of values to bring to docutainment and to documentary? I am wondering: it seems to me that - in Europe and particularly in Britain with <i>The Driving School</i> - a lot of the docutainment or docu-soap formats came from people who were doing documentaries. In North America, the people who are doing docutainment did not come from documentary; they came from entertainment but were using some of the documentary language. For North Americans, the question about values would be: "Do you need any?"</p>
<p>John Corner</p>	<p>(<i>Laughs</i>) No, no. That is true.</p>
<p>Rudy Buttignol</p>	<p>I know it is a vulgar question. I mean, really, is it an argument? Is it an argument for people who are believers in the documentary form and the social, political, educational element or documentary people from the entertainment industry? What's the number one thing you want to do? You want to make money and you make money by having the most viewers and the most advertisers.</p>
<p>John Corner</p>	<p>That is right. I think that also a lot of documentary directors initially got upset about docutainment because they thought that it would drive out their programme ideas from the schedules. They thought that it would have an economic effect upon commissioning of documentary, and to some extent it did. It also had some effect on</p>

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	the format. "Could you bring something a little bit more interesting in it? You know it is supposed to be a documentary series but, actually, can't you bring some more entertainment into it?" They actually resented it. Some found it quite an interesting positive challenge but there was also quite a lot negative response to that pressure.
Rudy Buttignol	We have got one question here and then one here and that will be it.
Audience	I have been a Commissioning Editor in the Netherlands for a long time. You said, in an offline byline, that people would be afraid that docutainment would take away some of the money that would be put aside for documentary. I think that you should not put that in a byline because that has happened very often, at least in the Netherlands. I think it is about half the budget that was available for documentaries in the classic sense. Also, the new formats like docu-drama - the big staged historical drama based on real stories - are taking away a lot of the money. The economic status of documentary versus docutainment is something that I am really worried about.
John Corner	I agree with that. I will not make any further comment on that but the economic aspect is very important
Rudy Buttignol	We can pick it up. Just two more questions before we have to move on. John has provided a really great opening position. As we have got two days together - and John, you are staying with us for the next two days, aren't you - the issues raised here this morning will be with us over the next two days. So, if you have a question, there will always be an opportunity to ask it in the next few sessions. Over here!
Audience	You mentioned that the obligation toward public knowledge would be an old fashioned way of thinking. My question is, if you put that away and say this is an old fashioned way of thinking, you will have a dual system in practically every European country. You have huge public TV-stations; you have private stations. If you take this obligation away, would it not question, to a certain degree, the existence of public TV because pure entertainment is something that private TV-stations can do very well on their own? Being cynical: why do you need an apparatus of civil servants to copy the private TV-stations?
John Corner	In many countries that is quite a big issue - in Britain it is. If you hang on to core news services, you can still justify the public function. The problem is if you are hanging on to programme formats that are not bringing in a good majority of viewers, you are also at risk in terms of public funding. The BBC has been caught on that one several times. Does it go for big popular programming that justifies its licence fee by size of audience and viewer satisfaction, or does it hold on to, as I put it, some old-fashioned values: "Never mind how many people watch it, this is serious stuff and we are going to commission it." I think this is very problematic.
Rudy Buttignol	That is actually a provocative question about public television. One final question!
Audience	My name is Elmar Bartlmae and I am from Leonardo Film in Oldenburg, Germany. You briefly touched on the way that the classical documentary slots may possibly also have changed slightly because of things like BBC <i>Horizon</i> or <i>Panorama</i> . I was just wondering if you could give an example because the classical ones I was thinking of, at least in the UK market, do not seem to have changed. Maybe you could give an example.
John Corner	The UK TV-industry is still big enough to contain a lot of quite serious documentary.

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	<p>Some people would say that it has declined in both quality and scale. There are still some great slots but actually they are getting fewer. I read a convincing article a couple of weeks ago about just how much they will be less by next year when the time comes to renew commissioning. One of the things they, the managers, do, of course, is to move serious stuff to a later slot. It used to be 9:00 p.m.; now it is 11:30 p.m.. There are ways of moving things into graveyard slots - ways of dropping documentary into that space - but even that space has more of a premium attached to it and less of the intended target audiences are being reached. Then there are the broader problems that follow. I think that you are right. There are several examples to look at just over the past two or three years of that happening</p>
Rudy Buttignol	<p>I think that is it for this session. We are out of time. You will be sticking around so we will raise some other questions later. A big round of applause for John! (<i>applause</i>)</p>