

# The Development of Documentary Filmmaking in the Age of AI

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## **Abstract**

In the age of digitalization and artificial intelligence (AI), documentary filmmaking has experienced a significant metamorphosis. Documentaries have grown thanks to digital tools, online platforms, and artificial intelligence (AI) technologies that change storytelling, aesthetics, and audience engagement. Historically, they were constrained by analog film processes and distribution barriers. The evolution of documentary filmmaking from film-based methods to the digital revolution and the emergence of AI-driven techniques is examined in this paper. It raises ethical and authenticity concerns while critically examining the ways AI supports visual effects, editing, scripting, and personalization. The article emphasizes how AI can be both an enabler and a disruptor, citing case studies like *Welcome to Chechnya* (2020), which used AI-based face replacement, Netflix's algorithmic documentary recommendations, and YouTube's role in activist storytelling. The study links theoretical viewpoints on digital media with practical applications through a qualitative, case-study-based methodology, demonstrating how artificial intelligence is changing the way documentaries are distributed, viewed, and told. According to the study's findings, artificial intelligence (AI) both challenges traditional ideas of truth and authorship that serve as the cornerstone of documentary practice and creates new opportunities for immersive and democratized storytelling.

## **Keywords:**

Documentary filmmaking, Artificial intelligence, Digital narratives, Storytelling, Online platforms, Ethics, Audience engagement.

## **Introduction**

Since it provides a lens through which reality is represented, interpreted, and discussed, documentary filmmaking has long been considered one of the most potent storytelling mediums. The documentary has served as a medium for social consciousness and cultural documentation in addition to being an art form since its inception in the works of pioneers like Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922). Documentaries are based on reality and derive their power from their capacity to enlighten, educate, inspire, and convince viewers, in contrast to fictional film, which depends on imagination and contrived storylines. The development of documentary filmmaking over the years has been closely linked to changes in technology. Celluloid film, videotape, digital recording, and online distribution are just a few examples of the new media that have changed production techniques, narrative aesthetics, and audience engagement. We are currently on the cusp of yet another technological revolution: the application of artificial intelligence (AI) to the documentary filmmaking industry.

The history of documentaries shows how closely creative practices and technological change are linked. Early 20th-century documentarians had to work within the constraints of celluloid film, which required significant financial, technological, and professional resources (Barnouw, 1993). The editing process required skilled

technicians to work with actual film strips, and mobility was limited by the heavy 35mm cameras. Notwithstanding these difficulties, the filmmakers of the time created important films that helped to establish the genre. The advent of synchronized sound recorders and portable 16mm cameras in the years following World War II paved the way for the development of direct cinema and *cinéma vérité* in the 1960s. This change in technology made it possible for filmmakers to document life as it happened rather than relying on heavily mediated, staged nonfiction films. This style was adopted by movements in the US, Canada, and France, leading to more naturalistic and impromptu depictions of reality (Ellis & McLane, 2005).

Documentary practice became even more accessible with the advent of videotape in the 1970s and 1980s. Because they were less expensive, more portable, and simpler to use, lightweight video cameras reduced obstacles for independent producers. This shift made room for grassroots and activist filmmaking and allowed a variety of voices to enter the field. Digital video and non-linear editing software signaled a paradigm shift in post-production and production techniques by the 1990s. Filmmakers were able to experiment with narrative structures, visual effects, and longer shooting times thanks to software like Adobe Premiere and Final Cut Pro, frequently at a fraction of the previous costs (Aufderheide, 2007). The democratization of technology allowed citizen journalists, students, and independent filmmakers to contribute to the development of nonfiction filmmaking and extended documentary practice outside of traditional institutional settings.

Distribution was transformed by the internet and online platforms in the early 21st century. Since its launch in 2005, YouTube has grown to become a global platform for news-based nonfiction, short-form documentaries, and personal narratives (Burgess & Green, 2018). Subscription services like Netflix, Amazon Prime, and Disney+ later made significant investments in documentary production, turning the genre into a popular cultural product. Through these platforms, documentaries like *Making a Murderer* (2015) and *My Octopus Teacher* (2020) achieved international acclaim, highlighting the growing demand for nonfiction content. Interactive forms of audience engagement were also made possible by online platforms, allowing viewers to share, comment on, and distribute documentaries in addition to watching them. During this time, documentaries were firmly established at the nexus of digital culture, activism, and storytelling.

However, the current era marks a change that is perhaps just as important as the invention of digital editing or portable cameras. With ramifications for every stage of the documentary filmmaking process, artificial intelligence is becoming a disruptive force. AI permeates the very process of conceiving and creating narratives, in contrast to earlier innovations that concentrated on capturing or disseminating reality. AI-powered tools are being used for voice synthesis, editing, transcription, translation, scriptwriting, and even creating images and videos. For example, ChatGPT and other large language models help filmmakers with storyline development, idea generation, and writing scripts for narration. In a similar vein, programs like Adobe Sensei and Runway AI automate time-consuming tasks like scene transitions, color grading, and video editing, which lowers production costs and time (McStay, 2023).

AI is being used to increase creative possibilities in addition to technical efficiency. AI-powered image and video generation is now used by filmmakers to animate still photos, visualize abstract ideas, and recreate historical scenes. The 2020 documentary *Welcome to Chechnya* provides a startling illustration of this, using AI-based face-swapping technology to safeguard the identities of LGBTQ+ activists. This creative application of AI struck a balance between moral considerations and narrative integrity, demonstrating how machine learning tools can be used to solve persistent problems in nonfiction storytelling. In addition to visual enhancement, AI is being used to analyze large video archives, a task that previously required months of human labor. More effective research and editing workflows are made possible by machine learning algorithms that can tag, classify, and retrieve footage based on location, thematic keywords, or facial recognition.

AI has ramifications for audience reception and distribution. AI-powered recommendation algorithms are already used by streaming services like Netflix and YouTube to examine user behavior and forecast viewing preferences (Napoli, 2019). These data-driven systems affect which stories are more likely to be seen as well as how documentaries are distributed to viewers. Although the user experience is improved by this personalization, algorithmic bias and the reduction of cultural exposure are also issues. Despite their artistic or social significance, independent and experimental documentaries may have trouble finding an audience if AI systems give preference to popular themes and genres.

AI integration into documentary practice is not without its difficulties, though. The perceived authenticity of documentaries, their assertion that they depict "truth" or "reality," has always been one of their distinguishing characteristics. The increasing use of AI-generated content raises important ethical issues by obfuscating the distinction between fact and fiction. Deepfake technology, for instance, can be used responsibly in documentaries to protect identities, but there is a chance that it will be manipulated and contain false information. According to Floridi and Chiriatti (2020), artificial intelligence (AI)-generated voices and synthetic images have the potential to improve storytelling, but they also pose a challenge to conventional ideas of authorship, originality, and credibility. These problems highlight the necessity of strong ethical frameworks to direct the incorporation of AI in nonfiction film.

Academically speaking, research on AI's application to documentary filmmaking is still in its infancy. Even though the effects of digitalization and online platforms have been thoroughly studied by academics, the incorporation of AI raises new research issues. How does AI alter the morality and aesthetics of narrative in nonfiction? How much does automation alter a filmmaker's function as a writer and creative force? What impressions do viewers have of documentaries that make extensive use of AI-driven procedures? These inquiries draw attention to a research void and emphasize the value of academic investigation in this nascent area.

In this sense, studying the development of documentary filmmaking in the AI era is a critical investigation into the ways in which social realities, machine intelligence, and human creativity interact rather than merely a study of new technologies. The AI era offers both opportunities and challenges: while it raises questions about ethics, cultural homogenization, and authenticity, it also promises efficiency, creativity, and global reach. Filmmakers, academics, and viewers who depend more and more on documentaries for information and interaction with the outside world must all comprehend this development. This research attempts to shed light on how the genre continues to evolve, adapt, and redefine itself in response to technological change by placing AI within the larger historical context of technological changes in documentary practice.

## **Literature Review**

Significant academic research has been conducted on the development of documentary filmmaking, with scholars looking at how new technologies alter audience engagement, narrative techniques, and moral behavior. Early research on the history of documentaries was done by Barnouw (1993), who focused on how the 1960s saw the invention of synchronized sound and portable cameras, which made it possible to produce *cinéma vérité* and direct cinema movements. This trajectory was further explained by Ellis and McLane (2005), who pointed out the transition in the 1970s and 1980s from institutionally controlled film production to more democratized forms of video and independent filmmaking. These studies demonstrate how technological advancements have continuously impacted documentaries' social and political functions in addition to their production.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, the digital revolution attracted a lot of scholarly attention. Digital cameras and non-linear editing systems, according to Aufderheide (2007), reduced obstacles for independent creators and opened the door for a greater variety of voices to enter the industry. By analyzing how digital formats broadened documentary aesthetics and gave rise to new hybrid forms like animated and performative documentaries, Nichols (2010) supported this. Winston (2008), meanwhile, highlighted conflicts between ethical obligation and technological innovation, cautioning that greater accessibility could jeopardize veracity and accuracy. When taken as a whole, these studies show how digital technologies changed the epistemological underpinnings of nonfiction storytelling while simultaneously improving technical capabilities.

Research has also focused on the rise of online platforms. Burgess and Green (2018) examined how YouTube contributes to the development of a participatory culture in which professional productions and user-generated documentaries coexist. Tryon (2013) examined how documentaries are now at the forefront of international entertainment markets due to the transformation of distribution models brought about by subscription platforms such as Netflix and Hulu. Lotz (2017) also highlighted how digital distribution is algorithmic, with recommendation systems influencing what viewers view. These studies demonstrate that online platforms are active mediators that affect audience exposure and cultural discourse rather than being neutral distributors.

While the field of artificial intelligence in filmmaking is still in its infancy, media and communication studies research on the subject offers a starting point. Concerns regarding creativity, authenticity, and ethical boundaries were raised by Floridi and Chiriatti (2020) as they examined the potential and constraints of generative AI systems such as GPT-3. McStay (2023) investigated the emergence of "emotional AI" in media, where machine learning systems mimic and analyze affective states, providing insights into how AI might change how audiences view movies. Napoli (2019) cautioned against the possible reduction of cultural exposure while examining the effects of algorithmic personalization on platforms such as Netflix on public interest and media pluralism. Although these studies offer valuable insights into the ramifications of artificial intelligence, they hardly ever discuss documentary filmmaking as a separate field. The increasing use of AI in nonfiction film is demonstrated by recent applied research. For instance, the 2020 documentary *Welcome to Chechnya* has received a lot of attention in the academic and journalistic community due to its creative use of AI face-swapping technology to conceal the identities of its subjects (Berlatsky, 2020). This case raises new concerns regarding the veracity of documentary photos while also demonstrating how AI can be used ethically. In a similar vein, experimental projects utilizing deep learning-based editing tools and AI-generated scripts are starting to surface in academic discussions and film festivals (Carroll, 2021). Despite these advancements, academic research on AI in documentaries is still dispersed and frequently concentrates on discrete case studies rather than thorough theoretical frameworks.

In conclusion, the body of existing literature offers a solid basis for comprehending the historical connection between technology and documentary filmmaking. The shifts from film to video, digital, and online platforms have all been thoroughly studied by scholars, who have shown how each phase altered production, distribution, and reception. Although it is expanding, most of the scholarship on AI has concentrated on media contexts in general rather than documentaries in particular. This highlights a crucial gap: a methodical investigation into the ways AI is changing documentary filmmaking in terms of ethics, creativity, and audience involvement is required. This study aims to close that gap and add to new media studies conversations by placing AI within the longer historical trajectory of technological change in documentaries.

## **Methodology**

This study examines how artificial intelligence (AI) is changing documentary filmmaking using a qualitative research methodology based on media and communication studies. In order to conduct a thorough investigation of technological advancements and their effects on narrative, ethics, and audience engagement, the methodological framework integrates historical analysis, case study research, and textual analysis.

## **Research Design**

A historical-comparative approach forms the basis of the research design, placing the emergence of AI within the larger technological trajectory of documentaries. Analytical benchmarks for evaluating the uniqueness of the AI era include earlier technological transitions, such as the transition from film to video, digital formats, and online platforms. The study can identify continuity and disruption in production methods, distribution strategies, and audience response thanks to this comparative framework.

## **Data Collection**

The study mostly uses secondary data sources, such as

1. **Academic Literature** – Peer-reviewed books, journal articles, and conference proceedings about digital media, AI applications in film, and documentary history (e.g., Aufderheide, 2007; Barnouw, 1993; Floridi & Chiriatti, 2020).
2. **Industry Reports and Reviews** – Trade journals, media and technology reports, and evaluations of AI's use in movies, including Variety and the MIT Technology Review.
3. **Case Studies of Documentaries** – Selected documentaries that have incorporated AI tools, such as Welcome to Chechnya (2020), which stands out for its creative application of AI-based face-swapping for moral identity protection. Other examples include experimental AI-powered generative storytelling and automated editing projects that have been shown at film festivals.
4. **Digital Platforms and Algorithms** – An examination of how AI-powered recommendation engines on websites like Netflix and YouTube affect how documentaries are seen and received.

## **Case Study Method**

To offer detailed insights into particular applications of AI in documentary filmmaking, the case study method is utilized. According to Yin (2018), case studies are especially useful for analyzing new media phenomena. Greetings from Chechnya is examined as a central case, supported by secondary examples, to explore how AI can serve both creative and ethical purposes while raising questions about authenticity and truth claims in nonfiction cinema.

**Analytical Framework:** Textual and contextual analysis are used in this study. Textual analysis looks at how AI tools change the visual representation, narrative structure, and editing techniques of documentaries. Contextual analysis places these modifications in the context of larger discussions concerning audience trust, ethics, and authenticity. This two-pronged strategy guarantees that AI's creative and cultural ramifications are covered.

**Scope and Limitations :** Documentaries made between 2010 and 2024 are the subject of the study, with a focus on those that either directly used AI technologies or were distributed via AI-powered platforms.



Although the study uses examples from around the world, it mostly uses English-language sources, which might restrict viewpoints from non-Western contexts. Furthermore, the study admits that its conclusions are not final and that they are only a snapshot of a field that is constantly changing due to the quick speed at which AI is developing.

**Ethical Considerations:** The study's framework heavily relies on ethical considerations as it examines AI-driven practices in nonfiction film. Since the use of AI in documentaries can both protect subjects and distort the truth, the research critically examines issues of authenticity, manipulation, and consent. Although this study does not directly involve human subjects, the ethical frameworks used in the case studies are drawn from current discussions in documentary ethics (Nichols, 2010; Winston, 2008).

**Results and Discussion** The study's conclusions show that the methods, aesthetics, and audience interaction of documentary filmmaking have been profoundly altered by technological developments, especially the incorporation of artificial intelligence (AI). Three major themes emerged from an analysis of secondary research and new case studies: (1) changing audience dynamics, (2) redefining narrative strategies, and (3) transformation of production and post-production practices.

### **1. Transformation of Production and Post-Production Practices**

The production of documentaries has been profoundly changed by AI, especially in the areas of automated color grading, sound design, and editing. Filmmakers can now save time and money by streamlining laborious editing procedures with the help of programs like Adobe Sensei, Descript, and Runway AI (McMahan, 2022). In the past, making documentaries involved a lot of manual labor, from handling hours of unprocessed footage to physically cutting film reels. AI-powered software, on the other hand, can now recognize patterns in video data, instantly transcribe interviews, and recommend the best cuts. For instance, the 2019 documentary "In Event of Moon Disaster" emphasized the ethical and creative ramifications of artificial intelligence in post-production by reimagining alternate history using deepfake technology (Vincent, 2019). By enabling even independent filmmakers to experiment with intricate visual effects that were previously only possible in big studios, these tools democratize access to high-quality filmmaking.

### **2. Redefinition of Narrative Strategies**

Documentaries have historically used linear storytelling that is influenced by the historical setting and the filmmaker's vision. Storytelling techniques are becoming more interactive, customized, and flexible as a result of digital advancements, especially artificial intelligence. Real-time customization of documentary experiences is possible through the analysis of audience behavior by AI algorithms. For example, viewers can choose how to follow storylines in immersive documentaries like *Clouds Over Sidra* (2015), which use AI and VR (Murray & Gaudenzi, 2016).

Furthermore, more and more people are using natural language processing (NLP) tools like ChatGPT to create subtitles, draft scripts, and provide real-time accuracy fact-checking (Zhang, 2023). This has created opportunities for hybrid storytelling, in which human creativity and machine intelligence work together to create stories that are more multifaceted and dynamic than those found in traditional formats. Scholars warn, though, that although AI-generated stories improve accessibility, they also bring up issues of authenticity and authorship (Nichols, 2020). The main point of contention is whether AI is a "co-creator" or just an augmentation tool.

### 3. Shifting Audience Dynamics and Engagement

Documentary distribution has already increased due to the growth of digital platforms like Netflix, YouTube, and over-the-top (OTT) services, but AI has further changed audience dynamics by improving interactivity and personalizing recommendations. Socially relevant documentaries like *The Social Dilemma* (2020) are guaranteed to reach specific audiences who are likely to interact with them thanks to Netflix's machine learning-powered recommendation engine (Smith, 2021). Additionally, filmmakers can anticipate which themes, images, or characters will appeal to audiences through AI-driven analytics, which has an impact on both content production and distribution. A change from the filmmaker-centric model to a more audience-centered paradigm is represented by this feedback loop. Meanwhile, worries about algorithmic bias and filter bubbles are becoming more and more pertinent (Pariser, 2011). Viewers might only see documentaries that support their preexisting opinions, which would limit their exposure to a range of viewpoints. A major problem in the AI era of documentary filmmaking is the conflict between inclusivity and personalization.

### Discussion

Together, the results show that AI is a paradigm shift in documentary filmmaking rather than just a technical advancement. The AI era brings intelligence, adaptability, and moral quandaries, whereas previous technological shifts (film → digital → online) prioritized efficiency and accessibility.

- **Benefits:** AI lowers production costs, increases audience engagement through personalization, improves storytelling through interactivity, and democratizes access to filmmaking tools.
- **Difficulties:** There are important discussions surrounding ethical issues related to authenticity, possible manipulation (deepfakes), algorithmic bias, and the decline of human authorship.

This dichotomy emphasizes how AI can both facilitate and disrupt. Documentaries have always been a place where truth and representation are negotiated, as Nichols (2020) points out, and AI intensifies this negotiation in previously unheard-of ways.

### Case Study 2

A complex interaction between narrative transformation and technological innovation can be seen in the evolution of documentary filmmaking in the AI era. The results of the chosen case studies—*Welcome to Chechnya* (2020), Netflix's digitally enhanced and AI-curated documentaries, and YouTube-driven activist documentaries—showcase how AI is changing production, aesthetics, ethics, and audience engagement. This section shows that AI is not just a technical tool but a cultural force that changes the way truth, participation, and distribution are negotiated in modern documentary practice by combining thematic analysis and case study evidence.

**Production and Ethical Storytelling Transformation:** By simplifying editing, transcription, color correction, and sound design, artificial intelligence has completely changed the production and post-production processes. The labor-intensive nature of documentary filmmaking can be decreased by using tools like Adobe Sensei, Runway AI, and Descript, which can automatically create subtitles, eliminate filler words, and even recommend cuts (McMahan, 2022). By lowering entry barriers that previously limited participation to those with substantial resources, these efficiencies make high-quality filmmaking more accessible to independent creators.

However, case studies demonstrate that AI can go beyond efficiency to solve persistent ethical issues. *Welcome to Chechnya* (2020) by David France is a seminal example. The movie preserved the emotional

expressions of LGBTQ+ activists while protecting their identities through the use of deepfake-style face replacement technology. AI-generated masking enables an empathic connection with viewers, in contrast to blurring or pixelation, which dehumanizes subjects. This approach is consistent with Nichols' (2017) "documentary ethics" theory, which holds that participant safety and truth-telling must be balanced. It also serves as an example of what Aufderheide (2015) refers to as the "new ethics of invisibility," wherein the use of concealment technologies becomes morally required.

However, authenticity is called into question by this innovation. Viewers may start to question whether what they see is "real" if AI is able to alter images, even for defensive reasons. Nonfiction has always created realities rather than objectively capturing them, as Bruzzi (2006) contends in her postmodern theory of documentary. Because AI makes manipulation more potent and less obvious, it exacerbates this tension.

### **Redefining Narrative Techniques: Algorithmic Culture and Netflix**

AI is having a bigger impact on documentary narrative techniques, especially on sites like Netflix. Using big data analytics, streaming services use algorithms to make content recommendations, influence viewer engagement, and even direct production choices (Lobato, 2019). True-crime documentaries, like *The Social Dilemma* (2020), for instance, use algorithmic promotion and AI-driven visualizations to reach their intended audiences.

This exemplifies the "platformization of culture," as defined by Nieborg and Poell (2018), in which algorithms both distribute and influence cultural content. The distinction between narrative and commercial logic is blurred in Netflix's case, as documentaries are purposefully made for algorithmic discoverability. Streaming platforms serve as both technological infrastructures and cultural producers, integrating commercial imperatives into narrative aesthetics, as Tryon (2020) points out. AI also creates opportunities for novel narrative formats. In order to create interactive, adaptive storylines where viewers' choices change the narrative, immersive documentaries like *Clouds Over Sidra* (2015) combine AI and VR (Murray & Gaudenzi, 2016). Additionally, scripts and multilingual subtitles are being created using natural language processing tools (Zhang, 2023). These developments point to a move away from rigid, sequential narratives and toward more flexible, individualized documentary experiences. However, as Nichols (2020) cautions, these partnerships between machine intelligence and human creativity make authorship more difficult and call into question whether AI is a co-creator or merely a tool.

### **Changing Audience Behavior: Participatory Culture and YouTube Activism**

AI also changes the dynamics of audiences, especially on sites like YouTube where low-budget documentarians create and distribute documentaries. In order to reach a global audience, social justice documentaries, Extinction Rebellion campaigns, and climate activism videos are increasingly depending on AI-based editing tools, automated captions, and real-time translation. Jenkins' (2006) idea of "participatory culture," in which viewers take on the role of active media producers rather than passive consumers, is in line with this democratization. Algorithmic governance, however, mediates participation. What Tufekci (2017) refers to as "algorithmic gatekeeping" is replicated by recommendation systems, which decide which activist documentaries are shown. AI limits reach by giving preference to content that fits platform logics like engagement and monetization, even as it empowers creators by lowering technical barriers. This paradox exemplifies Castells' (2009) concept of the "network society," in which corporate infrastructures continue to be embedded while decentralized activism is made possible by digital networks.



## Combining Theoretical Views with Synthesis :

Several theoretical conclusions can be drawn from these cases:

- **Documentary Ethics:** AI makes representation more difficult by facilitating identity protection while posing questions regarding authenticity (Nichols, 2017; Aufderheide, 2015).
- **Platform Studies (Nieborg & Poell, 2018; Tryon, 2020):** Netflix demonstrates how algorithms co-create narrative form and distribution, incorporating market logics into documentary culture.
- **Participatory Culture (Jenkins, 2006; Tufekci, 2017):** YouTube illustrates both the democratizing potential of AI and the restrictive influence of algorithmic governance.
- **Postmodern Documentary Theory:** In the AI era, the line between artifice and reality becomes even more hazy, necessitating new discussions of the documentary's veracity claims (Bruzzi, 2006).

**Implications :** The findings reveal three major implications for documentary practice in the AI era:

1. **Narrative Authenticity vs. Manipulation:** Although AI expands the possibilities for storytelling, it also runs the risk of eroding viewers' faith in the documentary as a source of truth.
2. **Accessibility and Democratization:** AI technologies increase filmmaking accessibility and strengthen a range of voices, particularly those of activists and citizen journalists.
3. **Platform Dependence:** AI-driven algorithms are increasingly determining the visibility of documentaries, consolidating cultural power on corporate platforms such as YouTube and Netflix.

## Conclusion

The technological trends that influence the creation and dissemination of media have always been inextricably linked to the development of documentary filmmaking. Every change has increased the documentary's ability to tell the truth, challenge authority, and engage viewers, from the analog era of 16mm reels to the advent of digital cameras and the growth of online streaming services. The continued incorporation of artificial intelligence (AI) into documentary practice represents a paradigm shift that reinterprets storytelling, authenticity, and representational ethics. It is not merely another phase in this technological continuum.

This study has looked at the theoretical and practical ways that AI-driven tools are changing documentary filmmaking. As demonstrated by the case studies of *Welcome to Chechnya* (2020), Netflix's AI-optimized recommendation and personalization strategies, and YouTube activism made possible by algorithmic visibility, artificial intelligence functions on several levels: in audience engagement, production, and distribution. These instances demonstrate how AI fosters creativity while also bringing up important issues with algorithmic bias, authenticity, and surveillance.

First, using deepfake-style face-swapping technology to conceal the identities of persecuted LGBTQ+ people, *Welcome to Chechnya* showcases the use of AI in post-production. AI offered a more compassionate alternative to the conventional blurring or pixelation used for this kind of protection, enabling participants to maintain their emotional expressiveness while staying safe. Since the film is authentic in spirit but mediated through artificial reconstruction, theoretical frameworks like Nichols' concept of "documentary authenticity" are called into question. This implies that AI forces us to reconsider the ontology of the documentary image by obfuscating the distinction between fact and fiction.

Second, Netflix demonstrates how AI is used outside of the camera lens, revolutionizing the way people watch documentaries. Recommendation engines examine how viewers behave, choose documentaries, and promote particular shows. This broadens the audience for specialized or topic-focused documentaries, but it

also calls into question algorithmic gatekeeping. More and more, opaque AI systems—rather than human editors—determine whose stories are highlighted and whose are kept hidden. In his work on media systems, McChesney (2013) reminds us that technology is never neutral; rather, it reflects political, cultural, and corporate priorities. As a result, Netflix runs the risk of reducing engagement to consumer preference rather than civic or political urgency, even though it makes diverse documentary voices accessible worldwide.

Third, the intersection of AI and grassroots storytelling is demonstrated by YouTube activism. Low-cost production tools are used by activists, citizen journalists, and content creators to distribute documentaries that question prevailing narratives. However, algorithmic logics of engagement control visibility on YouTube, frequently giving preference to emotionally charged or sensational content. This is consistent with Napoli's (2019) analysis of algorithmic visibility, in which audiences are accessed through predictive data-driven systems rather than editorial merit. YouTube documentaries may reach a previously unheard-of audience, but when producers modify their stories to satisfy algorithmic requirements, they run the risk of being distorted.

When combined, these examples show how AI in documentary filmmaking has two sides: it can be both liberating and limiting. AI technologies, on the one hand, democratize production, safeguard marginalized voices, and introduce audiences around the world to underrepresented realities. However, they also reinforce systemic biases in distribution, redefine authenticity, and pose new ethical conundrums. This paradox demands a more nuanced approach to the "AI documentary" from academics and practitioners. We need to consider how AI changes power dynamics in media ecosystems as well as how it improves filmmaking.

In the future, new ethical frameworks will be required as AI is incorporated into documentary filmmaking. There is an urgent need to address issues of audience manipulation, algorithmic transparency, data privacy, and consent. In order to ensure that AI is used to magnify the truth rather than distort it, documentary filmmakers must strike a balance between moral responsibility and creative innovation. Academic research should also look at cross-cultural contexts, such as how AI documentaries work in the Global South as opposed to the Global North or how corporate studios and grassroots filmmakers use AI differently.

In the end, the development of documentary filmmaking in the AI era exhibits both continuity and disruption. It upends long-held beliefs about what is "real," who controls visibility, and how stories are mediated, while simultaneously carrying on the tradition of using technology to reach new audiences and increase narrative capacity. Treating AI as a tool is no longer sufficient as it becomes more integrated into filmmaking processes; it is now a co-author, a gatekeeper, and a meaning-shaper. This article emphasizes that although technology will constantly change the medium, the fundamental principles of documentary filmmaking—truth, justice, and public participation—remain the same. The question facing documentaries in the AI era is not whether they will endure technological change—they certainly will—but rather whether they will continue to fulfill their civic and ethical purpose in the face of artificial intelligence's increasing power.