

USING DOCUMENTARIES IN THE ONLINE CLASSROOM TO TEACH MEDIA LITERACY AND BUSINESS ETHICS

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Abstract

Documentaries are enjoying popularity and prestige like never before. Stone (1) highlights 2019 as a turning point for documentary film where multiple news outlets announced “a new golden age of documentary” following considerable public appeal and investment. In particular, the journalistic investigation documentary, which includes the business ethics documentary, has seen significant growth due its relatively inexpensive format, the growth in Video On Demand (VOD) on platforms like Netflix, and isolation during the COVID19 lockdown.

Documentaries such as *Fyre* (2019), *The Social Dilemma* (2020), *Downfall: The Case Against Boeing* (2022), *White Hot: The Rise and Fall of Abercrombie and Fitch* (2022) and the Obama-produced *American Factory* (2019) and *Working: What We Do All Day* (2023) can all be mined for discussion in the online business ethics classroom to better prepare graduates for workplace challenges around being ethical, transparent, inclusive and sustainable. At the same time, these documentaries appeal to the visual learning style of undergraduate/Generation Z learners, as well as aligning with their values of social justice, inclusivity and environmental conservation.

An under-explored area within business school education and technology and enhanced learning is the importance of helping learners to become more media-literate, and preliminary findings from this research suggest that lifting the lid on how documentaries are made, particularly the distinct Netflix style replete with dramatic music, cinematic film-making techniques and skilful editing, may be an effective way to teach critical thinking and media literacy while engaging students on the importance of business ethics. This research will (1) raise awareness of Gen Z attitudes towards business documentaries as a tool for teaching media literacy (2) introduce a toolkit for using business documentaries in the classroom to teach media literacy.

Keywords: documentaries, business, online, Zoom, Articulate, Netflix, media literacy, critical thinking, Generation Z, visual learning style, engagement, active learning.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Visual case studies

One of the main issues that business school educators face is learner engagement. This may be especially pronounced in business schools with large numbers of undergraduate students from widening participation/Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME)/international backgrounds. Whether it is in the classroom or online, the tutor may often leave the class feeling that engagement had been too low despite their efforts in designing the learning.

This research argues that traditional approaches to reading textbooks and case studies as the usual source for learning may lead to uneven engagement because of a shift in how young learners absorb information. As Smith (2) argues,

“conventional classroom environments emphasizing textbooks, lectures, and an occasional case study discussion often leave students sitting in class fantasizing about how they might handle some envisioned future scenario”.

Educators may therefore wish to explore using business documentaries as a more visually engaging alternative to textbooks and as an opportunity to make the world of business more relevant to their students' career development. This research also takes the view that business documentaries can be used as a tool to develop media and visual literacy to better prepare students for their ongoing studies, careers and personal lives where these critical thinking skills will become even more important.

1.2 My research context

The context to this research is year 2 on undergraduate business programmes in a UK post-1992 university business school.

My own background as an HE educator started with Level 3 students (pre-undergraduate) on international foundation programmes. In the last 5 years since joining a Post-1992 business school, my teaching context has allowed me to understand the structure of the business curriculum, which has given me a more holistic view of how we prepare undergraduate students.

My role within my business school is as an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) programme coordinator, responsible for embedding support into modules with high failure rates and/or overseas student numbers. It is worth noting that although the main learning, i.e. lectures/tutorials, happens on campus due to a shortage of rooms, my support is conducted online via Zoom (please see section 2 for more details of the methodological approach).

Regardless of whether the learning is delivered on campus or online, the challenges are very similar throughout the student journey: how to make the study of business more interesting for students who may be unfamiliar with the expectations of undertaking a business degree and/or may lack curiosity about the actual business world. Perhaps the streaming platforms that they use for recreation (see Figure 1 below) may also be a key to unlock their learning.

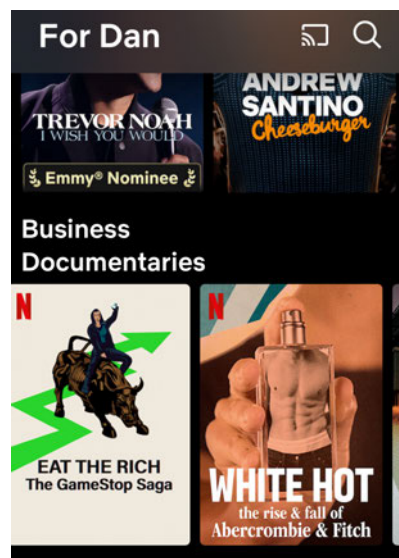


Figure 1: Netflix business documentary categories

There are also expectations to produce students with a global citizenship mindset by teaching them business ethics. By the end of their final year, students are expected to show higher level thinking skills and be attuned to problems such as global recessions, environmental degradation, inequality and exploitation, and cultural empathy. I am currently working on a year 2 module, "Exploring Business Ethics", where the aforementioned areas can be explored to help achieve the programme outcomes.

1.3 What are the current approaches to teaching business ethics?

At this point, it is worth considering some specific studies which focus on the use of film for educational purposes. For example, Assad (3) looked at the use of financial documentaries in the classroom. Her motivation for doing so is as follows:

"Corporate scandals and financial crises demonstrate the complexity of business behaviours and the imperfections of individual decision-makers, exposing the ethical conflicts individuals face in their daily jobs. Finding ways to prepare students for the ethical challenges they will face is a difficult, but critical responsibility."

Indeed, Assad's claim is validated by the steady release of financial scandal documentaries offering cautionary tales to graduates (please see Section 1.7 for more details).

One of the Netflix documentaries that I have used extensively in my teaching is *American Factory* (2019). Acquired by Barack and Michelle Obama's production company, Higher Ground Productions, this documentary is highly relevant to business ethics students for how it looks at a Chinese-based automobile glass-making company and its takeover of a closed General Motors factory in Dayton, Ohio, USA. The educational value of *American Factory* lies in how it depicts the cultural clashes and synergies between Chinese and American workers in the current era. Michelle Obama comments:

"'American Factory' doesn't come in with a perspective; it's not an editorial. I mean you truly let people speak for themselves, and that is a powerful thing that you don't always see happen" (4).

One interesting question that this quote raises is the idea of perspective and whether documentaries like *American Factory* ever come without perspective. Educators may wish to address this point with their students to promote active learning and see whether they can identify editorial choices, for example 'what to show' versus 'what not to show' or the deliberate use of music for emotional effect, and then discuss how these techniques are leading the audience to a particular conclusion. The importance of media and visual literacy will be discussed later in this section.

One can take the point of perspective or authenticity even further by examining a paper by Schmidt (5) and his recommendations for using *American Factory* in the classroom to explore common Human Resource Management (HRM) themes such as "conflict, communication, global HRM, labour law, culture, unionization, and employee relations". Amongst other examples, Schmidt proposes using the documentary as a basis for role-play or a launch pad to class discussion. Schmidt, however, understates the point of perspective and that *American Factory* is a construct where he comments:

"Documentaries allow students to consider what happened in real situations and how those situations were impacted by the ideas they learn in the classroom".

My research fully endorses Schmidt's use of documentaries in the classroom to engage students, but it also seeks to raise awareness of the director's perspective and that there is value in training students to understand perspective through editorial lenses (e.g. visual literacy).

In contrast, Hayward and Jiang (6) recognised the importance of editorial lenses where they asked their undergraduate strategic management students to consider the persuasive film-making techniques used in the Amazon Prime-streaming *Beer Wars* (2009), a provocative documentary which takes a critical look at how the major beer brewing companies deploy lobbyists to crush their smaller craft-brewery competitors. Hayward and Jiang persuasively argue that the inherent biases in documentaries provide an opportunity to guide students towards critical thinking. They add that without taking such an approach students would typically accept the documentarian's point of view without questioning it.

In brief, few studies have addressed using business documentaries critically in the online business classroom to improve both undergraduate academic and media literacy.

1.4 Generation Z Learners

Williams (7) states that Generation Z learners were born between the early 1990s and mid-2000s. The Gen Z learners who make up the vast majority of our undergraduate modules are described as "the first true digital natives" who value "on-demand content" and "tech-forward learning" (8). Gen Z are said to absorb information immediately and lose interest equally as fast (9). They tend to search for solutions on the internet as opposed to asking for advice, and they are likely to watch online lessons to learn, while still recognizing the value of a university degree.

A Pearson (10) study of 2,558 14-40 year old students in the US revealed that Gen Z/millennial learners mainly prefer video to learn, with 59% of Gen Z students citing YouTube as their preferred source of information and 47% spending 3-4 hours a day using YouTube to find answers to their questions. In contrast, 46% of Gen Z learners said they still valued books for information.

This research aims to use these findings as a basis for exploring the value, if any, that undergraduate business students place on business documentaries as a pedagogic tool.

1.5 Definitions of media literacy

The British Film Institute (BFI) and Office of Communication (Ofcom) share a common mission in promoting media literacy education.

The BFI (11) defines media literacy as

“the repertoire of knowledge, understanding and skills that enables us all to participate in social, cultural and political life.”

Similarly, Ofcom (12) define media literacy as “the ability to use, understand and create media and communications in a variety of contexts”. Ofcom’s interest in developing media literacy stems from the UK legislation - Communications Act 2003 - which seeks to promote media literacy, so everyone can participate online. Ofcom adds that regardless of whether the media is traditional or new, online media literacy is crucial for how students behave as consumers, users and digital citizens. Of particular interest to this investigation is how undergraduate students “access and receive information” and “critically form and express opinions” (Ofcom, 12).

1.6 What is a documentary? What role does it play as an educational resource?

There are multiple definitions of documentaries. According to Bill Nichols (13), documentaries are traditionally associated with the “discourse of sobriety” which includes philosophy, politics and science. Similarly, Stella Bruzzi (14) explains the origins of documentaries as “striving to represent reality as faithfully as possible”. In contrast, John Grierson, one of the earliest documentary film-makers, described documentaries as “the creative treatment of actuality” (15). From these definitions, documentary film is seen as having academic qualities because of the way it supposedly deals (soberly and faithfully) with the real world. In this sense, documentaries are not dissimilar to the academic texts that students are expected to read (and critique) at university. They can be viewed as fact-checked, mostly reliable sources of information for students to use as evidence to support their ideas within an assignment.

On the other hand, documentaries are viewed as possessing creative qualities, where the director makes claims about truth, which also likens documentaries to argument-driven texts that students encounter at university. This makes documentaries useful texts for critiquing, a skill which HE educators endeavour to foster in their students before undertaking a more substantial piece of research like a dissertation. As Lavery (16) explains, documentaries offer “an opportunity to push students beyond passivity and towards questioning and critical analysis”. At the same time, documentaries can enthuse educators who see connections between business documentaries and their own syllabus.

In the context of business schools, there lies an interesting question as to why documentaries do not feature more on module reading lists, especially when considering the aforementioned Gen Z learner styles and those who may learn more from watching than reading.

1.7 The growth of documentaries in cinemas and on streaming platforms, particularly Netflix

It is worth examining the growth of business documentaries where documentaries now regularly feature on streaming platforms such as Netflix, Amazon, Disney, Sky and AppleTV+. Fischer (17) reports that in 2020, documentaries showed the quickest growth of all genres on streaming platforms, caused in part by a surge in original productions on platforms such as Netflix. Lordache et al. (18) also explain how digitisation benefited the proliferation of the documentary genre while Chapman and Allison (19) and Baker (20) point to the reduced costs of “filming equipment”, “editing and postproduction software”, and the need for “large, specialised crews”.

The Corporation (2003), narrated by Michael Moore, serves as a good starting point for the catalogue of business documentaries, and it is one that I often use in my teaching to explain concepts like the birth of the corporation and the moral responsibilities of corporations. *Super Size Me* (2004) then deals with the aggressive marketing tactics of McDonalds and their effect on obesity. *Wal-Mart: The High Cost of Low Price* (2005) addresses precarious labour conditions in large corporations. In the same year, award-winning director Alex Gibney directed *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room*, a documentary about the corrupt accounting practices of the energy company, Enron, which eventually led to its collapse.

An Inconvenient Truth (2006) was one of the first documentaries to address how businesses and consumers are accelerating the harmful effects of climate change. It won Best Documentary Feature at the 2007 Oscars and made \$49.8m at the box office (the 11th highest grossing documentary film thus far in the USA) (21). Similarly, *Food, Inc.* (2008) focuses on corporate farming and its harmful effects on nature. Many other documentaries followed, and as streaming services began to grow, documentaries began to feature more prominently on platforms such as Netflix.

Dirty Money (2018) now has two seasons on Netflix, with various episodes drawing attention to corrupt practices within the automobile, pharmaceutical, and banking industries. Aimed at a slightly younger audience, the *Broken* (2019) series followed on Netflix, examining the role of influencers and marketing

in driving sales of counterfeit makeup and fuelling interest in vaping products like Juul. Other popular documentaries on streaming platforms which can complement a range of business-related modules include:

Inside Job (2010) - finance

The Greatest Movie Ever Sold (2011) – marketing

Fyre (2019) - tourism and events management

Seaspiracy (2021) - sustainability

Downfall: The Case Against Boeing (2022) – crisis management and stakeholder/shareholder theory

White Hot: The Rise & Fall of Abercrombie & Fitch (2022) – equality, diversity and inclusion in HRM

Thematically, these documentaries all deal with similar themes surrounding irresponsible business and industry, topics which are very useful for teaching business ethics.

There has also been a more recent run of ‘fake it till you make it’ documentaries, which offer younger viewers a vicarious experience of entrepreneurship, rapid wealth and fandom but also cautionary tales about fraud and reputational damage.

The Inventor: Out for Blood in Silicon Valley (2019)

WeWork: or The Making and Breaking of a \$47 Billion Unicorn (2021)

The Tinder Swindler (2022)

Trust No One: The Hunt for the Crypto King (2022)

Panorama, Downfall of The Crypto King (2023)

It is interesting to consider whether such documentaries appeal to our student body and whether students see a connection between these stories and why educators labour the importance of academic integrity throughout their student journey.

1.8 A closer look at the Business documentaries under consideration as pedagogic resources

At this point, it is worth considering the form of business documentaries, particularly the Netflix style, and the current techniques used by filmmakers to engage audiences. A brief search on YouTube reveals several tutorials on how to make a Netflix documentary (22) . The advice relates mainly to the ‘true crime’ subgenre, though the techniques are equally applicable to the business documentary or journalistic investigation documentary subgenre. The key point is that today’s Netflix documentaries are increasingly borrowing from Hollywood feature filmmaking techniques to make stories more enthralling. Some repeated methods in Netflix business documentaries include:

- Soft focus lighting on interviewees to produce an artistic effect (e.g. the Rembrandt triangle)
- The visual timeline and use of graphs/charts for educational effect
- The use of smart phone clicks and beeps to reflect the use of technology in the stories
- Use of electronic music for excitement and well as the ubiquitous single piano key for drama
- The inclusion of academic interviewees to add legitimacy
- Use of archive footage for historical context
- Expansive drone shots
- Dramatic titles

This research delves into these techniques in more detail, building them into lesson plans, in a bid to make business documentaries not only a tool for discussion but also a means of making the learners more media and visually literate.

1.9 Research questions

As previously explained, very few studies have focused on using business documentaries on undergraduate business courses. The main research focus is this study is:

An investigation into the value of business documentaries for teaching business ethics.

The more specific research questions within this study are as follows:

- 1 What has caused the appetite for numerous business documentaries on streaming platforms?
- 2 What value, if any, is there in using business documentaries in the online classroom with undergraduate learners?
- 3 What recommendations can be made for using business documentaries in the online classroom with undergraduate learners?

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Overview

This section will explore the research methodology behind this DBA topic.

Briefly speaking, I have designed several business documentary-based tutorials using the Articulate Rise software. These tutorials (*The Social Dilemma*; *Downfall: The Case Against Boeing*; *White Hot*; *The Rise and Fall of Abercrombie and Fitch*; *This Changes Everything*; *Hard NOx – Dirty Money*) replace the more traditional reading-based case studies on the Level 5 module entitled “Exploring Business Ethics”. The main teaching team deliver these tutorials on campus, so part of the enquiry considers the effect of learning in a face-to-face setting.

But as previously mentioned, my own embedded English for Academic Purposes (EAP) support takes place via Zoom. Here I try to consolidate the module learning by reinforcing lecture concepts and playing additional clips from the tutorials. As part of my teaching, I make use of Mentimeter for synchronous interaction plus the Zoom chat for discussing video clips as the learners watch (the latter taps into the recent phenomena of “watch alongs” or “second screen viewing”). It is also important to note that my teaching focuses on developing the skills of critical thinking and media/visual literacy, so students can critically refer to the documentaries in their assignments.

The research takes place over two cycles: firstly, with a cohort that started in September 2023 and then with a cohort starting in January 2024. The findings in Section 3 come from a pilot study in July 2022 on a Level 5 module called “Cross-cultural Management”.

2.2 Interpretivism

Broadly speaking, this research is subjective in that knowledge will be constructed through social interactions between myself (the researcher) and the undergraduate participants and teaching staff. Denzin and Lincoln (23) explain that qualitative research belongs to the interpretive philosophy. Saunders et al. (24) add that the interpretivist approach seeks to create a socially constructed reality to achieve an understanding of values and beliefs of human experience. Using this approach, this research aims to understand the pedagogic value of business documentaries in the undergraduate classroom. According to Silverman (25), an advantage of interpretivism is that it allows the researcher to be spontaneous, flexible, and adaptive during the data collection phase.

2.3 Mixed methods research design

This research is mixed-methods because it uses the data from a pre-intervention and post-intervention survey (closed and open questions) to inform the qualitative questions in subsequent interviews. As Saunders et al. (24) explain, a mixed methods approach is favourable because it combines multiple sets of data. Saunders et al. (24) add that the analysis of qualitative data allows for the emergence of patterns and themes. This research primarily takes an inductive (bottom up) approach with the potential for establishing new theories after analysing the data.

2.4 Case study approach

This research takes a case study approach, focusing on undergraduate Level 5 learners and teaching staff on the Exploring Business Ethics module. The naturalistic context will allow for in-depth observations about the value of business documentaries.

2.5 Action Research, Reflexive Thematic Analysis, and NVivo

As previously explained, the data comes from surveys (built in Qualtrics) and Zoom interviews, but data is also available via on campus lecture capture (Panopto) and Zoom lesson recordings. This data has allowed me to reflect on how the tutorials are used and received. This approach is akin to an action research journal, enabling me to regular modifications. Using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (26; 27), the aforementioned data sets will be coded using NVivo.

2.6 Pilot study

In July 2022, a small pilot study was conducted based on the above methodology. 95 students from the Level 5 Cross-cultural Management module who attended the researcher's support classes were invited to complete a survey designed using Qualtrics (please see Appendix A). 15 students completed the survey, resulting in a somewhat meagre response rate of 16%.

In August 2022, one interview with a mature Level 5 UK white female student and one focus group with a mature Level 5 UK BAME female student and one early 20s Level 5 Chinese male student were carried out. Despite the limited sample size, the research produced some useful (and unexpected) findings which are shown in the following section.

3 RESULTS

Below, I will outline some interesting findings from the pilot survey interview, plus some preliminary findings from the September 2023 cohort.

In the pilot study interview, when asked about their approach to research skills, the UK female student commented:

"If I'm honest, I never feel 100% confident where I'm getting my sources from. I think the Internet in particular is so overwhelmed with stuff. It's hard to know what you're looking at sometimes, and I do feel personally like there could have been more work done in like the first year to support students in researching because the researching skills are really important."

The comment above is broadly representative of the Level 5 students. The students appear to struggle with researching, and anecdotally speaking, many students tend to use the same examples, perhaps because they are overwhelmed by choice, or they lack curiosity in the subject. In any event, the comment helps to justify this intervention geared towards uncovering content within the students' preferred streaming platforms, for example Netflix.

Interestingly, the Chinese student from the focus group mentioned a new website called "Bilibili", the Chinese equivalent of YouTube, which he used for watching documentaries. Citing a Chinese documentary on Bilibili with 600 million views called *Second Life* (a story about conquering setbacks, starting over, and compassion) (see Figure 7 below), Zhou (28) comments:

"Documentaries have entered their prime in China over recent years... Genuineness is what makes documentaries successful, and that's well indicated by the frequently quoted line that there's more to life than books."

The main study will consider the effect of documentaries on different cultures and whether there are similarities or differences.

To better understand student motivation for watching Netflix and YouTube documentaries, the students were presented with the following quote from the survey:

"Usually, I watch YouTube videos that are shorter than a documentary because they are easier to keep focus on. I watch them because they are interesting and I feel I become more aware of the world around and have something to talk about to other people that makes me look a bit more knowledgeable."

In the interviews and focus groups, the students further expressed enthusiasm for these platforms, but they also revealed concerns about referring to YouTube and Netflix content for their assignments, with the mature UK BAME student commenting:

"I think my only concern with YouTube videos is whether you can use them as a reference. Are they knowledgeable enough? Are they experts in what they do? Are they academic? You know?"

Similarly, the mature UK white female student commented:

"There is a little bit of inconsistency... if we're saying that [using documentaries] is allowed, then all module leaders need to adhere to that being allowed to be a reference. I think my biggest issue with academics is that we have this idea that because this is an academic source, it counts, but then why are these other sources not viable in some way?"

The above statements suggest that students are risk-averse when it comes to using video content such as YouTube and Netflix business documentaries in their assignments because they may be marked down, which may in turn be driving them towards more traditional sources, such as books, journal articles, and of course website articles, with which they may engage less or very superficially. One major question, therefore, is how students can integrate video sources critically into their assignments.

In terms of media literacy and the checks the students do on the validity of the information, some participants showed fairly positive attitudes, with 29.41% saying they "check if it was by an organisation/author/presenter/director that I had heard of" and 23.53% saying they "Check if it was by an organisation/author/presenter/director that I thought was trustworthy".

The mature UK white female student made some very interesting comments about the perspective used by documentary filmmakers:

"Obviously I'm a little bit sceptical because everything's a little bit dramatized and some things are very skewed to one side. I think about Making a Murderer [Netflix's hugely successful 2015 'true crime' documentary] is very skewed to the side that this guy isn't guilty. And actually, there were two sides to that story. And there's a lot of missing information. So it's kind of making sure that [I] don't take it all as gospel. That's my one issue of documentaries... how much of that is swayed to one perspective?"

In brief, the pilot study appeared to validate my approach to using documentaries in the classroom. The respondents were enthusiastic about the online delivery using documentaries, with some saying they watched the documentary more than once and others saying it prompted them to read more about the story using other web sources. Specifically, the students welcomed the following:

- The relevance of documentaries to their assignment;
- The use of short clips in class to promote discussion;
- The value of breakout rooms to facilitate private discussion among students;
- The use of the zoom chat as a means to discuss the clips as they were being shown ("second screen viewing").

4 CONCLUSIONS

In close, the following quote by the acclaimed German film-maker, Werner Herzog, helps to distil the motivation behind this study. When asked why he once said a documentary film-maker should be a wasp with a sting rather than a fly on the wall, Herzog (29) replied:

"The idea of cinéma vérité [truthful cinema] is a historical mistake... We are creators. We are film-makers. We are directors, dammit! Otherwise the surveillance camera in the bank would be the greatest of all cameras. But you can wait for 15 years and not a single bank robbery is going to happen... Go out, shape a film, articulate it, stylise it, use music, use your sense of storytelling. Be active, don't sit back like a fly on the wall. That's idiotic."

Documentaries can be seen as a technological tool used to provoke and sting learners stuck in a passive state. Documentaries are no longer "cultural vegetables... good for you, but relatively unappealing" as Stone (1) historically describes them. The highly-stylised cinematic style of documentary film-making and story-telling that has enjoyed massive appeal on Netflix is directly aimed at Gen Z learners; it is fast-paced, full of bleeps and clicks, sinister, and provocative. At the same time, these stories appeal to the Gen Z social justice world view, addressing their concerns about the plight of the natural world, a lack of inclusivity in the workplace, and corporate greed. Yet, the use of documentaries in the classroom also begs the question as to whether students are able to critically acknowledge the way in which

documentaries are made, or whether they treat these information sources as fact. In a world of fake news, media and visual literacy are vital skills which universities do not always address.

It must also be said that educators need to be judicious when choosing which documentaries to use in class. Some documentaries, for example those that deal with issues of race, may alienate students of certain ethnicities, perhaps even reinforcing a rather hopeless world view. Uplifting stories which champion underrepresented groups should also be considered, but these stories are scarce or seemingly lack popular appeal. In addition, how much educators choose to show students in lesson time is also important to consider. Educators should consider carefully flipping the learning, so students can adequately prepare for the discussion and contribute accordingly.

Finally, a good internet connection and how the lessons are packaged (Articulate Rise/the use of subtitles) will play a part in how successfully documentaries are received in the online classroom. Moreover, the potential for second-screen viewing and maximising active learning is a useful area to explore.

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