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Navigating history: Aesthetics and appropriation and the interactive web documentary *Freedom's Ring* (2013)

ABSTRACT

The article focuses on web documentaries as a form of interactive historiography by presenting a case study on Freedom's Ring (2013), a multi-media-based animation of Martin Luther King's speech 'I have a Dream' published in Vectors. Taking both the production and the reception side into account, the article addresses the constitution of knowledge – or rather aesthetic experience – through artistic research practices. In doing so, it reflects upon the concepts of authorship, copyright and participation. Due to its numerous sources, the navigation system, the artwork, its referentiality and variability, it is made the case that Freedom's Ring challenges history as a 'grand narrative' by creating a subjective point of view and putting the user in the position of an activist. Web documentaries are regarded as part of an epistemic and sociopolitical development, in which artistic and academic methods merge.

KEYWORDS

interactive history
curating
web documentary
media aesthetics
artistic research
digital technologies
referential media
practices

1. SITUATING I-DOCS: NEW WAYS OF THINKING ABOUT THE PAST

In 1963 Martin Luther King gave his legendary speech ‘I have a Dream’ in front of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, DC. In 2013, 50 years after the ‘March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom’, a team including artistic researcher Evan Bissell and web designer Erik Loyer created *Freedom’s Ring* (<http://freedomring.stanford.edu>), a multi-media based animation of King’s speech. The interactive web documentary, or so-called i-doc, is a project of the Martin Luther King Jr Research and Education Institute at Stanford University in collaboration with Beacon Press’s King Legacy Series. It was created with the help of the Scalar open-source publishing and content management platform.

The term ‘i-docs’, also known as ‘web documentaries’ (Nash 2012), ‘data-base documentaries’ (Daniel n.d.) or ‘living documentaries’ (Gaudenzi 2013), refers to a broad range of heterogeneous forms of interactive online documentaries. It is instructive to look at how the various definitions of i-docs reflect the perspective and intention of the researcher and/or i-doc producer. Addressing the complexity of ‘definitional criteria associated with interactive digital documentaries’, media scholar Siobhan O’Flynn, for example, suggests distinguishing i-docs as ‘databases of content fragments’ from ‘webdocs’ as traditional documentaries distributed online (2012: 142–43). In doing so, she stresses, as most scholars do with regard to the digital media landscape, the novelty of i-docs in the field of documentary rather than the continuities in recent developments. For media theorists and former media producers Judith Aston and Sandra Gaudenzi, who founded the i-docs project including a biannual symposium in 2011 (i-Docs Official Website 2019), ‘[a]ny project that starts with an intention to document the “real” and that uses digital interactive technology to realize this intention can be considered an interactive documentary’ (Aston and Gaudenzi 2012: 125–26). They in turn foreground the aspect of interactivity, by attributing a central role to changing technologies in defining the phenomenon of i-docs. The relatively broad term i-doc was coined by Gaudenzi when developing a taxonomy in order to define i-docs as a genre with its different modes of interaction (2013). According to her, i-docs vary ‘in degrees of interactions, in levels of participation, in logics of interaction and in degrees of narrative control by the author’ (Gaudenzi 2013: 14).

A classification of the various forms of i-docs, including those mentioned above, has provided fruitful discussions about basic modes of the representation of new types of interactive media. In this article, however, with respect to *Freedom’s Ring* addressing a classic historical subject, I seek to slightly shift the focus to representation in academia by exploring i-docs as a particular way of thinking about the past in the digital era. My goal is not to situate i-docs in the tradition of documentary by analysing what has changed over time (see also Dovey and Rose 2013; Nash 2014), important as it is, but to understand their emergence in the context of historiography. Presenting a case study on *Freedom’s Ring*, I consider i-docs as part of an epistemic and political development in the field of digital history in which artistic and academic methods merge.

2. APPROACHING I-DOCS AS AUDIO-VISUAL MEDIA: A FILM STUDIES PERSPECTIVE

By approaching i-docs as audio-visual media, I interrogate how *Freedom’s Ring* produces and organizes historical knowledge from a film studies perspective. In contrast to Gaudenzi, who associates film studies with a rather ‘dualistic

approach film-audience' and therefore considers the discipline to be of limited use for understanding i-docs (2013: 16), I argue that the discourse on interactive web documentaries can highly benefit from film studies. In order to grasp the specific relationship between a user and a website, it is suggested to draw on the large field of film theories about spectatorship and the viewing process with regard to media specificity. Especially Neo-phenomenological approaches from media scholars such as Vivian Sobchack (2004) can be instructive for understanding the 'transformative, responsive and adaptive' interactive documentary or rather 'living documentary' (Gaudenzi 2013: 16). If taking into account the aesthetic experience of these 'non-linear ecosystems' (Gaudenzi 2013) they have more in common with traditional media like a film than it might appear at first sight.

Phenomenological media theorists distance themselves from both a formal approach to film (with a focus primarily on expression and thereby neglecting the dimension of perception) and a realistic approach to film (which interprets cinema as a metaphoric window to the world while dismissing the dimension of expression) (Sobchack 1992: 3–50). From a neo-phenomenological perspective, the film is not to be considered a static text-object but rather a dialectical communication process in the course of which film is regarded as an embodied experience of the viewer (Dang 2016: 33–39). The premise of Sobchack's approach, for example, is that there is no clear distinction between a viewing subject and a viewed object. Developing her approach out of the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophy on meaning-making through bodily perception, she understands cinema as an embodiment of perception and acts of expression in constant exchange with the spectator. Therefore, the film is not regarded as an object nor as a decipherable text but rather as an 'expression of experience by experience' (Sobchack 1992: 3). In response to psycho-analytic and ideological approaches of film theory of the period, Sobchack criticizes the implicit assumption of an ideal spectator and instead stresses the 'signifying freedom of individual viewers in their concrete, contingent, existential situation' (Sobchack 1992: 17). This does not implicate, however, that a film can be viewed in any way (suggesting that the 'text' is seen only in the eye of the beholder). Instead, the sensual subjective experience evoked by the film is highlighted.

In the light of the above, my principle argument is that looking at digital media from a film studies perspective that considers the dynamic and aesthetic dimension of the viewer's experience can provide interesting insights into the user's engagement as well as the media specificity of new media phenomena such as i-docs. Thus, in the case of *Freedom's Ring*, I look at the interrelations between text, sound and images and at what kind of user's viewing position they create. My analysis can therefore be defined as a 'text'-based approach, though here the text is viewed not in the sense of a static object but as being embedded in dynamic media practices.

Regarding *Freedom's Ring*, it seems obvious that such an approach can be useful. Compared to other i-docs, as described for example by documentary theorist Kate Nash (2012), this website follows rather traditional aesthetics. It fits, if at all, most likely in the category Nash has characterized as 'narrative webdoc' (Nash 2012: 203), as I will elaborate later in this article. With its animation at its heart, a kind of film-like or rather video-like viewing is encouraged by the producers. In addition, unlike most i-docs that are produced by broadcast television and radio companies (Nash 2012: 197), *Freedom's Ring* is an academic project that emerged from a collaboration of a highly prestigious

university and a publisher. It was created – and probably also predominantly distributed and presented, thus perceived – in an academic and educational environment. For this reason, I situate *Freedom's Ring* in the discourse on digital historiography around the question of how digital technologies shape scholarly media practices in terms of production, dissemination and perception of knowledge. By analysing the website's animation, I reflect upon appropriation, authorship and interactivity with regard to ways of thinking about the past. I argue that due to its numerous sources, navigation system, artwork and referentiality, *Freedom's Ring* challenges history as a master narrative, by creating a subjective point of view and putting us, the user, in the position of an activist.

3. ENGAGING WITH I-DOCS: INTERACTIVITY AND PARTICIPATION

While the emphasis on the differences between existent media forms such as television and film and i-docs has been proven to be instructive for understanding recent technology developments, I propose a stronger focus on the continuities in new media, to get a comprehensive view of current phenomena in terms of content and aesthetic experience (Bolter and Grusin 1999). This is particularly relevant when it comes to discussing the engagement of users in i-docs, which is often defined as 'interactive' in the sense of 'agency'. The application of a generalized 'active'–'passive' dichotomy often assumed when pointing out the novelty of recent developments in digital technologies is potentially problematic. As media theorist José van Dijck points out, the underlying notion of a passive recipient attributed to 'old media' on the one hand and an active, i.e. 'interactive', participant defined by 'new media' on the other, as it is prevalent in the discourse on i-docs, is historically and theoretically deceptive.

Ever since, humanities scholars have discussed the experience of media culture as subjective and active engagement (van Dijck 2009: 43–44). Hence, concepts such as agency and interactivity come along with 'significant cultural baggage that must be critically unpacked' (Nash 2012: 198). For instance, the physical interactivity attributed to i-docs as a unique feature by Aston and Gaudenzi (2012: 126) can also be found in the realm of cinema: described as an embodied experience, as shown above in the brief example of neo-phenomenology film theory. As Nash states, also referring to the work of Sobchack and, in addition to film historian Jane Gaines, 'a distinction between interpretation (mental) and interaction (physical) that discounts the physicality of traditional documentary spectatorship [...] while obscuring the interpretive elements of physical action' becomes problematic when analysing web documentaries (2014: 386). Rightly so, she states that interactivity 'has most often been approached from the perspective of technology, focusing on what is technically possible for users to *do* in relation to the webdoc' (Nash 2012: 196). For example, the interactive modes proposed by Gaudenzi (the conversational, the hypertext, the experiential and the participative) to approach i-docs apart from their topic and their platform environment (Aston and Gaudenzi 2012) appear to foreground the site of production and the producers' intentions rather than the site of reception and the user's concrete engagement. Whereas this seems to be a productive ground for a broader debate on the potentials of i-docs, as indicated by the authors, it risks leaving out the specifics of a particular website and the ways in which the users actually use and experience it.

Considering the degree of engagement, I suggest being more sceptical about what has been celebrated as a paradigm shift towards a participatory

culture. As van Dijck explains, user agency is complex. Theorizing agency in a digital media environment shaped by user-generated platforms, she emphasizes the need to pay attention to the ‘multifarious roles of users’ who are ‘generally referred to as active internet contributors’ (2009: 41–42). However, according to a *Guardian* technology reporter, 1 per cent of online users actually create content, 10 per cent ‘interact’ with it, for example by commenting and the other 89 per cent do ‘just’ view it (van Dijck 2009: 44). Apparently, the engagement with media can vary to a high degree. Defining clicking and scrolling through a website as interactivity in the sense of participation is highly questionable. Although van Dijck refers to YouTube as a particularly crucial case and thus addresses a platform infrastructure rather than the content of a single website, her reflections on power relationships illustrate a problem also relevant for the critical debate on i-docs: the need for a nuanced approach to the engagement of users in digital media.

Thus, O’Flynn decided to use the term ‘user’ ‘in order to acknowledge the utilitarian and consumer orientation [...], and highlight in contrast the agency and participation of the “interactant” in playing with dynamic interfaces that then shape and frame the experience of a given work’ (2012: 144). While this distinction may make sense to emphasize the different modes of engagement with digital media, for the above-mentioned reasons in this article I apply ‘user’, ‘viewer’ and ‘recipient’ synonymously, in order to question the problematic application of a generalized active–passive (often associated with commodity-art/entertainment-activism binaries) dichotomy that is time and again assumed when pointing out the novelty of recent developments in digital technologies.

Frequently used terms in the discourses surrounding new media trends – such as interactivity, participation, co-creation and collaboration – seem to be mostly positively connoted with developments towards more equality, agency and freedom. An activist and utopian nature are often found to be more or less explicitly ascribed to so-called interactive media. Undeniably, i-docs come along with exciting opportunities in offering new ways of producing and disseminating knowledge. However, it is important to critically scrutinize what we exactly mean when ascribing ‘interactivity’ and ‘participation’ to digital media (van Dijck 2009; Carpentier 2011; Nash 2012, 2014). While interactivity and participation can be useful – however ambiguous – concepts in defining i-docs, we must not equate these terms with digital culture. Differences in terms of the degree and logic of interactions and narrative control as well as levels of participation (Gaudenzi 2013: 14) need to be thoroughly interrogated in this framework.

Reflections I find especially useful in this respect in general and for my case study in particular are to be found, as already mentioned, in Nash’s work on web documentaries. Focusing on the social dimension of interaction and participation, she provides a pragmatic and theoretically informed approach to the textual organization of i-docs. Nash also makes a case for textual analysis, suggesting that we view the dimension of interactivity as being inherent to i-docs, as a ‘representational strategy that does not inherently empower the audience’ (2014: 386). Situating the web documentary within the documentary tradition, she approaches interactivity ‘in relation to modes of representation and user engagement’. In doing so, she identifies three interactive structures in web documentaries: the narrative, the categorical and the collaborative. While she defines the narrative structure as to ‘privilege a mode of engagement similar to that of traditional linear documentary narratives’ (Nash 2012:

203–04), the categorical structure appears to feature a collection of objects and elements that allow for comparisons and associations (Nash 2012: 205). The collaborative structure fosters contribution by users. Each can be found in one single web documentary and varies in terms of form and degree. Though heuristically distinguished, they can inform and interact with each other. As for the aesthetic experience, I would like to add that the narrative, categorical and collaborative aspects of an i-doc may be closely intertwined. This becomes especially manifest in the discourse on the database as a narrative, as I have argued elsewhere (Dang forthcoming 2020b), famously sparked by new media theorist Manovich (1999).

Hence, following my remarks above, I do agree with Nash in assuming that the way information is organized and presented to the recipient strongly impacts the way in which the user navigates and perceives a subject (2012: 196–97). Analysing interactivity in terms of representation as well as user engagement inscribed in the text and therefore web documentaries as ‘textual objects’ promises to be an instructive approach. When looking at i-docs, it seems to be helpful to explore the specific aesthetics to understand the complexity of websites, beyond the technical possibilities. Thus, by analysing *Freedom’s Ring* through close reading, I want to draw attention to the matter of engagement with regard to the experience inscribed in it. This raises the following questions: What kind of viewing position does this website create? What – or rather whose – story does it tell? How can we make use of the provided material? How is information organized and presented to us? In short, how do we view and experience history through this interactive web documentary?

4. FREEDOM’S RING: A CASE STUDY

On the website *Freedom’s Ring*, the user can access King’s speech in various and multimodal ways: By activating or deactivating different buttons one can either read the speech, listen to the historical recording of the speech, watch the animation of the speech or do all at once (Figure 1). This allows for comparing King’s delivered speech with his manuscript. Words which King improvised are in Italics and words excluded from the speech are crossed out. If we hide the text completely, the animation becomes stiller and the collage of the producers’ drawings comes into focus. If we leave the text in the animation, the visuals appear as a sort of teleprompter putting us, the user, into the position of the speaker.

Besides King’s speech itself, one can explore the historical context of the event by browsing through the numerous sources in the collection presented by the website. Through the index and hyperlinks attached to the manuscript, the website provides additional materials of all kind, e.g. historical documents, posters, video recordings, photographs, interviews with contemporary witnesses, presentations of artistic performances, short background texts with further references as well as drawings of historical characters, places and situations made by the producers, that are used for the animation (Figure 2). Thus, even though the seventeen-minute speech – respectively the animation itself – has a well-defined beginning and ending, it can be watched in one piece or just as well in fragments. We can watch the speech like an online video, by pausing and moving forward or backwards via either vertical scrolling or the horizontal timeline. Or we can navigate through the website by tracking one reference after the other. On the basis of how the content is organized, I argue

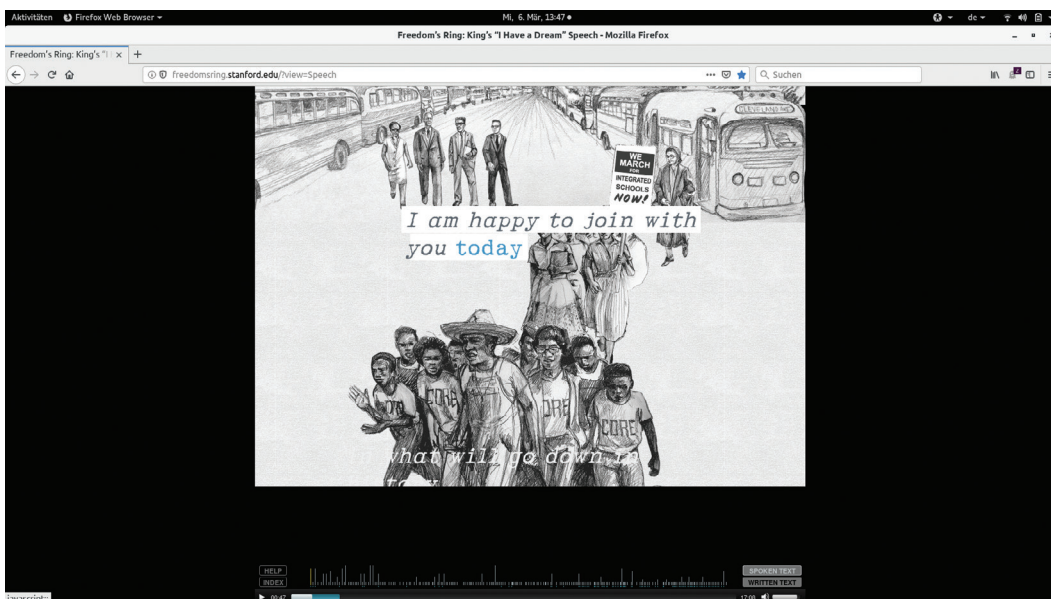


Figure 1: Screenshot of Freedom's Ring, showing how King's speech is animated.

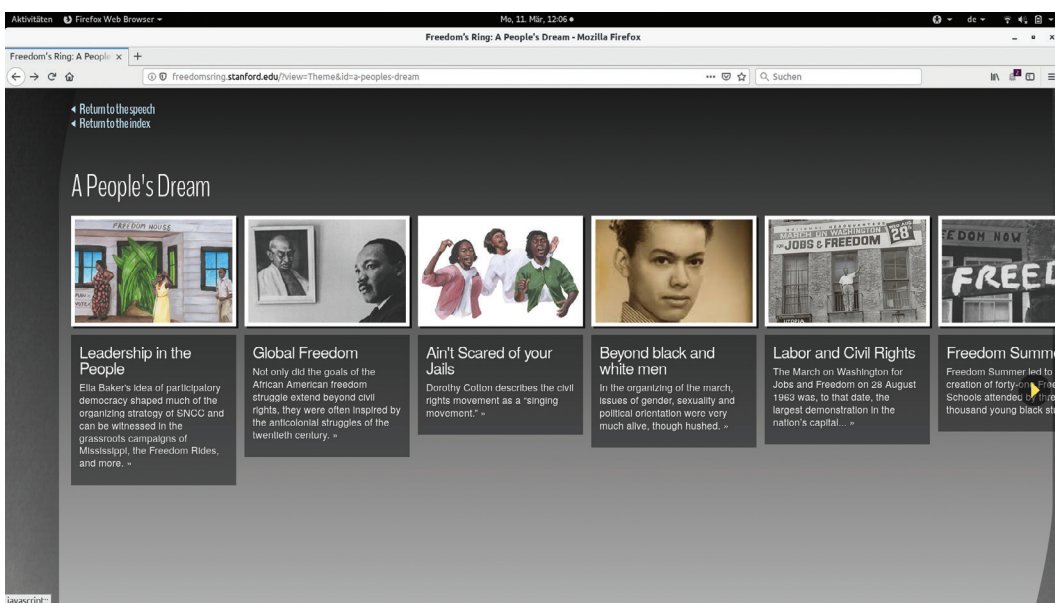


Figure 2: Screenshot of Freedom's Ring, showing the broad collection of various historical sources assembled by the producers.

that the producers have created a navigation system that allows us to follow diverse – though nevertheless given – paths of inquiry.

Considering interactivity in terms of user control over the content, the experience of *Freedom's Ring* does not significantly differ from watching a film or television documentary. Contrary to platforms such as YouTube, which

allow for a rather fragmentary consumption and random findings – although the users' choices are shaped by algorithms, filters and user behaviour (Dovey and Rose 2013: 368) – *Freedom's Ring* offers a limited range of possible readings. The hyperlinks are visibly embedded in the manuscript, enabling us to easily explore the collection of historical material in the back. However, by clearly featuring the animation as its centre piece the website encourages us to focus on the speech. The reception of *Freedom's Ring* is rather pre-determined – a common feature of the 'narrative webdoc' that features a central position and a casual chronology, although it is not necessarily experienced as such (Nash 2012: 203).

Freedom's Ring does neither foreground its database nor does it invite us to contribute to a database, to comment or interact with other users. Instead, by putting us into the position of the speaker who is reading the manuscript, the website privileges a clear chronological narrative framework that, one could argue, highlights the temporal organization of elements. However, looking at the dynamic structure *within* the animation in addition to the concept of the viewing process sketched out in the previous sections, it is suggested to consider the speech in its spatio-temporal dimension.

4.1. Curating as scholarship

While Nash more generally focuses on identifying various modes of representation in i-docs, in this article, I take a closer look at *Freedom's Ring* in order to understand how it affects our understanding of the past in both an academic and artistic manner. How does interactivity as a mode of representation shape the way in which we perceive King's legendary speech? How does the website make us engage in the event?



Figure 3: Screenshot of Freedom's Ring, showing how meaning is produced via transforming the contexts of words and images.

The website presents King's speech as an animated collage that consists of photographs, drawings, paintings, documents and words, concisely arranged by the producers. Words appear across images and merge with the visuals as soon as they have been vocalized by King. Words do not only communicate meaning here but also become material to be worked with. By merging words and images, contexts are transformed and new meaning is produced, for example when burning crosses become a cage (Figure 3). Images are arranged like well-formulated sentences, like words creating meaning by following one after another. From a semiotic perspective, the animation can be defined as a syntagmatic collage. In some parts, images anticipate the semantic content of the speech; in other parts, they illustrate and thereby emphasize its meaning by appearing simultaneously, for example when we hear of the 'great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand today' while a shadow-like image of the Lincoln statue appears across the screen.

The distinction between words and images seems to become obsolete. While in the video essay the voice-over often tends to dominate the audio-visual image (Pauleit 2014), *Freedom's Ring* presents the spoken and written text as well as the images as equally important elements. The audio and visual dimensions are closely intertwined and interact with each other. For example, when King states that 'the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material' we see a wooden cabin literally wiped away from the surface by skyscrapers assertively shooting up. 'The Negro is still languished in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land', the speech continues. This sentence is accompanied by a black worker sweeping away the illustration of King's argument. By carefully arranging images, text and the recording the producers composed an audio-visual space that invites the user to discover a range of meanings that multiplies with each time he/she watches the i-doc. The various materials complement, amplify and comment each other. In terms of address, the listener becomes a viewer, the viewer becomes a listener. In this sense, the user's experience of the animation can be conceptualized as being sensual and even synaesthetic.

The traditional concept of authorship as an individual expressing his/her inner thoughts is challenged in this concept. The website offers multiple, however not endless ways of navigation. The collection of historical sources and additional information was selected beforehand, and the website's interface obviously requires editorial control, imagination and creativity. By putting King's animated speech at the heart of the website, a preferred reading is clearly implemented. Potentially the recording can be muted, though probably this is not intended by the producers. Thus, Barthes' famous proclamation of the 'death of the author' cannot directly be applied to this i-doc. But regarding the website's organization of elements, the mode of authorship certainly differs from an authoritative voice.

As media scholars Jon Dovey and Mandy Rose conclude when reflecting on new online documentary forms, the 'role of the artist/producer in these collaborations remains central but shifts towards a curatorial position, a role of setting up rule sets, boundaried digital processes that establish the conditions of emergence' (2013: 374). They emphasize the possibilities of participation and collaboration fostered by new documentary arts practices such as i-docs, for example through comments or contributions in various forms. Although here my goal is not to explore the actual degree of 'co-creation' in the sense of distributed authorship, I agree in observing a challenge to the 'totalising vision of the auteur' (Dovey and Rose 2013) through curatorial strategies of

i-docs that allow the viewers to navigate their own experiences (Dovey and Rose 2013: 372).

Curating affects the way in which we engage with content and what is accessible in the first place. It can be broadly viewed as a process of meaning-making through selecting and arranging material for a recipient. In this sense, it profoundly affects the aesthetics of access. When faced with the abundance of digital artefacts on the Internet, I argue that curating has become a key activity in today's media practices. It has taken up a major role in designing how current discourses evolve. Paolo Cherchi Usai, a film historian and curator, defines curation as 'the art of interpreting the aesthetics, history, and technology of cinema through the selective collection, preservation, presentation, and documentation of films and their exhibition in archival presentations' (Usai cited in Heftberger 2014: 142). Drawing on Cherchi Usai's definition, in this context, I suggest considering curation as a media practice of interpretation and thus doing history through the selective collection, preservation, presentation and documentation of archival material and its online exhibition in the form of i-docs.

Viewing the process of meaning-making in terms of curating as an audiovisual form can help with the analysis of the aesthetics and media specificity of access: access to information and documents to understand the past. The perception of history is strongly influenced by which sources are in which ways aggregated and presented to the audience in addition to which sources are preserved to begin with. In a knowledge-based society, curating is an essential method of creating meaning.

In the digital era, curating is no longer practised only by archivists, librarians or employees at a museum but has become a major task also for scholars. In fact, according to digital humanists Jeffrey Schnapp and Todd Presner, who wrote *The Digital Humanities Manifesto 2*, new technologies have recast 'the scholar as curator and the curator as scholar' (2009: 8). Already ten years ago they defined curation as an 'augmented scholarly practice' that implies 'custodial responsibility with respect to the remains of the past as well as interpretive, meaning-making responsibilities with respect to the present and future'. In their view, curation is central for the future of the Humanities disciplines, 'making arguments through objects as well as words, images and sounds' (Schnapp and Presner 2009: 9). Due to its physical and/or virtual spatialization, it is considered 'fundamentally different' yet equal with 'traditional narrative scholarship' that is based on language alone (Schnapp and Presner 2009).

In the i-docs community, web documentaries are recognized as an alternative to text-based ways of academic reflections such as the book or article. Interactive media projects appear to even count for tenure or research grants in the field of digital culture. However, considering the specific environment of these artistic endeavours, the question rises whether i-docs reach beyond this community. Nevertheless, a case has been made by multiple scholars to value scholarship in its variety (Dang forthcoming 2020a). In the discourse on the potentials of i-docs, the issue of resources comes into play. The production of this kind of website requires immense financial and human resources, in spite of content management systems such as Scalar, which allow for a relatively easy use of platforms. Equally important, other than with traditional publications, modes of reflection facilitated by digital technologies are still not acknowledged as being equally legitimate, though a number of conferences and some job postings call for practical expertise both of the scholarly and the artistic media kind.

4.2. Appropriating history

With regard to the discourse on open science, particularly citizen science, it is perhaps no coincidence that oftentimes a higher political cause is associated with the aesthetically appealing i-docs. I-docs are described as extending ‘a logic of engagement that traditional documentary makers have often designed for, which is the capacity of documentary to serve as a catalyst for public outcry and hopefully social activism’ (O’Flynn 2012: 148). Viewing more generally at social media platforms and collaboration possibilities of the Internet more generally, O’Flynn considers i-docs to aim at initiating a dialogue between the audience and a call for action. Regarding my own experience at the recent i-docs symposium in Bristol in 2018, where I observed that indeed many projects draw attention to a pressing political issue, such as climate change or the US-American prison system, I do agree with this point. Nonetheless, whereas today’s possibilities of participation provided by recent technological developments and the emerging digital infrastructure are hard to deny, the question of impact inscribed in the text remains crucial for understanding the role of i-docs in the present media landscape. What is at stake when producing and presenting content through web documentaries?

Both in terms of content and method, *Freedom’s Ring* deals with King’s seminal speech in a way that reflects King’s original curatorial approach as well as current media practices. The animation can be viewed not just as an illustration of his famous words but also as a homage to his collage technique. Due to the multiple references (e.g. fragments of the Declaration of Independence, quotes of the Bible, metaphors by Malcolm X), ‘I have a Dream’ is regarded as an arranged rather than a written speech. Considering its intonation and rhythm, it appears to be both a song and a sermon. With their heterogeneous work, the team around Bissell and Loyer picked up King’s artistic way of making use of existing material. This approach can be viewed in the current context of what digital culture scholar Felix Stalder has called ‘referential media practices’, such as remix, remake, meme, mashup or appropriation, all of which heavily rely on digital technologies as well as on free access to and fair use of material. An interesting aspect of referentiality is that, although something new is produced, the original sources are still recognizable. Hence, the new creation is not to be viewed as a second-hand item but is as original as the sources it is based on (2016: 96–97).

With respect to *Freedom’s Ring*, one can observe that on the one hand the material included in the animation speaks for itself while on the other hand there emerge historical and political interconnections. Paradoxically, the alteration of the original sources creates a distance between now and then, thus between today’s user and past events, while at the same time the artistic appropriation of the original material dissolves this distance. This is interesting with respect to the i-doc’s potential dialogue between audience and call for action, as mentioned above, though here not viewed in terms of technical possibilities but of textual incorporation. As a consequence of my analysis, I argue that the website creates a point of view that puts us into the position of the activist. At the very end, when we hear the final words ‘free at last, free at last, free at last’ and the applause of the people, we see a close up of the audience. The bird’s eye view on the gathered people has been transformed into a position amidst the people. The individual perspective becomes a collective ‘we’ (Figure 4).

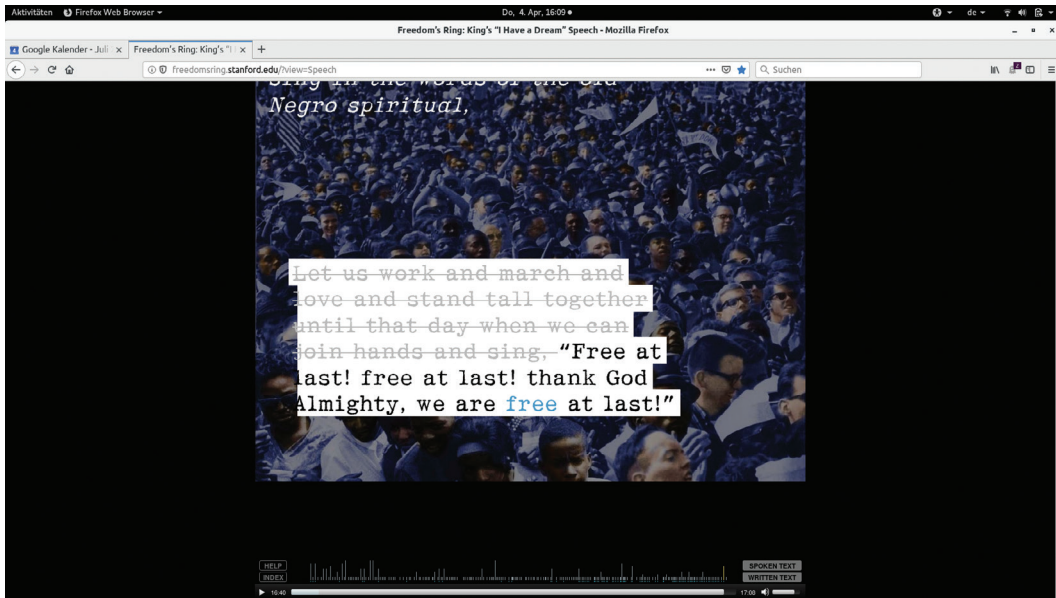


Figure 4: Screenshot of Freedom's Ring, showing how the individual perspective is transformed into a collective 'we'.

According to the sources on the website, King's speech did not receive that much media coverage at the time when it was delivered. Only over the course of time 'I have a Dream' became one of the most significant speeches in US-American history as well as an important symbol of the civil rights movement. It has been quoted countless times. However, it cannot be freely re-used without legal permission. Even though the speech itself includes all kinds of third-party material, it is protected by copyright for about two more decades, until 2038 – 70 years after King's death. Until then, the EMI Group, one of the biggest labels and part of the Universal Music Group, manages the licensing for advertisement and other purposes on behalf of King's heiress. By assembling, appropriating and reconfiguring historical documents through the i-doc, the producers have made King's speech freely accessible to the public online. In doing so, in a way they have overcome copyright law as well as concepts of traditional authorship based on originality and intellectual property.

5. CONCLUSION

Every discipline is affected by new technologies. However, some changes affect every field, others are more specific. When it comes to media studies and history, I believe that in addition to looking at how digitalization shapes archival workflows and historical artefacts, we need also be sensitive to the ways in which objects and findings are *presented* by and to researchers. If a website can be viewed as a platform both for distribution and knowledge production, it is instructive to scrutinize how it provides access to facts and events.

Coming back to my initial question of in which ways technologies shape scholarly media practices in terms of production, dissemination and perception of knowledge in the field of digital history, I argue that the case study on *Freedom's Ring* shows that meaning has to be affirmed, expanded and negotiated continuously in order to keep the subject it refers to alive (Stalder 2016:

128). This does happen not only on a cognitive level but also in a sensual way through aesthetic experience. In order to fully engage with its subject, I suggest that in the case of this study a user's ability to communicate by controlling and contributing to the website is not as significant as discussed in the theoretical work on interactivity. Although *Freedom's Ring* addresses a 'classic documentary subject', its goal is not so much of an investigative, journalistic nature, as ascribed to the 'traditional documentary' (Nash 2012: 198). Instead, I see *Freedom's Ring* as a kind of artistic re-enactment that does not try to reconstruct the historical events but transfers them to the present for demonstrating its meaning to today's audiences. As historian Reinhart Koselleck states, history has to be rewritten continuously in order to stay relevant for those whose history it is supposed to be (cited in Hediger and Schneider 2011: 142).

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