

Danish University Colleges

From Linear to Streaming

Changes in Narrative and Publication Practices in Danish Television

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Manuskript

(Åbningslide)

I would like to thank the organizers of this conference for giving me the opportunity to present our teams findings. While they are not with me on stage today, this presentation is a reflection of our collective efforts. In this presentation I will present findings from a qualitative interview study, in which we asked Danish TV documentary producers, editors and executives about their production practices in the streaming age. We wanted to know if anything had changed in their narrative practices, but quickly realized that practices regarding publication and development had grown increasingly important as well. To put it succinctly, according to the ten interviews we've conducted, it's hard to see that any **new** practices have emerged. What has happened, however, is that existing narrative and publication practices have been ***intensified in the struggle for the attention and retention of Danish audiences.***

(Skift til slide omkring metode)

This research was conducted as part of the research project 'Narrative Structure in the Age of Streaming'. Together with my colleagues pictured here, we conducted ten semi structured interviews of about 1 hour in length. We utilized a snowball sampling methodology, drawing on our existing contacts and network in the industry to recruit respondents. Our respondents represent television professionals working at public service broadcasters, as well as production companies producing for public service broadcasters and international streaming services.

(Skift til slide omkring projektets formål, slidet skal indeholde et billede fra berettermodellen)

The project began with a research question focusing on how narrative structures had changed in the age of streaming. Indeed, if they had changed. We wanted to know if there were some new models and principles that guided the narrative work of Danish documentary makers in the age of streaming, that were different from when they worked on linear television. This interest was in part sparked by the development of some so-called "new" narrative models, the most prominent one being called 'The Dragon' developed by researchers from the University of Southern Denmark. The purpose of this project was to make a media production

study, to identify whether new models such as this had been consolidated in the practices of documentary producers. There is always the risk of any new model to become overhyped and the article that presents the model explicitly says that 'Streaming television is killing the Hollywood model'. Our project was to investigate this from a neutral, empirical middle ground. It very quickly became clear that so-called "old" models: the Hollywood Model, three-act structure and Actantial-model are still used by Danish documentarists. While they had been introduced to the dragon model, that had not made any noteworthy impact on their practices. But that does not mean that their practices haven't changed. Let me begin by explaining the new circumstances that Danish documentary producers work in.

(Skift til slide om intensiveret konkurrencesituation)

What all of our respondents agree on is that the competitive landscape for television entertainment has changed dramatically. Danish public service broadcasters are in direct competition with international streaming giants such as Netflix and Disney. Not to mention other types of audiovisual media such as social media and video games.

Here is an especially telling quote from a seasoned documentary producer about this landscape:

[W]e have experienced the big change in the way that, before [streaming] we just force fed the viewers. And now they choose their own buffet, and you just have to adjust to that.

Until the late 1980's there was only one real provider of television content, and that was DR (Danmarks Radio). Now there is a more pluralistic media market, but there still only remains two large public service organizations: DR and TV2. As Hanne Bruun (2024) points out in a recent policy brief: the public service responsibility of 'universality' is under pressure from DR and TV2 being in direct competition with global actors. There is a battle of attention and retention of viewers, and everyone needs to adjust to that. So, what are those adjustments? One important adjustment is the way that the temporal logics of linear viewing have been replaced by the spatial logics of the interface (Bideau, 2020; Lassen & Sørensen, 2023). This has been mentioned in a lot of research on digital television, but is also echoed in the following quote by a producer at the public service broadcaster DR:

Publication becomes much more important in a way, because [the program] becomes an offer, that becomes a part of a catalogue, that becomes a part of, you know, a catalogue on our platform [DRTV], but which is one offer among, I don't know, an infinite number of offers across all platforms. [...] I would say that it demands more of our thinking about how we publish and when we publish. And why we publish in a particular way. And this also means that we have to be more precise in what we are doing.

Across our respondents, it is highlighted how everyone must bring their a-game in response to this competitive landscape. They can no longer expect that a Danish audience is interacting with Danish-language content in the same way as before. They can't expect it to be more visible than content published by international competitors.

Let us begin by looking at what this means with regards to narrative practices.

(Skift til slide omkring vigtigheden af en stærk åbning).

It is clear to our respondents that the necessity of a strong opening has become more important than before. When the audience has an abundance of choices, not only the first minutes, but the first seconds are important.

Producer: [W]e throw all the aces in the start. [...] This is something that we have to adjust to, because we are so used to keeping our gold cards close[.]

Chief Editor: [An opening] is one of the most difficult things we are doing. It's about making the hook that's edible.

The editor goes on to explain how a slow opening with atmospheric images and emotional buildup is not that useful viewers have already seen a thumbnail and maybe read a short description of the program before they click play. The editor also mentions that on line you needed a slow buildup so people could finish getting their snacks or flush the toilet. I would argue that here we see an effect of how the emergence of the public service streaming app has had an impact on how documentaries are edited. Slow buildups are less important, because the audience has already made a conscious decision to press play on a particular program. The argument isn't that openings have only become important recently. It's always

been important to grab the viewers' attention. What we observe in our data is a need to *intensify* the attention-grabbing qualities of the opening. Moving on from the question of attention, let's look at the ways that the documentary producers approach the subject of retention.

(Skift til slide om fastholdelse/retention)

Several of our respondents talk about retention relating to keeping the audience interested long enough to finish a single program.

Producer: Progression just has to be so much stronger on streaming. I mean you have to be retained from second to second. [...] So apart from the intro, where we create expectations, we also in the middle place something like 'just you wait for this!' I feel like we are constantly putting in a 'commercial break' without it being there.

Content Producer: We talk a lot about turning points. How can we constantly hook people? [...] [O]n stream, it has to be plastered with turning points, so they don't click away.

In the context of retention, intensification refers to the fact that cliffhangers, twists and turns must be more numerous. With the staggering number of alternatives at the audience's fingertips, the documentarists are constantly feeding audiences new knowledge gaps or filling that gap in a surprising way.

Retention does of course also relate to how the producers make sure that viewers keep watching the next episode or perhaps even binge the entire series.

The term 'cliff', i.e. a cliffhanger, shows up a lot in our data. As the quotes above indicate, retention across episodes means that a cliffhanger, where the audience has to 'hang in anticipation', has been replaced by what we would like to call a cliffhook. The 'cliff' at the end of an episode is meant to serve as the hook to begin the next episode as soon as possible. Removed from the temporal logics of linear viewing, audience anticipation can be instantly gratified. At least in those cases where an entire series is published all at once. We find it pertinent to introduce the concept of the cliffhook, since we see it as a consequence of the

streaming apps affordances, where episodes are autoplayed with a countdown of sometimes only 10 seconds. Based on our interviews, the respondents are actively changing the endings of their episodes to accommodate binge viewing.

It is worth noting that when talking to many of our respondents about their narrative practices, they rely on “old” structural models and sometimes simply their gut feeling about what keeps the audience’s attention. It would seem fair to say that they don’t see any need to introduce new models or fundamentally change their narrative practices. A well-told story is still a well-told story.

CEO: Structurally speaking across an entire narrative, there are still some pretty fundamental things, you know with arcs and obstacles and different character types and such, that still holds up very well. So the fundamental craft is about the same.

Senior Producer: [W]e draw up the actantial model – and much of this is pretty basic. Very oldfashioned actually. Who is the main character? So we spend a lot of time on that.

To summarize, it does not seem that new narrative models and structures are in use based on our data. But when it comes to grabbing the attention of the audience, openings have become an important tool for Danish documentary filmmakers. For purposes of retention, an intensification of twists, turns and cliffs are necessary within individual programs, as well as utilizing cliffhooks across a series.

Next, I will tell you about the changes in publication practices that our data suggests might be a consequence of the proliferation of streaming television.

(Skift til slide om publikationer og paratekster)

There is a huge change in the way television documentaries are published, from being something temporally placed in prime time to being another program on ‘offer’ in a massive catalogue. As Lassen & Sørensen (2023) point out, in this shift towards public service streaming apps, discoverability becomes a major factor. In their research the focus is on the

curational practices of DR as a public service institution. From a producer's perspective, discoverability is of course equally important.

CEO: [I]t is so important to create hype [...] [B]ecause things can much more easily drown today and not be discovered, than if they were on a big channel 10 years ago. [...] [T]oday, a show can just die.

When interviewing our respondents, their focus when it came to creating promotional paratexts, was how to create “hype and noise” across other media environments, such as social media and especially news. In this quote, one of our respondents describes how they actively feed information and stories to DR journalists, so they can publish news stories that boost their documentaries visibility.

Producer: [W]e make small teasers, that can be put on social media. And trailers of course. And then we also create the news coverage, if they want it, and they always want that. I have a journalist colleague and his job right now, while finishing his documentary [...] is to hold meetings with DR about how we can get news coverage about it.

This is also the case for documentarists working with TV2.

Chief Producer: [The program] has to somehow have a life next to [TV2] Play. And we are lucky there because we do journalism, so it gets on the news and TV2.dk or on something social, where people discover it.

It seems like the classical paratext, the documentary trailer, is a less obvious way of marketing a documentary since it is placed into the temporal flow of linear viewing. This is why the intensified practice of creating social media posts and even news stories, on top of the documentary itself, has become necessary for the producers to get a modern viewers attention and to strengthen their discoverability on public service streaming apps. While research on public service streaming apps has shown how important it is to be part of the top of the interface (Bruun & Lassen, 2023; Lassen & Sørensen, 2023), this heightened visibility is not necessarily enough for audiences to click play. Due to the journalistic nature of the documentaries, there is a synergistic relationship between the streaming app, SoMe and

news publishing. Here, the news story or social media post become the content teasers in a more effective way than a large tile on an interface. Based on some of our respondents, organic word-of-mouth, personal recommendations are considered more valuable than curation, algorithmic or otherwise.

CEO: [E]verything that works today has to in some way generate hype. [...] [M]any of the big documentaries that have been on DR and TV2 create that hype. I mean you have to see Herlufsholm. You have to see Skyggekrigen [Shadow War]. Its still about that watercooler-effect, as we called it in the old days.

The first documentary mentioned above is about one of the most revered boarding schools in Denmark and the other about the spying on Scandinavian countries from Vladimir Putin's government. As those examples indicate, there must be a strong connection to issues of linguistic and national proximity for these documentaries to gain a mainstream appeal. Bruun & Bille (2022) have argued that in the age of platforms, tv documentaries can be considered spearheads of public service television.

This makes their visibility and discoverability even more important when it comes to public service broadcasters maintaining their relevance in the fight for audiences' attention. As I have hopefully illustrated, documentary producers in Denmark are not blind to these developments. Their intensified practices surrounding attention, retention and discoverability are a testament to their attempts navigate this new competitive landscape.

(Skift til slide om data og demokrati)

This concludes the part of my presentation that focusses on the findings of our project. I don't expect these findings to be generalizable to the rest of Danish television production, but it serves as a look into how these documentary producers try to create and generate hype surrounding public service content.

Since our project has been developed and executed in a university college setting, our primary focus is on developing knowledge we can use for teaching our students. However, when framing our findings from the lens of how public service media try to adjust to the current technological and societal changes, it becomes clear to me at least that they reflect the

concrete struggles of documentarists to keep their linguistic and nationally specific productions visible, relevant and engaging. They are not only producing public service content of high quality, but they are also keeping Danish democracy alive. As Hanne Bruun (2024) makes clear in her recent policy brief: the continuing development of Danish public service media is important for our democratic society. International streaming giants such as Netflix and Disney do not have this as their objective. I'm not saying that they want to undermine Danish democracy, I'm just saying that they do not have a public service mandate.

This brings me to my final point, which goes a bit beyond the scope of this presentation. It's about a somewhat unnerving theme in our findings about lacking data transparency on the TV2 Play streaming app.

(Slide om TV-meter og seertal)

Many of our respondents mentioned that they did not have any access to data about how their documentaries performed on the streaming service TV2 Play. Three of our respondents explicitly stated that they were barred from receiving any streaming data. This is a massive difference compared with linear broadcasting, where TV-Meter and Nielsen provide detailed statistics on broadcast viewing numbers. They do provide linear and streaming statistics, but they are consolidated. Considering the ubiquity and dominance of streaming as a mode of distributing public service content, I would like to suggest that this lack of transparency in viewership data presents a democratic problem. If the producers are unable to gauge how well they are performing, they lack a critical feedback mechanism.

There currently exists research on the datafication of public service media and the potential problems of public service media adapting to commercial streaming logics (Sørensen, 2020; Nikunen & Hoka, 2020). I find it equally important to consider these problems from the producer's perspective. The platform TV2 Play, is part of TV2 Danmarks commercial division. It therefore has no public service obligations, even though it contains massive amounts of public service content. At this point in time, I fear that TV2s commercial obligations may be the reason why they keep their streaming data a secret. This points to an important dilemma that has grave implications for producers if their documentaries' viewership data becomes a product in itself. A cluster of data that can be sold to an interested third party. With that said,

this lack of transparency should be researched further to clear up any misgivings or fears. I still find it problematic that the producers of the documentaries themselves are barred from viewership statistics of the content they have provided for the service. Based on our interviews, it is a great source of frustration and confusion for them as well. This power asymmetry between those that provide the content and those that provide the infrastructure, may be part and parcel of commercial streaming apps. I find it to be a democratic problem, if this were to become the new normal for public service media.

Thank you very much for listening.

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