

# A Study of Narrative Strategies in the Internet-Born Documentary and Yet The Books

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## ABSTRACT

In the digital age, the fragmentation of information dissemination and the scarcity of audience attention have driven internet-born documentaries to become a new medium for cultural dissemination. This article analyzes the narrative strategies of the internet-born documentary *And Yet The Books* from three dimensions: narrative structure, narrative discourse, and participatory mechanisms. The film adopts a modular, multi-threaded narrative structure to adapt to fragmented communication, linking independent story units with a core theme. It uses diverse audiovisual language to reinforce the presentation of details and emotional resonance, balancing professional depth with popular expression. By leveraging interactive features such as bullet screens and comment sections to establish a participatory narrative mechanism, this approach promotes audience co-creation. Its strategies offer valuable insights for the creation and dissemination of knowledge-based documentaries in the new media environment.

## KEYWORDS

Internet-born documentary; *And yet the books*; Narrative strategy; Book culture

## 1 Introduction

With the popularization of 5G technology, the iteration of mobile terminals, and the deep penetration of social media, the media ecosystem is undergoing a structural transformation from centralized communication to decentralized interaction: The information reception environment is becoming increasingly fragmented, users' attention spans are fleeting, and content consumption places greater emphasis on engagement and emotional resonance. The documentary format centered on traditional television stations is gradually facing dissemination difficulties — lengthy linear narratives and grandiose themes are difficult to adapt to the viewing needs of the Internet age. Therefore, internet-born documentaries centered on the Internet have emerged.

Internet-born documentaries are produced and broadcast primarily on online platforms, with Generation Z young Internet users as their main audience. In terms of content, they break through the shackles of serious topics and shift to fragmented, light, and everyday expressions. In terms of narrative, they adopt a lighthearted, fast-paced rhythm, focus on small, specific topics, and use a collage-like format with multiple elements, maintaining audience attention through frequent climaxes, with flexible and controllable runtime<sup>[1]</sup>. It also relies on interactive features such as bullet screens, comment sections, and secondary creations to build a real-time interactive space between creators and audiences, completely breaking the limitations of traditional one-way documentary dissemination.

Since its premiere in 2019, the internet-born documentary *And Yet The Books* produced by Bilibili has received high praise and widespread discussion for all three seasons. Not only has it sparked a reading craze among young people, but it has also brought paper books, which have been gradually marginalized in the digital age, back into the public eye. The film breaks away from the grand narrative of traditional documentaries and instead focuses on various characters related to books—editors, translators, book collectors, picture book authors, Braille proofreaders, and so on — using a unique narrative strategy to give paper books contemporary vitality.

This article will analyze in depth the innovative narrative structure, the integration of narrative discourse, and the construction of participatory narrative mechanisms in *And Yet The Books*, providing useful insights for the creation and dissemination of knowledge-based documentaries in the new media environment.

## 2 Innovation in narrative structure

### 2.1 Multi-threaded interconnection under the core theme

*And Yet The Books* focuses on the mundane daily lives of industry workers and the macro-level cultural heritage as the subject matter to show the deep connection between ordinary people and culture. The film bypasses authoritative classic books and directly refers to "people" immersed in the literary world, constructing a multi-layered narrative network<sup>[2]</sup>. Although the characters or storylines chosen by the director have different focuses, they all serve the core theme of each episode. For example, the third season of "The People Who Write Instructions for Everything" presents the stories of a

botanical illustrator, an architectural science writer, and an astronomy science writer. Although they come from different fields, the spiritual essence they convey is consistent. They share a common spiritual pursuit in science popularization work, persistently exploring the beauty of science through words and illustrations, and using their own methods to bridge the gap between professional knowledge and public understanding.

Compared to the aesthetic fatigue that can result from a single storyline, a structure with multiple parallel storylines can continuously deliver new information and create emotional fluctuations, thereby firmly capturing the audience's attention. This film approaches the theme from different perspectives, forming a complementary relationship that allows the audience to gain a more comprehensive and profound understanding.

## 2.2 Modular combination of unitized narratives

And Yet The Books adopts a distinctive modular narrative structure to adapt to the fragmented nature of online communication and the viewing habits of its audience. Each episode revolves around a central theme, linking the stories of three characters related to books. Through the delicate capture of the characters' words, actions, and emotional traits, the unique emotional connection between individuals and books is vividly presented.

This plate-based narrative structure has significant adaptability for dissemination: The duration of each individual character's story is kept under 20 minutes, which not only aligns with the fragmented viewing habits of online users but also lowers the information intake threshold for the audience, enabling them to easily follow the narrative thread of each episode and grasp its core themes. More importantly, the units form an independent yet interconnected relationship — the independence of the units gives the audience the right to choose the viewing order autonomously, allowing them to prioritize specific content based on personal interests. The interconnectivity between episodes, such as implicit references to the overall theme and character stories, guides the audience to watch the entire series, thereby forming a complete understanding of the core theme and emotional experience. This structural design not only meets the flexibility of online communication but also ensures the depth of narrative themes, achieving a balance between fragmented communication and holistic expression.

## 3 Constructing a diverse and integrated narrative discourse

### 3.1 Diverse integration of audio-visual language

Visually, because internet-born micro-documentaries are relatively short, the story needs to be condensed and refined. Therefore, internet-born micro-documentaries rarely use long shots and wide angles to depict scenes, but rather use close-ups or medium shots to portray character details, delicately introducing the characters' living environments and personality traits<sup>[3]</sup>. The third season of "Let's Start Over, Books!" begins with an introduction to a county bookstore. In the picture, martial arts manuals are placed next to old spears and swords, while poetry, philosophy, and encyclopedias are placed on the same bookshelf. The books on the upper and lower floors of the bookstore are stacked tightly. A few shots showcase the diverse nature of the small shop, sparking the audience's curiosity about the shop owner and naturally leading into an introduction of the shop owner. The program also makes clever use of close-up shots, such as the focused gaze of a reader on a crowded subway, the protagonist's trembling hands when deeply moved by the words in the book, and yellowed manuscripts sealed in a document bag. These close-up shots strip away redundant information, allowing the most expressive details to become the core of the narrative and evoking emotional resonance in the audience in a short period of time.

The creators also innovatively employed animation techniques such as 2D animation, 3D animation, and stop-motion animation to make the narrative more vivid and compelling. For the numerous static elements in book documentaries, such as text, books, and manuscripts, animation can break through static presentation, lower the threshold for understanding, and enrich the characters' stories. For example, in the third season of "Book Sea Pursuing Light," in order to help the audience better understand the importance of phonetic symbols and tones in Braille proofreading, the episode clearly demonstrated the logical structure of Braille through animation — using six dots as a unit. One unit represents the initial consonant, one unit represents the final consonant, and one unit represents the tone, which together form a character. Through dynamic visual demonstrations, abstract and complex Braille knowledge is made intuitive and easy to understand. The film also combines live action with virtual animation. In the first season of "The Wonderful World of Picture Books," picture book creator Xiong Liang travels through natural forests. The program combines the characters from his picture books with the real natural world, creating interesting interactions between anthropomorphic little mushrooms, little frogs, and the creator Xiong Liang on screen. This not only vividly demonstrates the creator's love for nature, but also reflects his delicate exploration and unique insight into the world of children, allowing the audience to glimpse into the creator's rich inner world.

In terms of auditory presentation, the coordinated combination of voiceovers, real-life sound effects, and background

music not only creates a richly layered sound texture for the documentary, but also complements and enhances the visual imagery. Actor Hu Ge provided the voiceover for the first two seasons of the program. His magnetic and emotional voice matched the narration well, telling each story in a captivating manner. In the second season of "Word Ferryman," when the camera focuses on translator Bao Huiyi, the voiceover not only serves a narrative function but also seamlessly transitions between scenes with precise emotional nuance: "In the process of translation, she herself is like a mineral, refined in the crucible of metallurgy. Bao Huiyi's poetry writing and translation began almost simultaneously and have always intertwined, giving her poetry a unique hybrid quality. The scene seamlessly transitions from Bao Huiyi focused on translation to her writing poetry on an old-fashioned typewriter, accompanied by the crisp sound of keyboard clicks. The continuity of the sound helps avoid the jarring effect that a camera cut might otherwise create.

The stylized fusion of audiovisual language achieves a unity of information transmission, emotional resonance, and thematic depth within a limited time frame, aligning with the audience's demand for diverse audiovisual experiences. This has become an important narrative support for web-based documentaries adapted to online dissemination scenarios.

### 3.2 Presentation of details in narrative expression

Under the influence of entertainment-oriented consumption demands and fast-paced social culture, audiences' viewing preferences have undergone significant changes. The storytelling approach in documentaries remains an important means of attracting audiences. Creators should be adept at using story hooks to capture the audience's attention, paying attention to setting points of excitement, maintaining a brisk pace, and providing dense information, while downplaying didacticism and enhancing the element of fun, using character stories to convey the creator's multifaceted interpretation of the theme<sup>[4]</sup>. In the third season of "Reasons for Writing," the program introduces the protagonist Fan Yusu as a domestic worker. The camera first captures her browsing job listings as she navigates the streets, then records her focused posture as she writes at a desk on an old bed. The stark contrast between the two scenes instantly highlights the tension between the characters' survival and their ideals. At the same time, the program uses details to continuously deepen the narrative: Fan Yusu describes books that have never even been opened as "like a person who has never truly lived"; she buys over a thousand pounds of books for her daughters from secondhand bookstalls and scrap yards; she joins the Beijing Pichuan Literary Group and attends classes with her coworkers... From survival to spiritual pursuit, from personal perseverance to family heritage, the protagonist's character gradually becomes more vivid through the details.

This story-driven approach, which uses details as its framework, replaces grand narratives with concrete, tangible individual experiences. It aligns with the online audience's preference for lightweight narratives, allowing documentaries to maintain their documentary nature while also having stronger emotional appeal and dissemination power.

### 3.3 Balancing refinement and popularity in narrative style

And Yet The Books strikes a delicate balance between refinement and popularity in its narrative style. On the one hand, it adheres to in-depth discussions on book culture, the publishing industry, and the value of reading, without shying away from professional knowledge and historical context, demonstrating a serious cultural responsibility and intellectual rigor. On the other hand, it actively embraces online language, striving for expressions that are easy to understand and lively.

In terms of refinement, And Yet The Books delves deeply into the core of culture with a rigorous attitude. When introducing the bibliographer Shen Xieyuan, the film mentions that he was the editor-in-chief of the "Catalog of Rare Chinese Books" and provides a scientific explanation through commentary: "Rare books refer to precious ancient books that have historical and cultural value, academic value, and artistic value, but are rarely circulated." The film also maintains academic rigor through extensive displays of artifacts, footage of ancient texts being leafed through, and historical images, thereby enhancing the audience's intuitive understanding of ancient text research.

In terms of popularity, the film successfully uses vivid language and emotional resonance from the online context to bridge the gap in cultural communication. Having spent seventy years in the company of ancient books, the elderly Mr. Shen Xieyuan humorously likened the process of purchasing ancient books to "dating a girlfriend," effectively conveying the caution and reverence involved in acquiring such texts in a clear and accessible manner. The narration cleverly incorporates internet slang—describing National Library librarian Gu Xiaojun as "an NPC in a game who knows everything about the map" is an expression that not only fits the cognitive habits of internet audiences but also accurately summarizes his professional characteristics; teasing editor Zhu Yue as "the president of the Douban Bald Club" dispels the serious label of a senior editor and makes the character more approachable.

This narrative strategy combines a rigorous academic core that solidifies the foundation of cultural expression with a conversational tone that breaks down barriers to knowledge transfer, providing a narrative model that can be used as a reference for achieving a balance between depth and breadth in cultural documentaries in the internet age.

## 4 Interactive mechanisms for participatory storytelling

### 4.1 Interactive narrative functions of media platforms

As Bilibili's iconic interactive medium, bullet comments and comment sections together construct a multi-layered narrative interactive space, enabling audiences to provide immediate feedback on visual texts while expanding the boundaries of meaning of the works.

As a discourse co-created by image makers and viewers, bullet screens deconstruct the images themselves and expand the space of their meaning. As a standard feature of Bilibili, it has become an important way for audiences to engage and interact. For the audience, bullet comments are a celebration that transcends time and space; for the platform, bullet comments help to understand audience feedback in a timely manner and gain an intuitive sense of the audience's likes and dislikes<sup>[5]</sup>. For example, when volunteers read *The Little Prince* to blind children and came to the passage, "What is essential is invisible to the eye. It can only be seen with the heart," the children laughed heartily and applauded, then accepted brightly colored roses from the volunteers. Such a heartwarming scene resonated emotionally with the audience, who left comments in the live chat such as "That's a legendary line," "So tear-jerking," and "So touching." This interaction not only enhances audience engagement, but also creates an immersive experience through the atmosphere of group viewing, amplifying and conveying the spiritual power embodied in book culture.

The comment section serves as a platform for more in-depth interactive storytelling. On the one hand, audiences actively share their personal insights, related experiences, and book recommendations in the comments section, vividly supplementing the program content. On the other hand, the director of each episode will post director's notes in the comments section, recording the stories behind the making of the documentary. These notes recreate the details behind the filming from the creator's perspective — from the selection of subjects to in-depth exchanges with interviewees to the agonizing decisions made during editing—transforming the documentary's creative process into a narrative text that can be interpreted and discussed. The audience supplements their understanding of the main film through handwritten notes, enabling the originally closed visual text to extend into multiple layers of interpretation through the platform's functionality.

It is worth noting that the functional design extends interaction from the verbal level to the practical level. The comment section directly embeds a purchase link for "books related to the documentary," allowing the audience to transform from viewers of book culture to practitioners. And Yet The Books 3 and Bilibili Public Welfare jointly launched the "Disability Innovation Employment Support Program" in the comment section, providing a practical way for audiences concerned about the reading needs of people with disabilities to participate. Such interaction not only extends the social value of documentaries, but also breaks through the entertainment attributes of the platform's interactive functions, giving it a more profound practical significance.

### 4.2 Audience participation in narrative co-creation

This film encourages the audience to participate in co-creating the narrative, stimulating their initiative and creativity through a variety of methods. During the broadcast of the documentary, the platform will initiate topic discussions and invite audiences to share their reading experiences, personal insights, and other content. These real-life stories from the audience provide new perspectives and insights for other viewers, enriching the literary world depicted in the documentary and serving as a valuable supplement to its narrative.

Some viewers also create derivative works based on the content of the documentary, posting text and images on platforms such as Douban, Weibo, and Xiaohongshu, combining the parts of the documentary that touched their hearts with their personal reading experiences. Some viewers have compiled lists of recommended books and quotations from the film, accompanied by screenshots from the film, to create illustrated guides that attract more viewers to participate. Through interpretation and reconstruction from a personal perspective, the documentary explores the value of reading and the power of books in a more nuanced way.

Audience engagement extends to offline scenarios as well. In 2020, And Yet The Books opened a physical bookstore in Shanghai. The bookstore is made up of 12 shipping containers, divided into six themed venues. The "Secondhand Book Fantasy Drift Station" theme section echoes the story of the secondhand bookstore in the documentary, encouraging people to exchange books and leave their own reflections on them. The creation of physical spaces transforms the circulation of books from screen images into real-life experiences, and every time the audience reads, exchanges books, or leaves a message in an offline setting, they actively continue the narrative theme.

This collaborative model, which combines online and offline activities, not only brings the narrative of book culture closer to the lives of the audience, but also breaks through the boundaries of the screen to create a lasting cultural resonance through the active participation of the audience.

## 5 Conclusion

The success of *And Yet The Books* is due to its precise adaptation to the online environment and innovative narrative strategies. In terms of narrative structure, the combination of multi-threaded interconnection and modular composition not only achieves content aggregation through core themes, but also satisfies the demand for fragmented viewing through sectional design, balancing communication efficiency and thematic depth. At the narrative discourse level, the diverse integration of audiovisual language, detailed storytelling, and a style that balances elegance and vulgarity transform book culture from an abstract concept into a tangible individual experience, enhancing the content's appeal and dissemination. The construction of participatory narrative mechanisms breaks the traditional one-way communication model of documentary films. Through methods such as interactive subtitles, secondary creation, and offline scene extensions, audiences are transformed from viewers into co-creators of cultural communication, promoting the continuous growth of book culture through interaction.

As an important medium for cultural dissemination, online documentaries in the new era should be based on the viewing habits and emotional needs of online audiences. They should build on a foundation of local culture and uphold cultural values through narrative innovation. This means using flexible structural designs and vivid language to adapt to fragmented communication scenarios, while also relying on open interactive mechanisms to activate audience participation. In this way, cultural consensus can be formed through interactive communication, and cultural value and communication effectiveness can be unified. Only in this way can Chinese stories be revitalized in the context of the times, and cultural confidence truly become a spiritual force that permeates people's hearts.

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