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Oil in Place Interactive Documentary

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Report on University Grant Program Small Grant
2015 – 2016
Oil in Place Interactive Documentary
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This report summarizes the results of my creative research funded by a 2015 small grant from the University Grant Program. This funding was essential in supporting the development and production of an interactive documentary project that reflects the complex relationship between technological advances, the world oil market and laborers’ and residents’ experiences in the Bakken oil field region.

With UGP funding I was able to secure needed supplies and fund travel to the Bakken region to work as a one-woman documentary crew. I traveled to the region twice during the grant period to record a variety of oral history interviews, cinema verite footage and field recordings for an interactive documentary project.

With UGP funding, I was also able to hire an interactive artist Austin Slominski as a collaborator to help envision and design a real time reactive data network for the project and also data-driven audio and visual effects.

My original proposal included a plan to create an interactive documentary installation that relied upon motion sensor technology and viewer movement. As I worked in the region and researched the oil industry, I re-designed the interactive elements as real time data-driven effects, which had a stronger conceptual relationship to the subject matter. The project will now be available in two formats – a theatrical film with a live projection element and a multi-channel installation.

The theatrical live projection version of the project is a feature-length documentary film that is projected in conjunction with live data-driven reactive audio and visual effects. Each screening of the film is a unique audio and visual experience, depending upon data from oil market activity and social media posts related to the region. The multi-channel installation is intended to be exhibited in gallery spaces, with three channels of video and live real time reactive data driven effects that change the look and sound of the work.

Working in an interactive documentary format, I was able to weave together a multitude of perspectives and respond to the complex forces that drive the region through non-linear storytelling, formal experimentation and the integration of social media content and data-driven effects. While utilizing some modes of production from traditional documentary film conventions, the interactive format of the project opens
up the possibilities for documenting and exhibiting a wide range of residents’ and laborers’ experiences, dreams and desires.

As we experience media and film through an increasingly diverse array of platforms, new opportunities for documentary engagement are emerging. Interactive documentaries present a new format for exploring issues of representation and audience engagement. The responsive, ever-changing audiovisual environment developed for Oil in Place has the possibility to reflect both the physical Bakken oil field community in a state of flux and the distant, digital Bakken communities on social media. In most traditional documentary works, documentarians come to the community, capture footage for a time and then leave with a more static image or narrative of the community. In contrast to traditional documentary filmmaking, this project develops a framework for a documentary practice that can continue to respond to life in the community long beyond the initial production phase.

The interactive form of the project resists fixing the subject matter in a strictly historical format. Integration of social media posts is a key part of the network of data that controls the form of the project. Social media posts form another layer of representation for individuals with a range of perspectives. Residents of the Bakken region will be able to continue to participate in representing their own stories through their social media engagement. The primacy of the subject’s stories are maintained through the integration of social media posts, while the complex network of economic and industry forces that shape their lives are made visible through the process of overlaying data-driven real time effects. This allows for a representation of simultaneous realities – both a wide lens on the world of the oil industry and an intimate focus on the industry’s impacts on a human scale.

I am pleased to report that my paper “Oil in Place: Social Media and Real Time Data Responsive Documentary” detailing the process of developing and producing Oil in Place was accepted for presentation at the 2017 College Art Association Conference in New York City. I am currently submitting the project to film and media art festivals for consideration in the 2017 festival season.

I would like to thank the Office of Research and Creative Scholarship and the University Grant Program for their support in furthering my creative research.