

The nexus of political documentary and alternative journalism

Addressing the social world

Abstract: This article is a critical commentary of how political documentary embodies the traits and functions of alternative journalism. I explore this notion through *Obrero* ('worker') my independent documentary project about the labour migration of Filipino workers to Christchurch, Aotearoa New Zealand, after the earthquake in 2011. This article maps out the points at where the theories and practices of alternative media and documentary intersect. Analysing political documentary as a format of alternative journalism has links to the long tradition of film and video production as a tool for social critique. As a form of practice-based research, *Obrero* falls under the rubric of alternative journalism—able to represent the politically marginal sectors of the polity and report on issues underreported in the mainstream press. This article concludes that a distribution plan that is responsive to fragmenting audiences works best when alternative journalism no longer targets a niche but transborder audiences.

Keywords: alternative journalism, Christchurch rebuild, documentary, Frontline, journalism as research, labour migration, New Zealand, Philippines, political documentary

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Introduction

THE PRACTICES of documentary and journalism are largely intertwined to 'the same ethos and commitments to truth-telling, sense-making, and explaining' (Uricchio et al., 2014, p. 10). Both practices emphasise their obligation to reveal, understand, represent, and address the social and historical world. Although difficult at times to delineate the distinctions between the two subfields, those who distinguish documentary from journalism do so on the basis that it is different in content, style, and format to mainstream journalism. As Dan Krauss has argued: 'The contract with the audience when you are a journalistic organisation is very different from the contract you have with your

audience at a theatre showing an independent film' (Kelth, 2015, 'Understand the contract' section, para 1).

Links have been made however between documentary and investigative journalism. At a Sundance forum in 2015, political filmmakers contemplated on how their film practices mesh with investigative reporting. Laura Poitras calls her practice 'journalism plus' and identifies herself as a visual journalist, Alex Gibney reflects that his practice is filmmaking with 'journalistic baggage', and Marc Silver argues there is a 'journalistic layer' in documentary production (Das, 2015; White, 2015). There is a compelling reason why political documentary makers assume the journalist hat. As the media has shifted towards tabloidisation, some argue the documentary makers are assuming journalism's watchdog role, probing political issues (Goldson, 2015). This argument emphasises the important role that the documentary can play in the reportage of social dilemma or in holding those powerful to account. Drawing on these academic and industry insights, I sketch out the points at where the theories and practices of alternative journalism and documentary intersect. I then reflect on documentary's status as research and its capacity to add new knowledge about a socio-political issue.

Case study overview

This article is based on my independent documentary titled *Obrero* ('worker') that tells the story of Filipino rebuild workers migrating to Christchurch, Aotearoa New Zealand, following the devastating magnitude 6.3 earthquake in 2011. Christchurch is a compelling setting for a documentary. First, the huge rebuilding demand led to the historical movement of workers from overseas to the city. And second, Christchurch is undergoing a dramatic wholesale construction following the disaster. All these reasons make the city a suitable backdrop for a migration documentary. Apart from that, the entry of Filipino workers to Christchurch can be considered a significant moment in the bilateral relationship between the Philippines and New Zealand.

Due to the need to reconstruct, New Zealand relaxed its immigration policies and sought construction workers overseas. Some of the migration policies have been overridden by New Zealand's demand for foreign labourers, especially in Christchurch. In the beginning of the rebuild phase, New Zealand employers turned to its traditional source countries such as Ireland and the United Kingdom to recruit the much-needed workforce. Filipino rebuild workers started arriving in the city beginning 2013, a majority of them are former contract workers in the Middle East and other parts of Asia. The presence of Filipinos in Christchurch has been reported in numerous media platforms, which have covered issues such as exploitation, housing problems and exorbitant recruitment fees (McClure & Meier, 2015; Morrah, 2016). The peak of the rebuild was between 2014 to 2016 and it was during this period that cases of worker exploitation were first reported

in the media. The documentary aims to contextualise the culture of labour migration in the Philippines by featuring Filipino builders in Christchurch as a case study and the Christchurch disaster as a backdrop to its narrative. It also explains the effects of unethical recruitment systems on Filipino workers.

Obrero targets an audience from the Philippines which I engage with the experiences of Filipino workers in Christchurch. The New Zealand audience are also targeted because of their high interests in the rebuild and the volatile debates around immigration issues in the country. By the time I released the documentary in 2018, the media gaze had shifted, and so the documentary



Figure 1: *Obrero*'s film poster—obrerofilm.com

served as a timely follow up. The film was accepted In Competition at the 13th Documentary Edge Film Festival and it was shortlisted as a finalist for the Best New Zealand Short Documentary category. It was shown to audiences in Auckland and Wellington, and was included in the DocEdge's Docs4Schools programme. A few months after the New Zealand premiere, *Obrero* was also invited for screening at the Cinematografo International Film Festival in San Francisco, USA. Film festivals can be categorised as 'spaces of contestation and dissent, where the cultural politics of radical, progressive political documentaries are given space to spill over into the festival space' (Winton, 2013, p. 48). *Obrero*'s festival selection allotted the documentary a form of legitimacy, given the project is independent in scope.

Two months after the film's festival screening, I released an interactive documentary (i-doc) version of *Obrero* (see obrerofilm.com). As a new home for original documentary content, the web offers several advantages to makers and users. For instance, it has ample space for context and detail. It can also handle, mix, remix, and hyperlink fragments of media, including those existing outside the

i-doc's interface. The approach I observed is similar in principle to current affairs documentaries on television that contextualise a hot button issue and multimedia journalism packages online that expand and represent a topic using different media.

The documentarist as journalist

There are numerous intersecting points between journalism's watchdog function and documentary's nature of political representation. Documentary has been well understood as a form of 'journalistic inquiry and exposition' sorting out evidences and testimonies as elements of its visual reportage (Corner, 2002, p. 259). Erik Barnouw (1974) also labelled early documentary makers as 'reporters' referring primarily to the works of Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov. Vertov had given 'the reporter-as-documentarist a moment at the center of cinema' (Barnouw, 1974, p. 66).

Journalism has been associated with the four elements: 'reporting, judging, a public voice, and the here and now' (cited in Nash, 2016a, p. 12). These elements, according to Nash (2016a), suggest that journalism addresses the 'real world', the present and the public interest (p. 13). Like documentary, journalism also has truth claims that can intersect largely with the affairs of the humanities and social sciences. A recent case study also highlighted journalism as an act of translation, not only between disciplines but also ensuring that underreported issues become context aware (Lopez, 2020).

Documentary's relationship to journalism is even more important to contemplate 'at a time when documentary seems to have taken over some of journalism's traditional terrain and found success doing so' (Craft, 2018, p. 415). Yet their routines and practices also vary. Journalism's preoccupation with objectivity is often rooted to the influence of social responsibility theory that demands journalists to observe impartiality through 'informed reportage and diverse views' (Ward, 2008, p. 140). This objective stance differentiates journalism from documentary's political and radical perspective (see Craft, 2018). Because of this, documentary makers are frequently criticised for 'transgressing norms of perceived objectivity' often expected of conventional mainstream journalism (Prager, 2015, p. 35).

In terms of form, moving pictures began meshing with journalism when newsreels attained a popular status as genre at the beginning of the 20th century. Defined as 'a single film reel of topical news items' (McKernan, 2008, p. 1), the term newsreel can be applied to any motion picture footage of news and current events shown in cinemas as part of a programme. Scholars often situate newsreels at the intersecting point between the 'idea of news and that of documentary' (Corner, 2018, p. vi). Newsreels, since their inception, were treated as secondary to feature films, but proved useful for publicity and prestige of the production companies (Chambers et al., 2018). But not all newsreels were commercially

distributed. Scant representation of social issues in mainstream media through newsreels pushed some filmmakers to set up their own distribution networks screening alternative newsreels projecting proletarian subjects (Pizzichini, 2003). By the 1960s, newsreel collectives revived an 'alternative form of reportage' by showcasing alternative videos that highlighted news angles not covered by mainstream press (Nichols, 1973, p. 7). This logic of giving voice to the under-represented is the same principle behind the practice of alternative journalism.

Defining alternative journalism

The term 'alternative' journalism has different connotations depending on the form, content, and ideology that are highlighted and depending on the 'political and social environment in which it operates' (Forde, 2015, p. 294). Most scholars situate alternative journalism under the broader umbrella of alternative media. John Downing (2001) explores alternative media's links to radicalism and defined it as 'generally small-scale and in many different forms, that express an alternative vision to hegemonic policies, priorities, and perspectives' (p. v). This notion of being in opposition to dominant media structures appears consistently in succeeding research and case studies that depict journalism as research (e.g. Atton & Hamilton, 2008; Robie, 2016). Alternative journalism arises out of discontent with dominant media practices, challenging professionalisation and reliance on elite sources in favor of a journalism giving voice to the marginalised and underrepresented. Offers a historical overview, consideration of political and economic factors, case studies (with a particular focus on those who produce alternative journalism).

Studies on alternative journalism, however, typically address instances of amateur style reporting, citizen journalism, community journalism, alternative online news and social movement, and the convergence of alternative and mainstream journalism online (Atton, 2009a; Forde, 2015; Kenix, 2013). Similar to advocacy journalism (Janowitz, 1975; Thomas, 2018), alternative journalists emphasise the perspective of ordinary people and provide insights from non-traditional sources rather than deploying an objective lens and a hierarchy of sources used in professionalised journalism (Atton, 2009b), or simply put 'self-perceived corrective' of the mainstream media (Holt, Figenschou, & Frischlich, 2019, p. 862). They represent the political by intending: 'to give a voice to the voiceless, to fill the gaps left by the mainstream, to empower ordinary people to participate in democracy, and in many instances, to educate people with information they cannot access elsewhere' (Forde, 2011, p. 45).

When is documentary alternative?

Political documentary has been historically labelled under the rubric of alternative or radical media. Radical media is often characterised by its inherent

potential to echo a political point of view, contesting those in power. It is a unique attitude that separates documentary from newsreels and other forms of actualities (Nichols, 2001). This notion of radical filmmaking ‘coupled to social purpose lend distinction to documentary as an art form capable of envisioning a transformed world’ (Nichols, 2001, p. 608). Barsam (1973) argues that documentary is a special form of rhetorical expression and is a ‘film with a message’ (p. 4). This message is what is lacking in travelogues, educational films and newsreels.

Although documentary is alternative in many ways to the dominant commercial film culture, there is also a ‘tradition of independence’ within the documentary tradition (Chapman, 2015, p. 216). These documentary makers often work as ‘independents’ or those producing work outside the mainstream or dominant studio-based system. They are typically low-budget and community-supported, are often ‘viewed as aligned to left-wing politics, partly due to practical links between documentary activism, demands for access and alternative media outlets’ (Geiger, 2011, p. 189). As a format of alternative journalism, documentary is valuable for its capacity to ‘create new spaces or alternative voices that provide the focus both for specific community interests’ (Silverstone, 1999, p. 103).

Documentaries that exist at the interstices of mainstream production and distribution can easily fall under the common typologies of alternative journalism. Independently produced documentaries, for instance, could also be positioned in opposition to the mainstream, produced through collective efforts and participation of community members. Similarly, documentaries that embody the traits of alternative journalism could well qualify as civil society media and function as rhizomatic media that links activist groups and movements (Bailey et al., 2008). Recent scholarship also explores a wave of independent documentary makers operating outside the influence of the mainstream linked to an environment of protest cultures where they can exercise creativity, experimentations, and innovation in film practice (Mutibwa, 2019).

Creative practice as research

Journalist-researchers take advantage of reflexivity as a unique feature of practice-related inquiry (Niblock, 2007). This approach nurtures critical practitioners who can fully comprehend the context and implications of their journalism (Niblock, 2007, p. 22). As Jarvis (1999) once noted, practitioners reflexively analysing their own practice can offer a thick description of their experience by combining their experiential knowledge with theory. In social sciences, this reflexive turn argues for the role of the researcher as part of the subject or world in question, and includes two characteristics: ‘careful interpretation and reflection’ (Alvesson & Sköldbberg, 2000, p. 5).

In the academy, it is typical to use film either as ‘a site for systematically

gathering reflections on the process of doing/making' or a 'result of research and therefore performs the research findings' (Batty & Kerrigan, 2018, p. 7). Similarly, I position *Obrero* within two interrelated layers of practice-related analysis. On the one hand, I treat my journalism as research capable of producing new knowledge on the conditions and context of Filipino workers in Christchurch. I employed observational cinema as practical ethnography and combined it with journalistic methodologies such as interviews, both informal (off-camera) and formal (on-camera), and using unstructured and semi-structured styles. As a practitioner who treats journalism practice as academic research, my production process also involves a critical reading of related literature. This can influence how the work is produced, including how the reportage expresses the academic discourses related to the topic under study. On the other hand, I also reflect not just about the topic of my journalism but also the discursive practice involved in the production of *Obrero*, which by itself is also a 'mode of research' (Wayne, 2008). Through production commentary, I reinscribe the relationship between documentary film and alternative journalism underlining in my exegesis the strategic choices involved in my creative practice. This analytical framework is informed by a burgeoning literature that supports and advocates the greater recognition of journalism practice as research in the academy (Bacon, 2012; Goldson, 2020; Nash, 2013, 2016b; Robie, 2015, 2016).

Depicting labour migration through film

Obrero depicts labour migration as a highly politicised activity. The addition of the word 'labour' in labour migration extends and alters its connotation and emphasises the employment-seeking motives of the migrant. While it may sound simple and straightforward, the concept of foreign worker is more complex due to the interplay of actors and its political structures (Bartram, 2005). Labour migration is inherent in countries in Asia and the Pacific. They contribute enormously to economic development in their source countries, for instance, through remittances and upgraded skills upon return (ILO, n.d.).

Despite an increasing number of Filipinos in New Zealand, the country remains a relatively new destination for Filipino workers. America, Middle East, and some parts of Asia have been typically favoured by those looking for overseas work opportunities (Martin et al., 2006). In Southeast Asia, the Philippines is considered a model country for the strategic exportation of labour force to developed states (Rodriguez, 2010). This is the reason why the notions of migrant and migration are both 'socially produced' and 'politically constructed and contested' (Tyner, 2004, p. 140). This is evident through the establishment of the called 'state migratory apparatus' in the Philippines, which has transformed labour migration as highly politicised state activity (p. 27). Rodriguez (2010) used the term 'labor brokerage' to encapsulate the 'institutional and discursive



Figure 2: Filipino workers leaving a construction site in Christchurch CBD.

practices through which the Philippine state mobilises its citizens and sends them abroad to work for employers throughout the world' (p. x). It could be argued, therefore, that the presence of state apparatuses (e.g. government-run employment administration) mentioned above reflects the stronger position of the Philippine government to institutionalise the export of labour (Tyner, 2004).

Obrero represents the point of view of migrants from a developing country whose decision to migrate is related overwhelmingly to the search for economic betterment. At the core of *Obrero's* reportage is the issue of an unethical migrant worker recruitment system, marked by the excessive amounts of placement fees charged by recruitment agencies in the Philippines. As the documentary outlines, workers moving to New Zealand can spend an entire year simply recovering from their debts. The issue was first reported by local newspapers in Christchurch and was then picked up by other mainstream news media outlets in New Zealand. This exposure triggered the renewal of a memorandum of agreement between the governments of New Zealand and the Philippines which calls for a strict implementation of the no-placement fee policy and prevention of illegal recruitment, among other regulations.¹ But as the film reveals, cases of workers charged recruitment fees continue unabated despite the government intervention. Recruiters in the Philippines evaded the regulations by requiring Filipino migrants to sign a waiver document that certified that no fees were collected. Some recruitment agencies followed the reformed policy, but others persisted in charging arriving workers in Christchurch and Auckland. Although focused on this one aspect of exploitation, the documentary shows there is little monitoring and regulation of private recruitment entities in the source country. Through the film, I argue that the social phenomenon of foreign rebuild workers in New Zealand, their conditions and contexts, are political in nature driven by agencies and actors that shape the policies both in sending and in receiving countries.

Obrero was positioned as a form of investigative documentary that exposes the corruption in the labour migration business in the Philippines. Although it recounts the implications of an unethical recruitment system, the story also highlights the agency, collective action, and protest of Filipino workers in Christchurch. The film commenced its exposition with a cause and effect structure—the earthquake in Christchurch serves as a triggering event. The argument of the film was simple: a devastating earthquake triggered a wholesale reconstruction in New Zealand. Workers were needed, and those from the Philippines were the largest migrant workers group. The conditions they experienced led them to protest against overcharging of placement fees. This narrative strategy is also used in mainstream television documentary, such as emphasising causal agency as a particular narrative arc that indicates the principle of why the subject matter occurred (Wayne, 1997, p. 152). In the case of *Obrero*, however, the ‘cause and effect’ structure is more embedded in the historical context of the Filipino workers. In the opening scene, I show brief intertitles over a moving POV (point of view) shot of an airport baggage carousel:

10 million Filipinos work overseas sending \$2 billion home each month.
The workers were mostly based in the Middle East and Asia not New Zealand... until a deadly disaster struck. (Opening sequence, *Obrero*)

The documentary was released during a time of persistent media coverage of worker issues in New Zealand. Different news outlets report on several fragments of stories, featuring interviews with workers, officials, experts, and activist groups. In other words, the audiences have consumed a swath of information regarding the issue of the rebuild and its workforce. My choice of using causation as a storytelling device then allows the audience to pause and reflect and ultimately to process a complex narrative.

The well-being of the workers themselves, distanced as they are from their families and community, is another aspect of *Obrero*’s depiction of labour migration. It provides a picture of the social consequences of Filipino parents’ sustained separation from their families. While the ‘OFW as hero’ is evidently the most prevalent dictum of the government and the general public, recently debates have begun to probe the long-term benefits of this economic mindset (Tigno, 2015). OFW stands for overseas Filipino workers, a term used to refer to the citizens of the Philippines working abroad. A particular challenge in this project is that I need to tell a story while revealing an investigation without compromising context and history. The balance is crucial and deserves attention throughout the production process.

The social concept of *sapalaran* (‘to take chances’) was a theme that appeared in many of the recorded interviews with the workers. They argue that their chances of getting a well-paid job are better overseas. They understand that migration entails risk-taking and that entering into a risky agreement is their

only viable option if they wish to continue the process. Taking risk is naturally engrained in Filipino psychology. The notion of *bahala na* is the closest cultural value that embodies how Filipinos perceive the risks involved in working overseas. *Bahala na* has no English translation, but it connotes the trait of ‘determination and risk-taking’ (Lagmay, cited in Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000, p. 55). This risk-taking attitude, together with their lack of awareness of New Zealand as a work destination, contributes to Filipino workers’ vulnerability while in the host country. As I emphasise in the conclusion of *Obrero’s* i-doc, unethical recruitment and the draining of financial resources produce a ripple effect—workers keep mum despite experiencing further exploitation in the host country. For example, the long bureaucratic red tape involved in the actual hearings of complaints against recruiters in the Philippines dissuade workers from filing formal complaints. The documentary film as a format of journalism can effectively capture these intricacies and can contextualise the narrative while observing its commitment to truth-telling.

Mainstream versus alternative practices

Because of my prior journalism experience researching and producing labour migration stories in the Philippines, and also as a member of the same ethnic community, I have developed an abiding interest in the affairs of the OFWs. *Obrero’s* conception was not a by-product of my academic work. I have always had a desire to create a documentary that can capture the realities of labour migration in New Zealand. I first introduced the story to my colleagues at *I-Witness*, a documentary programme I was directing for a Filipino broadcast station GMA Network. But location for us was a barrier and funding available for overseas filming was also very limited.

In producing the film, I drew and departed from my technical and editorial training in mainstream journalism. For instance, the effective messaging style of current affairs television largely influenced how I produced my work. I also adopted the principle of parallelism, an editing style that is often applied to long form broadcast journalism. I alternated the stories of two Filipino workers depicting both their individual and collective stories as migrants in Christchurch. The analysis is interwoven and dispersed in the bigger narrative to ensure that the emotional elements of the story are distributed evenly, enticing the audience to remain focused and engaged throughout the film. I also wore the typical attitude inherent in mainstream television documentaries. I ensured a fluid presentation of the narrative, persuaded the audience about the credibility of the arguments, and used compelling visuals and music scoring to sustain audience retention. These are typical considerations of commercial broadcast journalism considering competition is fierce in the industry.

However, the production methodology I observed in this film is distinct

from my prior experience in television and from what I would have produced. The style of my film production was influenced by many variables—like my subjects, I am a Filipino, we thus share a language and the same basic perception of reality as fellow migrants in New Zealand. Therefore, most interaction in the film is spontaneous, which distinguishes *Obrero* from other forms of actualities such as news reporting that explore similar subject matter. Unlike an episodic documentary that is restricted to a particular length and timeslot, independent journalism is less constrained. Furthermore, compared to my prior experience in mainstream journalism, the working relationship I established with the Filipino workers is also more symbiotic. I cooperated with the workers instead of treating them as mere subjects of the documentary. I also bypassed the typical (public relations) gatekeepers that connect the community and mainstream journalists. Instead I immersed myself in the community of workers thus gathering narratives directly from the subjects of the film.

Analysing *Obrero* as alternative journalism

Drawing on existing body of work on alternative journalism (Atton & Hamilton, 2008; Forde, 2011; Harcup, 2005), I assert that *Obrero* as a political documentary meshes with alternative journalism founded on three main features: the reportage of social issue, the independent stance of the filmmaker, and the participants in the documentary. First, the social issues I represented were covered although not fully explained by New Zealand journalists, and also less visible in media channels in the Philippines. Although labour migration is reported as a legitimate topic of news, the extremely fast cycle of journalism could compromise the reportage of community issues in favour of news topics that are immediate and of national interest. In other words, I position *Obrero*'s reportage of worker issues in opposition to the typical news agenda of the mainstream media (Downing, 2001; Harcup, 2005). This practice is consistent with early arguments that associate alternative journalism to 'social responsibility, replacing an ideology of "objectivity" with overt advocacy and oppositional practices' (Atton, 2003, p. 267). Through my interviews and fieldwork, I explain in the film the key phases of transnational recruitment from the Philippines to New Zealand that are most prone to abuse. In the film, I depict how workers fight to end the overcharging and even illegal charging of fees through lodging a formal complaint. The film also reveals the negative sentiment it produced among Filipino workers. *Obrero* then provides my audience an alternative social reality about the conditions of workers in Christchurch.

Second, my creative decisions as a filmmaker are informed by the sensibility of independent media production. Although it sounds simplistic, this independence serves as a particular strength of *Obrero*'s production as I remain free from any newsroom routine, policies, and politics or obligation from film funders. As a single-authored documentary, I exercised greater liberty in experimenting on

moving image as a mediated format of truth-telling. I produced professional and high definition quality content using a consumer-sized camera and also bypassed several access restrictions often encountered by a large film and television crew. Being independent production also liberates the project from the constraints and pressures of professional journalism. Although single-authored film production is not a sustainable model of journalism (Zafra, 2018) it remains a possibility given that the scarcity of resources pushes many independent journalists to fulfil both reportorial and technical tasks. Practitioners transitioning from mainstream to independent will certainly feel their big departure from the resources, mechanism, and prestige of big media outlets. But universities that welcome creative practice as a legitimate format of knowledge production may fill this gap and offer a sustainable venue for alternative journalism to flourish (Goldson, 2020; Nash, 2016b; Robie, 2015).

And finally, the documentary provides insights from non-traditional sources rather than deploying the hierarchy of sources used in ‘professionalised’ journalism (Atton, 2009b). It is akin to the principles of citizen journalism, emphasising the perspective of ordinary people. No longer under my tutelage as an author or filmmaker, the rebuild workers are co-creators in the production process as they contribute not only their stories but also their recorded moments of protests and personal narratives often captured through their mobile phones. For example, my subjects contributed a cell phone footage of the Filipino Labour Attaché addressing the workers who protested against excessive recruitment fees. Apart from occasional interviews with migrant advocates, the project focuses fully on the experiences of workers. Throughout the documentary, the interviews with the workers aid the narration instead of a voice-over. This gesture moves the film beyond the limits of expository mode of documentary—and is effective in sharing the authorship with the Filipino workers. The process of cooperating with the Filipino workers’ collective in Christchurch is another aspect of prioritising them as sources of information. Their political objectives gelled with the perspectives of the documentary, and in many ways, moderated the ethical concerns often attached to alternative journalism. As an insider and member of the same ethnic community, I also have a better understanding of the context of their situation. A common disposition along this critique is that insiders as storytellers do it ‘from a position of knowing, of affinity, of wielding insider knowledge’ (Sikand, 2015, p. 45).

In summary, the nexus of political documentary and alternative journalism is examined in this article both as a process and a product (Atton, 2002). As a process, this article tackles how the principles of representing reality adhere to the ethos and sensibility of documentary and alternative media. The film eschews the sourcing hierarchy in professional journalism, uses the advantage of a backpack filmmaker as eyewitness, and shines a spotlight on social issues that are less visible in the workers’ origin of country. Analysing the intersection of their

values is a heuristic process that enables journalists and filmmakers to interrogate and learn from each other (Beliveau, 2012). But *Obrero* is also a product of fieldwork and its ability to depict social reality using lens-based techniques means it falls under the category of research. While the broader literature on alternative journalism focuses on organisational features of alternative media and several case studies of community press, activist networks and citizen journalism, the present study expands its application to low-budget and single-authored journalistic documentaries.

Conclusion

The focus of this article on analysing documentary as a format of journalism has links to the long tradition of film and video production as a tool for social critique. Depicting labour migration as a topic of *Obrero* and as a social phenomenon is even more important given the tangible and increasing impact of globalisation and neoliberalism in developing economies. However, my experience as a filmmaker shows that it is not enough for journalistic documentary to simply oppose the dominant format or the rhetoric of the mainstream media, but also to reimagine traditional modes of production, distribution, and reception. To do this, documentary makers assuming the journalist hat must span the boundaries of conventional film and explore alternative communicative and participatory platforms to invite and sustain audience interactivity. Just like how legacy journalistic organisations distribute content across digital media platforms, political documentary as alternative media also has the potential to be refashioned for different audiences. It can learn from the successes and failures of their mainstream counterparts (Kenix, 2011).

For instance, I engage with international audience through a web documentary version of *Obrero*. As a webdoc, I shifted my practice away from shovelware routine of early online journalism, wherein a website serves as a repository only for traditional media content (Boczkowski, 2004). Some Filipino workers felt more comfortable to offer their knowledge off-camera rather than through formal interview techniques of documentary and broadcast journalism. These findings are at times difficult to integrate into the film's narrative, but suitable when I repurposed the film as an interactive documentary. Using a web platform, I reported on several 'hot button' issues, minimally tackled in the film variant of *Obrero* (30 minutes). Some of these fragments include several explanations to issues reported by the mainstream press, visualisation on the changing immigration policies in New Zealand, story maps, and profiles of the worker community. An i-doc, therefore, is an opportunity to translate field work data into visualisation that captures the bigger context of the issue.

Apart from i-doc, I also expanded the reportage into miniscule journalistic content on Facebook to reach audiences in the Philippines, an instance of social

network documentary (Zafra, in press).(2) Although Facebook is highly effective to reach audiences across borders, filmmakers still need to be cognisant of its algorithmic restrictions given it is a highly commercial networked environment. I argue that a distribution plan that is responsive to fragmenting audiences works best when alternative media no longer targets a niche but transborder audiences. This is especially true for filmmakers who want complete editorial and artistic independence, resist any obligation from funding bodies, and rely mostly on crowdfunding and contributions from concerned individuals.

In developing countries where the constant threats to democracy have consistently undermined the Fourth Estate functions of journalism, the production of political documentaries as alternative media could fuel public discussion and debate. Documentary can effectively represent socio-political issues. Its rhetorical strategies can also address audiences that transcend national boundaries, language, and cultures. As this *Frontline* article explicates, political documentary can easily blend with alternative journalism as both forms of media practice are deep-rooted in their social purpose, capable of depicting and mirroring social realities, but desirous of transforming them.

Notes

1. The labour cooperation agreement, Arrangement on the Principles and Controls on the Recruitment and Protection of Filipino workers in New Zealand, was signed in September 2015.
2. See www.facebook.com/Obrero [Documentary].

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