

Journalism as Popular Culture
Docu-Soap: A new Genre crossing the Border
of Fact and Fiction

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1. *Journalism viewed beyond the Information-Transmission Model*

If journalism only, or even primarily, communicated within the framework of the informative mode of communication, it would hardly have the audience it has today. Indeed, it would most probably be a rather marginal phenomenon. There is not enough information of urgent importance to warrant daily consumption of journalism. (Ekström 2000: p. 489)

In journalism research as well as in professional magazines or self-descriptions of journalists themselves journalism is traditionally seen in terms of the information-transmission model. It is the duty of journalism to provide the public with relevant information. This information enables people to act as citizens. Journalism, facts, information – these three terms seem to be connected indissolubly. Terms like fiction and entertainment do not fit into this concept. They are incompatible with journalism.

This concept of journalism – though still dominant in academic discourse, especially in Germany – can only be maintained under two conditions. Firstly, one must adopt the perspective of journalists and communicators, and neglect that of the audience. Secondly, one must focus on one aspect of journalism only, i.e. political news. This segment, especially in TV journalism, is constantly losing both relevance and dominance. In spite of this, however, research into journalism – at least in Germany – still focuses either explicitly or implicitly on political news journalism (in the mode of objective reporting) as the nucleus of journalism (cf. Scholl/Weischenberg 1998, Esser 1998, Sievert 1998, Donsbach 1993). If we subscribe to this point of view, new developments in television, described variously as "personalisation", "intimisation" or "tabloidisation", must be seen as a threat to 'serious' journalism.

If we take the perspective of the audience, this decision cannot be sufficient. From audience research we know that it is **not** the mode of information that makes journalism popular. When people are asked about details after they have watched television news, the proportion of 'misunderstanding', 'incomplete recalling' and 'wrong reconstruction' is extremely high (Ruhrmann 1994: p. 253-54). It is not primarily information that viewers take out of TV news. It is a ritual for structuring their everyday life (Neverla 1992); it is a narrative enabling them to be aware of their own position in a changing environment; it is listening to modern myths and tales (Hickethier 1997, Liebes 1994). Dahlgren (1988: p. 286) describes the consequences of this knowledge for journalistic production in the following way:

"Interestingly enough, this does not seem to have any significant impact on TV journalists or producers. In so far as one can detect changes in audiovisual discourse (...) the trend seems to make informational comprehension all the more difficult. Yet public discussions about TV news are still premised on the informational model."

Moving away from this "informational model" based on the transmission concept does not mean to say that we are moving towards the trivial and popular side of journalism. Some authors argue that we need a change in journalism research towards a more audience-based concept in order to be able to analyse phenomena like tabloid journalism or special forms of magazine journalism (Sparks 1992, van Zoonen 1997, Renger 2000). Although I agree that we need to broaden our view of all forms of journalism, I would like to emphasise that a change is necessary in what is called '**the heart of journalism**', i.e. in serious political news. Otherwise, I am afraid that within journalism research we will reconstruct a well-known dualism (see Gray 2001): on the one hand the 'public knowledge project', dealing with serious news based on the informational model, and on the other hand the 'popular culture project', dealing with tabloids, talkshows and factual entertainment based on a symbolic and ritual view of communication using a cultural studies approach.

The Swedish communication researcher Mats Ekström (2000) distinguishes between three modes of communication in journalism: information, storytelling and attraction. With these three terms he tries to avoid the duality of information and entertainment. This distinction would appear to be useful for textual analysis; for in journalistic texts

we find forms of informing, storytelling and attracting. But these textual modes cannot be directly transferred to modes of reception. Texts written in the informational mode can be read as tales.

Thus, I would like to start with five assumptions of current TV journalism and journalism research:

- I. *Entertainment is and has always been a central and integral function of journalism* (Klaus 1996, Klaus/Lünenborg 2000). The popularity of journalism cannot be understood without being aware that, in order to reach an audience, it is necessary to entertain it (the word for 'entertainment' in German means not just pleasure but also a reason for conversation). What constitutes entertainment is ultimately defined by the audience. Therefore, I have adopted a definition by Ursula Dehm (1984), who says that entertainment is a specific function of the text which is constructed by the viewer in the process of media reception and sense-making. Based on this definition, the unproductive antagonism of information and entertainment is no longer necessary or useful.
- II. *Narration is a key concept which makes a text entertaining.* Or, as Peter Dahlgren (1992: p. 14) has put it: "Storytelling (...) is a key link which unites journalism and popular culture." In my view narration is not only to be defined as a textual characteristic but also as a specific form of reception. The text contains narratives and thus offers the audience opportunities of identifying with the protagonists. At the same time these narratives, which might be incomplete or contradictory, can be decoded as stories that will become part of the recipients' everyday experience.
- III. *The distinction between fact and fiction is no longer useful in marking journalism off from other forms of media production.* Especially in TV journalism we are aware of processes of hybridisation and loss of differentiation. New genres crossing the border between fact and fiction have been established. It depends on our (theoretical) point of view whether we call it journalism or fictional media production (Klaus/Lünenborg 2002). New terms like "factual

entertainment" (Brunsdon *et al.* 2001) or "factual television" (Dovey 2000) reflect this new insecurity.

- IV. Traditional research into journalism, based as it is on the information-transmission model, describes these developments necessarily as the decline of TV journalism, as the lowering of standards. From the audience's perspective it is not possible to make such a general judgment. We need to go into detail, and ask what journalism – as a part of popular culture – can do for society. *If journalism informs with entertainment and entertains with information, we must ask what kind of interpretation of social reality TV journalism offers that uses staged scenes as well as observation, fact as well as fiction?* In order to answer these questions we need an analysis of journalism firmly rooted in a cultural context.
- V. Constructivist media researchers will probably not find anything fundamentally new in these ideas. If you agree that every word, every symbol, every picture is a culturally based construct, the blurring of the border between fact and fiction is not threatening. This means conversely that, although naive realism is not the 'state of the art' in journalism research, *current developments as described above threaten the idea of journalism giving (objective) information about reality.*

2. New genres in TV journalism on the border between fact and fiction

In my view there are two significant trends in current TV development. On the one hand, reality is gaining increasing relevance in TV entertainment. On the other, journalism is using techniques of screenplay and staging drawn from fictional programmes. Along with what we call technical convergence, we can see a specific form of convergence of content. Documentaries, journalism, fiction and entertainment can no longer be separated from each other; and this has led to the creation of new mixed genres. In media research different terms are used to describe this development. We talk of "‘performative’ reality TV" (*performatives Realitätsfernsehen*, Angela Keppler 1994) to highlight the new concept of reality in TV entertainment. "Emotion TV" (*Affektfernsehen*, Bente/Fromm 1997) denotes daily chat and game shows – "genres that are not fictional, i.e. claiming to represent or even create reality". And

finally there is the term *reality TV*. This term should be something of a challenge for journalism researchers, especially as it is the declared aim of journalism to inform the public about reality. But instead of being jealous we can see resentment.

In German journalistic discourse *reality TV* is still just seen in its very early forms, showing video material about accidents, catastrophes and police in action. Though this form is not at all new—*Aktenzeichen XY*, the very first form of reality TV, started in German public television in 1967 – journalism researchers and professionals made very moral judgments about this kind of programme, seeing it as a further decline of serious journalism (Jonas/Neuberger 1996). But reality TV today means a lot more than *Emergency Call* or eyewitness videos: there are police and victim programmes like *Rescue* or *Cops*; there are docu-soaps like *Hotel* or *Wunschkind* [*Planned Families*]; and there are real-life soaps, reality shows and real-people shows like *Big Brother*.

3. Reality TV: how it arose and what significance it has for society

In a brief description of the format *reality TV* it is important to say that it deals with everyday experience. By making private affairs public, the genre offers the audience opportunities of making sense out of everyday life. It is not the expert, the politician or the journalist explaining who and what and where, but ‘ordinary people’. Bondebjerg (1996: p. 29) describes this effect as

“the democratization of an old public service discourse, dominated by experts and a very official kind of talk, and the creation of a new mixed public sphere, where common knowledge and everyday experience play a much larger role”.

If, following Beck (1996) and Giddens (1996), we analyse society as ‘reflexive modernity’, it is necessary for the individual to create identity and to build up a sense of purpose by being able to cope with different roles. The media are becoming more and more important in offering some of these possible roles. The increasing relevance of everyday issues in the media reflects a decreasing relevance of official institutions (e.g. the family, the church or political parties). As long as these institutions are no longer able to represent meaningful structures, individual behaviour becomes more and more important, both socially and politically. This is the place where everyone has to do his or her own sense-making. In this process reality TV offers opportunities of orientation. The specific potential is to be found in the discourse of privacy and intimacy. Therefore,

reality TV is part of a very basic transformation in which television is casting off its former public character and changing to a more private discourse.

This transformation signifies a shift towards social, cultural, generation and gender-specific discourses (Bondebjerg 2002: p. 163). These discourses are mixed with journalistic and expert discourses. The result of this mixture has been described as “bottom-up journalistic discourses from below, or based on a stronger populist notion of the expert, the elite and the ordinary citizen” (ibid). Seen in this light, reality TV is part of a democratisation of television on several levels: the *issues/topics* are closer to everyday experience, the *people talking* are not only representatives of elite groups and the *language* is becoming less formal. Brunson *et al.* (2001: p. 33) describe what they call ‘factual entertainment’ as a “hybridization of categories, genres and modes which is suggestive in relation to questions of public service broadcasting, citizenship and the definition of the public sphere”.

In order to analyse the different forms of reality TV more systematically, it is necessary to get away from the normatively and morally founded discourse that has hitherto dominated the German discussion. Instead, Bondebjerg offers a different view which looks at the documentary quality of the images in the different forms of reality TV. He does not see any *fundamental* distinction between traditions of journalism and documentaries on the one hand and reality TV on the other. He distinguishes four forms of documentary as the basis for different forms of reality TV (see Table 1).

Systematic distinction of documentary forms

Documentary forms	characteristics	TV format
Investigative and journalistic documentary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☞☞ Linear structure ☞☞ More arguing than story-telling (at least diegetic narration) ☞☞ Authoritative voice of journalistic discourse by off-speaker 	Reality Magazine
Observational documentary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☞☞ Episodic, impressionistic and mosaic structure ☞☞ Mimetic Narration ☞☞ Chronological or thematic montage 	Docu-Soap
Reflexive-poetic documentary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☞☞ Style and form in a very subjective form often dominate content 	No TV Format Film Documentary
Dramatized documentary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☞☞ Based on authentic cases ☞☞ Enacted by professional actors ☞☞ Semi-fictional ☞☞,extreme case of fictional realism‘ 	Docu-Drama (e.g. Breloer) TV Drama
Reality Show (Real-Life Show / Real-People Show) as a Hybrid-Genre of Talk Show, Game Show, Soap and Docu-Soap		

Based on Bondebjerg 2002

4. *The docu-soap – “A bastard union of several forms”*

The term 'docu-soap' already suggests its hybrid character. With regard to its format, it can be described as a documentary narrative in serial form. The mixture of documentary as a specific quality of public broadcasting services and the narrative style of soap operas makes this genre “the emblematic hard/soft genre, combining the factual/realist mode of documentary with the privileging of the private, personal narrative of soap opera” (Brunsdon et al. 2001: p. 33).

Real people relating to each other in their work or leisure activities, or chosen because of a specific activity, are observed by the camera over a certain period of time. Their individual development and their personal experience in a specific social context are the focus of the series. The underlying story is usually of more general interest like growing up or starting work – or something very general such as life and death, as in hospital series. It is striking that the very early docu-soaps chose characters from the lower middle class, both in Britain as well as in Germany. Women form the majority of the main characters – a first sign of the gendered structure of the genre. A fixed set of characters and a normally closed structure of time and place are necessary to use the staging strategies of the soap opera. Personalisation, intimisation and emotionalisation are important narrative techniques. There is a story-line connecting the whole series. Besides, there are closed plots in each episode .. 'Cliffhangers' are used to draw attention to the next episode. Narrative depth is created by picking up different story-lines and intertwining them like a plait in a girl's hair.

In the daily TV programme structure docu-soaps bridge the gap between daytime fictional soaps and prime-time factual programmes (Ruoff 2002), at least in the case of the United States and Britain. If we look at Germany and France, the Franco-German cultural channel ARTE is the main producer of docu-soaps. The broadcasting time of docu-soaps (8.15 - 8.45 p.m.) helps to synchronise the start of TV prime time. Docu-soaps, therefore, make a symbolic contribution to the synchronisation of these two different television cultures.

Although docu-soaps boomed during the 1990s, they had begun to appear much earlier. The very first docu-soaps (although the term did not exist at that time) were produced by public broadcasting stations in the 1970s. *The American Family* (1973, PBS) in the

USA and *The Family* (1974, BBC) in Great Britain observed the lives of ‘ordinary families’ (Ruoff 2002). In Germany *Die Fussbroichs* (1989-2002, WDR) was based on a similar concept, but was conceived as a long-running serial. Ruoff (2002) points out that in those days it could only have been public television that was able and willing to produce this kind of long-running observational documentary.

The docu-soaps of the 1990s built on these experiences and went a step further. Several social and technical preconditions were necessary before this genre could be established:

Technical prerequisites:

1. The fondest dream of the video movement – to shoot as much footage as you liked as the film material itself was no longer expensive – had become reality. The observing camera, the ‘fly on the wall’ camera, was no longer a question of money and could be used in low-budget projects as well.
2. The digitalised hand-held camera enabled film-makers to observe intimate situations and react to events and happenings quickly and flexibly. As a rule, a two-person team (camera and sound/direction) – in extreme cases even a one-man or a one-woman team – did the work. Sound, which is very important for docu-soaps, was created by separate sound sources for each protagonist (by MDs and pin-on microphones), guaranteeing an intimate and direct sound that is extensively used to avoid 'off-text' explanations.

Social prerequisites:

3. The visual documentation of private affairs had become normal because of the widespread use of video cameras and web cameras. In their social function, private amateur videos and webcams are a kind of forerunner of docu-soaps. In more general terms, the blurring of the border-line between private and public in media discourse as well as in social discourse has been a necessary precondition in establishing docu-soaps as a successful genre.

Economic prerequisites:

4. Hachmeister (1999) talks of a “new economy of documentaries” (*neue Ökonomie des Dokumentarischen*), a “global non-fiction industry with ever increasing turnover”. After a long period of time, during which documentaries were just a niche product, they have attracted the attention of global marketing interests. As far as I can see, in

the case of docu-soaps this does not mean a direct transnational utilization of the same product. Stories and narrative structure seem to be culturally grounded in national and language structures. But what we do see is an exportation of concepts, ideas and formats, which need to be culturally adapted to the country that imports them.

Media prerequisites:

5 At the audience level

Changing audience habits require new forms of documentaries. There is hardly a place any longer on TV for the 120-minute documentary. If TV is now seen as a serial medium – with viewing strongly structured by ritualised everyday routine – the documentary needs to find formats and rhythms suited to these routines. The serial documentary narrative is one of these.

6 At the product level:

The “breakdown of fixed distinctions between reality and spectacle, public and private, serial narratives and non-fiction film and television” (Ruoff 1998: pp. 288-89) has resulted in the establishment of this new genre. The “bastard union of several forms”, the “emblematic hard/soft genre” is a prototype of the new domain without the familiar boundaries. For public broadcasting this provides the opportunity of using its specific competence in documentary work and finding new ways of presentation which take into consideration the changed structure and interests of the audience.

While we can observe the BBC – the mother of this genre – engaging self-ironically with the idea of ‘soap’ and the entertaining character of this genre, other public broadcasting stations seem to be afraid of the “smell of soap”. In public television in Germany as well as in Denmark the terms ‘documentary series’ or ‘everyday drama’ tend to be used instead of docu-soap. Only ARTE, the Franco-German cultural channel, continues to use the name ‘docu-soap’. They could also choose the French term ‘feuilleton documentaire’, which has no taste of soap at all. As shown below, this fear of taking popular culture for granted as a part of public broadcasting is a direct reaction to the media discourse on this genre.

5. Media discourse on docu-soaps

I would like to go into the question of how docu-soaps are covered in the German press. The central issue is how journalists – especially those of the arts and the media pages as well as of media journals – report on the blurring of boundaries in journalism. What kind of discourses do they create and construct? The analysis is based on German national papers (along with the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*), news magazines and media journals dealing with docu-soaps from 1998 until today. The peak of reports was in the period 1999 - 2000, especially reporting in more general terms on the genre, and its particularity lies in that period. The analysis gives an example of the journalistic discourse on a genre located outside the mode of information.

I would like to focus on three types of discourse:

- 1) “The smell of soap” – dealing with the entertaining
- 2) “Real life like it is” – the claim of authenticity
- 3) Good docus and bad soaps – docu-soaps in public and private broadcasting

5.1 “The smell of soap” – dealing with the entertaining

Bondebjerg (2002) and Brunson *et al.* (2001) focused on the social, cultural and gendered discourse in docu-soaps. The following quotation shows the way this discourse is focused in media reporting:

When corpulent women groan and squeak like the Teletubbies for hours on end, this normally constitutes the offence of disturbing the peace or – if you happen to have tuned into RTL2 late at night – that of wilfully encouraging bad taste. However, if the fat ladies groan on public stations, then it is quite possible that the programme is not showered with complaints but with awards. At least that is what happened to the rather dreary docu-soap *On a Diet in Essen* on WDR television. (Hans Hoff in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 27.3.2000)

This is how the journalist Hans Hoff, writing in the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, contributes to the gendered discourse. The derision he pours on the four women talking about their attempts to lose weight is fundamental. Serious men – and journalists belong to this group – are not interested in such things. The media researcher Peter Winterhoff-Spurk (2000) has criticised the “disgust for trivia” (Ekel vor dem Leichten) in German media research dealing with everyday phenomena. The number of such comments shows that

this disgust is a central stereotype in journalistic reporting. In the *Frankfurter Rundschau* the author uses even more dramatic images:

A ghost is haunting German television, the ghost of docu-soap. Every vet, baker or male nurse is a potential protagonist of a story written by life. (Manfred Riepe in *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 11.6.1999)

People who are not afraid of the ghost are given more details: the “bastard between documentary and soap opera” has the “smell of soap”. There are lots of articles which turn their noses up at the soap part of docu-soaps. Therefore, the strategy of avoiding the term employed by public broadcasting stations seems to be a direct reaction to this media coverage.

The polarisation between light entertainment on the one hand and enlightening information on the other is a fundamental structure of those reports dealing with the genre in a more basic manner. The observation of everyday life, which is one of the key elements of docu-soaps, is normally seen to be ‘light’ and not ‘enlightening’. The contempt and malice revealed in some articles (cf. Hoff in the *SZ*) shows the disrespect of journalists towards different social milieus. As an example I would cite a report on *Die Fussbroichs*, a very early German docu-soap. The news magazine *Focus* quotes Annemie Fussbroich: “Having nice holidays, driving a smart car – that’s it.” The main character has to be shown as a rather simple person, merely interested in consuming – that’s it. While some critics praise the respect for the characters as an attribute of the genre, others destroy it with their criticism.

5.2 “Real life like it is “ – the claim of authenticity

The central discourse in the articles analysed here is concerned with terms like ‘authenticity’, ‘staging’ and ‘credibility’. The articles discuss such questions as: "Does the docu-soap genre present statements about reality?"; "Does it present credible statements for the audience?"; and "To what extent does the docu-soap work with staging (which might be not obvious to the audience)?"

“Real life like it is,” in the words of director Jan Peter; “Close-ups of reality,” says ZDF television's editor-in-chief, Klaus Bresser; “unfalsified, true-life reality” as ZDF's deputy editor-in-chief, Helmut Reitze, puts it – these simple but impressive statements from senior public television figures declare their claims of authenticity. But, of course,

they are talking nonsense. The journalist Jan Müller, writing in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, is right when he says, “It’s a well-known fact in media theory that the camera changes the behaviour of the characters”. Therefore, he argues, the metaphor of the ‘fly-on-the-wall camera’ is wrong. The camera never just observes; it always makes a difference.

This critical remark on the effect of the camera applies to every TV product. As far as the docu-soap is concerned, we must ask more specifically what is done after shooting and what is done before. Most of the story-telling work is done in post-production. Out of hundreds of hours of video material plots are constructed and story-lines developed. This might happen in journalistic work as well, though normally not to this extent. The critical point, ultimately, is whether scenes are staged, whether things happen just because there is a camera team present and whether they would not have happened otherwise. In Great Britain a fundamental discussion on the genre has been inspired by this question. In Germany it is mostly public television which insists on ‘authenticity’, while private stations like RTL informs viewers that some of the scenes have been staged.

While on the arts pages we find very sophisticated reporting on these issues, based on a critical discussion of film theory (especially with regard to documentaries and the relationship between reality and film), the media pages or TV critics' reviews deal with quite simple links between film, reality and audience. The journalist Hanns-Georg Rodek wrote in *Die Welt* (8.12.1998):

The latest projects confirm that it is not a matter of recording life as it is. It is a matter of throwing optical food to a greedy audience no longer content with stories that are invented.

The audience is seen as some kind of immoral criminal. On the other hand, the same author describes the audience as a passive congregation in need of protection:

[The docu-soap genre] reconciles such irreconcilable extremes as documentaries and soap operas to form a TV pineapple. If pictures are the genes of television, then this is genetic manipulation without any labelling for the consumer. (ibid.)

Media research on the genre competence of teenagers watching talkshows reveals, for example, that they are quite able to cope with different genres and distinguish between media images and reality. Nevertheless, the stereotype of a helpless audience that needs to be protected from media influence is still alive in reporting.

5.3 Good docus and bad soaps – docu-soaps in public and private broadcasting

Peter Dahlgren has pointed out that agreeing with the ideas of textual openness and the interpretive freedom of the audience raises profound problems for journalism.

Not only can people make different sense of journalistic texts and use them for a variety of purposes, but the meaning of the texts themselves cannot be assumed to be ‘stable’. In effect, the central distinctions between journalism and non-journalism, or good journalism and bad journalism – the boundaries so characteristic of journalism’s self-legitimizing discourses – become fluid. (Dahlgren 1992: p. 14)

Media discourse on docu-soaps exemplifies these difficulties. What is the docu-soap to be compared with? Has it to be a form of investigative reporting? Has it to be a newsworthy documentary? Has it to be an entertaining story? Has it to be a sensitive observation? All the questions might be answered in the affirmative, but nothing is obligatory. It will be part of my research to analyse the way in which the audience interprets these different possibilities and decides on the quality of the genre.

At the moment we can see how journalists deal with the ‘fluid distinction’ between good and bad. In media coverage we can see a fundamental distinction between docu-soaps in public and in private television. This distinction corresponds to an evaluation of good (i.e. precise, analytic) documentaries broadcast on public television and bad (i.e. shallow, trivial, voyeuristic) soaps broadcast on commercial TV. This dichotomy is first and foremost based on the choice of topics. Commercial TV chooses stories dealing with crime, violence or some form of sex; public TV docu-soaps tell stories of ‘relevance’ – about unemployment, working conditions or racial conflicts. But of course this is just a cliché; there are many examples which do not fit into this pattern. The docu-soaps “Geburtsstation” [Maternity Ward] (ARTE, SFB), “Abnehmen in Essen” [On a Diet in Essen] (ARTE, WDR), “OP- Schicksale im Klinikum” [OP – People in Hospital] (ZDF) are examples of ‘trivial’ issues in public TV docu-soaps. Although some were very successful in terms of audience ratings and TV awards, they had no chance among TV critics. Too much soap is not allowed in serious public television. As far as I can see, the cliché has not been shaken by any examples to the contrary, i.e. private TV stations producing docu-soaps dealing with ‘relevant’, ‘serious’ issues.

But when we see exceptions to this fundamental dichotomy between ‘serious public TV docus’ and ‘trivial private TV soaps’, we need to go further into the details of quality in the new docu-soap genre. “Wunsch Kinder” [Planned Families] (ZDF 2001) is observing five couples on their way to becoming parents by in-vitro fertilisation. Here, the focus is not on the medical, technical or moral aspects of the issue but on the very personal and intimate spheres of the people accompanied by the film team. The news magazine *Der Spiegel* applauds this intimacy on public TV:

The strength of this exciting film lies in the fact that, although the people observed talk quite openly in front of the camera, they are never exposed to ridicule, and that the stories do not only tell of happy endings. (Marianne Wellershoff in *Der Spiegel* 47, 2001, p. 74)

6. *Resumé*

Docu-soaps represent a quite recent form of audio-visual engagement with reality. Based on forms of documentary observation, the genre uses modes of staging and story-telling known from fictional series, especially soap operas. The genre started with public TV stations using their knowledge and tradition of different forms of documentary television and transforming these into serial narratives in order to adjust to changing audience habits. The documentary narrative can therefore be seen as a part of the story-telling mode of journalism, using in addition performative elements belonging to the attraction mode of communication (Ekström). These forms of narration and performance are key prerequisites in giving journalistic media texts an entertaining quality. The function of the genre to entertain the audience, revealed in the ‘soap’ part of soap-opera, seems to present a problem for (German) public TV stations. The trend of renaming ‘docu-soaps’ and calling them ‘docu-series’ indicates this ambiguity. It is media discourse on this genre which has supported this trend. The dichotomy between serious reporting on public TV and trivial stories on commercial TV continues to exist in the discussion on the genre in the German press. Journalists reporting on a genre crossing the border between information and entertainment, fact and fiction, the popular and the serious try to reconstruct these borders by referring to old dichotomies. Whether this is an adequate way to describe new forms of popular television is a question which will be answered by the audience. During the process of viewing it is the audience that will decide whether it is worthwhile to go on watching, whether it is

convincing enough to be credible and whether it is relevant enough to be of significance for their everyday lives.

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