

## ТЕОРІЯ І ПРАКТИКА СОЦІАЛЬНИХ КОМУНІКАЦІЙ

УДК 007:304:001

DOI:<http://dx.doi.org/10.30970/trj.2020.19.2949>

### BBC DOCUMENTARIES: PROS&CONS (RESEARCHERS' OPINION)

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In the following article author justifies why our Ukrainian media society needs to start analyzing BBC's experience of documentary making and who has already studied the topic. In many ways, this scientific work is a historiography of British Broadcasting Corporation's documentaries and their peculiarities, which are observed from Ukrainian point of view.

*Key words:* media, documentary, BBC, war, terrorism, environmental issues, IRA, cinema.

**Formulation of the problem.** Documentaries are chronicles of modern society. They are footprints for future generations. They are Bayeux Tapestry\* which is going to tell the truth (?) to our posterity. Therefore we must know how to use this tool not to misguide future generations. The task becomes even more difficult in times of post-truth and hybrid wars. So I really believe that documentaries should be a subject for thorough study. We have too powerful tool, even weapon in some cases, in hands not to know how it works. And before starting our own research we have to understand what has been already spoken about documentaries in the scientific society, not to reinvent a bike. But, of course, it will not be very wise to research everything concerning documentary. We have to concentrate on something peculiar and, of course, useful. And taking into account that British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) is a symbol of journalism, an authority around the world, why us, Ukrainians, people who need to tell the truth in the form of documentaries so badly, do not start scrupulous investigation from researching BBC experience, BBC stylistic, BBC methodology, principals in the context of BBC documentaries. So, logically, while considering everything said above, we must start looking through British Broadcasting Corporation documentaries without a delay.

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\* The Bayeux Tapestry is an embroidered cloth nearly 70 metres (230 ft) long and 50 centimetres (20 in) tall, which depicts the events leading up to the Norman conquest of England concerning William, Duke of Normandy, and Harold, Earl of Wessex, later King of England, and culminating in the Battle of Hastings.

**Difficulties in historiography.** It is always very responsible task to be the first or one of the first who researches this or that topic. And it is a difficult research, because you cannot count on previous exploration, on a reliable base made by reliable scientists. And while exploring BBC documentaries I feel similar emotions, similar fears. Documentary is a research itself and obviously there are not many researches of the research. So, you have to count mostly on your opinion. On the other hand, being the first or almost the first one who dives into the depth of a topic, means you cannot corrupt your views with the views of somebody else. And in the end of this part of my article I would like also to stress that I cannot obviously claim to be the pioneer of the BBC research. There are works that we need to know, we need to analyze before taking honor and responsibility to shoot a documentary. And my article is dedicated to these works. My article is dedicated to the historiography of investigation of BBC documentaries.

**The purpose of the article.** This scientific work aims to systematize all the knowledge concerning BBC documentaries to help Ukrainian specialists find some new ways, strategies of dealing with local difficulties with the form of documentary films. In other words, the purpose of the article is to make a general historiography which will cover researches of BBC documentaries.

**Methodological part of the research.** Before writing the research I had made a decent preparation which is a basement for my conclusions. I believe, that all scientific works, and this one is not an exception, should be grounded on *analysis and synthesis*. There is another pair of powerful researcher's tools – *induction and deduction* – which I used while preparing to the very research. Also *method of using expert's opinions* is one of the core for this and similar historiographies. In addition, I used *abstraction method* to made some general conclusions which were done with the help of real media cases, *structural and functional approach, axiological approach, system-genetic approach, information approach, cognitive approach, method of analogy and simulation, reductionism, socio-cultural approach and philosophical methodology*.

**Main part of the research.** To begin with, you do not have to imagine different rules, principals of British Broadcasting Corporation if there are some, written by BBC creators. According to the BBC website, «*the key words you should think about when developing content for us are timeliness, scale and ambition*», BBC wants «*documentary series that matter now and tell the stories that impact people's lives today*»<sup>1</sup>.

Yes, I have told about the importance of the influence on the future generations, but we live here and now, so I agree that really good documentary should make a difference here and now.

There is a research by post-doctoral researcher Darío Fernández-Bellon with the title *Do David Attenborough documentaries help the natural world? New research gives cause for hope*.<sup>2</sup> And the idea of this research is to find out whether documentaries of one of the greatest BBC directors really impact people lives today. Investigation made by Fernández-

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<sup>1</sup> BBC, «Documentary commissioning»...

<sup>2</sup> Fernández-Bellon, D., «Do David Attenborough documentaries help the natural world?»...

Bellon «analysed data from Twitter and Wikipedia to understand how people behave after watching nature documentaries»<sup>3</sup> During the research we find out that, for instance, «*Planet Earth II* barely mentioned environmental issues – only 6 % of the script was dedicated to topics like climate change, and audiences reacted accordingly. Analysing 30,000 tweets with the hashtag #PlanetEarth2 that were posted during episode broadcasts, we saw that only 1 % mentioned topics such as species extinction or other environmental issues».<sup>4</sup> There is a similar correlation between a broadcasting of *Planet Earth II* and Wikipedia visiting: «almost half of the *Planet Earth II* species registered annual peaks in visits to their Wikipedia pages immediately after the show was broadcast... the species that got the most airtime also got the most visits on Wikipedia».<sup>5</sup> According to the investigation, some animals after the program even received their pages on Wikipedia. Such an interest to the environment, obviously, can be treated as a difference that documentaries ought to bring about. What is more, Fernández-Bellon's investigation comes to a very important conclusion: «the documentary appeared to be as effective in generating interest and awareness as targeted conservation campaigns».<sup>6</sup> After all, the quintessence of the analyzed article is in the following quotation: «Documentaries can help raise interest and awareness in nature, helping connect increasingly urbanised societies to the natural world. There is scope for these shows to do more though. Even super-productions like *Planet Earth II*, *Our Planet* or *Seven Worlds, One Planet* can help conservation efforts. Simply by giving more screen time to threatened species, they can help raise public awareness and engagement».<sup>7</sup>

So, we can derive from the summary that if we include right messages in our documentary, if we stress on the most important information while writing a script, we may expect a proper reaction from the audience. But, of course, it is not that easy, and, to be honest, despite crucial importance of right accents, messages and a proper script, making of successful documentary is a process which requires a lot of other components of a good quality. And these components were analyzed by other scholars, whom I am going to introduce to this historiography. But, for the time being, we have to conclude that BBC directors work with good scripts which contain useful and understandable messages and, as a result, they provoke audience's reaction.

Obviously, we need films about environment, we need a proper reaction from the audience, but, while living in contemporary Ukraine, we, of course, feel the need of right historical, political, socially oriented movies. And because of the fact that we exist in the paradigm of hybrid war, the task for Ukrainian filmmakers, journalists is certainly difficult. The difficulty of the task is perfectly illustrated with the help of the following quotation: «*One of the reasons why terrorism is such a virulent poison is that the cure can damage society as*

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<sup>3</sup> Fernández-Bellon, D., «Do David Attenborough documentaries help the natural world?»...

<sup>4</sup> Fernández-Bellon, D., «Do David Attenborough documentaries help the natural world?»...

<sup>5</sup> Fernández-Bellon, D., «Do David Attenborough documentaries help the natural world?»...

<sup>6</sup> Fernández-Bellon, D., «Do David Attenborough documentaries help the natural world?»...

<sup>7</sup> Fernández-Bellon, D., «Do David Attenborough documentaries help the natural world?»...

*much as the disease can.»*<sup>8</sup> Personally, I think that it would be useful to use experience of some foreign documentaries creators and find out how they dealt or deal with the notion of post-truth, with the notion of separatism, terrorism and so on and so forth. BBC, I guess, for Ukrainian journalism, is a great example of media, which has been dealing with the problems of terrorism and separatism for decades. Because, we remember that the worldwide symbol of journalism works for country (and here, obviously, I mean people) which suffers from, to begin with, IRA\* problem.

A great research about cases where BBC used very good strategy to show people the situation with terrorism in the country and cases where Broadcasting Corporation failed to do so was done by John David Viera – *Terrorism at the BBC: the IRA on British television.*<sup>9</sup> Also this investigation includes almost all-encompassing history around North Ireland conflict. And, what is peculiar, the author talks about this opposition in the context of media coverage. Viera starts with the, probably, most important and controversial question: *«how to cover terrorism without advancing terrorism's goals».*<sup>10</sup> Then the author jumps in his article to the point of, maybe, the most challenging part of BBC's IRA coverage. British Broadcasting Corporation decided to show a documentary about IRA with an interview with McGuinness (the leader of the movement). But very soon, after political pressure from Thatcher's government, BBC's Board of Governors prohibited the documentary. This resulted into the revelation that MI5 had been approving hiring and firing in BBC for years. Soon after the prohibition, management of BBC, who disapprove the decision of governors of BBC, conclude an agreement to strike. This strike made the board of governors change their ban for later screening of the film with some alterations. *«Almost two month later, on October 16, 1986, the controversy over At the Edge of the Union ended with the film was broadcast unchanged, except for the addition of 19 seconds of archival footage of victims of IRA bombing on Belfast.»*<sup>11</sup> Such strong position and, on the other hand, ability to compromise for the benefit of society, I think, deserve a scrupulous analysis from our journalists and filmmakers.

What I also want to add from myself, in the periods of terrorism, war, especially, hybrid war, we, journalists, ought to rethink some familiar to us standards of journalism. Let's, for instance, remember the words of Margaret Thatcher: *«we must try to find ways to starve the terrorist and the hijacker of the oxygen of publicity on which they depend»*<sup>12</sup> I believe that the work of journalists is a little bit more complicated than just to show and tell everything what we see or hear. One of the trickiest thing is not to let us be just a part of somebody's game, not to let us be just a player who plays, but do not know the rules of a game.

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<sup>8</sup> Viera, J. D. (1988) «Terrorism at the BBC: the IRA on British television», *Journal of Film and Video*, Vol. 40, No. 4... p. 31.

\* The Irish Republican Army (IRA) is a name used by various paramilitary organisations in Ireland throughout the 20th and the 21st century. The political movement is dedicated to Irish republicanism, the belief that all of Ireland should be an independent republic free from British rule [Wikipedia].

<sup>9</sup> Viera, J. D. (1988) «Terrorism at the BBC: the IRA on British television», ... p. 28.

<sup>10</sup> Viera, J. D. (1988) «Terrorism at the BBC: the IRA on British television», ... p. 28.

<sup>11</sup> Viera, J. D. (1988), «Terrorism at the BBC: the IRA on British television», ... p. 28.

<sup>12</sup> Viera, J. D. (1988), «Terrorism at the BBC: the IRA on British television», ...p. 29.

According to John David Viera, there are two camps of people: one suppose that media exposure legitimate terrorists, and fuel them, make them a real force to impact citizens; another camp believe that accessibility to media release that potential terroristic energy and terrorists do not need to declare themselves, their position with the help of bloodshed. I think there should be a decent balance. Documentaries should tell the truth, but with the help of the truthful words: «terrorism», «bandits», «mercenaries», etc. And, what is extremely important, media should not be a theatre, place for an entertainment, when we are talking about terroristic activity coverage. Society will not benefit from screening the scenes of violence; terrorists, I suppose, will. And, going back to the BBC topic, I think that the British Broadcasting Corporation is a good example of sticking to that balance which I have mentioned above. And the case of *At the Edge of the Union*, documentary with IRA leader, McGuinness, reinforce my suggestion.

But, also, John David Viera in his research voice his opinion that, still, «*a look at the BBC's internal controls concerning the coverage of terrorists reveals the BBC's lack of autonomy. In 1971, both BBC and ITV were forced to declare their loyalty to the government and eliminate the goal of impartiality. The government minister in charge of broadcasting told Parliament that equal coverage was no longer to be given to the other side. Both the BBC chairman and the head of ITV assured the Home Office that their organizations would uphold «the values and objectives of the society that they were there to serve».*<sup>13</sup> After all, I do not think that we should blame BBC, I do not believe it was a wrong choice. I cannot agree that equal representation is impartiality. Once, I wrote the whole essay dedicated to the problem of balance of thoughts. And, while talking about BBC's not equal representation of IRA issue, I cannot resist to quote my previous work: «*journalists mixed up word «balance» and «equal representation». They invite to their studios people from opposite camps and give them equal rights, equal time for expressing their points of view, their outlook. Well, says those journalists, we are following the rules – balance of thoughts, you know. But what is actually balance? Let's start from the opposite term. Disbalance is a notion of disequilibrium that is a threat to the existence of the system which is based on the equilibrium of its components. If we have on air messages which threat to the system of ideas of our society, to its equilibrium, these messages has nothing in common with balance... Nobody is surprised that we don't have murderers and rapists who have the same airtime as their victims have. Nobody is surprised that these murderers and rapists have no airtime for discussing their motivation for committing crime, after all, the details of its committing. It is not normal. So why should it be normal to dedicate airtime to rapists of Ukrainian idea».*<sup>14</sup> or some other ideas, moral values.

BBC's media coverage and their documentary production also was a subject of Liz Curtis' scientific work *British broadcasting and Ireland*.<sup>15</sup> Interesting ideas upon the topic we also

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<sup>13</sup> Viera, J. D. (1988) «Terrorism at the BBC: the IRA on British television», *Journal of Film and Video*, Vol. 40, No. 4... p. 32.

<sup>14</sup> Antonov, V. (2018), «Balance of thoughts and indifference in the context of information warfare», *TV and Radio journalism*, Issue 17...p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Curtis, L. (1986), «British broadcasting and Ireland», *Screen*, Vol. 27, Issue 2...

can find in the article *Terrorism in Britain: On the Limits of Free Expression*<sup>16</sup> by Jaehnig. And about the connection between BBC and MI5 there is an articles by David Leigh and Paul Lashmar *Revealed: How MI5 vets BBC staff*<sup>17</sup>, *THE BLACKLIST IN ROOM 105*<sup>18</sup>. Another great work is written by Philip Schlesinger, Graham Murdock, and Philip Elliott *TELEVISIONING TERRORISM: POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN POPULAR CULTURE*<sup>19</sup>.

And there is another, besides the script and ability to speak freely for greater good, another part, one of the most important part, that makes BBC documentaries so good and can potentially make our Ukrainian films more effective. BBC films are cinematic. In times when we used to blockbusters, big movies (now even indie movies has very professional and impressive video sequence) we expect from every kind of filmmakers' product great and again impressive quality, we expect drama, in a way, theatre. And British Broadcasting Corporation gives us these components. They invite Hans Zimmer to write soundtrack, they write script, like for drama, they try to be as cinematic as they can. Joss Fong and Dion Lee analyzed the way of developing BBC documentaries.<sup>20</sup> And Mike Gutton, the executive producer of *Planet Earth II* told them: «*I think you have to tell the stories from a dramatic perspective, and that means putting yourselves in the eyes, in the mind, in the world of the animals, and seeing what's at stake for them*».<sup>21</sup> But not only script plays an important role, director, cameramen with their vision, camera movement – everything should push a viewer as far as possible from boredom. This idea is supported by Chadden Hunter, producer of the «*Grasslands*» episode of *Planet Earth II*: «*now we're trying to compete with things like Game of Thrones or House of Cards. We really want to use every technique, from the image to the sound design to the storytelling, to really make that a really dramatic, emotional journey. ... When you're talking about something of the scale of Planet Earth II, the market that we're trying to reach — we're really taking wildlife almost into another genre*».<sup>22</sup>

But, I cannot resist to add, that, while trying to make documentaries cinematic, we are not allowed to make them feature films. To be more subjective, we must include into this article works that accused BBC in constant fakery. There is a very scrupulous research upon the topic by Robert Mendick and Edward Malnick *BBC accused of routine «fakery» in wildlife documentaries*.<sup>23</sup> Authors provide us with evidences that famous wildlife documentaries were shot partially on artificial sets. And when, sometimes, you have to do it, because you cannot show «the wildlife» from other perspective (in these rare cases you should warn your audience about the decision), I strongly believe, there are situations, when it is a dishonest

<sup>16</sup> Jaehnig, W., «Terrorism in Britain: On the Limits of Free Expression»...

<sup>17</sup> Leigh, D. & Lashmar, P. (1985), «Revealed: How MI5 vets BBC staff», *The Observer*...

<sup>18</sup> Leigh, D. & Lashmar, P. (1985), «THE BLACKLIST IN ROOM 105», *The Observer*...

<sup>19</sup> Schlesinger, P., Murdock, G. & Elliot, P. (1983), «TELEVISIONING TERRORISM: POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN POPULAR CULTURE», London: Comedia...

<sup>20</sup> Fong, J. & Lee, D (2017), «How the BBC makes wildlife films that look like Hollywood movies», *Vox*...

<sup>21</sup> Fong, J. & Lee, D (2017), «How the BBC makes wildlife films that look like Hollywood movies», *Vox*...

<sup>22</sup> Fong, J. & Lee, D. (2017), «How the BBC makes wildlife films that look like Hollywood movies», *Vox*...

<sup>23</sup> Mendick, R., Malnick, E. (2011), «BBC accused of routine 'fakery' in wildlife documentaries», *The Telegraph*...

way to shoot something on set and claim that it is a real, live shot. Well, the reason why we watch documentaries is because we want to know the truth about our unbelievably true world. So, while making a documentary do not take from people the happiness of being able to widen their horizon about the real universe, where we live. (*Interesting fact: according to BBC research, watching nature documentaries indeed can produce real happiness*).<sup>24</sup>

**Results of the research. Perspectives of the further researchers of the topic.** In the result, we justified the reason why we ought to study documentaries in the scientific paradigm. And that BBC documentaries are the right object for Ukrainian scholars to research. We need to create our Bayeux Tapestry and to do this we need to master our skills and analyze the experience of other media that have already created masterpieces. I admit that making documentaries in Ukrainian realities is very ambitious and, on the other hand, very difficult task. And this research, I believe, brought a little bit of light to these realities and on the basis of BBC we can build our own strategy how to deal with terrorists, separatists, war and other components which have to be included into our documentaries, our chronicles for future generations. In the end of this part, I am dare to claim that future more and more scrupulous researches will help us, Ukrainian filmmakers, understand how to create efficient products which will have great positive impact on our society.

**Summary.** To sum up, it is a difficult task to write a historiography of researches which concern some other researches. But still I have managed to find authors who researched BBC documentaries. There is a great work by Darío Fernández-Bellon with the title *Do David Attenborough documentaries help the natural world? New research gives cause for hope*.<sup>25</sup> about very fine impact of BBC environmental documentaries. Also I have mentioned authors who wrote about British Broadcasting Corporation's coverage of IRA problem. Of course, this separatists' movement is different from that we have in our country, first of all, because we are in war with another country – Russia Federation – which attacked us in 2014. But I believe that BBC's experience is very important for us to study. And the following authors have already written about the media problem of terrorism coverage: John David Viera (*Terrorism at the BBC*<sup>26</sup>), Liz Curtis (*British broadcasting and Ireland*<sup>27</sup>), Jaehnig (*Terrorism in Britain: On the Limits of Free Expression*<sup>28</sup>), David Leigh and Paul Lashmar (*Revealed: How MI5 vets BBC staff*<sup>29</sup>, *THE BLACKLIST IN ROOM 105*<sup>30</sup>), Schlesinger, Murdock, Elliott

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<sup>24</sup> Keltner, D., Bowman, R., & Richards, H., «EXPLORING THE EMOTIONAL STATE OF 'REAL HAPPINESS'. A STUDY INTO THE EFFECTS OF WATCHING NATURAL HISTORY TELEVISION CONTENT.»...

<sup>25</sup> Fernández-Bellon, D., «Do David Attenborough documentaries help the natural world? New research gives cause for hope»...

<sup>26</sup> Viera, J. D. (1988), «Terrorism at the BBC: the IRA on British television», *Journal of Film and Video*, Vol. 40, No. 4...

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<sup>30</sup> Leigh, D. & Lashmar, P. (1985), «THE BLACKLIST IN ROOM 105», *The Observer*...

(*TELEVISIONING TERRORISM: POLITICAL VIOLENCE IN POPULAR CULTURE*<sup>31</sup>). In addition, in my research I have studied works that analyze cinematic (even we may describe it as dramatic) aspect of modern documentaries, BBC documentaries. About this wrote Joss Fong and Dion Lee<sup>32</sup>, Robert Mendick, Edward Malnick (*BBC accused of routine 'fakery' in wildlife documentaries*<sup>33</sup>), etc.

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Стаття надійшла до редколегії 15.11.2019

Прийнята до друку 18.11.2019

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<sup>32</sup> Fong, J. & Lee, D (2017), «How the BBC makes wildlife films that look like Hollywood movies», *Vox*...

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УДК 007:304:001

## **ДОКУМЕНТАЛЬНІ ФІЛЬМИ Бі-Бі-Сі: ПЕРЕВАГИ ТА НЕДОЛІКИ (ДУМКИ ДОСЛІДНИКІВ)**

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У науковій статті досліджено історіографію документальних фільмів на Бі-Бі-Сі та аргументовано важливість вивчення та аналізу британського досвіду у фільммейкінгу для українського суспільства. Проведено прискіпливе дослідження британського документального кінематографа й у загальних рисах описані вже наявні дослідження з обраної теми. Зрештою, стаття результує у висновок, що матеріали Бі-Бі-Сі викликають реакцію у суспільства через добре прописані сценарії та кінематографічність. Остання особливість працює за правилами голлівудського художнього кіно. Щоправда, ця наукова робота також зазначає, що, часом, женучись за драматичністю, фільмовістю, британське телебачення знімає не надто документальні фільми. Та таке трапляється нечасто, тому, вважаю, що британське документальне кіно – приклад професійної роботи журналістів, фільммейкерів, дослідників. Їхнє кіно вміло порадється з викликами суспільства, що видно у тому, як Бі-Бі-Сі висвітлює проблему ІРА. У статті обґрунтовано, чому цей аспект мав би бути особливо цікавим українським дослідникам, науковцям, чия держава потерпає від воєнної та терористичної агресії з боку Російської Федерації. Ця робота є вкрай важливою на сьогодні, адже дає працівникам засобів масової інформації доступ до стратегії та моделей поведінки при створенні документальних фільмів, полегшує роботу в українських реаліях.

*Ключові слова:* ЗМІ, документальні фільми, Бі-Бі-Сі, війна, тероризм, ІРА, кіно.