

***Loose Change* and the emergence of the living documentary**

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Loose Change (Dylan Avery 2006), despite being a viciously controversial documentary, is an example of an innovative new feature on the cinematic landscape. It is a living documentary that can be adapted as the situation changes. This is demonstrated via the documentary's several versions, the response towards criticisms in the new versions, and the form of the criticisms themselves, which are often in the form of video themselves, as well as up to date as they react towards new forms of the documentary. According to their website Louder Than Words Productions have decided to release a final cut of the documentary for theaters. However, some consider this a mistake, as it will take away from the living documentary nature.

It has been said that one of the most powerful roles in filmmaking is not that of the director, the producer, or the writer, but that of the editor. Movies have been drastically changed in the editing room, either saving (*Annie Hall*) or ruining (*Blade Runner*) whatever comes across the editor's desk, and Dylan Avery's controversial documentary *Loose Change* is no different. Considering that Avery's documentary consists largely CGI recreations, footage from other sources, and shots of quotes and news stories, his film depends even more heavily on the ability to edit.

However, Dylan Avery was among the first to take advantage of an opportunity that previous filmmakers had not had. Unlike most feature length documentary filmmakers, his film has received no theatrical release, no any release over television nor through the education circuit. DVDs are available at the website, but the main delivery for the film has been online, via sites like YouTube and Google Video.

¹ Pat Regan, an undergraduate communication student at Trinity University, wrote this term paper in December 2006 for a course on documentary film. The course was taught by Professor Aaron Delwiche. Student papers are available online at <http://www.trinity.edu/adelwich/documentary/guides.html>

This has allowed Avery to do something new, exciting, and possibly unprecedented in filmmaking: hear criticism of his documentary and change it accordingly. Of course, it is next to impossible to prove that it is without precedent, but if it is with precedent, this is one of the most high profile examples of it. According to their website, they have released two versions of the film, a re-edit of the 2nd version, and have a 3rd version on the way. With each successive version and cut, some things are added and others are taken away, as new information is brought to light and new criticisms are brought against the filmmakers. It is similar to a non-fiction author adding new chapters to a paperback edition of a book, or a fictional filmmaker releasing a director's cut of their movie, but on a scale and speed that surpasses either.

According to an interview with Dylan Avery (available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3ZjJQWNQZog>), *Loose Change* started life as Dylan's attempt to make a fictional movie about him and his friends discovering that 9/11 was a government conspiracy and releasing it to the world. However, according to him, as he was doing research for the movie, he slowly began to believe that his fictional premise was correct, and he decided to make the documentary film *Loose Change* instead.

On April 13th, 2005, *Loose Change* was released "to a limited group of rabid fans" (Avery, 2006), after which it was "promoted on Phil Jayhan's website, Letsroll911.org". At some point during this, it was uploaded onto the internet and began to make the rounds as the latest internet meme, or information virus.

Memes have found particular prominence in the day of the internet. With the ability to "infect" almost anyone around the world, an idea can spread from one end of the world to another in a matter of days. When compared to, say, they days of the Roman Empire, when thoughts could only travel across distances at the speed the fastest horse could ride, the change is quite staggering. For a film like *Loose Change*, which would most likely have received no theatrical release under normal circumstances due to its extremely controversial material, it is a godsend, as it allows *Loose Change* to spread around the country (and technically, the world) by word of mouth alone in a matter of months alone.

According to the Internet Movie Database, the 2nd Edition of *Loose Change* was released in June of 2006 (unknown, 2006), while Wikipedia has it at

coming out in November 2005. Due to its virus style spread, an exact date is difficult to pin down without asking the producers directly (I attempted to contact them, but as of this writing have not heard back). The producers significantly changed the film, giving it a new introduction, according to the Loose Change website, as well as having a new conclusion which “[sums] up the film with the information that came out after the events.” (Avery, 2006)

Apparently among those changes that occurred was Dylan’s change in explanation for what happened to the now famous Flight 93. In the original version, Dylan maintains that Flight 93 was shot down by a military aircraft, while in the second edition, he reveals a much more elaborate story involving the plane landing at a Cleveland airport where everyone in the plane was ushered into a NASA research facility. Avery does not explain where they went from there, or what did crash in Pennsylvania, although he does intimate that the hole and the debris were a poorly made artificially created crash site.

Some speculate that Avery modified this film in response to a Popular Mechanics (2005) article devoted to debunking many of the claims of 9/11 Conspiracy Theorists in general. It gave special attention to the evidence used by some conspiracy theorists that United 93 was shot down by a military aircraft. The article in question was compiled by the editors (specifically Jim Meigs) from the accounts and reports of “over three hundred experts and organizations” (Editors, 2005). A list of what the article describes as the most helpful can be found here:

http://www.popularmechanics.com/technology/military_law/1227842.html?page=9.

According to the article, the main piece of evidence to the “United 93 Shot Down” theory is a statement by a Retired Colonel who claimed to know, personally, the man who shot down United 93, a Major Rick Gibney. Gibney was unwilling to comment on the subject, but Popular Mechanics spoke Ed Jacoby Jr, the director of the New York State Emergency Management Office, whom Gibney was transporting at the time.

The Popular Mechanics article would have come out very soon before the movie was released, most likely not early enough for the filmmakers to react to it. However, within the space of seven months, they had produced a film that omitted the possibly debunked material as well as assimilated whatever

evidence had been found that lead them to conclude that United 93 really landed at a Cleveland Airport.

In this way, *Loose Change* has become a feature-length example of what is happening with Youtube. Within the Youtube website, people may post videos and then post videos in response to other videos. However, on Youtube, this is only an option with shorter videos a maximum of ten minutes. With *Loose Change*, it has reached the scale of feature length films being able to respond to criticism as well as reinvent themselves in regards to new information, the way a political satirist might add more chapters to account for new events in politics.

Another example of a response to criticism is the first edition’s mention of a suspicious bump on the underside of one of the planes that hit the World Trade Center, which Dylan Avery asserts is proof that the planes were remote controlled. This was one of the things cited in an online critique of *Loose Change* on the blog “9-11 Research” by Dr. Michael B Green (Green, 2005).

Both Michael Green and the Popular Mechanics article assert that the strange bulge in question is, in fact, a common bulge on 767s where the landing gear is held during flight. Popular Mechanics asked an expert image analyst to identify the pod from a famous picture and came back with this answer: “After studying the high-resolution image and comparing it to photos of a Boeing 767-200ER’s undercarriage, Greeley dismissed the notion that the Howard photo reveals a “pod.” In fact, the photo reveals only the Boeing’s right fairing, a pronounced bulge that contains the landing gear”(Editors, 2005). In *Loose Change: Second Edition*, all reference to the pod was removed completely.

One of the noted criticisms of *Loose Change* was the extensive referencing of the collectively updated online encyclopedia Wikipedia. Most serious scholars and documentary filmmakers are unwilling to accept wikipedia as a valid source, as the content is provided entirely by users and can be altered by anyone. As Wikipedia itself states in the introduction to the site: “Wikipedia is an encyclopedia collaboratively written by many of its readers. It uses a special type of website, called a wiki, that makes collaboration easy. Lots of people are constantly improving Wikipedia, making thousands of changes an hour, all of which are recorded on article histories and recent changes. Inappropriate changes are usually removed quickly, and repeat offenders can be blocked from editing,” (unkown, 2006) One of the non-specific critiques often brought up against *Loose*

Change and *Loose Change: Second Edition*, is its frequent referencing of Wikipedia. One of the noticeable changes in *Loose Change: Second Edition: Recut* (released August 2006) was the removal of all references to Wikipedia, although no replacement reference was put in its place. This could be likened to a new edition of book making corrections of information now found out to be untrue.

This sort of instant response and critique is not merely limited to Dylan Avery's side. Extremely fast internet multi-media rebuttals have been found on the side of the *Loose Change* detractors. The most noticeable is found on the website Screw Loose Change, which links to a video of the same name which is an annotated version of *Loose Change* entitled *Screw Loose Change – Not Freakin' Again Edition*. The website, which takes the form of a blog, also links to other videos, including another video called *9/11 Deniers Speak*, an edited collection of appearances of Dylan Avery and others like him on various news shows, interviews, and public appearances, much in the same way *Loose Change* largely relies on news footage acquired from various news sources and other documentaries.

Of course, the Louder Than Words production company, led by Dylan Avery, does not solely operate on a reactionary basis towards criticism in regards to their production of *Loose Change*. If that had been the case, they would not have produced a *Loose Change: Second Edition*, or a re-cut. They would merely have taken the route often found in Youtube and created a video response, although that is a subjective judgment on my part.

More worth noting, though, is that they do not simply take out every single thing that is refuted by things such as the Popular Mechanics article or Michael Green and Screw Loose Change's blogs. They still have to build a case first and foremost beyond responding to criticism. The innovative nature of what Dylan Avery and *Loose Change* is doing is not that they are responding to criticism, as done on YouTube or in a blog (although Dylan Avery does keep a blog). Rather, they are revising their documentary based on new evidence and criticism, releasing a new "draft" of the documentary, as it were.

I would like, for a short while at the end of the end of the paper, to lose my scholarly objectivity for a moment and speak candidly. I do not like the film *Loose Change*. I disagree with many of the things in it, believe it uses flashy graphics and moody music to make up for a lack of credible sources and substance,

such as the infamous "building explosions" scene. Every time I see *Loose Change*, it loses even more credibility in my eyes.

As mentioned earlier in the paper, aside from the three versions of *Loose Change* that currently exist (*Loose Change*, *Loose Change: Second Edition*, *Loose Change: Second Edition Re-cut*), Dylan Avery and Louder Than Words Productions are currently in pre-production for a fourth version (Third Edition) of *Loose Change*, which their website states will be out in Spring of 2007. They plan to have the fourth version "be substantially different in content and presentation, but will remain true to the spirit that has put *Loose Change* where it is today" (Avery, 2006). The film will be entitled *Loose Change: Final Cut*, and will be the final version of *Loose Change*, according to the website.

In my opinion, releasing a final version, especially a final version meant for theatrical release, would be a grave mistake. The way *Loose Change* arranges its mes-en-scene and edits its content and music is extremely manipulative. Many of the claims of *Loose Change* are completely false and flat out ridiculous in some cases. However, the idea of *Loose Change*, the idea that of a documentary released over the internet and revised as criticisms are leveled or new information comes to light, I like. And I am of the opinion that releasing a "final version" stops this idea cold. While it might be argued that this might be considered a "final draft" of the film, I would argue that it changes the film from being a living text to a dead one.

The nature of a theatrical release would, in particular, have this effect. The nature of theatrical releases would prevent Louder Than Words from releasing another documentary, even if they did decide to break their self-imposed rule that this be the final release. Theaters would not accept a "revised" version of the film unless it came out shortly after the release, as they would not make any money off of it. Audiences would not pay to see a movie they thought they had already seen. And a new internet release would be felt as "cheap" next to a full scale theatrical release.

Loose Change, as controversial as it might be, as manipulative as some might consider it, is something new on the filmic landscape, and that cannot be ignored. It is the first popular living film text, subject to change and edit as the situation on which it is about changes. It is, in a sense, the first living documentary.

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