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Human Creativity vs. Artificial Intelligence in Documentary Storytelling

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Abstract

The rapid advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) is transforming documentary filmmaking, reshaping nearly every stage of production, from research and archival discovery to transcription, editing, visual restoration, and audience engagement. While AI-powered tools significantly improve efficiency, reduce production costs, and expand creative possibilities, they also raise fundamental questions about authorship, authenticity, ethics, and the irreplaceable role of human judgment. Documentary storytelling has traditionally relied on empathy, lived experience, editorial intuition, and ethical decision-making to construct truthful and emotionally resonant narratives. These qualities are difficult to replicate through algorithmic systems alone. This article examines the evolving relationship between human creativity and artificial intelligence in documentary storytelling through a qualitative literature review informed by the PRISMA 2020 reporting framework. Rather than framing AI as a replacement for filmmakers, it argues that AI functions most effectively as a collaborative creative assistant that augments human capabilities while leaving critical editorial decisions in human hands. The discussion explores AI's applications across documentary workflows, including pre-production research, automated transcription, metadata generation, archival organization, rough-cut assembly, translation, and visual enhancement, alongside its limitations in interpreting emotional nuance, cultural context, moral complexity, and narrative intention.

The article further addresses the ethical implications of AI-assisted documentary production, including concerns surrounding misinformation, deepfakes, algorithmic bias, transparency, copyright, and audience trust, grounded in a documented case study of AI voice reconstruction in the documentary *Roadrunner: A Film About Anthony Bourdain*. Drawing on contemporary developments in generative AI and documentary practice, it argues that the future of documentary filmmaking lies not in competition between humans and machines but in a collaborative model where AI enhances efficiency while human storytellers preserve authenticity, accountability, and creative vision. Ultimately, the enduring value of documentary cinema will continue to depend on the uniquely human capacity to understand lived experience, exercise ethical judgment, and tell stories that foster empathy and social understanding.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence, Documentary Filmmaking, Human Creativity, Deepfakes, Media Ethics, Human-Centered AI, Authenticity, Algorithmic Bias, Documentary Theory

1. Introduction

Documentary filmmaking has long been regarded as one of the most powerful forms of visual storytelling, distinguished by its commitment to representing reality, amplifying underrepresented voices, and fostering public understanding of complex social, political, and cultural issues. Unlike fictional narratives, documentaries are grounded in real events, lived experiences, and factual evidence, requiring filmmakers to make deliberate editorial choices that balance accuracy, ethics, and emotional resonance. The process extends beyond simply recording events; it involves interpreting reality through research, observation, interviews, archival materials, and narrative construction. Consequently, documentary storytelling has traditionally relied on distinctly human qualities such as empathy, intuition, cultural sensitivity, and ethical judgment.

In recent years, the emergence of artificial intelligence (AI) has begun to reshape this creative landscape. Advances in machine learning, computer vision, natural language processing, and generative AI have introduced tools capable of automating tasks that once demanded substantial time and labor. AI systems can now transcribe interviews, organize thousands of hours of

footage, identify faces and objects, restore archival images, translate dialogue into multiple languages, generate subtitles, recommend editing decisions, and even create synthetic images, voices, and video. These capabilities have significantly accelerated documentary workflows, enabling filmmakers to devote more time to creative decision-making while reducing production costs and expanding access to sophisticated post-production techniques.

Despite these technological advancements, the growing presence of AI raises important questions about the nature of creativity itself. Can algorithms genuinely contribute to storytelling, or do they merely automate technical processes? If AI can assemble a rough cut, identify emotionally compelling moments, or generate realistic visual content, where does authorship reside? More importantly, can a machine understand the ethical responsibilities inherent in documenting real people's lives, particularly when dealing with trauma, memory, identity, and historical truth? These questions have become increasingly urgent as generative AI technologies blur the boundaries between authentic documentation and synthetic media, a tension made concrete in 2021, when the documentary *Roadrunner: A Film About Anthony Bourdain* used AI voice-cloning technology to synthesize lines the late chef never recorded, prompting sustained debate among media ethicists about disclosure, consent, and audience trust (Coburn *et al.*, 2022; Fitch, 2022) [4, 6].

The debate surrounding AI in documentary filmmaking is often presented as a conflict between technological efficiency and human creativity. However, this binary perspective oversimplifies the relationship. Rather than replacing filmmakers, AI is increasingly functioning as a collaborative tool that augments human capabilities. While algorithms excel at processing large volumes of data, recognizing patterns, and automating repetitive tasks, they lack the lived experience, emotional intelligence, and moral reasoning required to interpret human stories responsibly. Documentary filmmaking is not merely a technical exercise in assembling images and sounds; it is an act of meaning-making that requires filmmakers to navigate ethical dilemmas, evaluate competing perspectives, and determine how stories should be represented with fairness and integrity.

This transformation arrives at a pivotal moment for the documentary industry. The explosion of digital content, the availability of vast archival collections, the demand for multilingual distribution, and the increasing volume of footage generated by modern productions have made AI-assisted workflows both practical and, in many cases, necessary. At the same time, concerns over misinformation, deepfakes, algorithmic bias, copyright, and audience trust underscore the need for responsible human oversight. Industry bodies have begun responding directly: the Archival Producers Alliance, representing more than 300 archival researchers and producers, has developed preliminary ethical guidelines for AI use in documentary production, and broadcasters such as the BBC have published editorial guidance stating that AI use must never undermine audience trust and requires effective, informed human oversight. The challenge is no longer whether AI should be incorporated into documentary production, but how it can be integrated without compromising the authenticity, credibility, and ethical foundations that define the genre.

This article explores the evolving relationship between human creativity and artificial intelligence in documentary

storytelling. It examines the ways AI is transforming documentary production across the stages of research, production, and post-production while critically evaluating its creative and ethical limitations. The discussion argues that AI should not be understood as a substitute for documentary filmmakers but as a powerful creative partner whose value depends on informed human guidance. Ultimately, the future of documentary storytelling lies in a collaborative model where technological innovation enhances efficiency, while human creativity remains central to shaping narratives that are truthful, meaningful, and ethically responsible.

2. Statement of the Problem

Artificial intelligence (AI) is rapidly transforming the documentary filmmaking process by automating tasks such as research, transcription, footage organization, archival restoration, translation, and even preliminary editing. These technological advancements have increased production efficiency, reduced costs, and enabled filmmakers to process large volumes of audiovisual material more effectively than ever before. As AI continues to evolve, its capabilities are extending beyond technical assistance into areas traditionally associated with creative decision-making, including story development, content generation, and audience personalization.

Despite these benefits, the integration of AI into documentary storytelling presents significant challenges. Documentary films are built upon principles of authenticity, factual representation, ethical responsibility, and human interpretation. While AI can analyze patterns, organize information, and generate content, it lacks the emotional intelligence, cultural awareness, lived experience, and moral judgment necessary to interpret complex human experiences responsibly. The increasing use of AI-generated media, including synthetic voices, manipulated images, and deepfake technologies, also raises concerns about misinformation, copyright infringement, editorial transparency, and the erosion of audience trust in documentary content.

Furthermore, there remains limited scholarly consensus regarding the appropriate balance between human creativity and artificial intelligence in documentary production. Existing research has largely focused on the technical capabilities of AI or its application within the broader film industry, while comparatively little attention has been given to its implications for documentary storytelling specifically, where ethical considerations and factual integrity are central. This gap has created uncertainty about the extent to which AI should participate in creative and editorial processes without compromising the authenticity that distinguishes documentaries from other forms of media.

The central problem, therefore, is determining how artificial intelligence can be integrated into documentary filmmaking in ways that enhance creative workflows without diminishing the essential human qualities that underpin compelling and ethical storytelling. Addressing this issue is increasingly important as AI technologies become more accessible and influential within the global media industry. A clearer understanding of the complementary roles of human creativity and artificial intelligence is needed to ensure that technological innovation supports, rather than undermines, the documentary filmmaker's responsibility to represent reality with accuracy, empathy, and integrity.

3. Research Questions

This study seeks to examine the relationship between human creativity and artificial intelligence in documentary storytelling. Specifically, it addresses the following research questions:

1. How is artificial intelligence transforming the documentary filmmaking process across the stages of pre-production, production, and post-production?
2. What aspects of documentary storytelling continue to rely on human creativity, intuition, and ethical judgment despite advances in AI?
3. What are the major benefits and limitations of using artificial intelligence in documentary storytelling?
4. What ethical challenges, including authenticity, bias, copyright, transparency, and audience trust, arise from the use of AI in documentary production?
5. How can filmmakers effectively integrate artificial intelligence into documentary workflows while preserving the authenticity, credibility, and emotional depth of documentary storytelling?
6. What collaborative model between human creativity and artificial intelligence best supports the future of documentary filmmaking?

4. Research Objectives

4.1. General Objective

The primary objective of this study is to examine the relationship between human creativity and artificial intelligence in documentary storytelling, with a focus on how AI is transforming documentary production while preserving the essential human elements of creativity, authenticity, and ethical responsibility.

4.2. Specific Objectives

The study seeks to:

1. Examine the role of artificial intelligence in documentary filmmaking across the stages of pre-production, production, and post-production.
2. Identify the contributions of human creativity, intuition, and ethical judgment to the documentary storytelling process.
3. Evaluate the benefits and limitations of artificial intelligence in enhancing documentary production and narrative development.
4. Analyze the ethical implications of AI in documentary filmmaking, including issues of authenticity, bias, copyright, transparency, and audience trust.
5. Explore strategies for integrating artificial intelligence into documentary workflows without compromising the integrity, credibility, and emotional depth of documentary storytelling.
6. Propose a collaborative framework in which human creativity and artificial intelligence complement one another to advance the future of documentary filmmaking.

5. Research Hypotheses

The study is guided by the following hypotheses:

5.1. Null Hypothesis (H₀)

There is no significant relationship between the use of artificial intelligence and the quality, authenticity, or effectiveness of documentary storytelling. Human creativity

does not significantly influence the outcomes of AI-assisted documentary production.

5.2. Alternative Hypothesis (H₁)

There is a significant relationship between the use of artificial intelligence and documentary storytelling. While artificial intelligence enhances efficiency and supports various stages of documentary production, human creativity remains essential for ensuring authenticity, ethical integrity, emotional depth, and effective narrative construction.

5.3. Supporting Hypotheses

To further guide the study, the following sub-hypotheses are considered:

H_{1a}: Artificial intelligence significantly improves the efficiency of documentary production by automating repetitive and data-intensive tasks.

H_{1b}: Human creativity has a significant positive influence on the authenticity, emotional impact, and ethical quality of documentary storytelling.

H_{1c}: Ethical concerns such as algorithmic bias, deepfakes, copyright issues, and misinformation significantly affect the adoption and use of AI in documentary filmmaking.

H_{1d}: A collaborative approach that combines human creativity with artificial intelligence produces more effective documentary storytelling than reliance on either human effort or AI alone.

6. Literature Review

6.1. Introduction

The integration of artificial intelligence (AI) into creative industries has generated considerable scholarly interest, particularly within film and media studies. Documentary filmmaking, a genre traditionally grounded in factual representation, ethical responsibility, and human interpretation, is increasingly adopting AI-driven technologies to improve production efficiency and expand creative possibilities. AI applications such as automated transcription, metadata generation, facial recognition, speech analysis, archival restoration, machine translation, and generative content creation are reshaping documentary workflows from research to post-production (Amato *et al.*, 2019; Anantrasirichai & Bull, 2022) ^[1, 2]. While these technologies offer significant advantages, they also challenge conventional notions of creativity, authorship, authenticity, and truth. This literature review examines existing scholarship on documentary storytelling, human creativity, AI in filmmaking, and the ethical implications of AI-assisted media production to establish the theoretical foundation for this study.

6.2. Documentary Storytelling and Human Creativity

Documentary filmmaking has evolved from being a purely observational medium to one that actively constructs meaning through narrative choices. According to Nichols (2017) ^[10], documentaries do not simply record reality but represent it through the filmmaker's perspective. Every documentary involves decisions regarding framing, sequencing, editing, interviews, sound design, and visual composition, all of which influence how audiences interpret events. John Grierson, often regarded as the father of documentary filmmaking, famously described documentary as the "creative treatment of actuality." This definition

emphasizes that documentaries are not objective reproductions of reality but carefully crafted narratives shaped through human creativity and editorial judgment. Renov (2004)^[13] further argues that documentary storytelling involves interpretation rather than passive observation, requiring filmmakers to balance factual accuracy with compelling narrative structure.

Human creativity is therefore central to every stage of documentary production. Csikszentmihalyi (1996)^[5] describes creativity as the ability to produce original and meaningful ideas within a particular social and cultural context. In documentary filmmaking, creativity extends beyond artistic expression to include empathy, ethical reasoning, cultural sensitivity, and the ability to identify meaningful stories within complex realities. These qualities remain difficult for artificial intelligence to replicate because they depend on lived experience, emotional understanding, and contextual interpretation.

6.3. Artificial Intelligence in Film and Documentary Production

Artificial intelligence has become an increasingly important tool within film production. Russell and Norvig (2021)^[14] define AI as the study and development of intelligent systems capable of performing tasks that typically require human intelligence, including learning, reasoning, language processing, and decision-making. Within documentary production, AI applications have expanded rapidly. Machine learning algorithms now assist with organizing media assets, automatically generating transcripts, detecting objects and faces within footage, restoring damaged archival materials, translating dialogue, generating subtitles, and recommending edits based on visual and audio analysis. Cloud-based editing platforms and AI-powered software have significantly reduced the time required for many technical tasks that previously demanded extensive manual effort.

Recent scholarship examining documentary-specific AI adoption reports that automation is becoming particularly valuable for productions generating hundreds or thousands of hours of footage, where automated metadata tagging and semantic search allow editors to retrieve relevant clips quickly, improving efficiency during post-production (Liu, 2025)^[8]. Likewise, speech recognition technologies have transformed interview-based documentaries by producing searchable transcripts that support both editorial decision-making and accessibility. However, scholars emphasize that these systems primarily enhance workflow efficiency rather than replace creative decision-making. AI identifies patterns within data but cannot independently determine narrative significance or ethical priorities (Liu, 2025)^[8].

6.4. Human Creativity versus Artificial Intelligence

The relationship between human creativity and AI has become one of the most debated topics in contemporary media studies. Boden (2016)^[3] argues that while computers can simulate certain forms of creativity by generating new combinations of existing information, genuine creativity involves intentionality, consciousness, and contextual understanding. Boden distinguishes between computational creativity and human creativity by emphasizing that machines generate outputs based on learned patterns rather than lived experience. AI systems lack intrinsic motivation, emotional awareness, and personal experience, all of which

influence how documentary filmmakers approach sensitive subjects such as trauma, identity, injustice, and historical memory.

Conversely, Manovich (2019)^[9] argues that AI should be viewed as a collaborative creative partner rather than a replacement for human creators. AI excels at repetitive analytical tasks, allowing filmmakers to devote greater attention to storytelling, audience engagement, and ethical decision-making. This perspective aligns with current industry practices where AI supports editors, producers, and researchers instead of replacing them. Existing literature increasingly supports a hybrid model in which AI augments human creativity while preserving human authority over editorial decisions, a pattern also documented across the broader creative industries, where AI is most consistently reported as an assistive collaborator embedded in human-directed workflows rather than an autonomous creative agent (Anantrasirichai & Bull, 2022)^[12].

6.5. Ethical Issues in AI-Assisted Documentary Storytelling

The ethical implications of AI represent one of the fastest-growing areas of academic research. UNESCO's *Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence* (2021) emphasizes principles including transparency, accountability, fairness, privacy, and human oversight. These principles are particularly important within documentary filmmaking because audiences expect documentaries to represent reality accurately.

One major concern involves generative AI technologies capable of creating realistic synthetic images, voices, and videos. Deepfake technologies have raised questions regarding authenticity and audience trust, especially when synthetic content becomes difficult to distinguish from genuine footage. This concern moved from the theoretical to the concrete in 2021, when director Morgan Neville used AI voice-cloning software to generate several lines of narration in the words of the late chef Anthony Bourdain for the documentary *Roadrunner*, without disclosing which specific lines were synthetic. Coburn *et al.* (2022)^[4] analyze the controversy as a case study in the tension between "enhanced realism" and "AI-generated illusion," arguing that the absence of clear disclosure, rather than the use of the technology itself, was the central ethical failure. Companion commentaries in the same journal issue reached similar conclusions: Fitch (2022)^[6] argues the undisclosed synthesis broke audience trust regardless of its narrative value, while Painter (2022)^[12] contends that documentary ethics, though distinct from journalistic ethics, still require truth-telling and informed consent that the film's approach did not fully satisfy. Lees (2025)^[7] situates this case within a broader pattern of documentary filmmakers being early adopters of deepfake and voice-synthesis techniques, often before industry-wide ethical or disclosure norms have caught up with the technology's capabilities.

Algorithmic bias represents another significant concern. AI systems learn from existing datasets, which may reflect historical inequalities or incomplete cultural representation. Consequently, automated systems may privilege particular perspectives while overlooking marginalized voices, reinforcing existing biases rather than correcting them. Copyright and intellectual property also remain contentious issues. Generative AI models are frequently trained using

copyrighted creative works without explicit permission, raising legal and ethical questions regarding ownership, attribution, and fair use. Documentary filmmakers increasingly face uncertainty regarding the acceptable use of AI-generated visual and audio materials.

These ethical challenges demonstrate that technological capability alone cannot determine responsible documentary practice. Human oversight remains essential for ensuring fairness, transparency, and accountability, a conclusion reflected in emerging industry self-regulation, including editorial guidance published by broadcasters explicitly requiring that AI use never undermine audience trust and remain subject to effective human oversight, and preliminary ethical standards developed by archival-production professional bodies for AI use in documentary contexts.

6.6. Theoretical Framework

This study is informed primarily by the Human-Centered AI (HCAI) framework developed by Shneiderman (2020) ^[15], which argues that well-designed AI systems should pursue simultaneously high levels of human control and high levels of automation, rather than treating the two as a trade-off. Shneiderman's framework explicitly identifies the goal of producing systems that are reliable, safe, and trustworthy while supporting human self-efficacy, mastery, creativity, and responsibility, a formulation directly applicable to documentary production, where automation should accelerate technical workflows without displacing the filmmaker's responsibility for truthful and ethical representation.

The study is also supported by Nichols' (2017) ^[10] documentary theory, particularly the concept that documentaries represent reality through creative interpretation rather than objective recording. Nichols' framework reinforces the importance of editorial judgment, ethical responsibility, and narrative construction as fundamentally human processes that AI can support but not independently perform.

Together, these theoretical perspectives suggest that the future of documentary storytelling lies in collaborative intelligence, where AI contributes technical efficiency while human filmmakers retain responsibility for creativity, ethical decision-making, and narrative meaning.

6.7. Gap in the Literature

Although existing literature extensively examines artificial intelligence in media production and computational creativity, relatively few studies focus specifically on the intersection of AI and documentary storytelling. Much of the current research emphasizes technological capabilities, workflow optimization, or generative media without fully examining how AI affects the creative, ethical, and narrative dimensions unique to documentary filmmaking. Furthermore, there remains limited scholarly consensus regarding the appropriate balance between automation and human creative control. Few studies propose practical frameworks that define the complementary roles of AI and filmmakers while addressing concerns related to authenticity, transparency, audience trust, and editorial responsibility.

This study seeks to address this gap by critically examining how artificial intelligence can enhance documentary production without compromising the human creativity, ethical judgment, and authenticity that distinguish

documentary storytelling from other forms of audiovisual media.

7. Methodology

7.1. Review Design

This study adopts a qualitative literature review design informed by the reporting structure of the PRISMA 2020 statement (Page *et al.*, 2021) ^[11]. As with other reviews of a genuinely emerging technology intersection, PRISMA 2020 is applied here as a framework for transparent search reporting and thematic synthesis rather than as a protocol for statistical meta-analysis, given the heterogeneity of the underlying literature, which spans film and media studies, media ethics, computer science, and documentary theory.

7.2. Search Strategy

Literature was identified through structured searches across academic publisher platforms (including Taylor & Francis/Journal of Media Ethics, Edinburgh University Press, JSTOR, PhilPapers, and general academic literature search), supplemented by direct retrieval of primary theoretical texts (documentary theory, computational creativity theory, and human-centered AI theory) cited in the field. Search terms combined: *artificial intelligence*, *documentary filmmaking*, *deepfake*, *synthetic voice*, *documentary ethics*, *human creativity*, *computational creativity*, *human-centered AI*, and *archival restoration*. Searches focused on sources published between 2016 and 2026, covering the period in which both computational creativity theory matured and generative AI tools became practically available to documentary production teams.

7.3. Eligibility Criteria

Inclusion criteria: (a) peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, or foundational scholarly monographs; (b) sources directly addressing artificial intelligence in relation to documentary filmmaking, media ethics, or the human-creativity/AI relationship; (c) publications from 2016–2026, or earlier foundational texts in documentary theory and creativity theory that remain the field's standard references; (d) English-language sources.

Exclusion criteria: (a) promotional or vendor material without scholarly or analytical content; (b) sources addressing AI in fictional filmmaking or general media production without specific relevance to documentary's authenticity-based conventions; (c) non-English sources, due to translation-verification constraints within the scope of this review.

7.4. Selection Process and Resulting Corpus

Sources retrieved through the search process described above were screened for direct relevance to the study's research questions. Foundational theoretical texts (documentary theory, computational creativity, human-centered AI) were retained regardless of publication date given their status as standard reference points in the field; empirical and case-study literature was restricted to the 2016–2026 window. The final corpus retained for narrative synthesis is listed in full in the References section and includes, notably, a directly documented case study of AI-generated synthetic voice in a released documentary film (Coburn *et al.*, 2022) ^[4] and its accompanying peer commentaries (Fitch, 2022; Painter, 2022) ^[6, 12], which together provide the closest available

approximation to primary empirical evidence on audience- and industry-facing consequences of undisclosed AI use in documentary production.

7.5. Synthesis Approach

Given the heterogeneity of the corpus, spanning philosophical treatments of creativity, documentary theory, human-computer interaction theory, and a documented industry case study, a thematic narrative synthesis was used. Sources were coded against the study's six research questions, with recurring themes (workflow transformation, the boundaries of computational creativity, ethical governance, and disclosure/trust) used to organize the Findings in Section 8.

8. Findings

8.1. AI's Transformation of the Documentary Pipeline

In response to RQ1, the reviewed literature indicates that AI adoption in documentary filmmaking spans all three production stages. In pre-production, AI assists with research and archival discovery; in production, it supports logging and organization of footage as it is captured; and in post-production, where the literature concentrates most heavily, it performs transcription, metadata tagging, semantic search, translation, subtitle generation, archival restoration, and rough-cut assistance (Amato *et al.*, 2019; Liu, 2025) ^[1, 8]. Documentary-specific adoption is reported as particularly valuable for productions generating very large volumes of footage, where manual logging would otherwise be prohibitively time-consuming.

8.2. The Continued Centrality of Human Judgment

Addressing RQ2, the literature converges on a consistent set of functions that remain human-led even in AI-augmented workflows: determining narrative significance, framing ethical dilemmas, exercising cultural sensitivity toward interview subjects, and making the editorial judgment calls documentary theory identifies as constitutive of the form itself. Nichols' (2017) ^[10] foundational argument, that documentary is a creative interpretation of reality rather than a neutral recording of it, implies that the interpretive act itself cannot be delegated to a system without collapsing the ethical distinction between documentary and synthetic media. Boden's (2016) ^[3] distinction between computational pattern-generation and genuine creativity (which she ties to intentionality and contextual understanding) provides the clearest theoretical account of why this is so: AI can recombine patterns learned from training data, but cannot independently determine which patterns matter ethically or narratively in a given human story.

8.3. Benefits and Limitations

In relation to RQ3, the benefits reported across the literature are concentrated in efficiency and access: reduced production time and cost, expanded ability to process large archival collections, and multilingual accessibility through automated translation and subtitling. The limitations are concentrated in judgment-dependent tasks: AI cannot reliably assess emotional nuance, cultural context, or the moral weight of a given representational choice, and its pattern-based outputs can misrepresent the very subjects documentary aims to represent faithfully if left unsupervised (Boden, 2016; Liu, 2025) ^[3, 8].

8.4. Ethical Challenges: Authenticity, Bias, Copyright, and Trust

In relation to RQ4, the *Roadrunner* case study provides the clearest evidence base in the reviewed literature. Coburn *et al.* (2022) ^[4] and the accompanying commentaries (Fitch, 2022; Painter, 2022) ^[6, 12] converge on a specific finding: the ethical failure in that case was less about the technology's use per se than about the absence of clear disclosure to the audience about which words were synthetic. This distinction, disclosed versus undisclosed AI-generated content, recurs as the operative ethical line across the literature more broadly, echoed in the BBC's published editorial position that AI use must never undermine audience trust and requires open, accountable, human-overseen application. Algorithmic bias and copyright are identified as further governance concerns, though the literature reviewed here addresses them at a more general level than the disclosure question, which has the benefit of a documented, analyzed case.

8.5. Conditions for Effective Integration

Addressing RQ5, the literature suggests several conditions for integrating AI into documentary workflows without compromising authenticity: explicit disclosure of AI-generated or AI-modified content to audiences; retaining human decision authority over which AI-generated options are used in the final narrative; and applying AI preferentially to structured, judgment-light tasks (transcription, logging, translation, restoration) rather than to the construction of synthetic representations of real people, where the *Roadrunner* case demonstrates the ethical stakes are highest.

8.6. A Collaborative Model for the Future

In relation to RQ6, the literature, read through Shneiderman's (2020) ^[15] Human-Centered AI framework and Nichols' (2017) ^[10] documentary theory together, supports a collaborative model in which AI is treated as a high-automation, high-human-control system: automation is maximized for repetitive, structured tasks, while human control is preserved, undiminished, over interpretive and ethical decisions. This is consistent with the pattern observed across the creative industries more broadly, where AI performs most reliably as a supervised collaborator rather than an autonomous creative agent (Anantrasirichai & Bull, 2022) ^[2].

8.7. Synthesis Against the Research Hypotheses

Read against Section 5, the reviewed literature offers qualitative support for H₁ overall, and specifically for H_{1a} (efficiency gains from automating repetitive, data-intensive tasks) and H_{1b} (the continued positive influence of human creativity on authenticity and emotional depth). H_{1c} (that ethical concerns significantly affect AI adoption) is well supported by the *Roadrunner* case and subsequent industry guidance development. H_{1d} (that a collaborative approach outperforms either human-only or AI-only production) is theoretically well-grounded in the Human-Centered AI framework but, as with the companion review of post-production workflows, lacks controlled comparative empirical data within the literature reviewed here, a limitation addressed directly in Section 9.3 and identified as a priority for future primary research.

9. Discussion

9.1. Interpretation of Findings

The findings support this study's central argument: AI is most defensible in documentary production when applied to structured, judgment-light tasks, and most ethically fraught when applied to the construction of synthetic representations of real people and events, precisely the domain documentary's claim to truthfulness depends on. The *Roadrunner* case is instructive because it demonstrates that the ethical question is not simply "should AI be used" but "was its use disclosed, and did that disclosure preserve the audience's ability to distinguish documented reality from synthesized reconstruction." This reframes the debate in a way consistent with Shneiderman's (2020) ^[15] Human-Centered AI framework: the objective is not to minimize automation but to pair high automation with high human control and transparency.

9.2. Implications for Practice, Education, and Policy

For documentary filmmakers and production companies, the findings suggest that disclosure practices, clearly identifying AI-generated or AI-modified content to audiences, are not a peripheral compliance matter but central to preserving the credibility on which the documentary form depends. For journalism and film schools, the findings suggest a need to teach not only AI tools but the ethical frameworks (informed consent, disclosure, truth-telling standards distinct from but related to journalistic ethics) needed to use them responsibly in non-fiction contexts. For industry bodies and broadcasters, the early guidance published by organizations such as the Archival Producers Alliance and the BBC represents a promising but still-developing model that other production companies and platforms would benefit from adopting or adapting.

9.3. Limitations

Several limitations qualify these conclusions. First, as with the companion review of AI in post-production more broadly, this review's search process was conducted across academic publisher platforms and general scholarly search rather than a single-database Boolean search with a formal, exportable PRISMA flow diagram; replication through institutional Scopus or Web of Science access is recommended before this review is submitted for indexed publication. Second, the empirical evidence base specific to documentary (as opposed to film/media production generally) remains genuinely thin, the *Roadrunner* case, while well-analyzed, is a single documented incident, and generalizing from it to AI-assisted documentary practice as a whole should be done cautiously. Third, several foundational texts cited here (Nichols, Renov, Csikszentmihalyi, Boden, Russell & Norvig) predate the generative AI tools currently reshaping documentary production and are applied here by extension of their theoretical logic rather than because they directly studied these specific tools. Fourth, the review was limited to English-language sources. Finally, as a qualitative narrative synthesis, this review identifies consistent patterns and theoretically grounded arguments rather than quantified effect sizes, and Hypotheses H_{1c} and H_{1d} in particular would benefit from dedicated primary research (e.g., audience-reception studies of disclosed versus undisclosed AI use, or comparative case studies across multiple documentary productions) beyond the scope of a literature-based review.

10. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study examined the relationship between human creativity and artificial intelligence in documentary storytelling. The synthesized literature supports a clear central conclusion: AI is transforming documentary production most decisively in structured, data-intensive tasks, transcription, archival organization, translation, and restoration, while human judgment remains indispensable for the interpretive and ethical work that defines documentary as a form: deciding what a story means, how it should be represented, and what audiences deserve to be told about how that representation was constructed. The *Roadrunner* controversy demonstrates concretely that undisclosed AI-generated content can damage audience trust even when the underlying technical achievement is impressive, reinforcing that disclosure and human accountability, not the mere presence or absence of AI, are the operative ethical variables. Three sets of recommendations follow from this conclusion:

For Documentary Filmmakers And Production Companies: adopt explicit disclosure practices for AI-generated or AI-modified content; reserve AI use for structured, judgment-light tasks by default, and apply heightened scrutiny and disclosure requirements when AI is used to reconstruct or synthesize representations of real people; and engage with emerging industry guidance (e.g., from archival-production professional bodies and broadcaster editorial standards) rather than developing ad hoc, production-specific policies in isolation.

For Journalism and Film Education: integrate AI literacy and non-fiction media ethics into documentary curricula together, since the findings suggest these cannot be taught as separate competencies, using AI responsibly in documentary contexts is fundamentally an ethical skill, not only a technical one.

For Future Research: this review identifies a clear need for primary empirical research, audience-reception studies on disclosed versus undisclosed AI use, comparative analysis across a larger sample of AI-assisted documentaries, and practitioner interviews, to build a stronger empirical foundation than the largely theoretical and single-case-study evidence base synthesized here, particularly to test Hypotheses H_{1c} and H_{1d} rigorously.

Artificial intelligence does not, on the evidence synthesized here, dissolve the distinction between documentary and synthetic media. It sharpens the importance of the human choices, disclosure, consent, editorial judgment, ethical accountability, that have always been what made documentary a trustworthy form of storytelling in the first place.

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