

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Documentary Distribution Options: Life Beyond TV

Lisa Bowers · Wednesday, November 18th, 2015

It's a great time for docs, and for doc filmmakers. "More feature documentaries are being released theatrically than ever, more docs are being featured on major TV outlets and platforms (HBO, Discovery, CNN, PBS, Netflix, EPIX, Showtime) than ever, and the accessibility and discoverability of the genre has never been better," notes Susan Margolin, President, Cinedigm Docurama and Special Acquisitions. "Millennials are discovering docs in a big way, and older audiences are flocking to docs. Transmedia storytelling is bringing in new audiences online, and virtual reality is beginning to explode, as witnessed by *The New York Times*' distribution of a Google cardboard player."

Your documentary has [broadcast distribution](#) and is [funded](#). You're ready to develop a [promotion strategy](#). But wait. Have you investigated all of the distribution alternatives to television? The minute you initiate your film project, you need to be thinking about how you will maximize awareness for the completed film – beyond broadcast. Television is not the endgame anymore. It is okay if your viewers miss the broadcast airing or don't have access to the cable network on which it aired. You have an opportunity to create a film that will be evergreen.

Online/mobile audiences are growing and broadcast and cable audiences, while still huge, are shrinking. A whole new crop of people watch most of their video on Facebook and other social media. Even with a lot of content competing for viewer attention, this presents a new opportunity.

The multitude of options can make strategy execution complicated. Many producers end up using a distribution company, aggregator or advisor to help them through the process. Acquisitions and mergers and/or changing business models seem to be the norm, so talk to experts and do your homework before signing on. Firms known for documentary or independent film distribution expertise include [Cinedigm](#), [Filmbuff](#), [IndieFlix](#), [distribber](#) (now part of GoDigital, which merged into Amplify), and [Gravitas Ventures](#) (which claims to be the largest supplier of independent films to the North American cable VOD marketplace).

While the sheer number of distribution options is good news for today's documentarian, Ms. Margolin cautions that this creates challenges: "As budgets drop due to pressure from broadcasters and improved technology, there are increasing demands on the filmmaking team to deliver content faster, cheaper and of higher quality. This puts a strain on budgets, and often what gets sacrificed is the filmmaker's fee, which is often deferred. In addition, there is often the need and expectation that the filmmaker will spend time traveling to promote and publicize the film."

Doc Distribution Strategies for Consideration

Try to take your passion for the project out of your distribution decision. Max Duke, Vice President of Content and Community Partnerships at [WPBT2](#), suggests examining the current audience of a potential distributor: its “social following,” local market ranking, and the average viewer age. Base your film business decisions on analytics and logic and not necessarily on how many dollars you will make, but whether they are furthering your goal.

If you have an affinity group or geographical area that is your target, would it be smarter to approach relevant partners with patrons jazzed about your subject matter than attempt to get television distribution, which could be at a time slot or on a carrier accessible to a very small percentage of your target? If you have a mission-oriented film, think about the most effective way to reach the people who will most enjoy or benefit from watching it.

Rights matter. Producers today should be retaining as many rights as they can. This allows for the consideration of all viable options, including those that are monetizable, via revenue sharing from advertising, downloads, or streaming. Many distribution companies will work with discrete or on a limited rights basis, but most prefer working on an all rights basis, so that they can place your documentary on as many platforms as makes sense. Some producers can successfully expand their footprint themselves. For example, independent Grace Creek’s *Ideas in Action*, distributed on public television through Executive Program Services, Inc. (EPS), also has its own Roku channel, website, and [YouTube channel](#).



Lizzie Velasquez in Washington D.C. to lobby for a federal anti-bullying bill pending in Congress.
FROM A BRAVE HEART: THE LIZZIE VELASQUEZ STORY/CINEDIGM & WOMEN RISING

Know the Current Marketplace Preferences. Ms. Margolin states that “comedies, action, sci fi and faith-based genres are always popular amongst narrative independent films. On the documentary front, films that cover unusual or unique subjects (e.g., *A Brave Heart: The Lizzie Velasquez Story*), or that uncover stories that have not been widely known or that are newsworthy (*The Invisible War, Gasland*) have been amongst Cinedigm’s best performers.” Here is a list of the 2016 Oscar nominees in the documentary category: <http://variety.com/2015/film/news/academy-awards-documentaries-submitted-1201625122/>

Create short-form. Rethink how you present your content. Consider editing, repackaging, and shortening. Break up long-form content into a series, so you can monetize each part of the series.

The 21st century filmmaking world is about transmedia. The appetite for blue chip one-hour films has shrunk. Viewers are now nourished by Snapchat and Facebook, especially on mobile.

Rachel Link, a producer at National Geographic, always thinks mobile first, although NG video generally starts out in the video player at [nationalgeographic.com](#) and at National Geographic’s YouTube channel. (Approximately 50% of YouTube’s views are mobile but that percentage is probably lower for documentary viewing.) Most content that Ms. Link receives is repurposed for different formats, dependent on the specific contract and the rights owned by National Geographic.

Vice Media is one of the hottest games in town for shorts. And if you’re okay with a VERY short-term presence, check out Snapchat, where the top “Snaps” are just 10 seconds (you can swipe up to see the full-length piece). Today’s Snapchat viewer doesn’t want to tilt their phone or zoom in

anymore: [they are 9 times more likely to engage with vertical video](#) than with horizontal video. This presents a unique opportunity for filmmakers. Suggests Ms. Link, “Innovate – see what can be done to enhance vertical viewing. You can’t change how people view so run with the pack if not in front of the pack. The most successful brands on Snapchat are thinking creatively about how to present vertical content.”

Maximize exposure. Crowdfunding campaigns and social media platforms are relatively easy, low-cost ways to get exposure. *MAKERS*, the largest collection of women’s stories ever assembled, built itself into a powerful brand, eventually picked up by AOL, by posting video shorts on Facebook as complements to its 3-hour PBS broadcast. The shorts were high-quality and interesting enough to be shared. It now has 41K Facebook likes, launches new *MAKERS* each week on #*MAKERSMonday*, and recently launched *MAKERS* Minutes.

Look for ways to let people know about your video outside of social media. *Storyhunter* is a platform for filmmakers, journalists, and documentarians with a global news focus. Fill out a profile and your pitch will reach news and media outlets like CNN, ABC, and National Geographic, most likely more quickly than if you pitched each individually. Its rating system for each piece is viewable by other outlets, which can give you more clout.

Distribution Alternatives to Television

Documentaries have many distribution options, ideal in a fragmented world of consumers with different preferences for how they consume documentaries. Alternatives include digital video platforms (including transactional, streaming and branded publisher platforms), home entertainment (including DVD and Blu-Ray), IPTV VOD, global distribution, film festivals, theatrical distribution, and special screenings.

Online video platforms. Online video viewed on video on demand (VOD) platforms is rapidly becoming as important as broadcast for many producers, although the ROI is usually lower. There are many different types, such as EST (or Electronic Sell-Through, the model used by iTunes), Internet Video-On-Demand or iVOD, SVOD (premier Subscription VOD), transactional VOD (also known as pay per view), and AVOD (Advertisement Supported VOD). Most documentarians are careful to explore other avenues that involve funding and that require exclusivity before VOD because the commonly held belief is that anyone can put their doc on YouTube for free.

Who is watching online? It’s safe to say almost everyone. The conventional wisdom was that it was the younger generation, but J.J. Kelley, an award-winning filmmaker, believes that a major shift has occurred, made real by “seeing a 70-year old man watching an episode of his favorite program on his iPhone.”

Popular digital platforms for traditional long-form documentaries are iTunes, Hulu, Netflix, [SnagFilms](#), Vimeo, and Amazon. (These are not necessarily the biggest, as you can see from the Comscore research below. For example, Facebook was responsible for more than 40% of YouTube’s video volume as of April 2015.) The field changes often so it is important to keep on top of the newest and the best for you, which may mean % of views comprised of documentaries, % of revenues provided to content producer/rightsholder, or number of monthly views.



Top 10 Video Content Properties by Unique Viewers from comScore, Inc. (Click image to enlarge.)

Many of the top online video platforms have become difficult to get placement for all but the most well-known documentaries. It definitely helps if you know someone and persistence doesn't hurt. Most filmmakers find more success with a third party distributor, especially for platforms that are very difficult to gain entry into.

Distributing your documentary on an established online video platform can greatly expand your reach and even generate revenues. It is not a field of dreams, however. Just because you have a great documentary on YouTube does not mean that millions will watch it and you will make lots of money, although both are possible. Develop a strategy on how best to get those eyeballs and be prepared to spend a lot of time marketing your documentary. And remember that you may need to customize your content to the requirements and viewer preferences of different online video platforms and players.

While **YouTube** has invested in original content and in select creators (such as the Fine Brothers, who have over 17 million subscribers and over 3 billion views), it is primarily a do-it-yourself platform. The success of its creators and its own success are inextricably intertwined, so it does offer support. In NYC and LA (and in 5 other world cities), YouTube Spaces offer creators workshops, events, and the use of production facilities. You can monetize your content through a revenue sharing agreement but be prepared to work hard to generate any kind of meaningful revenues. If you are a nonprofit, YouTube offers additional benefits through its YouTube for Nonprofits program.

Without the kind of awareness that sparks the attention of **Netflix** Content Acquisitions, a distribution deal, or an aggregator, distribution on Netflix has gotten increasingly difficult. Their process for inclusion is actually quite democratic – your title has to be popular enough to appear in their database and the queue demand has to be adequate enough to justify a distributor or aggregator extending Netflix an offer, which may be lower than you'd like.

iTunes offers several festival hits and favorites, a number of which are released prior to their theatrical debuts or day-and-date with their arrivals in theaters. Because it offers downloads to own rather than streams, **iTunes**' business model is different from other platforms. Apple offers independent filmmakers the ability to [apply](#) on their own for distribution. However, while you will be diluting your total revenues, working with one of the [9 approved US aggregators](#) is probably the safest bet.

Amazon has become widely known for its original content. Unless you are a movie, children's series, or comedy (for which you receive \$10,000 to start if they like your script, mini-bible or concept video), **Amazon Studios** is not going to be the way you get your doc on Amazon. The best way is through a distribution company or aggregator, or through Amazon's do-it-yourself platform – [CreateSpace](#).

Vimeo on Demand, a slightly newer player launched in 2013, allows creators to monetize their videos without in-player advertising (the most common model with the exception of iTunes' download model). It is also a do-it-yourself platform, and already has 17,000 titles. It offers a lot of advice on things like [monetization](#).

While the largest online video players offer the potential for a lucky few to reach millions and

generate a lot of revenue because of their sheer size, that size can also be a detriment to being found unless you are willing to invest a lot of time into promoting your title(s). The field changes frequently, but other platforms recommended for investigation include Hulu (which offers viewers both AVOD and SVOD options), Hulu's dotcom affiliate for documentaries, Docurama Channel (which now has 650,000 users), [VHX](#), Vudu, Snagfilms (which now works only with aggregators and larger distribution companies), Vessel, DailyMotion, Yahoo, Fandor, Big Star Movies, MUBI, RISE, VOX, Victorious, and Comcast. For a local distribution model, described as "public access for the internet," check out [watchnyc.tv](#). If you're just looking for awareness, a creative home, and don't care about longevity or monetization, try [Snapchat's Stories](#) or another social media platform.

Content Publisher Platforms. Traditional content publishers are now distributors in their own right.

The experience of J.J. Kelley, director of the one-hour film [Warlords of Ivory](#), reinforces the value of distributing your content on a branded platform. Video posted on his production company's YouTube page may generate a few thousand views. The same video might generate hundreds of thousands of views if distributed online by National Geographic or *The New York Times*. He highly recommends partnering with a big media organization on a non-exclusive basis. You provide the content and they provide more eyeballs than you could ever hope to generate on your own website. Any underwriting they might provide is icing on the cake.

National Geographic's 24/7 digital platform offers producers opportunities through both National Geographic Studios (which includes Giant Screen Films, Television, and Digital content) and [National Geographic Creative](#) (a possibility for premier filmmakers looking for representation).



In Rishikesh, India on a 45 day, 1,557-mile expedition down the Ganges, J.J. Kelley, Josh Thomas, and Dave Costello film *Go Ganges*. Photo by Dave Costello

It is rare that National Geographic Digital pays for content, but they do give filmmakers a wide-ranging platform with an imprimatur that can open doors and guarantee that your film will be seen. While the travel videos for which National Geographic is known tend to be sponsored content for *National Geographic Travel* and *National Geographic Adventure*, the Short Film Showcase is an ideal distribution platform, especially for new and emerging filmmakers. Ms. Link manages the Showcase, which accepts videos of 10 minutes or less. (If you have a longer piece, they will also consider excerpts that tell the story or part of the story in 5 minutes and will link to the longer piece.) NG Studios searches for great content on everything from Vimeo to Devour. They also get submissions from individual filmmakers.

Videos featured on National Geographic get broad exposure, with views of anywhere from 20,000 to upwards of 250,000. The "Two Blind Sisters See for the First Time" video has received upwards of 4.5mm views. Videos are also promoted on National Geographic's Facebook page, which has over 37 million fans. If a film is particularly well received and National Geographic likes your style, a commissioned travel piece could be a possibility. Many filmmakers use their shorts as a calling card for Acquisitions or NG Travel, where you might get \$1K to \$3K per piece. The rapidly expanding documentary news investigative team is also looking for harder hitting pieces. They have run a couple of series, accept pitches for short-form video, and will pay for content.

[embedvideo id="ElIpB4EtYU" website="youtube"]

PBS Digital has the “most unique digital distribution for local content of any media company, deploying content on everything from Xbox to Kindle, to iOS platforms,” according to Mr. Duke. The cornerstone of this syndication network is video.pbs.org.

PBS Distribution, or PBSd, offers commercial distribution. PBSd is the leading media distributor for the public television community, both domestically and internationally, extending the reach of these programs beyond broadcast while generating revenue for the public television system, stations, and producers. Screeners for long-form videos can be submitted to PBSd. Its 5 distribution arms are listed below in Resources.

Independent film producers can even create their own channel on Roku; boutique and faith-based broadcasters have especially embraced this option. While discovery is still an issue, this allows them to reach 7.5mm households. To start, just open a [Roku Developer account](#).

Given the many tools now available for self-promotion, more and more filmmakers are attempting self-distribution. This is a fine option if you have business, marketing, and operational savvy. And your film is very, very good.



Martin Clunes takes a break in filming for *DOC MARTIN*, in which he plays the grumpy town surgeon who suffers from an odd distaste for the sight of blood! From APT Syndication.

Global Markets. Many filmmakers find initial success in the international market. If you are a US-based independent filmmaker, a good marketplace to start with is [No Borders](#), “the premiere U.S. forum for buyers, sales agents, and financiers to meet with established U.S. and international producers who have strong track records for producing films in the international marketplace. 35 projects in development are selected each year that have 20%+ financing in place, some cast and/or principal attachments in place, and little to no previous marketplace exposure.”

[APT Worldwide](#) is another outlet for producers of quality nonfiction programming looking for any type of non-theatrical distribution in the international marketplace, i.e., with foreign broadcasters, and on domestic alternatives like Netflix. [APT Worldwide](#) offers international licensing for nonfiction programming and has a particularly strong DVD business. It works like an agent on a commission basis and requires exclusive representation. Check out their website, which targets potential buyers, to see whether your program is appropriate for the outlets they pitch. To take advantage of [APT Worldwide](#)’s representation at key marketplaces, be mindful of the following deadlines: July 15 for the MIPCOM market in October, November 1 for the NATPE market every January, and January 15 for the MIPTV market in April.



Point and Shoot by two-time Oscar nominee Marshall Curry, celebrating 10 years with *POV*. © American Documentary, Inc.

Film Festivals. For many documentarians, the first entry point to audiences is via film festivals (see Resources below for select festival names and links). Industry film festivals attracting distributors provide filmmakers an opportunity to get picked up by broadcasters or distributors. Even if your film is accepted by festivals but does not get picked up, the credibility of your pitches to distributors will be enhanced if your film is selected by a prestigious film festival. You can also get on the radar of broadcasters and distributors and make valuable connections.

The majority of broadcasters and film distributors interested in documentaries attend the premier film festivals. Your festival plan should focus on festivals whose themes match your film. For example, the **Jackson Hole Wildlife Film Festival** attracts broadcasters interested in wildlife films. The festival claims “650+ media and conservation stakeholders” as annual attendees.

New York WILD Film Festival showcases films about exploration, wildlife, conservation and the environment and will be celebrating its 3rd year in January 2016. Nancy Rosenthal, New York WILD’s Executive Director and Founder, suggests that another advantage of participating in the festival circuit is that you can “meet people who might represent opportunities. Plus, there are all of these fantastic films out there that don’t get broadcast and picked up – film festivals also provide an opportunity for audiences to see fantastic work.”

If you are producing shorts, you are probably not targeting broadcasters. Film festivals offer a venue for film-lovers to see your shorts. *Delta Dawn* is a short that has had a successful film festival run, resulting in many festivalgoers and their tribes now aware of director Pete McBride’s cause to save the Colorado River. Lexus and the Weinstein Company make it a little easier for creators of shorts matching their annual theme – the 4 winners of the 3rd **Annual Lexus Short Film** series will be able to participate in a tour of top film festivals.

Despite the growing number of film festivals with every imaginable theme, competition can be fierce. The costs of entry have decreased materially because of digital platforms, but entry fees vary widely per festival. Filmfreeway is free and provides access to 2,753 screeners. **Withoutabox**, an Amazon company, is free for films up to 10GB. Both offer access to some of the biggest film festivals. Even at a newer festival like New York WILD, only 10% of entries were selected for screening in 2014. At Jackson Hole, nearly 1000 entries (a record) competed for 23 awards in 2015.

If possible, enter every festival at which you think your film has a good chance of getting selected. If you are acquired (and negotiate a smart deal), it will be worth it!

Theatrical Screenings. **Gathr** – Theatrical On Demand – offers a rich list of documentaries, or “empathy-building machines, to galvanize local communities around social impact and political action . . . Through grassroots marketing and outreach it generates public and private screening event requests for [its] films and then accommodates and books those requests in local theaters and non-theatrical venues.” This grassroots theatrical platform was the seed to the success of *Girl Rising*, first previewed at Sundance, and now a global campaign for girls’ education. Helpful in its grassroots appeal was a cast that included Cate Blanchett, Selena Gomez, Anne Hathaway, and Salma Hayek and the harsh reality of 62 million girls without education globally. However, much of *Girl Rising*’s success can be attributed to its effective use of Gathr to empower a passionate audience to basically crowdsource *Girl Rising* into theaters.

Tugg also offers the ability to self-distribute in theaters nationwide via a crowdsourcing model. It too relies on “promoters,” persons or organizations that host a Tugg event, and social media to get “butts in seats.” Gravitas Ventures is also well known for theatrical distribution.

Special screenings. **Greg Reitman**, producer of **Rooted in Peace**, states, “theatrical, even limited theatrical distribution, and private screenings are a great way to find your audience . . although distributors base their decisions on film festivals.” He has found success with organizations that have an affinity for the content. Reitman believes that film festivals can allow celebrities to drive

their selection and that “traditional great storytelling may not drive placement.”

The award-winning *Race to Nowhere* used screenings at PTA’s and other relevant non-profit venues to reach the over-stressed parents who might not be watching public television at night. Says their website, “from non-profit advocacy groups to global corporations, from elementary school gyms to synagogue sanctuaries, from college-wide events to a library’s local moms’ group, *Race to Nowhere* has been embraced far and wide by all those passionate about changing our education system for the better.” Since its release in 2010, it has been shown on 7,000 screens.

So. You’ve used every resource available to you to create an amazing documentary that should be seen by as many people as possible. Ideally, you continue to make money on it because great content has value. The options are dynamic and ever-changing, but a good distribution firm or consultant can keep abreast of them for you, evaluate your plan, and help you get distribution.

The most important thing is to make sure there are many ways for your target viewer to see your film. You don’t want them to miss out on a great experience! Let us know how it goes and [share your comments](#) on what’s worked.

RESOURCES

Film Festivals:

– Premier film festivals (not an all-inclusive list):

- Cannes Film Festival
- Toronto Film Festival
- Tribeca Film Festival
- Sundance Film Festival
- New York Film Festival

– Film Festivals for Documentaries (select festivals only):

- Hot Docs
- Full Frame Documentary Film Festival
- MoMA’s Documentary Fortnight
- AFI Docs
- Sheffield Doc/Fest
- DOC NYC
- IDFA in Amsterdam

– [POV’s List](#) – A Comprehensive Documentary Festival List

National Geographic:

- Short Film Showcase
- SciEX video on YouTube
- National Geographic News YouTube Video

PBS Distribution Channels:

- (1) Retail Distribution: customers include Best Buy, Target, Walmart, distributors like Baker & Taylor & Ingram, as well as museum stores and catalogs
- (2) Consumer Distribution, or ShopPBS (sells DVD and Blu-ray products as well as program-branded merchandise of every description online and through print catalogs)
- (3) Digital Distribution – leading platforms like amazon instant video, iTunes, Gravitas Ventures, and Google play
- (4) Educational Distribution, via PBS Teacher Shop and PBS LearningMedia
- (5) International Distribution (represents over 400 hours of factual and children's programming)

APT Worldwide Submission Guidelines:

To submit properties for review, send a DVD with descriptive materials to Judy Barlow or Kevin McKenna at American Public Television, 55 Summer Street, Boston, MA 02110 (for additional information, you can e-mail Judy_Barlow@aptonline.org or Kevin_Mckenna@aptonline.org).

Industry News: [VideoInk](#) will keep you current on the latest news for digital platforms.

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