



THE STATE OF JOURNALISM

on the

DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKING SCENE

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

We asked 66 professionals across the field of documentary-focused journalism:

As documentary becomes an ever-larger feature of the media landscape, is journalism addressing documentary's role in the informational environment for public life? And where are there weaknesses? What would help?

They told us that the burgeoning field of documentary has developed without internal standards and practices for accuracy, avoiding conflict of interest, representational fairness, or other ethical standards. It also has historically had little critical or investigative scrutiny from journalism, either from critics or reporters. This means the field of documentary lacks both the benefits of increased awareness and the accountability measures that journalism can provide.

The ecology of information circulation about documentary is dysfunctional for many other reasons as well—the economic crisis of journalism more generally; arts journalism's complicity with public relations; the common characterization of documentary film as entertainment; systemic lack of opportunity for rising and BIPOC critical voices; and absence of publicly available data about the field.

Interviewees recommended a variety of ways to address the problem:

- Documentarians need to articulate and publicize the standards of their field;
- Journalistic editors need to know more about the growing importance of the documentary business;
- Critics need to know about the history and aesthetics of documentary;
- There should be more public discussion of documentary standards.

Interviewees also described a variety of programs, venues and models to accomplish these goals.

INTRODUCTION

Documentary film has become a popular form of entertainment, and a meaningful source of information—and misinformation—about the world. And yet it lacks an ecology like the one surrounding mainstream news coverage about politics and economics, in which public scrutiny, through journalism, on assertions and expressions provides accountability—the network of accountability well-mapped by Benkler, Faris and Roberts (2019). It also lacks the intimate (sometimes disturbingly

intimate) relationship between critic and artist in the arts world, or even the now-fraying relationship between critic and pop culture producers in the fiction film environment.



Tiger King has many elements of reality shows, but Netflix calls it a documentary series.

Documentary filmmaking is thus on the informational frontier, without expectations or norms for responsible conduct. And yet it is entertainment with a claim to significance, to interpreting real life and giving meaning to the deluge of data we swim in every day. Without a vibrant ecology of information circulation, it can easily become as much part of the problem of dis/misinformation as a solution for it.

How does journalism currently work to hold documentary filmmaking accountable for its claim to be a truthful, good-faith portrait of something real in the world? What deficits exist in this area and why? What support and interventions would maximize its potential to bolster accountability to the viewing public in this vitally important form?

METHODS

To address this question, we did a scan of the information environment, using searches through academic libraries and the Internet, through suggestions from editors and writers, and information from interviewers. We interviewed 34 professionals connected to journalism and documentary filmmaking, including 12 critics, seven journalists, eight academics, three film festival programmers, seven documentary filmmakers, six editors, one consultant, one funder, four producers, three professionals in leadership positions at publications, and three professionals in leadership positions at film festivals (some people fall into more

Documentary film is on the informational frontier, and can easily become part of the mis/disinformation problem.

than one category). The group consisted of 16 female and 17 male participants, and at least one non-binary person. Nine of them (27%) are BIPOC. The interviewees also represent a variety of career stages. We interviewed 13 veterans, 18 mid-career professionals, and three emerging professionals. All were offered confidentiality, and after review of the draft document, the chance to either list or keep off the list their names as interviewees. We also held three meetings with a variety of thought leaders, who discussed a draft version of the report, and refined suggestions for change. A total of 32 professionals participated in these convenings including eight academics, eight journalists, eight producers, two directors, four programmers, two critics, one editor, four individuals in festival leadership positions, and 14 professionals representing funding entities (as before, some participants are listed in more than one category). 17 female and 15 male participants joined these conversations. 15 of them (47%) are BIPOC. The group consisted of 14 veterans in their respective fields and 18 mid-career professionals. A list of those who wanted to be recognized is in the appendix.

Our results are described below. We first describe the growth of importance of documentary film as a resource for public knowledge. Next, we look at the relationship between independent documentary filmmaking and public trust. Third, we summarize the state of standards and practices in documentary production—standards that typically set public and journalistic expectations. We then examine the state of journalism, both film criticism and reporting on the business of documentary, today. Our interviewees' various analyses to explain the state of documentary-focused journalism are then summarized. Finally, we summarize proposals for ways to support more and better journalism in this area.

DOCUMENTARY FILM

Growing Faster Than Its Standards

Documentary film has never been more important in the media diet of Americans. Documentary production has grown dramatically in the last three decades as production fueled by Discovery, National Geographic, Amazon, Netflix, Hulu and niche content providers shows us.

[Market data](#) from Nash Information Services (2021) demonstrates documentary's rapid growth at the box office in recent years. The number of annual documentary theatrical releases has more than tripled since 2000. Nonfiction programming on TV has experienced a similar upward trend. Likewise, nonfiction programming is an increasingly important content category on streaming platforms. Netflix's *Tiger King* (2020) was one of the [most watched](#) SVOD original series of 2020, outpacing *The Mandalorian* (2020) on Disney+ (Nielsen, 2020). The documentary genre, [up 120% from 2019 to 2020](#), was the fastest-growing genre on streaming in 2020 (Fischer, 2021).

*Fiction and fact
blur in productions
that capitalize on
documentary's fast
rise to commercial
popularity.*

Mainstream documentary has both vastly diversified in the last two decades, and also become indeterminate at the edges. Documentary is a form distinguished specifically by its claim to tell a meaning-making story in good faith, about something that really happened. The line between that claim and fiction has become less clear in some cases. While documentary has long used re-enactment, for instance, it has become far more common to incorporate both scenes re-enacting an episode (for instance, in *Coup 53* [2019] and *Client 9* [2010]) and actors simulating a real-life role (*Operation Varsity Blues* [2021]). Entire films have been composed using fictional aesthetics—for instance, *Silenced* (2014), using a black-and-white film noir approach for extended re-enactment segments, and *1971* (2014), using a sepia tone and blurring imagery to hint that re-enactment is actually recovered videotape footage (Hornaday, 2021). While some filmmakers, including the above-referenced films, make their choices explicit within the film, others simply elide fiction with documentary. For instance, *Mighty Times: The Children's March* (2004) famously faked actuality footage from a 1963 civil rights march. The use of reenactment entered new territory when artificial intelligence was used to mimic the voice of Anthony Bourdain in *Roadrunner* (2021), without revealing the manipulation.



Netflix falsely categorized *Operation Varsity Blues*, a scripted and acted docudrama, as a documentary.

Meanwhile, fast-paced entertainment production has seized both on the lower-cost production realities of documentary and the growing popularity of the form, to exploit the form's claims to truth for sensationalism. As documentary channel ratings increased in the early 2000s, History Channel began to fill up with UFO stories, Court TV expanded its crime coverage, Discovery and National Geographic channels both packed every moment of their top-rated series with suspense. They borrowed from the look of documentary *cinéma vérité* and its claims to unfiltered reality, exploiting it for sensationalism (Ouellette, 2020). Reality television, a hybrid of documentary, fiction and game shows, surpassed sitcoms, dramas, and sports in popularity for the first time in the 2002-2003 television season, according to [audience data](#) published by Nielsen (2011), and has continued to capture large audiences in recent years. Streamers have fomented binge watching by encouraging production of documentary mini-series (Morfoot, 2021). True crime is a top-rated genre in streamed mini-series, which typically recapitulate and even glorify the legitimacy of policing and criminal justice systems that reinforce injustice and inequality (Rangan & Story, 2021).

As documentary has grown, production practices have evolved to keep pace, and in some troubling ways. By the 1990s, cable TV had developed factory-like production systems both in-house and in production companies that served them, matching their branded looks and styles. These made-for-hire works fed into what

became known variously as the non-fiction, factual and unscripted market. As reality television became its own category, documentary filmmakers often got their first work, and learned production practices, on reality shows. Filmmakers reported being told what to tell people in their films to say; productions skimped on or skipped fact-checking; field producers never met editors, who themselves were being told to cut to brand messaging and expectation. Fiction and fact blur. All the while, audiences have remained largely in the dark with respect to these practices and have tended to accept these stories at face value.



David Foster (center) exercised some creative control over the production of *Off the Record*, a doc about his life and career.

In service to the market, commercial productions borrow the mantle of authenticity from public trust in the documentary form to give works more audience appeal. “Documentaries help form the architecture of the studios’ brand, signaling that they care about the climate justice, Me Too, and Black Lives Matter movements as well as projecting an image of the organization as transparent, authentic, and truthful,” notes a leading documentary scholar (Glick 2021). And so even programs that are not documentary are reclassified to attract the gloss. *Operation Varsity Blues* (2021), a fiction docudrama starring Matthew Modine, is classified on Netflix’s site as a documentary. Netflix’s *Tiger King* (2020) had many reality-TV aspects, but it was also marketed as a documentary. True-crime series can use the trappings of

investigation, while selecting the evidence to oversimplify and crusade. For instance, the Netflix series *Making a Murderer* slighted evidence against its central characters, leading some to characterize it as “highbrow vigilante justice” (Schulz, 2016). But it became wildly popular, and it led to a national petition demanding exoneration.

With the exception of public TV, sponsorship has become a largely unguarded area full of conflict-of-interest possibilities. Maria Schwarzenegger’s child’s addiction problems with Adderall led her to provide her foundation’s funds for a Netflix documentary, *Take Your Pills* (2018); the foundation’s influence is unknown. Verizon fully funded a film by Rory Kennedy, *Without a Net* (2017), on issues affecting the FCC’s e-rate policy; the film does not disclose Verizon’s interest in e-rate or conflicting views about how that fund is managed. Bill and Melinda Gates’ foundation provides funding that results in substantial media production, where funder influence goes unexamined. Paying people for their interviews—even giving them their talking points—as seems to have happened in *Tiger King* (2020)—goes unscrutinized. Mike Rowe’s *Six Degrees* on Discovery+ is openly funded by fossil fuel corporate interests, reflected in his constant plugs for fossil fuel. (Aufderheide, Chandra & Jaszi, 2009; Aufderheide, 2019; Ruwer, 2020; Schwab, 2019; Schwab 2020; Noor, 2021)

With the advent of instant global distribution by streamers, geopolitical questions have become even more relevant to commerce. Streaming companies might avoid films on important issues—such as the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, or the death of Kim Jong-un’s brother—that could complicate their global businesses (Sperling, 2020). Netflix has taken down content at the request of foreign governments eight times in recent years. Despite the fact that documentaries are its fastest-growing category, Netflix’s president Reed Hastings blandly asserts that censorship is not a concern for the company, because it’s merely providing entertainment. (Molla & Kafka, 2020a; Molla & Kafka 2020b)

In this environment, independent documentary filmmaking of the kind showcased on public TV, on CNN Docs, ESPN’s 30X30, and HBO Documentaries has distinguished itself both for (often passionate) authorial voice and integrity, including basic claims to accuracy, authenticity, and transparency about perspective. As that market has heated up, however, and with the addition of streamers such as Amazon, Netflix and Hulu, these documentaries have also become hot commodities for their ability to win critical attention and awards. At Sundance 2021, [streamers easily outpriced](#) other purchasers in acquiring documentaries, to the point of raising questions about further concentration in the distribution arena (Kaufman, 2021). Documentaries’ legitimacy and credibility accrues as well to the organizations that distribute them.

At the same time, transparency about standards and practices resides exclusively in public broadcasting, where [PBS’s standards](#) and [Frontline’s journalistic guidelines](#) are used.

THE PUBLIC TRUST IN DOCUMENTARY

Is It Earned?

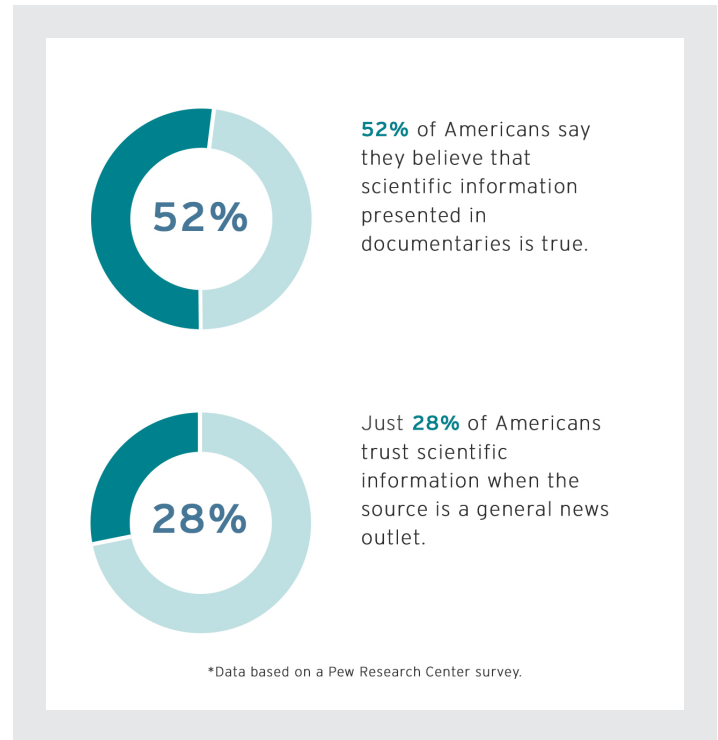
As traditional journalistic outlets, especially local journalism, have declined (Abernathy, 2020), documentaries as a medium people trust become ever more important to examine. Documentary is a unique format, for its combination of immersive storytelling and its claim to truthfulness—a claim that includes factual accuracy, the meaningfulness of the story, the independent stance of the storyteller, and good-faith treatment of participants. This combination has engendered remarkable public trust in documentaries, at a time when public distrust has grown with much commercial media.

As a 2020 [Pew Research Center study](#) reveals, nearly half (44%) of Americans surveyed believe that news organizations publish deliberately misleading information and 38% say they aren’t confident in the factual accuracy of the news. More than half (55%) of those surveyed also expressed a desire for greater transparency with regard to whether the news stories they consume are based on fact or opinion (Gottfried, Walker & Mitchell, 2020).

Americans overall [place greater faith](#) in the factual accuracy of documentary film than in news. More than half (52%) of Americans express confidence in the veracity of scientific information in documentary films and nonfiction TV programs. That percentage drops to 28% when the source of information is a news outlet (Funk, Gottfried & Mitchell 2017). A 2021 [American Press Institute study](#) hints at why this skew might happen. It finds that people respond to framing that reflects moral values, including fairness, caring, heroism and loyalty, and that common journalistic assumptions about journalistic mission are not necessarily widely shared by the general public (American Press Institute, 2021).

This public trust in documentary has been exploited cynically—or, in some cases, delusionally. Misinformation on Covid-19 was spread widely, for instance, through the documentary *Plandemic* (2020). *ShadowGate* (2020) peddled a vast and utterly unsupported conspiracy theory about global cabals. Both were seen by millions on social media before being taken down. (Brown, 2020; Newton, 2020)

Extreme right-wing activists such as Steve Bannon and Michael Pack have used the form to stake a claim to credibility. Bannon has leveraged money from extreme-right funders, the Mercer family, to produce scurrilous documentaries such as *Clinton Cash* (2016) (Goldstein, 2017). Pack's *Created Equal: Clarence Thomas in His Own Words* (2020) was a fawning, in-his-own-words portrait of the controversial Supreme Court Justice. Pack's self-asserted documentary expertise was used to credential him for his disastrous, if short, leadership of the U.S. Agency for Governmental Media (Gold, 2018). Considering the relative accessibility of documentary as a storytelling tool and in the absence of any widely accepted standards, documentary is fertile ground for future abuse and an ideal means of ideological manipulation.



DOCUMENTARY STANDARDS AND PRACTICES ARE MISSING

What kinds of standards exist to articulate expectations for behavior and performance for the documentary field? Currently, the field lacks public and common standards documents. Some corporations have internal, proprietary standards and practices documents, although documentaries produced for those companies' entertainment divisions are not typically subject to the standards and practices relevant to journalism. PBS's standards, which are public, are widely regarded by filmmakers as unduly onerous and restrictive, specifically around funding, although they are successfully used by producers for hundreds of hours of programming each season.

Although a Center for Media & Social Impact 2009 report, [Honest Truths](#), revealed deep frustrations in the field with working conditions forcing documentarians to violate their own moral code, filmmaker organizations have so far resisted initiating any efforts to establish ethics codes (Aufderheide, Chandra & Jaszi, 2009). The aversion of most media lawyers to ethics codes has reinforced concern in the field to having any such standards documents. (Lawyers fear that any standards documents will create opportunities for litigation, with plaintiffs using interpretations of standards as ammunition.) Several efforts led by BIPOC filmmakers are currently in development, to articulate ethical values for productions, but they have yet to be finalized, and must then circulate, cultivate endorsements, and be adopted and used by production entities.



Filmmakers chose not to discuss publicly *Act of Killing's* choice for re-enactment of political murders.

Without standards set by documentarians themselves, ethics conversations happen sporadically, and without consequences.

In the absence of membership-backed, field-specific ethics codes, some documentarians use related tools. Some film teachers have resorted to using [No Film School's "Basic Filmmakers' Code"](#) (Renée, 2019) as a rough guide. Journalistic ethics codes, most importantly that of the [Society of Professional Journalists](#), are also used. SPJ's Code of Ethics has four general categories: Seek truth and report it; minimize harm; act independently; and be accountable and transparent

(Society of Professional Journalists, 2014). These are highly similar to the concerns of filmmakers as expressed in *Honest Truths*. However, many filmmakers, often without ever looking at SPJ's code, reject the notion that their aesthetically-rich work can be compared to journalism, especially daily journalism. Meanwhile, their viewers do routinely assume that they're observing basic journalistic standards.

Lacking public consensus, the documentary filmmaking field most commonly holds ethics discussions privately. Filmmaker AJ Schnack noted in 2014, "one constant gripe within the world of documentary has been a need for more writing and better criticism about the craft of the filmmaking (as opposed to summaries of the plot or lionizations of the subject)." And yet, he also wrote, it wasn't easy to rise beyond muttered conversations in hallways and over drinks. Public criticism is often seen as a betrayal of an embattled community. (Schnack, 2014)



Hulu's *Fyre Fraud* paid its lead interviewee (Fyre con artist Billy McFarland, above) for access, and Netflix' *Fyre* was co-executive produced by one of the entities involved in the fraud.

We heard from interviewees, for instance, that *Blackfish's* (2013) stellar ratings and reviews did not reflect widespread but quiet criticism among filmmakers. But they did not want to share the critique with us, even with promise of confidentiality. Sarah Polley's *Stories We Tell* (2013) conversely may have lost out on an Academy Award nomination, one person speculated, when no one from the field publicly defended the role of reenactment in the film and her claims for it.

When controversy breaks out and the filmmaking community notices, it can be around grandstanding polemics. [This is what happened](#) around *Act of Killing* (2012), when a notoriously acerbic broadcast programmer, Nick Fraser, and an equally acidic filmmaker/critic, Jill Godmilow, both lambasted the film for different reasons. Their self-righteousness and pontificating created a solidary wall of resentment in the filmmaking community, and discussion stopped, after social media shaming of the two polemicists. (Schnack, 2014)

Sometimes criticism has resulted in wider public conversation, but not necessarily with followup. Morgan Neville's casual admission that he had faked elements of *Roadrunner* created a spate of coverage, both from reporters and critics. Neville had used AI to recreate the voice of his subject Anthony Bourdain, reading intimate correspondence he had written; he also created a mural that was represented as one of many that had sprung up, which Bourdain's friend defaced theatrically at the end of the film. Neville's open and unforced admission startled many, who went to Twitter to say that they experienced the manipulations as a betrayal. He was unmoved, though; he appeared confident in his decision. "We can have a documentary-ethics panel about it later," he told *The New Yorker* (Rosner, 2021).

Davis Guggenheim's *Waiting for "Superman"* (2010) argued that charter schools could solve problems created by poor public education. The film was initiated by and produced by Participant Productions, which included investors in charter schools on its board. The film received some negative comments from critics. It also mobilized the ire of teachers' unions and education scholars, including lengthy articles by education policy expert Diane Ravitch in the *New York Review of Books*, some who made a rebuttal film and one who made a critique video of main points (Trier, 2019). That controversy however was not reflected back into either arts journalism or the documentary filmmaking community. Nor did it apparently have a reputational effect. Guggenheim continues to be a favored choice for well-funded projects at his Concordia Studio. Concordia has the backing of Laurene Powell Jobs (Morfoot, 2021a).

Two documentaries that appeared almost simultaneously about the debacle of the Fyre Festival, Netflix's *Fyre* (2019) and Hulu's *Fyre Fraud* (2019) attracted wide journalistic attention, but mostly for the fact that both appeared at the same time. One article, however, went into depth about ethical problems in Netflix's documentary (Livingstone, 2019), and others noted that Hulu's documentary involved paying a key subject. However, Chris Smith, the creator of *Fyre*, appears untouched by the attention. He is a veteran of edgy documentary (*American Movie*, *Yes Men*), an executive producer of *Tiger King*. Netflix in 2021 released his *Operation Varsity Blues* with wide marketing and to uncritical reviews.

In contrast, when the *New York Times* was found to have promoted an ultimately false narrative in *Caliphate*, a podcast that has similarities to documentary film, its narrator was moved off her beat and the producer was ultimately fired. The scandal was too much for the *New York Times*' reputation to survive without action.

Knowledge about the media industry is largely circulated among filmmakers on a private basis. Better-connected filmmakers may have an inkling of the contract terms for public TV strands, or the ways to approach streaming services, or the implications of accepting equity investment upfront. Business issues may be the topic of film festival panels, usually stocked by interested company reps, and consultants whose business is selling information. Film schools train students to be makers, but typically not to be businesspeople. Organizations such as the Documentary Producers Alliance and a union, Writers Guild of America-East, as well as academic sites such as the Center for Media & Social Impact sometimes report on the filmmaking business, but most filmmakers operate in a world of highly partial knowledge.



Edit Media (editmedia.org), a project of film production professors, is developing standards around diversity, equity, and inclusion.

JOURNALISM COULD BRING THE SUNLIGHT AND OXYGEN

But Does It?

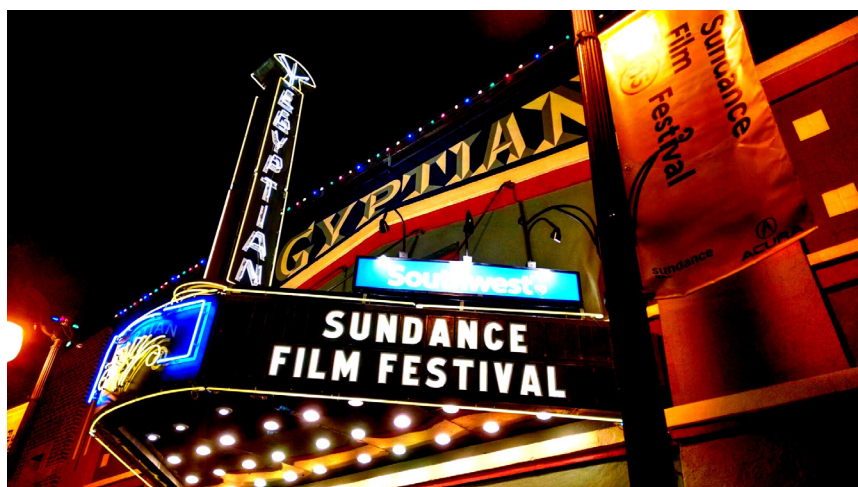
Journalism can bring critique, visibility and transparency to practice in both the art and the business of documentary filmmaking. In both areas, there is important work being done, but also deficits, which matter to public knowledge.

Journalism at its best plays the role of making power accountable to the public. As Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, both senior journalists and leaders in the field, describe it in their iconic *The Elements of Journalism* (2007),

The primary purpose of journalism is to provide citizens with the information they need to be free and self-governing...It is difficult, in looking back, even to separate the concept of journalism from the concept of creating community and later democracy. Journalism is so fundamental to that purpose that... societies that want to suppress freedom must first suppress the press (p. 12).

Local corruption, polarization and decline in civic engagement, and lack of public financing are all associated with journalistic decline (Klas, 2019; Gow et al., 2020).

This anchoring mission is why the old saw about “comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable,” attributed first to the activist priest Peter Dunne, endures in newsrooms. Journalistic exposés brought down President Nixon, exposed the Iran-Contra scandal, forced the American Catholic church to acknowledge a history of sexual abuse, and returned millions of dollars to victimized account-holders of US banks after the 2008 financial crisis. Journalism about documentary films and filmmaking alerts users to the existence of a category of truth-telling to be analyzed. It also provides the sunlight to shine on existing practices and trends in the business. And of course, journalism provides the oxygen to help work circulate and gain value. (Overholser & Jamieson, 2005)



Streamers' appetite for documentaries is reflected in bidding wars at film festivals.

Journalists' choice of what to cover and how to cover it—what is called “framing” by communication scholars—sets readers' agenda for what to regard as meaningful and important. Whether it is scandal, trends, individual expressions or people, journalistic coverage provides not merely an affirmation of the importance of what is covered, not only the relevance of what is covered for the user's own understanding of reality,

but the very construction of a reality that is shared widely with others, whether users know them or not. (McCombs, 2004; Kenski & Jamieson, 2017, pp. 484-87)

How effective in meeting the accountability function of journalism is journalism about documentary filmmaking today? Our interviewees generally concluded that there was too little of it, and that what exists is rarely rigorous or representative.

FILM CRITICISM

Not Enough, Poorly Informed, And Too White

Film criticism can help viewers understand why they might decide to watch a documentary; illuminate the link between form and content; provide valuable context; and alert readers to bias.

But interviewees often flagged several main problems with the current state of film criticism about documentary:

*More diverse
perspectives would
enrich both criticism
and reporting.*

- Film criticism is generally valued more for longform fiction over longform documentary, and longform documentary over short documentary. While short documentaries have crept into the Emmy and Peabody awards, sometimes through mainstream journalistic outlets such as the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, both longform and short documentaries continue to maintain second class status in the highest film awards. Criticism of documentary films thus fights for space and attention in major outlets.
- Published criticism often betrays a lack of understanding of documentary form or its role in shaping public opinion. Critics tend to focus on the subject matter, not the form. Criticism is often descriptive rather than analytical. It rarely critiques either the approach to the subject matter or the accuracy of the material. “Somehow a critic is just supposed to be an arbiter of whether or not a thing is good or bad, as opposed to unlocking the text for people, bringing new perspectives to bear and making connections that a reader might not necessarily make otherwise,” said Jeff Reichert. One critic, Alissa Wilkinson, argued in print that a genuinely critical approach, informed about the medium, is critical to diversity goals: “Criticism is about expanding a work of art, making it part of a cultural conversation and discourse...This is why criticism needs to be diverse. Critics try to read a film through the lens of their own unique experience, and that gives life to the work of art. Even when we all sit in the same movie theater, we all watch a different work of art. Adding those perspectives to the chorus can only enrich and expand the movie.” (FWD-Docs, 2021, p. 27)

- Critiques, when they do come, can be astoundingly wrong-headed, and not focused on the medium. A *New York Times* review of *Remote Area Medical*, a cinéma vérité feature film about an emergency medical team that routinely works in Appalachia and other US regions where healthcare is lacking, berated the film for not providing solutions for America's health care problems (Genzlinger, 2014). This critique simply ignored the film on the screen, and its goals of exposing to filmgoers an America they were ignoring.



The filmmakers behind *Remote Area Medical* intended to shed light on a little -known issue.

- Medium matters. While cable and broadcast journalism on documentary, when it appears at all, focuses on entertainment, mainstream print or online textual sites offer more space for both critical analysis and business reporting. But “clicks and shares” logic works there too to exclude analysis and investigative reporting. Podcasts in the interview format, as for instance with Thom Powers and Rafaela Neihausen's [Pure Nonfiction](#), lean toward the appreciative and admiring. Industry podcasts such as *The Business* and *Indiewire Screen Talk* follow the horse race, while others such as *Team Deakins* focus on the how-to and technical.
- Critics tend to be from dominant social demographics; BIPOC, LGBTQ+, young and non-coastal writers are uncommon in major outlets. Critics such as Eric Deggans at NPR, Mahita Gajanan at *Time*, K. Austin Collins at *Rolling Stone* and Wesley Morris at the *New York Times* are exceptions. These comments are substantiated in a study showing that film critics generally are overwhelmingly male and white. The skew is particularly pronounced for BIPOC women (Choueiti, Smith & Pieper, 2018).
- This skewing of film criticism to the white and male has implications for the success of films made outside the dominant social categories, as [an analysis by a group representing filmmakers who focus on disability](#), FWD-Doc, discusses:

Film criticism is a crucial contributor to representation and equity in society, and a skilled writer will inform themselves about authentic portrayals of disability, recognize misconceptions and tropes, and take steps to avoid ableist language and interpretations of films. If authentic films are made by authentic voices but on release only reviewed by writers with no insight into that authenticity, then they are immediately disadvantaged in the crucial independent cinema pipeline that leads directly from enthusiastic festival reviews to sales and distribution deals

to awards to ‘success’. The nuance and artistry of narratives that avoid the pervasive misrepresentations of disability that have dominated culture for decades (e.g., ‘inspiration porn’, ‘disability as tragedy’) can be invisible to critics if the lens they are viewing through is an ableist one. (FWD-Doc, 2021)

This analysis is reinforced in a [poignant essay](#) by Mexican-American critic Carlos Aguilar, who also interviewed BIPOC colleagues and analyzed the cost of losing multiple perspectives on our popular culture (Aguilar, 2021).

A new generation of ethnically and otherwise diverse writers has emerged, but typically writes for a range of small publications. Arts and culture critic Soraya Nadia McDonald writes for [The Undeclared](#), a digital platform dedicated to “exploring the intersections of race, sports, and culture.” Soraya’s body of work also investigates harmful film tropes targeting black Americans and addresses how particular films relate to broader aspects of African American life and culture. Film critic Shea Vassar, a citizen of the Cherokee Nation, regularly writes for [Film School Rejects](#), where she contributes a column called [Through a Native Lens](#). It provides insightful analysis of indigenous representation on screen. Kristal Sotomayor is a Latinx filmmaker whose writing foregrounds Latinidad and LGBTQIA+ experiences. Their work (in both English and Spanish) has been featured in *Documentary Magazine*, *AL DÍA*, and *Cine Speak* among others. More diverse criticism is sometimes picked up in venues such as *World Records Journal*, which recently published a notable, extended [analysis of the true-crime genre](#) (Rangan & Story, 2021) and strives to be not only a publication but a site to foster conversation; *Reverse Shot*; *Talkhouse*; *Screen Slate*; *Film Quarterly*, and *Film Comment*. Academic journals such as *Cinema Journal*, *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, and *Studies in Documentary Film* publish theoretically-framed film analysis.



Some BIPOC critics establish their own sites, such as [Token Theatre Friends](#).

on discussions about Latinx representation in film and TV. The challenge for the good work done on those sites is stimulating a conversation that reaches beyond a one-time publication on a relatively small-circulation site.

Some BIPOC critics establish or develop alternative sites, rejecting an approach to mainstream discourse entirely. One such space is [Token Theatre Friends](#), an all-BIPOC digital platform led by arts critic Jose Solís. This site arose as a result of Solís’s frustration with repeated instances of rejection by mainstream news outlets, especially with regard to stories centered around BIPOC and LGBTQ experiences. Contributors presumably enjoy a greater degree of freedom in their writing as their work is not subjected to the level of scrutiny typical of larger outlets. Another such independent site is [Latinx Lens](#), a weekly podcast hosted by Catherine Gonzales and Rosa Parra, which focuses

BUSINESS JOURNALISM

Lacking Data, Lacking Analysis

Journalism about the business of documentary is generally consumer-focused, and press-release dependent. Journalists say that they find it hard to interest editors in longer, deeper pieces; they lack industry data to draw on; and they rarely understand the business ecology.

Journalism lacks reliable sources for independent, beat-grounded reporting on the industry. Both broadcasting and cable at least have some FCC reporting requirements, and are subject to publicly-available ratings information from audience-rating services such as Nielsen. Streamers are entirely opaque and unaccountable (Hersko, 2019). Aside from scanty information from quarterly investor calls and SEC filings, we have little concrete information, to answer basic economic or demographic questions about the documentary ecology. For instance, in February 2021, Amazon, which long had a policy of allowing anyone to place a documentary for sale on their platform, suddenly reversed its policy and stripped the site of uncurated documentaries. It provided no warning or explanation (Lindahl & Harris-Bridson, 2021). The rare in-depth works of research, e.g. by Documentarybusiness.com or Ampere Analysis, are oriented to the corporate market and are expensive to produce and to purchase.

Mainstream media, such as the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *NPR*, prioritize longform fiction industry stories in reporting about film production. Reporters told us that they face discouraging comments in suggesting documentary

stories. “That is not going to get us clicks,” was a comment repeatedly heard from editors. “So much journalism now functions on the basis of clicks,” said Peter Hamilton, an industry veteran.

Occasional stories—for instance, the *New York Times* article on internationally controversial films not picked up by streamers with multinational audiences, or the *Rolling Stone* piece on the problematic sensationalism of Netflix’s true-crime mini-series, *The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* (Dickson, 2021)—rarely are followed up, or picked up by other outlets. A flurry of mainstream articles reporting on a public letter written by BIPOC filmmakers that critiques PBS for ignoring independent BIPOC makers

Business journalism about the documentary field is starved for reliable raw data, and there are few beat reporters.



The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel attracted criticism in written reviews but generated little discussion within the field.

shows no awareness of the long history of this issue (Wicker, 2021; Deggans, 2021). In fact, filmmakers have been a force pushing for greater diversity in public television since the 1970s, and more recently in 2013 and 2015 led a nation-wide protest against PBS' proposed removal of the two most diverse series (*POV* and *Independent Lens*) from its prime-time schedule (Das, 2015; Rainey, 2015). Those earlier efforts consistently have failed to get mainstream coverage, and the 2021 coverage did not provide such context for the current demands.

Without beat reporters on documentary business, it is difficult for either journalists or editors to accumulate either sources or a knowledge base on issues. Without regular beat coverage, one-time reporting, no matter how good, lacks the follow-up and pick-up that ensures a wider awareness and conversation.

So business reporting on documentary tends to be shallow. *Variety* and *Hollywood Reporter*, now under one roof, typically report headline, horse-race news, as well as sometimes-excellent business trends analysis, as well as industry-oriented reviews. *The Wrap*'s beat includes documentary, but not from an investigative or trends analysis perspective. *Realscreen* is dependably an outlet for press releases. *Indiewire* is an analytical news source, with a staff of industry reporters, but does not focus primarily on documentaries. Peter Hamilton's highly-topical, fact-grounded site, richly researched *Documentarytelevision.com* provides in-depth dives into the terms of business and latest news from markets and festivals, but rarely addresses the social, economic, and political implications of the trends reported on. Membership magazines, such as *Documentary* (IDA), *American Cinematographer* (American Society of Cinematographers) and *Filmmaker* (The Gotham, formerly IFP), sometimes cover industry trends and their implications for filmmakers. For instance, a recent *Filmmaker* article discussed the [shutout of independent work](#) on Amazon's Prime Video Direct (Kaufman, 2021). Their primary function of service to membership, however, constrains them both in terms of resources and focus.

Media watchdog sites occasionally cover documentary issues, but not consistently. *Columbia Journalism Review*, the nation's premier site for watchdogging journalism, occasionally covers documentary issues, with guest writers. CJR articles that even use the phrase "documentary film" in passing averaged five a year between 2016-2021. Some of those articles pick up big topics, e.g. June Cross' [challenge of the constructed distinction](#) between journalism and documentary, Danny Funt's analysis of [uncomfortably close relationships between filmmakers and celebrity subjects](#), Judith Matloff on the dangers to documentary from [legal intimidation techniques](#). The online site 100Reporters, which also sponsors the Double Exposure Film Festival on investigative documentaries, in 2020 published a deeply-researched investigative piece on [sponsorship of documentaries](#) marketed as independents (Schwab, 2019).

Finally, some academic publications and think tanks produce analysis that contributes to a better understanding of documentary form and process. The Center for Media & Social Impact's research [on diversity in public and commercial outlets for documentary](#), on the [social effects of documentary circulation](#), and on [economic sustainability of the filmmaking field](#) are examples. Journals such as *Cineaste*, *Film Quarterly*, and *Journal of Film and Video* might address documentary form and

ethics. The *Journal of Media Ethics* sometimes includes discussion of ethics of documentaries. Without vigorous promotion in the field, though, such work can remain within the academic silo, although it often is incorporated into the classroom.

So many questions—about the role of funders, accuracy, representation, framing, conflict of interest or undue influence—go unasked and unanswered.

WHY IS THE CIRCULATORY SYSTEM OF INFORMATION ON DOCUMENTARY IN POOR SHAPE?

Journalism is an element of a circulatory system of information, in which journalism is in dialog with a variety of other actors: filmmakers, programmers, scholars, museums, galleries, corporations, government regulators. The weaknesses of journalism point to a larger weakness in this circulatory system. What accounts for this failure? Our interviewees provided a variety of reasons.

One stark reality looming over any other considerations is the crisis of journalism more generally. The rapid decline in local journalism is most stark, but just as notable is the decline in the revenues of the entire sector of reporting (Clark & Chideya,

2021). This is both an economic crisis and a mission crisis, as public skepticism about the reliability of journalism grows. This makes a zone of journalism already branded as entertainment seem dispensable.

Journalism's economic crises limit the time and effort writers can devote to documentary.

Another large issue looms over journalists and their editors: The field of documentary itself has no articulated standards to hold itself to, which means that journalists also have no

field standards to refer to in their criticism. Critiques published in media watchdog outlets typically use journalistic standards, which are not generally amiss. But they also do not consider a range of issues particularly appropriate to independent documentary, such as ethical questions around re-enactment, the consequences of months- or years-long relationships with subjects, the commercial pressures to focus on individual rather than systemic issues, the implications of filmmakers from a privileged group telling the story of someone from an oppressed group, or the definition of “independent” itself. A media ethicist, Prof. Ginny Whitehouse, told us bluntly, “In order to have an ethics discussion, you have to start with a common understanding of what is ethical.”

Within those twin alarming realities, other forces buffet the aspiring journalist. There is the power of the editor. Coverage of BIPOC, disabled and other disenfranchised

voices in documentary film can be inhibited by ignorance on the part of white editors, who may not believe those topics or artists are relevant to their readership/viewership/listenership. José Solís said, “Every editor running every arts section in every single major publication is a white person. So our stories really don’t matter to them. Not because they’re bad people, but simply since we don’t share the same background that they come from.” Another interviewee, who preferred anonymity, explained recent public discourse around race has opened pathways for writers to explore issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion. However, it’s unclear whether this effect will last. “Right now, we’re in a moment where systemic racism is a thing that every editor has now heard of. But there’s also the fatigue part of the cycle. So now, the onus is on you to find the unique angle... Are you saying something about the industry that we haven’t already heard before? What makes it something that people are going to want to click on?”

Public relations staff and organizations also wield power. Arts journalism in general is a close partner of public relations. Arts journalists are typically beholden to public relations reps for access, and often see themselves as supporting embattled artists. Public relations staff hold the keys of access over the journalists. One interviewee, who chose anonymity, explained, “You run into this brick wall because a lot of the time my interface is with the publicist. And they’re not going to tell me, even if they know. They’re not working for me; they don’t owe me anything.” As well, major organizations (e.g., the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts and Sciences; large media companies) can easily blackball nonconforming journalists entirely—a career-killer. This is far more relevant to writers who are freelancers than to well-established journalists at major papers, but even they are aware of the need to cultivate those relationships.

Arts journalism in general-interest media is also commonly understood as a consumer service. Editors and producers typically slot it with an eye to answer the user’s question, “Do I want to watch this?” Moreover, documentary falls between journalism and the arts. Readers and editors alike do not feel the need to put documentaries under the kind of scrutiny they might reserve for journalism. Neither do they find documentary as entertaining as the fiction film world. “There’s a need to counter the [editor’s] perception that documentary is sort of obscure and uninteresting,” said critic Charlie Phillips.

Critics rarely get training specific to the form, and, since they are seen as stand-ins for the audience, they are not expected to have any special knowledge. “I think that the understanding of why a documentary film is a different kind of film than a traditional scripted fictional narrative is just totally lacking,” said critic Alissa Wilkinson. Phillips commented, “You get a lot of general writers and reviewers who aren’t really equipped or engaged with the history of documentaries; they’re not knowledgeable about the industry. It’s entirely seen as information distribution/journalism, and not as a creative work.”

Writers can find themselves with a conflict of interest, if a funder of their outlet is a funder of a film, or is the target of a film. As well, writers are sometimes also filmmakers, and need the support of their own field; they pay a price in their own careers for any criticism. “It’s a great risk to your career to ask certain questions about certain films,” warned Peter Hamilton.

Critics lack the time to independently research documentaries to verify facts. “If you’re writing about documentary and you ask a simple question—Is that actually the way that happened? Is this right? Is this fair?—suddenly you’re engaged in a research project and the time frame for finishing that has gone from an afternoon to a week,” said critic Phillip Kennicott. Another critic, who preferred anonymity, agreed: “On the beat you wind up being a dilettante about everything because every film that you write about is about something else.”

WHAT COULD IMPROVE THE SITUATION?

Our interviewees offered a range of suggestions for bolstering the robustness of journalism about documentary. They presumed, with our encouragement, that it would be possible to find foundation support for a worthy initiative. Indeed, private philanthropy has quadrupled recently for journalism in crisis, and a recent report analyzes different approaches (Clark & Chideya, 2021).

We group the suggestions below by category.

Documentarians need to articulate and publicize the standards of their field.

Interviewees came back again and again to the fact that the field of documentary filmmaking is currently ungoverned by ethical standards. Without such standards, filmmakers not only lack norms but an ability to point to standards when working with networks and streamers. Corporate executives can simply claim, as does Netflix’ Reed Hastings, that they are merely providing entertainment. Journalistic scrutiny might bring attention to the lack of standards, but it will never compensate for it. Porting over journalistic standards to a form that many viewers choose precisely because it is not “merely” journalistic, because it is emotionally rich, point-of-view storytelling, can be ineffective and unconvincing. Our interviewees also wanted any standards documents to empower filmmakers rather than restrain creativity. They also stressed that practicing transparency would be as important as articulating values would be.

Currently in-process best-practices documents may be good steps forward. The [Documentary Accountability Working Group](#) is circulating within the filmmaking community a proposed set of values to guide more equitable and less exploitative documentary filmmaking. [FWD-Doc](#) has created a guide for writers about disability in film. [Undocumented Filmmakers Collective](#) is producing a standards document for people who are asked to be filmed for a documentary.

Interviewees also believed that a potent force for change, including encouraging more interest in standards-setting, was public conversation. They pointed to festivals, museums, publications, and of course documentary organizations themselves. Universities, particularly within journalism programs, have the ability to convene and host stakeholder discussions. Other organizations are also possible venues for

creation, endorsement, and publicizing of standards. The International Documentary Association has a biennial conference and has developed a policy and advocacy wing. The University Film and Video Association (UFVA) has an annual conference and a Documentary Working Group. Editmedia.org, a best-practices project with roots in UFVA, which promotes equity, inclusion and diversity in teaching media, is another potential venue.

Increase the space within journalism for coverage of the documentary scene.

Even in a harsh journalistic environment, our interlocutors believed that there were ways to increase coverage and analysis of the documentary scene. Investigative journalism is expensive, and often, as with Pro Publica, Reveal, and the Investigative Reporting Workshop, supported by donations. Even routine business coverage depends on a sustained engagement with the area, which at a time of crisis in journalism is beyond many outlets' resources or business plans. So our interviewees' suggestions focused not only on the creation of new opportunities within and beyond existing outlets, but also on outside support for such work. Interviewees, however, cautioned that private foundation support could also create a conflict of interest with the mission of investigative reporting. This is because many foundations that would want to see more such reporting might also be providing funding for documentaries.

Pitch more news about the field to journalists, which could happen by such measures as:

- Disseminate this report widely;
- Generate more analysis by graduate students and faculty members in the documentary area, creating public-facing versions of it;
- Have festivals, museums, publications, universities and trade associations hold events that showcase accountability issues and offer journalists, documentarians, editors, and funders a chance to engage each other around both accountability and the realities of the field. Newspaper editor Janice Page said, "I really believe that what you need to do is connect the different forces that all believe that documentary and journalism and truth-telling are worthwhile... There's not enough emphasis put into trying to connect these parties." One model is the [Based on a True Story](#) conference, conducted at the University of Missouri's journalism school in conjunction with the True/False Film Festival;
- Start a watchdog entity—suggestions included an online news site; a podcast; or a newsletter—at a university that has both journalism and documentary programs. Thus, the entity could employ students and recent alumni from its own programs and train them, perhaps working with outlets to place their work;
- Develop fellowships for researchers at investigative journalism nonprofits for research or a watchdog project on documentary business.

Encourage promotion from watchdog sites to mainstream publications to cover their work on documentary filmmaking.

- Encourage journalistic outlets to try a critical editorial approach that uses a “New York Review of Books model” for discussing documentaries, with experts on the topic and the form addressing not just individual projects but groups and trends. This could be folded into existing reviews and op-ed sections. Indeed, the *NYRB*, the *Los Angeles Review of Books* and the *London Review of Books* occasionally publish articles on documentary film;
- Expand awards and recognition for journalism about documentary filmmaking, whether within existing awards bodies, within film festivals, at documentary film membership organizations, or through conferences.

Increase the space for criticism, particularly from diverse and disenfranchised perspectives, about documentary.

People suggested that investing in opportunities for rising journalistic talent, creating guides, and providing training would all help. Other, more specific suggestions included:

- Expand opportunities for BIPOC and other less-heard voices to attend film festivals, building on examples from Sundance and the Toronto International Film Festival. That model itself has [faced critique](#) (Sotomayor, 2021), for underfunding and poor communication. But those critiques do not impair the value of the model;
- Support fellowships for BIPOC and other less-heard voices to publish and research on this topic, on the [Nieman Journalism Fellows](#) model; the IDA’s [Documentary Magazine Editorial Initiative](#) is another, less ambitious model;
- Journalistic enterprises could foreground hires and subject-matter focus on BIPOC and other less-heard voices. As in any area where anti-racism and equality in general is the goal, making it a top priority for policy change (e.g. in hiring, coverage, focus) is essential (Kendi, 2019);
- Develop workshops and events providing critical/analytical training for critics, possibly through a university, a film festival, or an arts institution of another kind;
- Create fellowships on the [Alicia Patterson Foundation](#) model, to allow a journalist to devote substantial time to a single research area in documentary filmmaking, of their own choosing and without funder bias;
- Support smaller and more experimental journals, podcasts, video series, and newsletters, for production that links to events and public discussions at other venues such as festivals, museums, and academic association conferences;

- Host/fund projects that spur creative approaches to criticism, again in conjunction with public events that spur conversations. One model is the [Working on It](#) initiative offered at the Museum of the Moving Image's First Look Film Festival, which focuses on the filmmaking process. A newly launched workshop brings together critics and independent documentary filmmakers in a collaborative laboratory setting.

CONCLUSION

Documentary filmmaking has enjoyed exponential growth in recent years, capturing the attention and trust of a rapidly growing audience. It has also become a highly influential, important part of public culture. Despite that reality, this vitally important field has yet to develop and broadly embrace an anchoring set of values and expectations of its own—values that address the unique needs of this versatile storytelling medium. This genre is anchored in a claim to represent something that really happened in a way that is fair both to the people in the film and the people watching it.

Given these qualities, documentary is ideally situated to sway public opinion, shape the public's perception of reality, and inspire action. As such, it deserves scrutiny from reporters covering the business of media, critics analyzing the form itself, and from media watchdogs.

Closing the gaps within the current state of reporting on documentary film will require work and collaboration among journalists as well as among filmmakers themselves. Filmmakers can articulate shared values to hew true to the fundamental claims of the form. Journalists and media watchdogs can look at how business trends affect the ability to accomplish those claims. Critics and their supporting institutions can diversify the perspectives available to understand the form. Advocates, policymakers and funders can enable more accountability, in ways that permit filmmakers to do what they regard as best practices in an imperfect world.

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APPENDIX

Appreciation is extended to the following participants who chose to be recognized as interviewees and other individuals who preferred to remain anonymous.

Christopher Allen,

Co-Founder & Executive Art Director, UnionDocs

John Anderson,

Film & Television Critic, Independent

Jody Arlington,

Public Relations, SXSW

Ashley Clark,

Curatorial director, The Criterion Collection

Jessica Clark,

Founder and Executive Director, Dot Connector Studio

Brenda Coughlin,

Director of Producing and Impact Strategy,
Sundance Institute

Noah Cowan,

Head, Noah Cowan Consulting

Jessica Devaney,

Founder & President, Multitude Films

Julie Drizin,

Executive Director, Current

David Eisenberg

Senior Director of Production, ITVS

Giacomo Francia,

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Sam Fullwood III

Dean, American University's School of Communication

Jon Funabiki

Founder & Executive Director, Renaissance Journalism

Peter Hamilton,

Director, Documentary Business

Phillip Kennicott,

Art & Architecture Critic, The Washington Post

David Kurpius,

Dean of Journalism, Missouri School of Journalism

David Lieberman,

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Charlie Phillips,

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Independent Documentary Filmmaker

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Tim Schwab,

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Jose Solís,

Cultural Critic & Founder, Token Theater Friends

Kristal Sotomayor,

Filmmaker & Journalist, Independent

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Filmmaker & Critic, Independent



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