



THE STATE OF THE DOCUMENTARY FIELD

2026 STUDY OF GLOBAL DOCUMENTARY PROFESSIONALS

**CONVERSATIONS WITH DOCUMENTARY
THINKERS AND DOERS ABOUT
A CRITICAL MOMENT IN U.S.
DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKING AND
DISTRIBUTION**

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ABOUT THE CENTER FOR MEDIA & SOCIAL IMPACT



 SCHOOL of COMMUNICATION
AMERICAN UNIVERSITY • WASHINGTON, DC

The Center for Media & Social Impact (CMSI), based at American University's School of Communication in Washington, D.C., is a creative innovation lab and research center that creates, studies, and showcases media and storytelling for human rights, social good, and civic participation. Focusing on three core themes—*Documentary & Independent Media*, *Participatory & Civic Media*, and *Entertainment & Popular Culture*—the Center bridges boundaries between scholars, producers and communication practitioners across media industries, social justice, public policy, and public engagement. CMSI produces resources for the field and academic research; creates original media; convenes conferences and events; and works collaboratively to understand and design media that matter cmsimpact.org

ABOUT THIS REPORT

In 2025, as part of the long-running *State of the Documentary Field* initiative, the Center for Media & Social Impact research team facilitated and captured 17 in-depth interviews with documentary professionals. While the interview participants include filmmakers and producers who work on films around the world, the focus of interview discussions was primarily around recent trends in U.S. documentary filmmaking. Conversations centered on the country's recent upheaval in public media and rapid rise of commercial distribution over the last few years; the ripple effect of trends and changes in the U.S. has global implications. Most of the interview participants reside and primarily work in the United States. Interviews took place on Zoom and phone, recorded with informed consent; on average, interviews took about 45 minutes. Interviewees included members of the following groups of documentary community professionals:

 **Primary Makers:** directors and producers

 **Professionals:** nonprofit and foundation leaders, funders, outreach experts, distributors, marketers

 **Impact Professionals:** impact producers, outreach experts, documentary organizers

Interviewees included:

- Alex Kelly: Producer and Impact Producer, Australia
- Alison Byrne Fields: Producer and Impact Producer, United States
- Amanda Upson: Producer, United States
- Chloe Genga: Filmmaker and Impact Producer, Kenya
- Diane Quon: Producer, United States
- Ian Robertson Kibbe: Filmmaker and Writer, United States
- Jenni Wolfson: CEO of Chicken & Egg Films, United States
- Lance Kramer: Director and Producer, United States
- PJ Raval: Director and Producer, United States
- Megha Agrawal Sood: Co-Executive Director of Doc Society, United States
- Sara Archambault, Producer/Director and Program Director for the Shorenstein Center's Documentary Film in the Public Interest program, United States
- Sonya Childress: Co-Executive Director of Color Congress and Cultural Strategist, United States
- Susan Margolin: Producer and Digital Film Distributor, United States
- Stephanie Palumbo: Director of Film Impact and Innovation at Peace is Loud, United States
- Anonymous Impact Strategist #1
- Anonymous Producer #1
- Anonymous Film Executive #1

In parallel with the survey results for the *State of the Documentary Field* initiative, interviewees shared their perspective about a range of challenges and motivations for independent documentary work in a complex time for media makers. The following report provides highlights organized by key themes:



CHALLENGES AND TRENDS: FUNDING, DISTRIBUTION, AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

- *Distribution and Funding: The Complex Combination of the Political Moment and the Business Model of Major Media Platforms*
- *A New Culture of Fear: The Implications of Public Media Precarity*
- *Risk Aversion: A Growing Divide Between Streamers and Social-Issue Films*
- *On Escalating Censorship and Self-Censorship*
- *The Challenge and Opportunity of Artificial Intelligence*
- *An Opportunity to Collaborate*



A WAY FORWARD: OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION

- *Coalitions and Learning from Grassroots Movements*
- *Collective and Cooperative Distribution Models*
- *Bringing New Funding and Educating Funders*
- *Alternative Channels and Visibility/"Discoverability"*
- *Media Policy and Regulation*
- *Ethics and Documentary Participants' Rights*
- *Return to Filmmaking as a Public Good (and Community Storytelling Models)*
- *A Growing Market For Independent, Political Films*
- *Tenacity of Independent Documentary Filmmakers*

INTERVIEW HIGHLIGHTS

Documentary filmmakers and advocates see the interconnected issues of censorship/self-censorship, the disappearance of funding, and ever-narrowing distribution channels as the biggest challenges they face today. They identify the combination of the political moment (from cutting funds to expanding censorship pressures) with the consolidating business models of commercial and streaming platforms (which increasingly favor celebrity and noncontroversial documentaries) as the roots of these issues. At the same time, according to our interviewees, these same challenges, trends, and issues are creating opportunities for new models of collaboration and distribution, as filmmakers and other actors are pushed by these same conditions to collaborate more and to think about different ways of reaching their audiences.

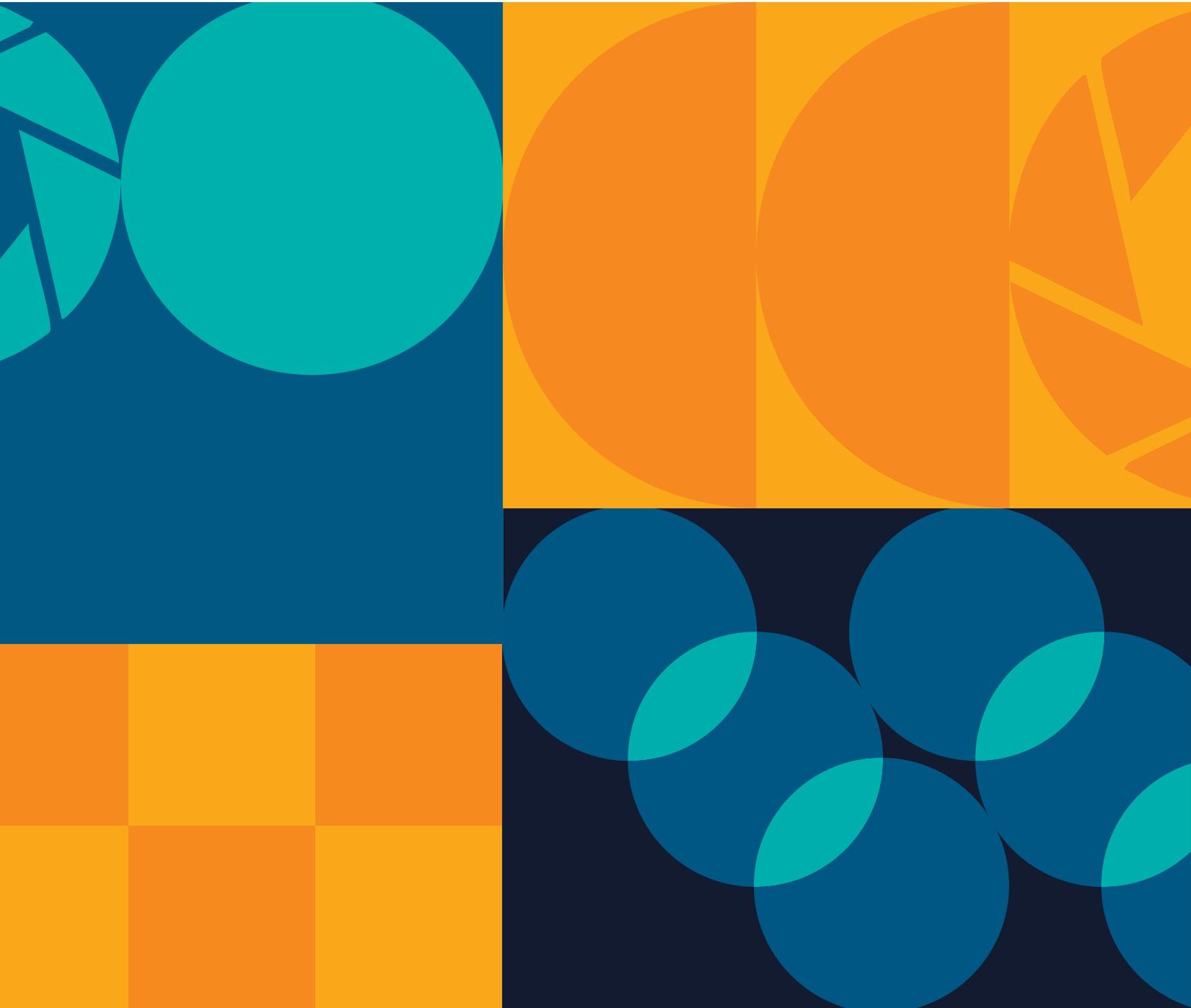
In July 2025, PBS and NPR lost \$1.1 billion in public broadcasting funds. As a result, PBS had to make significant reductions to its budget while the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), which supported independent documentaries through PBS for almost 60 years, announced its closure. Meanwhile, the commercial platforms and streamers are continuing to invest in celebrity and true-crime documentaries while generally avoiding controversial and political films. Despite these escalating pressures and trends, our interviewees also emphasized that more and more people are making independent social-issue films.

Filmmakers, advocates, and impact producers emphasized the need for new distribution approaches that center around cooperation and collaboration—including with grassroots movements and historically marginalized communities—to overcome today's challenges. They also talked about the need to bring more funders to the table and explore new ways that documentary can reach their audiences, such as producing more short films, utilizing different platforms including YouTube, and expanding into different markets, such as international audiences. According to our interviewees, today's challenges are raising the urgency of collaboration, as well as heightening the need for filmmakers and advocates to better organize and unionize, not only to address their problems and support each other but also to resist the current political moment and commercial business models before they become even more entrenched.

PART 1

CHALLENGES AND TRENDS

FUNDING, DISTRIBUTION, AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION



DISTRIBUTION AND FUNDING: THE COMPLEX COMBINATION OF THE POLITICAL MOMENT AND THE BUSINESS MODEL OF MAJOR MEDIA PLATFORMS

"We're at a moment in time where public good is not being prioritized," said filmmaker, impact producer, and Director of Film Impact and Innovation at Peace is Loud, **Stephanie Palumbo**. She pointed to several "existential challenges," including a dominant challenge in which: "funding is being cut to public media and to the arts and the commercial platforms as they prioritize true crime, celebrity, or music documentaries." Palumbo emphasized that legacy institutions that have long supported documentary film are "either losing their funding or are in jeopardy of being persecuted for supporting... films made by people of color, by trans people or immigrants."

Impact producer, cultural strategist, and founding Co-Director of Color Congress, **Sonya Childress**, also found this to be an "existential" moment for the field, fueled by a trio of interconnected pressures:



"I think the most significant challenge right now is funding. The gutting of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting is an existential threat to an art form that is largely federally funded, unlike most art forms... And to cut that funding and siphon that funding off [will] have an extremely negative impact on the ability of especially diverse bankers to make documentary work. And especially [to] make work that's feature-length broadcasting. And then not only just funding for the production, but then the dismantling of the system by which many of those films get seen by people—so, the broadcast capability as well. Also, there hasn't been defunding...but philanthropy's rollbacks on films is also having a compounded impact. And then the third place in which documentary films were receiving funding from—the commercial sector—and their pullback from any film content that's either overtly political, politically progressive, or films that are looking at issues that are now deemed DEI issues. They were of interest five years ago and are now being cast aside and less resourced. And so all of those—the commercial drawback, the philanthropic drawback, the federal defunding—are the biggest threat to doc filmmaking right now in this country."

—Sonya Childress

Filmmaker and Program Director for the Shorenstein Center's Documentary Film at Harvard's Kennedy School, **Sara Archambault**, similarly highlighted that a constellation of related problems is causing the biggest disruption to distribution models. Particularly for public interest documentaries, she noted, public media's potential collapse and commercial media's consolidation around "true crime, celebrity, biography, cults, et cetera" are creating an untenable situation for the field. While entertainment style films can sometimes be a "Trojan horse for wonderful public interest work," she said, "but more often than not; they are answerable to metrics of mass entertainment and not to public good." She continued:



"So, those commercially driven motivations for profit over people, seeing people as consumers over citizens is a major problem for those of us who are doing public interest minded work...we don't see distribution at a wide scale, for particularly a lot of social impact documentaries. And I think none of this is new. I mean, it's news in that everybody in the field sort of knows it, right? And that these incredible films, either aren't able to reach audiences or have to do an enormous amount of labor and, raise money to be able to self-distribute their films."

—**Sara Archambault**

Jenni Wolfson, human rights activist, storyteller, and CEO of Chicken & Egg Films, also pointed to old issues around funding and distribution that are being exacerbated by the political and commercial moment as posing the biggest challenges facing filmmakers. She said: "I'm sure it's partly the political moment and, you know, companies themselves concerned about the broader political environment and how that might impact their business models."

"[T]he biggest challenge is distribution," said filmmaker and former executive at NBC and Paramount Pictures, **Diane Quon**, adding that it's the result of both cutting public media's funds and the streamers' approach. "[W]ith all the mergers and acquisitions, there's just less people to go to in the first place. And then in the second place is just the kind of content that they are preferring, in terms of themes and topics....celebrity and true-crime documentaries is more and more what the buyers want."

Filmmaker and head of Climate Story Unit at Doc Society, **Megha Agrawal Sood**, similarly said "the biggest challenges in the field are funding and distribution..." and added that this is because of both government policies and changes in the streamers approach to documentaries. Agrawal Sood said individual donors are also not spending as much. As a result, self-censorship is inevitable, she added; "You can't deny that today's climate is not impacting how a filmmaker may position or frame a project in order to feel like a quote-unquote 'safe bet' from established stakeholders."

A NEW CULTURE OF FEAR: THE IMPLICATIONS OF PUBLIC MEDIA PRECARITY

An impact strategist who did not want to be named emphasized that “the biggest challenge is the disruption this new administration is causing.” According to the impact strategist, “we’re seeing things that should not be legal happen anyway or things that are illegal happen anyway... The disruption, the distrust that grows between partners that have been working together for years, sometimes decades, is being eroded.” And within the industry, they noted, “we’re kind of losing allies and folks are turning on each other.”

Part of this is because of surveillance and fear as a result of the political moment:

“Folks are having their social media monitored in ways that haven’t happened before... So it’s kind of this big thing of word salad and word soup where we’re just throwing words around, moving them around and trying to be in the good graces of anyone who has the money and to not be offensive, to funders or the government. So, I think there’s a lot of fear, and I think fear is the biggest issue right now in a time where we need to see courage, and we need to stand up for the rights that we have now before they’re taken away.”

—Impact Strategist

Sonya Childress noted her particular concern over the rise of political disinvestment:

“The golden age, brought on by the commercial streamers’ investment in docu-nonfiction filmmaking, is so new. And it was in many ways a blip on the screen. The history of documentary filmmaking is a history about federal investment. It’s a history about investment that flows through Corporation for Public Broadcasting through PBS into stations, or into strands, or into ITVS. The blip on the screen was commercial money, whether that was cable television 15 years ago, HBO, or Netflix, but to me, the bulk of doc documentary films were not in large quantities resourced through the commercial sector. They simply got bigger audiences and bigger budgets from the commercial sector. But the bread and butter of documentary filmmaking is resourced and made possible from both production and outreach and distribution through the federal system. And that dismantling is to me, well, obviously that’s political and that’s very new. So, the new commercial investment and the divestment is actually not having as much of an impact to me as the federal disinvestment. But I think they’re both political, I think it’s all political.”

—Sonya Childress

Filmmaker and cinematographer **PJ Raval** agrees. “I mean, I hate to be so obvious, but it’s funding,” said Raval. According to Raval, even public media is avoiding “hot-button” controversial social and political issues. “Public media is obviously having a real attack. And then I think the challenge there is also, if I’m making things that are maybe quote-unquote ‘hot button’ issues, then public media also shies away from it.”

According to filmmaker and co-founder of Meridian Hill Pictures **Lance Kramer**, the assault on public media is the biggest issue in the documentary field right now, and it affects everyone: “it’s of course the assault on public media [that is the biggest industry issue of the moment]. And the, you know, removal of funding for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the cancellation of grants... the removal of certain documentary strands, like *America Reframed*... So this, the assault on public media and its support for nonfiction, independent storytelling in particular, I think is extremely detrimental... even for people like us who are not currently supported by public media.”

As a result of the funding crisis, **Stephanie Palumbo** raises a series of important questions:

“Who gets to make films now? Because of the funding crisis, you know, are we going to just see more documentaries, even it’s already skewed this way, but are we going to see even more, you know, from people in terms of economic class, who have the financial means to sustain themselves and fund a film, or who have wealthy networks and who does that exclude? And whose voices does that exclude? And is it going to push people... out of the field because they can’t financially sustain it?”

—**Stephanie Palumbo**

Chloe Genga, filmmaker and impact producer based in Kenya, talked about how an assault on public media and budget cuts in the U.S. and Europe are also affecting filmmakers elsewhere. “The biggest challenge that a lot of people are facing globally is all the budget cuts,” Genga said. As result of this, Western commercial and public media are not paying for films like they used to anymore, and so filmmakers in Africa are also using direct community screenings to solve the distribution problem.

“The broadcasters and the streamers that used to acquire these documentaries are now... taking them at lower costs. We have broadcasters, like POV, which were like the main broadcast acquirers when it came to documentaries, and they’re also shutting down. [I]t’s a global crisis at the moment. And that’s why I think there’s a shift towards impact producing where a lot of filmmakers are like, let’s take the film directly to these communities and audiences. But now the problem is sustainability.”

—**Chloe Genga**

She added that “from the African perspective, funding is also really short as well. So it also trickled down to us with the budget cuts and all the governments, because a lot of our funding comes from Europe and North America.” To overcome funding struggles, filmmakers in Kenya often co-produce with a Western partner, but this then influences the storytelling and alienates the local audiences:

“And then... you end up doing like a co-production. And so when you do the co-production, it’s really important to have the right partner because sometimes if you have a partner who is bringing the financial, most of the financial support, then sometimes they tell the story from a different perspective that may make more sense to them, even without knowing. And they push for that. And so sometimes that leaves local filmmakers telling the story in a way that local audiences don’t necessarily relate to.”

—Chloe Genga

She said that although when a Western partner who has the funding pushes their approach and storytelling, even with a good story based on their country, African audiences “don’t consume the film the way it should, because they know it’s not a film for them.”

Genga also emphasized there’s a global trend of defunding arts and culture as right-wing governments and approaches are on the rise globally:

“So, because a lot of funding came from NGOs, from governments, from grants... for instance, in Kenya a lot of our funding comes from, when it comes to the film industry, it’s Europe and North America... from Germany and France. And so they have done a lot of budget cuts in terms of the money that they’re putting in. So that’s also trickled down. And then also just across the region and the globe with a lot of right-wing governments coming in... before when it was more left-wing, they were more open to supporting arts and culture, especially here in Africa. But the more right-wing it goes, the more they’re not open to it... here in Africa, we don’t have the right infrastructures and channels. So most of the funding, it’s very donor heavy at the moment. So that’s why the funding cuts affects us.”

—Chloe Genga

According to impact producer and founder of Aggregate **Alison Byrne Fields**, the rise of authoritarianism is the main problem: “We need to be figuring out how to contribute to countering the authoritarianism around the world and the misinformation that is leading people to fall prey to a lot of the ideas and policies of people who want to take away our rights and civil liberties.” She also added that this would also create an opportunity to challenge both political and commercial pressures: “I feel like it’s almost this huge opportunity... we kind of need to let go of the shackles of market forces and policy forces to say ‘oh, no, no, this is our role right now.’ This is it. We have to step up because we have a big problem that’s much bigger than whether or not our film gets seen.”

According to filmmaker and pioneer of digital film distribution **Susan Margolin**, the biggest challenge now is “the global assault on democracy and global trend toward autocracy, and that’s a problem that goes beyond just our field but, you know, [also] directly affecting our field.” Margolin said “that the PBS funding problem is, you know, specific to the political moment that we’re in. I think that... the Trump administration is taking aim at media that it considers unfriendly... retribution and the desire to control [the] media.”

RISK AVERSION: A GROWING DIVIDE BETWEEN STREAMERS' BUSINESS MODELS AND SOCIAL-ISSUE FILMS

According to **Stephanie Palumbo**, impact work for social-issue documentaries are at odds with the priorities of the streaming platforms:



"... our whole focus is on working with filmmakers, participants, organizers to use their films as a tool to advance social justice and in particular gender justice. And when their films have had distribution on the streamers, and especially exclusive distribution, there are so many times where it has felt like that is directly at odds with the streamers' priorities."

—Stephanie Palumbo

She added that the very interests and values of commercial distributors seem to increasingly be antithetical to why many filmmakers make films in the first place. And while the differences may have been at least somewhat reconcilable on some occasions in the past, they are no longer. "Ideally," she notes, distributors would understand that many filmmakers see:



...films as tools, as mass movement building tools... to build a mass movement to increase civic engagement, to increase people's engagement in political organizing, withhold their labor and go on strike to strengthen and form unions to disrupt the flow of capital ... and to advance the human rights of people who are currently being oppressed. And I think the streamer's interests are really just so at odds with that... I mean, I think they want to advance the flow of capital. They don't want disruption to it, and they want ... the status quo to continue. They want political favor, right? I mean, we see deals being made to make Melania documentaries... I mean, we see that political alignment. . . And so what I've found is that even when streamers pick up a political film and want to distribute a political film, they don't want it to be political. They want to depoliticize it and deemphasize the political nature and make it more gentle and non-threatening and appealing to all of their audiences, including folks who aren't aligned."

—Stephanie Palumbo

According to **PJ Raval**, there has never been a real interest shown by the streamers in independent social issue documentaries: "... there is this false narrative that there was a golden age of documentary... that's a fallacy. The golden age of documentary meant there were a couple filmmakers who made a lot of money through acquisitions. Because of their documentaries. But in my experience, nowhere did that span the total documentary community. Especially the ones that I've been part of..."

Similarly, **Sara Archambaut** said that "we all have to be somewhat braver about the future that we are facing. It's not the boom time for documentary that I think a lot of people want to hold onto. It was a blip in the history of this form. It was an ascending balloon that popped."

Jenni Wolfson agreed: "I don't think the documentary system was working great right before this moment. Yeah. And certainly not for, you know, underrepresented and marginalized filmmakers. So, it is an opportunity to rethink models."

Filmmaker and the Founder of Tuck and Roll Productions, **Amanda Upson**, has observed that despite "massive audience interest" in documentaries, there is no commercial support for the field, "unless it's a true crime documentary... or celebrity." Part of this, she argues, is based on bad audience data and misconceptions among distributors, alongside a difficult to dismantle culture of disinterest in films that represent marginalized and underrepresented communities, including audiences with disabilities:



"This is where we get to talk about disability and how disability isn't seen on screen. And when there is so little disability represented on screen, and even less disability represented behind the camera, anytime you approach a streamer or broadcaster that is focused on mainstream commercial media and utter the word disability, you can almost guarantee you have shut the door and you, no matter how much data you provide, no matter how much information on audience size you provide, and no matter how much good data on comms you provide, you are still in an even worse position. So, you know, I think broadcasters and streamers need to do their own research on audience and what audiences will watch. Because one of the things that I repeatedly am told is that audiences will not consume media with disabled people on screen. And I think that, I don't think it's accurate, and I think it's based on bad data, but I think they don't know the actual size of the audience, and they don't actually know that. And part of the problem is when disability is represented on screen, oftentimes it's not authentic representation. And oftentimes the team working on it is not disabled. And oftentimes the team marketing it is not disabled. So what happens is you have a project that has disability in it that doesn't perform because the team doesn't know how to market it.

—Amanda Upson

Lance Kramer notes that, among distributors, he has witnessed increasing “fear and risk aversion” to anything that seems politically sensitive, controversial, or provocative:



“For a lot of the work that a lot of the bold and important work that independent documentary filmmakers create in the United States, I think [the trend in distribution] is making it such that the most urgent stories that actually do have broad appeal have increasingly fewer places to go.”

—Lance Kramer

Jenni Wolfson has also found that, behind the lack of serious documentary content on major distributions, is the truth that streaming platforms are “absolutely censoring” content:



*They’re not taking on sensitive content and people keep talking about the same examples, whether it’s about the Amazon union workers or **No Other Land** about the Israeli Palestinian conflict. People are going for safe subjects that are going to please wide audiences. And, I think they’re underestimating audiences. I think that there is a desire to watch serious well-made documentaries, and that’s the beautiful thing about documentaries.*

—Jenni Wolfson

Susan Margolin said that streamers have lost interest in documentary film, and so for their original programming strategies “they need to put their resources towards their multi-multimillion-dollar-per-episode, original programming, so documentaries are a distraction to them for the most part, except for a few where they might go for an awards play.” At the same time, Margolin notes how the streamers have squashed other potential distribution pathways for documentaries. “And the streamers the streamers have virtually, you know, they’ve disrupted the more traditional windowing of independent content. So that model no longer exists, which means that it’s very difficult to generate revenue for independent content.” Margolin explained their perspective on why streamers lost interest in documentary films from the perspective of their business model:



“...[w]hen Netflix had that subscriber loss and Wall Street kind of... pushed back and said, okay, you know, ‘the metrics of subscriber growth only those days are over. Now we’re looking for profitability from streaming platforms.’ And so streaming platforms had to look at their businesses differently. It wasn’t only about bringing on documentaries to as awards play and prestige, they really had to focus on profitability. So that means the big splashy original series and... that’s where the money resources and focus has gone.”

—Susan Margolin

A filmmaker who spoke on the condition of anonymity said that when they were talking to a sales agent recently, “not surprisingly his advice was like, look, if you want to make it, you should just be making something commercial. Like, find something that’s commercially successful. And, you know, my question was like, well, what does that mean?... I mean, I got what he meant. It was like, yeah, you know, celebrity true crime.”

According to **Diane Quon**, the streamers are using the flawed logic of “this is what the audiences want” to justify their choice of investing only in celebrity and true crime type documentaries and avoiding social issue films. Another reason the streamers are avoiding social-issue documentaries, Quon emphasizes, is about the political moment as they want to be safe and “stay away from” political issues.

Filmmaker, impact producer, and organizer **Alex Kelly** said that it’s very hard to do community screenings with the distribution agreements the streamers pushing: “...it is quite difficult to be able to still do non-theatrical screenings and use the film in the ways that we wanted to at a community level because of the, those [streaming] agreements.” She added that they had to turn down an offer from a streamer in Australia because of the non-theatrical clauses:



“...we had a big conversation with a streamer here that offered a considerable amount of money for the film that we’re making, but it would mean no non-theatrical exclusive on the platform. And that’s just not viable for us. You know, we are making a film in a community that specifically wants to make the film to reach people to share the story of the climate impacts and the case. So it’s weighing those things up. And I think the other thing, when you go on a streamer, you get some figures, like X number of people have watched it, and sometimes a territorial breakdown, but not the level of data that would be useful for us... when we’ve released films on video on demand, being able to see where people are watching it and rewatching it, and then paying attention to movements or organizations in those places, is really useful to us. So sometimes the streamers feel like a bit of a black box that you don’t get enough information back from.”

—Alex Kelly

According to **Chloe Genga**, the streamers’ business model is having a global impact in the documentary field as the streamers and other commercial platforms are not investing in social-issue documentaries as much: “now streamers aren’t seeing the need to [spend as much], and the entertainment value and the shock is more sellable. So they’re leaning more towards that. So the people, especially indie filmmakers, are really struggling to break even... So the money that they’re [streamers] giving and the, the content itself that they’re looking for, they want the more flashy, the more shocking, there’s a certain type of documentary they want, and a lot of indie films don’t fit within that scope of what they’re looking for.”

ON ESCALATING CENSORSHIP AND SELF-CENSORSHIP

As disinvestment in public media widens, trends in global politics are increasingly hostile to social-issue documentaries, and commercial platforms focus on producing entertainment-based celebrity and true crime documentaries for the bottom line, global documentary interviewees not only see examples of blatant censorship, but also self-censorship as having a significant chilling effect on the types of films being made and seen.

"We just saw the piece that just came out recently... on PBS where they asked the Art Spiegelman documentary to remove the piece of footage that criticized Trump," said **Stephanie Palumbo**. "I think there is both censorship from organizations... that either support film or fund film or distribute film. I think there's also, like a sort of compliance in advance where some of... that is happening, even when they've not been ordered by the government to censor these things... I think there's censorship also just even in film selection, in terms of what films do get funding at this point..."

According to **Lance Kramer**, the level of self-censorship taking place right now in the documentary field may almost be "as bad as" direct forms of censorship:



"I do think that the fear that people have of, you know, touching the third rail, poking the bear, however you want to think about it, as far as what sort of backlash things might provoke, has become so over dialed that there's such a narrowing effect of what has become, in a sense acceptable or marketable. And I'm talking specifically on any sort of corporate platforms... what's said is that I think that they're missing business opportunities... There are films and stories that I actually think have mass appeal... the fear of any sort of political backlash, in some ways even is stronger than whatever sort of upside there might be financially. And certainly they're not thinking at all about the social benefit."

—Lance Kramer

Kramer continued,



"...as we also have all these domestic and global conflicts... that are so urgent and that imperil so many people's lives, and that nonfiction, independent nonfiction storytellers have often been on the front lines of telling those stories. I think it's very, very important to figure out where those stories live.... This to me, I think is like one of the grave concerns that people are basically being left to look on social media as the only kind of frontier to get their information because they can't [find it elsewhere], because companies or otherwise are not taking the step to platform these stories."

—Lance Kramer

According to **Susan Margolin**, when both public and commercial channels try to avoid politically controversial films, then self-censorship becomes inevitable:



"[T]he streamers are not interested in politically challenging films. Most of the distributors are shying away from films that are controversial and now, you know, PBS is also currently, while they're still afloat, they're avoiding controversial film subjects for the most part. So, you know, that becomes its own form of censorship. Right? It's kind of self-censorship."

—Susan Margolin

An impact strategist who wished to not be named said that self-censorship among filmmakers and a fear of speaking out against current trends within—and outside of—the documentary field is likely the biggest challenge facing the future of documentary film:

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“So I think there’s a lot of fear, and I think fear is the biggest issue right now in a time where we need to see courage, and we need to stand up for the rights that we have now before they’re taken away. And we look up and we no longer have the right to say what we want. We don’t have the right to critique a government that might be a fascist government and looking like they are going to arrest anyone and everyone, whether you’re a citizen or not, and take your rights away where you won’t have due process. So I think it’s a scary time... ‘witch hunt’ comes to mind, fear, confusion.”

—**Impact Strategist**

Sonya Childress noted that censorship is appearing in many forms in the field today, including through the unspoken preferences made clear through distributor acquisition. While she said that current defunding and disinvestment of public media is causing censorship, so is blatant disinterest shown by commercial media in social issue films:

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“The commercial streaming platforms had a moment of deep investment in nonfiction filmmaking, [and] it came with deep curation... it was very clear to filmmakers that their passion projects, [if they] were about something that was either really small and intimate, or overtly, progressively political was likely not going to get acquired... So the streamers were imposing, have been imposing their own kind of censorship simply through their curation, what they were interested in buying, and what they were interested in commissioning. It wasn’t that they were turning all this political work down and censoring people’s voices as much as they weren’t buying it. They just weren’t looking for it, and they weren’t commissioning it by and large, with a few outliers. Public media has had its own experience as a censoring body. Although to a much lesser extent, it’s been a much more open platform...”

—**Sonya Childress**

According to **Alison Byrne Fields**, there's censorship "through denial of platforms to, or denial of funding, to be able to make things... clearly there is government censorship, but I also kind of want to flip it and say, 'well, how do we get creative to think about how to get, how to not rely solely on, on streamers to get our stories out there?'"

Amanda Upson said that there has always been pressure on filmmakers to find funding, but the current political climate is making it worse, and "that funders feeling more pressure to have a say in editorial decisions." She continued:

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"When you have a funder that is concerned about political pressure, you'll also have a funder that is telling you what you can and cannot say, is putting pressure on you to skew a story, you know, to a story editor providing editorial direction that lines up with the funder's desires."

—**Amanda Upson**

Upson added that "given the political climate in the US right now, I think funders feel more pressure to have a say in editorial decisions... there's too much censorship." She said that with the attack on DEI initiatives by the administration and after the January 2025 executive orders, documentaries on disability are being avoided by both the commercial and public media:

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"I think streamers are avoiding it. I think public media is avoiding it....Anybody who is concerned about repercussions from the administration is avoiding it. So I have a really hard time being helpful, but I will say in terms of opportunities, I think disabled filmmakers offer up a chance to reach audiences that are not served. So I know there's a lot of, you know, concerns about not being able to reach audience....There are untapped markets. I think in terms of business models and looking for ways to fix this, if you were to go back to any sort of traditional model that we've used in the past or any focus on in-person screenings, if theaters can move towards ensuring that their screenings are accessible, I think they have a chance for audiences to come in person and support projects."

—**Amanda Upson**

THE CHALLENGE AND OPPORTUNITY OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Across interviews, participants raised interest in the arrival of AI tools—which filmmakers say are likely being used more than people think in the industry—but that it raises several ethical issues for a documentary field that simply hasn't shown a preparedness in openly addressing yet.

Susan Margolin offered a perspective shared by many of the filmmakers interviewed in this research: that AI tools are promising, but the field of documentary still lacks clear guidelines for how to use them ethically:



"I like the guidelines that the archival producers have put together and, you know, I think that there needs to be guardrails... Everyone's using AI, but there just aren't safe guardrails in place to protect filmmakers, to protect participants, to protect [intellectual property]."

—Susan Margolin

An impact strategist who did not want to be named also said there should be a wider discussion within the field about best practices with AI:



"There's a group of producers that have written a guide on involving AI in your productions. And I think filmmakers need to really weigh in and be open and honest about how they're using AI in terms of their creativity."

—Impact Strategist

Alex Kelly raised several concerns shared by other filmmakers, as well:



"I'm very concerned about the unregulated and commercial nature of AI...There's the risk of replacing labor... there's the risk of generating information that's not correct and not correctly cited and all of that. But I think alongside all of these different issues, there's also the fact of who owns the tools...They're commercial tools that are owned by companies that have agendas. And they're not regulated and we don't know how to trust them completely."

—Alex Kelly

Sonya Childress shared a similar perspective:



"if we're thinking about film as a public good, documentary filmmaking as a public good—which is how I view it, it's not how everyone views this work, this art form—but then we have to think about the tools that we're using. And AI is one that has lots of ethical minefields."

—Sonya Childress

AN OPPORTUNITY TO COLLABORATE

If there is a silver lining to the immense pressures faced by filmmakers today, **Lance Kramer** wonders if that could be heightened collaboration:

"I think filmmakers are more supportive of one another than they ever have been before, what I've seen in the last 15 years. Because there's so much maybe shared struggle that people are really generous with each other in providing kind of mutual support and also transparency and openness between one another, which I think is really critical for solving problems. And I've been seeing a lot of that..."

"Independent filmmakers are at a huge disadvantage because they have no ability or very limited ability to build upon whatever they've done successfully, even if they've had a successful release of a film or production of a film. So I think that there's also just a lot of imperative for independent filmmakers to figure out what, I don't know what the answer is necessarily, whether it's collective or identifying economies of scale or whatever that may be that helps people to have shared infrastructure."

—Lance Kramer

Stephanie Palumbo shared a similar observation: "In the past we've run full-scale impact, but now we're thinking, can we just get like, you know, many films together focused on collective distribution."

According **Susan Margolin**, the field is in a moment of collapse and opportunity at the same time as the current conditions are causing organizations, filmmakers, and advocates to get together. She emphasized that more and more organizations and individuals are "getting together," such as new Future Film Coalition:

“Filmmakers, distributors, academia, data scientists who are coming together to create a coalition that hopes to advocate on behalf of independent media, of all types of all stripes, to promote freedom of expression and fight against censorship ultimately to find or establish a public-private partnership. . .”

—Susan Margolin

Jenni Wolfson agreed and said that “this is not the moment for us to shrink.”

Megha Agrawal Sood also emphasized the emergence of new collaborations. She said that in the face of today’s funding and distribution challenges, “there’s a lot of work that’s been going on to organize the field... and there’s been so many new coalitions... and there’s a lot of strengthening that’s there... I think the coalition-building that’s happening is really important right now.”

PART 2

A WAY FORWARD

OPPORTUNITIES FOR ACTION



COALITIONS AND LEARNING FROM GRASSROOTS MOVEMENTS

An impact strategist who wished not to be named emphasized that filmmakers and advocates need to learn from historically marginalized communities and grassroots movements:



"I think we really need to get our leadership from the grassroots, get our leadership from marginalized folks, like folks who have lived with a disability. They are the original hacker. They had to figure some shit out in order to make life work for them. And I think that's what these people have done. And we have people who are leading us who are not thinking about how their decisions are impacting the lives of other people and making their lives worse with their decisions. So I think we need to really hear the voices of the people who will be most impacted. If public media goes away, it's not going to harm the person that has unlimited purse strings to buy every platform. You know, it's going to be the person living in that rural area that doesn't always get a signal, that doesn't get WiFi. So, I think there are many voices that we can be lifting up in this moment."

—Impact Strategist

An impact strategist also said that filmmakers, advocates, workers in the industry need to collaborate, support each other more and unionize:



"There's no union right now for some workers, depending on where you work, for workers in this industry. But I think even having a database around or a fund around safety; a lot of people are getting cut off. A lot of people are getting laid off. A lot of people have a lot of things to say, but also don't want to put their jobs in jeopardy. I think it would be amazing if there was some sort of resource that gave people legal advice. Maybe advice on basic funding on basic needs. If you lose your job and you don't get a severance package, is there a way to apply for some funding, for some time... How are we showing care in this moment for people that are given so much... what funding thing might happen that might lose my job?... So even if there are no unions, union-like networks, organizations... some sort of support. Maybe looking at what unions provide and if you don't have a union, could you provide some of those things still?"

—Impact Strategist

Alex Kelly also emphasized the need to collaborate and organize:



"...any way that filmmakers can collaborate and build power together. I mean [we're] not unionized. We are not a workforce that has a lot of power collectively. I think that would be better. I think visibility, speaking out, pushing back, putting pressure, and building some collective power would be good."

—Alex Kelly

COLLECTIVE AND COOPERATIVE DISTRIBUTION MODELS

In addressing a way forward, **Stephanie Palumbo** pointed to the need for new distribution channels:

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“We need new pathways of distribution. And that’s how ITVS was founded, right? That’s how POV was founded. It’s like, we need new arenas of distribution. And I think, you know, there’s, there’s so many places that have popped up in terms of digital distribution... and these different tools for filmmakers. Um, but there is a labor and capacity and, sometimes a knowledge gap and certainly an economic gap to be able to fund the work, because it’s a tremendous amount of work to do. And so at Peace is Loud, we’ve been thinking about how can we support filmmakers, not just one, but how can we support cohorts or groups of filmmakers to distribute their audiences... and take on some of that labor... In the past we’ve run like kind of full scale impact, but now we’re thinking, [how] can we get many films together focused on collective distribution?”

—**Stephanie Palumbo**

Sara Archambault emphasized “collective action” and “collectivist and interdisciplinary strategies” as key to solving the “much bigger problem of sustainability”:

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“I am very buoyed by what’s going on with the Future Film Coalition. There we are seeing an interdisciplinary model of people who are wanting to work together to problem solve and think about systems and not just products... There are a number of mid-level distributors for independent film. All of those distributors are actually consolidating, right? They used to allow you to split up rights. They’re consolidating rights... What... if we brought all of those businesses under one umbrella, could we amass attention? Could we amass, audience with that kind of catalog and marketing power?... I think we need to find better ways to build solidarity amongst us.”

—**Sara Archambault**

Alex Kelly also noted that cooperative distribution is the answer for today's challenges: "There are conversations in Australia about what would it look like to start like cooperative distribution and have filmmaker distribution co-ops."

Lance Kramer shared a similar perspective on the need—and potential—for new distribution models:



"I think that there's a lot to be done... There's still a lack of, or rather, I think there's an opportunity from new players to enter into the distribution market who actually see the opportunity [corporate platforms missing business opportunities by avoiding political/controversial films]... I think independent film stands out, truly independent film, I think stands out more than ever before. And I think audiences respond in very, very powerful ways, to these kinds of stories... I think that audiences really respond positively and really appreciate films that they feel like they can trust... they don't feel were designed to manipulate them and or propagandize something or, you know, any of these other kinds of objectives. And I think that that's a big opportunity, actually."

—Lance Kramer

BRINGING NEW FUNDING AND EDUCATING FUNDERS

According to **Jenni Wolfson**, the industry should also focus on educating and bringing more and “new” funders to the documentary space. “Documentary film probably seems more like a luxury” compared to other areas, like arts and museums, she notes, where the philanthropic funding typically goes.



“We do have to look for different ways, and that’s why there’s all these different groups who are coming together just to address distribution. But I think the challenge is to make any of them work it requires funding, whether it’s funding these companies who are trying to create this new distribution hurdle or supporting the marketing efforts. Because even if you have a new platform, if no one knows about it, it’s not going work. So beyond just having a platform is the marketing dollars. So we’d have to find funding for that. Or if it’s a model where we just go out and do it on our own as filmmakers, the filmmakers already are struggling to find funding. So I think that’s the challenge, if we’re going to try these different ways where the filmmakers are going to be the ones bringing out the films and using these other models... how do we provide funding?”

—Diane Quon

Alison Byrne Fields shared her perspective that documentary advocates and organizations should focus on “bringing new funders to the table by educating them about the value of storytelling...” She also emphasized the need for more community screenings “done in a more coordinated way.”

ALTERNATIVE CHANNELS AND VISIBILITY/“DISCOVERABILITY”

Sara Archambault pointed to the need for alternative channels to be explored and centered in conversations of new distribution models:

“There’s the commercial streamers, there’s the public media angle, and then there’s also, in terms of distribution, there is a lot of opportunity in places like YouTube, places that are... more kind of democratized and easily accessible types of, self-distribution. However, there’s no significant monetization in those spaces in ways that maintain the sustainability of the work, um, and no way near matches in most cases. Again, I think there are rare cases when that’s not true. In most cases it does not monetize to the degree required in order for that work to continue to be sustainable. So, what is linked to that distribution crisis, and one that I think is really important, is that we have a crisis of discoverability. So where these films are, where they’re lurking, they are often just hidden from public view.”

—Sara Archambault

According to **Archambault**, part of the issue is changes in consumer behavior: “so consumer behaviors are now gravitating away from subscription... The only place for growth is free streaming, which is really just what TV used to be. Ad-based fast channels is where you’re seeing growth.” Considering an alternative “creator economy model” could be one way forward, she noted:

“[In the area of] distribution, the documentary field has a lot to learn from the ‘creator economy’... audience-centered solutions; where are the audiences living? Where are they, how are they engaging in content? And how can we become visible and important to them? The solutions lie in centering those notions, in my opinion. So I think we need to look at, at the relationships that creators, establish with their audiences. There are many people on the creator economy model who are monetizing something about their content is breaking through. Now, does that mean that we should not pursue documentary as its own unique methodology in art form? Absolutely not. But what can we learn from that that helps us connect more directly to audiences? Yeah. I think there are ways in which we could and should be utilizing YouTube more.”

—Sara Archambault

Lance Kramer also raised the importance of alternative channels, like YouTube:

“...in the vein of filmmakers also questioning... some of our own allegiance to prestige is that we have completely undervalued things like YouTube... and, you know, Twitch celebrities that will have way more views than we’d ever have in a lifetime, just from one video that they record in their in their attic. And, think it’s worth us as independent filmmakers taking a hard look at how we’ve passed up on ubiquitous platforms that we’ve thought as maybe not as prestigious, but that are highly accessible as places to get our work out there... I’d like to see that become more accepted and just adopted within the community rather than seen as just this kind of side piece.”

—Lance Kramer

Theatrical screenings and international venues are also channels that **Kramer** feels more people should pay attention to:

"I also think that putting a greater focus on in-person distribution, theatrical in particular, is a big area of opportunity. As people are obviously glued to their streaming services, but also becoming disaffected in some cases with this narrowing effect. I think that theaters thankfully now in some cases have recovered from parts of the downtick from COVID. And they are becoming, you know, a haven again for strong independent film. International distribution is [another] huge area of opportunity... It makes more sense to invest effort in international forms of distribution, festivals, broadcasters, etc., and to build the film's profile and awareness outside the U.S. and where there's just more room of a sense to drive interest back in the U.S."

—Lance Kramer

Susan Margolin shared excitement at the idea of a new platform "where filmmakers can access the data and understand the data that they will be empowered to be able to more effectively reach their audiences and maximize audiences."

Jenni Wolfson pointed to short films as another potential response to current industry barriers: "There's always a lot of talk about sort of making short films, because they cost less. And there are really an opportunity to show your sort of your artistic talent to reach different kinds of audiences."

MEDIA POLICY AND REGULATION

Sara Archambault pointed to public policy as an area that should get greater focus in deliberations on a way forward:



"I think there needs to be a lot more done on the public policy side. There's, you know, terrestrial television, the phone lines, all of these things used to be under the jurisdiction of the FCC... Once we moved to the digital age without all the knobs and tubes, those things went beyond the FCC's jurisdiction and became, in a way, largely unregulated... And so we are in a moment where we'll make very little traction on the regulatory front. However, I think we have a lot to learn from our colleagues in other countries who have been successful in the ground they've gained through regulatory approaches. But I also think we as a community need to build a vision for public policy for media in general."

—Sara Archambault

ETHICS AND DOCUMENTARY PARTICIPANTS' RIGHTS

In addition to the external challenges, **Stephanie Palumbo** pointed toward important internal challenges to the industry that need more attention. Namely, better protections for the people who appear on screen, including “maintaining the human rights for people who participate in documentary films.” Palumbo raised several examples of films where the filmmaker didn’t protect its participants from the repercussions of having their faces and stories shared with a wider audience, leading to people being killed or forced into hiding. She also emphasized “smaller scale” examples of the rights of people in a film not being protected, and yet still result in people being traumatized and harmed for no reason other than a neglectful film industry. At the same time, she noted that she is starting to see some efforts to change these harmful practices, including conversations of care for filmmaking teams:



“I see that as a real point of reckoning for the industry and also something that I think a lot is actively being done about. On the flip side, there’s great care needed for filmmakers, who are also at great risk telling these stories, who are struggling to find the ability to raise the money to actually produce their films and are dealing with oppression by the same systems that they might be making a film about.”

—Stephanie Palumbo

Palumbo said that this is one of the areas that she is starting to see a big shift and that she’s optimistic about; “I think, so for one, I think even just in terms of participant care, in the past five years, I think there’s been a huge shift—even the discussion piece around it, and in terms of folks [who] are prioritizing it.”

One of the trends **Alison Byrne Fields** also highlighted as hopeful included increasing efforts and conversations about “participant care.” “I think it’s positive that more and more people are thinking about it and thinking about it in very meaningful ways...” She also mentioned the Documentary Accountability Working Group’s efforts in this area to be very promising.

RETURN TO FILMMAKING AS A PUBLIC GOOD (AND COMMUNITY STORYTELLING MODELS)

Sonya Childress believes the current moment will also increase the value of filmmaking within communities that speaks to communities, and that people will continue making these types of movies:



"I think people who pick up films and are documenting conditions and stories in their own communities and training their cameras on their own communities not for commercial gain and not for industry acclaim, but simply because these are stories that have to be told because they want their own communities to see themselves. I think that work is going to continue because that work has not been resourced adequately ever, which means the people whose impulses are to make that kind of work will not be deterred by a moment in which there's fewer resources to do that work. They're going to do it anyway because they've been doing it. And I think there's real value in that kind of filmmaking. It may not be as cinematic, it may not win awards. It may not appeal to mass audiences, but it will be meaningful for the filmmaker..."

—Sonya Childress

Childress noted that there's an opportunity to use this challenging moment "to embrace a new kind of cinema culture":



"...where film is seen in community, where distribution is decentralized, and now where local filmmakers are turning the cameras on their communities and sharing that work in community. So I think we're moving into a place that is possibly really exciting... there's an opportunity to reassert the value of public interest documentary films in this country."

—Sonya Childress

Childress also emphasized that filmmakers and advocates should embrace the unique role that documentary as an art form plays in the public sphere to show us “where we are and where we’ve been.” She said:



“...what I fear is that we turned away from what is in many ways the real power of this form as an art form, that is an incredible canvas. It’s a window and a mirror to where we are and where we’ve been. And in a moment of deep, deep turmoil this is where the form really needs to show up. And documentary filmmakers who understand what this form can really do to activate people, to engage people in democracy by looking at work, looking and talking about that work together. That this is a moment for the film, for this art form to play a really unique role in public, in the public sphere.”

—Sonya Childress

A GROWING MARKET FOR INDEPENDENT, POLITICAL FILMS

Lance Kramer said that there is a myth that people are no longer interested in going to theaters; in his experience, this is not true. People are very, very hungry to have these kinds of experiences in theaters."

Diane Quon also emphasized that the streamers' logic of "this is what audiences want" is simply not true.

Alex Kelly shared a similar perspective:

"So even though it's a more difficult time to fund things, make things, find pathways to audiences, I think audiences are increasingly media literate, even if they don't necessarily have the language for that literacy. And they want to gather, they want to have deep conversations, they want to be transported to other stories, other places...I live in a very small town, 8,000 people, and there's a documentary film festival here every year, and it's really big and it sells out. There's a great theater in town and it screens documentaries all the time, and it's very well attended."

—Alex Kelly

Amanda Upson noted that she has witnessed tremendous audience interest in documentaries, as well:

"It seems to me there's massive audience interest and yet no commercial support unless it's a true-crime documentary... I think broadcasters and streamers need to do their own research on what audiences will watch. Because one of the things that I repeatedly am told is that audiences will not consume media with disabled people on screen. And I don't think it's accurate, and I think it's based in bad data."

—Amanda Upson

TENACITY OF INDEPENDENT DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKERS

Lance Kramer said that seeing other independent filmmakers push their work forward despite the enormity of recent challenges gives him hope.



"The amazing thing about independent filmmakers is that even with all of these barriers and challenges, people are still making films... It's an incredible testament to the tenacity and the spirit of what drives independent filmmakers... I think that actually for a very relatively low cost, a distributor or someone who entered into that side of the market who was really interested in bringing those films, those titles to the market in creative ways. I think [they] would find that there was a significant opportunity. I just really haven't seen that play out yet."

—Lance Kramer

Sara Archambault also pointed to new voices and ideas within the field as a point of optimism.



"What gives me hope is that we have a lot of tireless workers who are used to working for nothing... but with great ideas and who are unafraid to experiment. We have fewer financiers and foundations who are as entrepreneurial... so I think I, my fire gets lit when I am encountering people who have really good ideas and who are willing to go give it a shot... The light that I see is that if you are truly dedicated to speaking truth to power, if you're truly dedicated to the investigative work, if you're truly dedicated to the storytelling of the unheard or the unseen, that work will continue. And so we are going to need to find those spaces and discover new ways to help that work continue."

—Sara Archambault

Diane Quon shared a similar perspective and hope:



"I meet so many filmmakers who still have great stories and that gives me hope that they won't give up. People still want to somehow make films that matter to them, even though they know it's tough out there. And I really appreciate so many leaders coming together to try to figure out new ways of distribution. So that gives me hope. It's a feisty group. They don't—even though sometimes you feel beaten down and tired—we don't give up."

—Diane Quon

An impact strategist who didn't want to be named noted:



"I feel hopeful about young people and the fact that they have cameras in their hands and they are thinking about what their story is, working on their editing skills and working to shape what they're witnessing, [and to] shape it in ways that might be more engaging for their audiences. So I feel like we'll have the emergent filmmakers that are coming through are going to be awesome. And, I'm hopeful that after witnessing wars and genocides with the most imagery that we've ever had around these incidents in life, that that will produce a more empathetic softer kind of world."

—Impact Strategist



THE STATE OF THE DOCUMENTARY FIELD

2026 STUDY OF GLOBAL DOCUMENTARY PROFESSIONALS

**CONVERSATIONS WITH DOCUMENTARY
THINKERS AND DOERS ABOUT
A CRITICAL MOMENT IN U.S.
DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKING AND
DISTRIBUTION**



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