



THE STATE OF THE DOCUMENTARY FIELD

2026 STUDY OF GLOBAL DOCUMENTARY PROFESSIONALS

15 KEY FINDINGS

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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 THE STUDY

THE DOCUMENTARY FIELD IN 2026: OPPORTUNITY AND CHALLENGE

Documentary has long enjoyed a vibrant space in the global media ecology, and the marketplace for creative nonfiction storytelling continues to expand around the world. Despite an expansive landscape for documentary filmmakers and audiences, challenges persist: It's difficult to make a sustainable living in documentary filmmaking, full editorial freedom to tell boundary-pushing stories can be elusive, and distribution in a consolidated commercial global media system is increasingly difficult. Likewise, the struggle to showcase an expansive spectrum of lived experiences requires constant scrutiny and explicit effort. As viewers continue to discover documentary storytelling across various platforms, and as new filmmakers enter the craft, tracking industry professionals' perspectives and lived experiences is a vital pursuit. This study is motivated by these ideas and imperatives.

THE STUDY'S HISTORY, OVERVIEW & OBJECTIVES

The *State of the Documentary Field* initiative is a decade-long initiative. In 2016, in collaboration with the International Documentary Association (IDA), the Center for Media & Social Impact identified a need to understand documentary trends, as well as the motivations, concerns, and perspectives of documentary industry professionals and makers at a moment of transition and opportunity. Sparked by this need and curiosity, CMSI launched a pilot phase of this research in 2016, which was released at the 2016 IDA Getting Real convening. The 2018 version, which focused on U.S.-based documentary professionals, launched at the 2018 IDA Getting Real convening. In 2020, the *State of the Documentary Field* study expanded to include a broader snapshot of documentary professionals around the world. The 2020 study was the first research to reveal trends and experiences of contemporary documentary professionals based in the United States and around the world, although we note the overrepresentation of U.S. respondents given our institutional home and access in the United States. The full 2026 version of this report presents global findings (inclusive of U.S. data) and U.S. findings as distinct sections, given the study's origin, execution, and funding.

Originally crafted by CMSI with feedback from the International Documentary Association, the study was informed by insights and questions from documentary

professionals who were consulted in several waves of research over the last decade. The study is designed to understand documentary industry members' perspectives and lived experiences based on four key themes:



DOCUMENTARY MOTIVATIONS, OPPORTUNITIES & CHALLENGES



DOCUMENTARY CAREER SUSTAINABILITY, ECONOMICS & FUNDING



DOCUMENTARY AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION



DOCUMENTARY DISTRIBUTION & PLATFORMS

For the 2026 report, CMSI collected survey responses between March and May 2025. Respondents' participation was voluntary, and personally-identifiable information was not collected. The survey was anonymous and confidential, and internet protocol information was not collected through the online survey platform. No financial incentives were offered or given. American University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) reviewed and approved the research protocol, and the authors—trained university researchers required to indicate regular research ethics training certification (CITI)—captured and analyzed the data. The survey was hosted online on American University's Qualtrics platform.

To assure robust participation from documentary film professionals, CMSI worked with an impact producer, Alice Quinlan of Red Owl Partners (based in the U.S.), to identify and invite additional documentary groups and communities to participate in outreach; these groups notified their members and strongly encouraged participation in the survey through email lists and social media promotion. For international outreach, CMSI collaborated with Doc Society (based in the UK) to engage with the international documentary community and invite respondents to participate. Note that the survey was made available to all documentary professionals around the world who wished to participate. The 2026 study was generously funded by the Perspective Fund.

(To see the full U.S. and global data, see the separate "The State of the Documentary Field 2026: Complete Data for Global and U.S. Respondents" report, available on cmsimpact.org.)

REPORT FORMAT: “DOCUMENTARY PROFESSIONALS” AND “DOCUMENTARY MAKERS”

These survey findings are based on the perspectives of 820 documentary industry professionals around the world, although predominantly hailing from the United States.¹ Demographic characteristics of respondents:

- **Racial: 66% White, 34% BIPOC**
- **Gender Identification: 63% Women, 32% Men, 4% Nonbinary, 1% Self-Describe**
- **Age: 73% ages 35-64, 15% age 65+, 13% ages 18-34**

The survey was designed to assess two groups of documentary professionals and makers:

- Findings with **“Documentary Professionals”** in the title reveal the major findings of the survey based on *all* respondents. Based on a filter question that asked respondents to indicate their “primary position” in documentary, this section of questions offered opportunities for all self-described members of the documentary profession to respond; this group of respondents included those who identified their primary role as directors, producers, editors, directors of photography, as well as nonprofit professionals, impact producers or strategists, film festival professionals, broadcasters, professors and other educators, and funders. (Total “professionals” respondents: 820)
- The findings labeled **“Documentary Makers”** (or “filmmakers”) include responses to additional economics questions asked of those professionals who identified themselves primarily as “directors” or “producers,” given that these roles allow a full understanding of the key creative, business decision-making, and full economics of their individual films. (Note that this study does not make the claim, of course, that roles like editor, cinematographer, and sound mixer are not “makers,” but this “makers” (directors/producers) designation simply allows the researchers to gather reliable and precise information from the film’s decision-making roles about the full economic realities of their films, which the other roles typically may not have as fully or readily). In this way, we were able to ascertain film economics information and other insights from decision-making documentary filmmakers who have this information to share about their individual films and film experiences. (Total “makers” respondents: 544)

¹ The total of “820” is the total possible respondents (83% U.S. respondents, 17% international). Because some respondents skipped some questions, despite our best efforts to discourage this practice (directed in the survey introduction text), the exact number of people who answered varies from question to question, but not in a way that is systematically meaningful. In total, 820 people completed at least some questions in this survey.

GLOBAL DOCUMENTARY STATE OF THE FIELD 2026

15 KEY FINDINGS



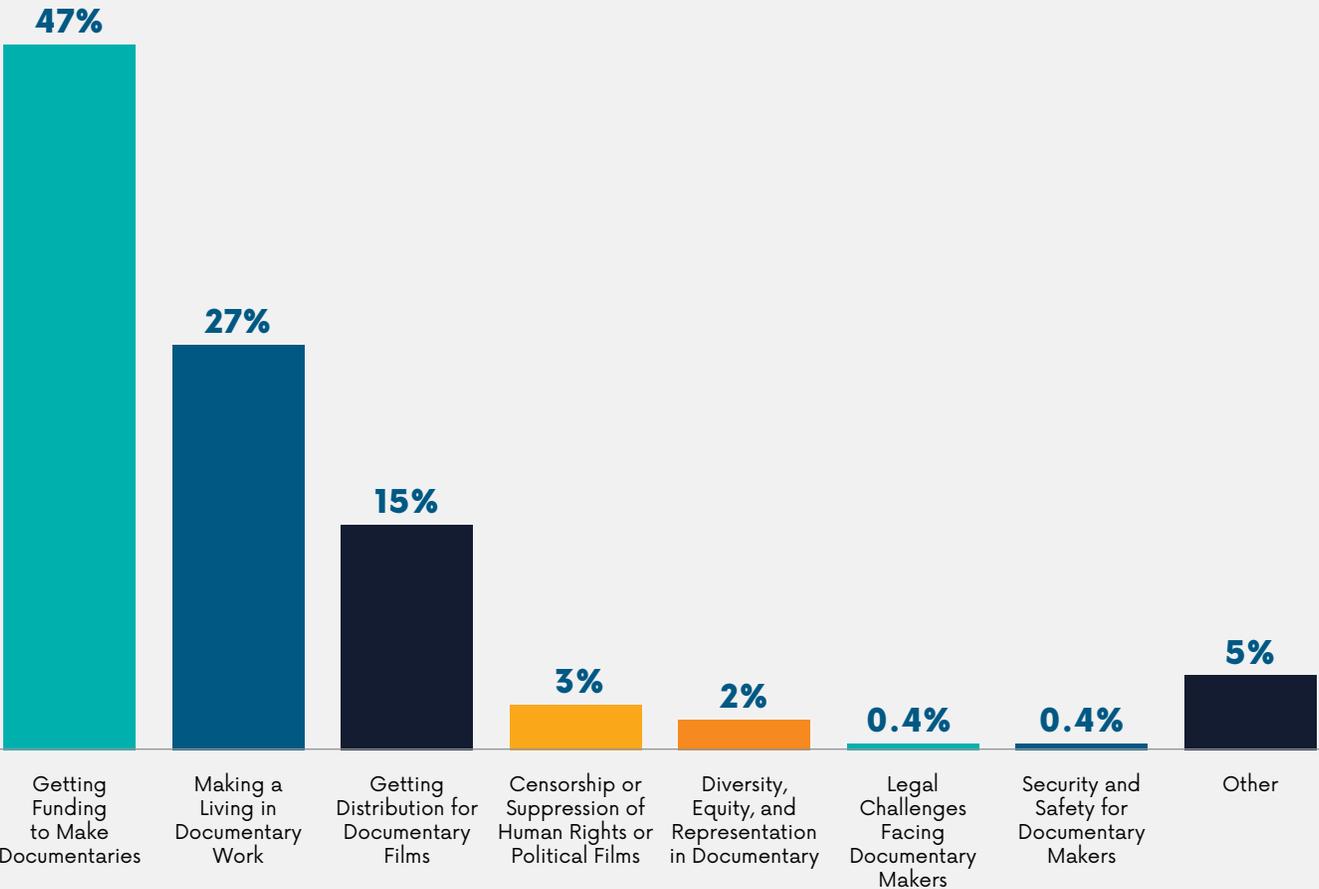
1

MAKING A LIVING IN DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKING IS INCREASINGLY DIFFICULT.

Nearly three-quarters (74%) of global documentary professionals respondents say the greatest challenge facing the documentary field today is the ability to make them in the first place, including getting funding to make films (47% say this is the greatest challenge) and making a living in documentary (27%).

What is the greatest challenge facing the documentary field today?

[DOCUMENTARY PROFESSIONALS]



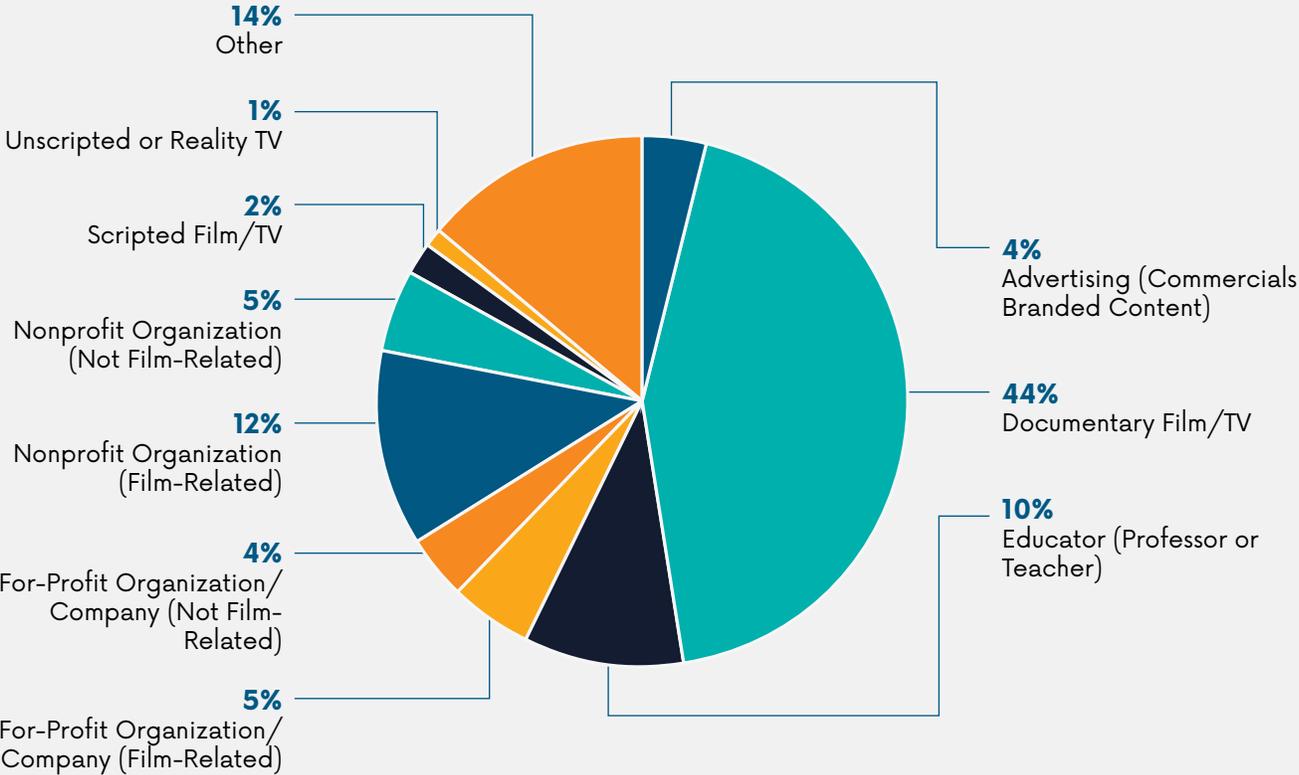
2

DOCUMENTARY FILM IS STILL A PUBLIC INTEREST PURSUIT AND ART FORM.

Documentary—despite media industry changes and an increase in popular-culture topics throughout the commercial streaming media age—can still be considered an art form for the public interest. Taking out “Documentary Film/TV” as primary source of income, the majority of documentary professionals work in education and the nonprofit sector (27%) compared to the commercial sector (16%).

Which best describes your primary source of personal income?

[DOCUMENTARY PROFESSIONALS]



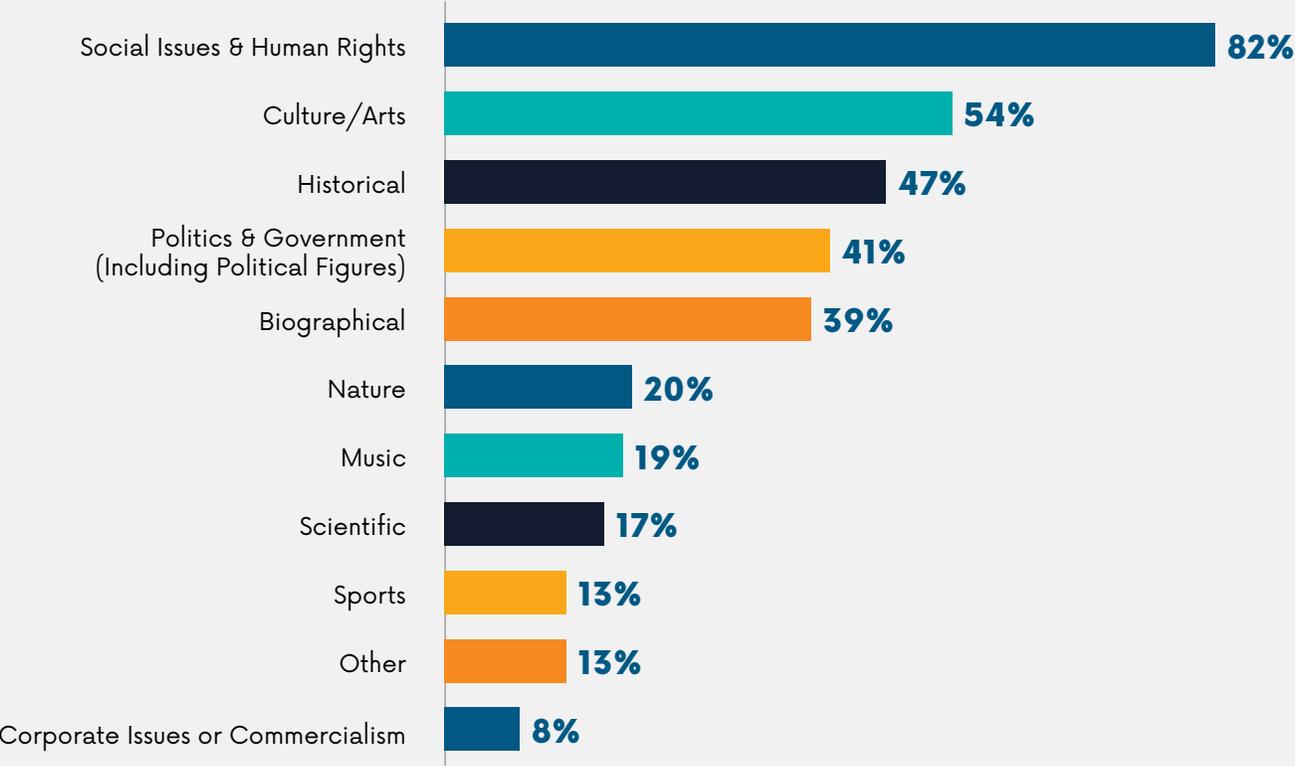
3

GLOBAL DOCUMENTARY MAKERS CONTINUE TO PRODUCE HUMAN RIGHTS FILMS, DESPITE THE CHALLENGE OF COMMERCIAL MEDIA DISTRIBUTION.

Despite the dominance of commercial networks' focus on music, sports, and crime documentaries, today's documentary makers are overwhelmingly producing stories focused on social issues and human rights. More than 8 in 10 (82%) of documentary directors and producers say they made films focused on social issues and human rights within the past two years. Whether or not those films are distributed by major commercial media companies is a different story.

What topics have you covered in your films over the past two years? [Select all that apply.]

[DOCUMENTARY MAKERS]



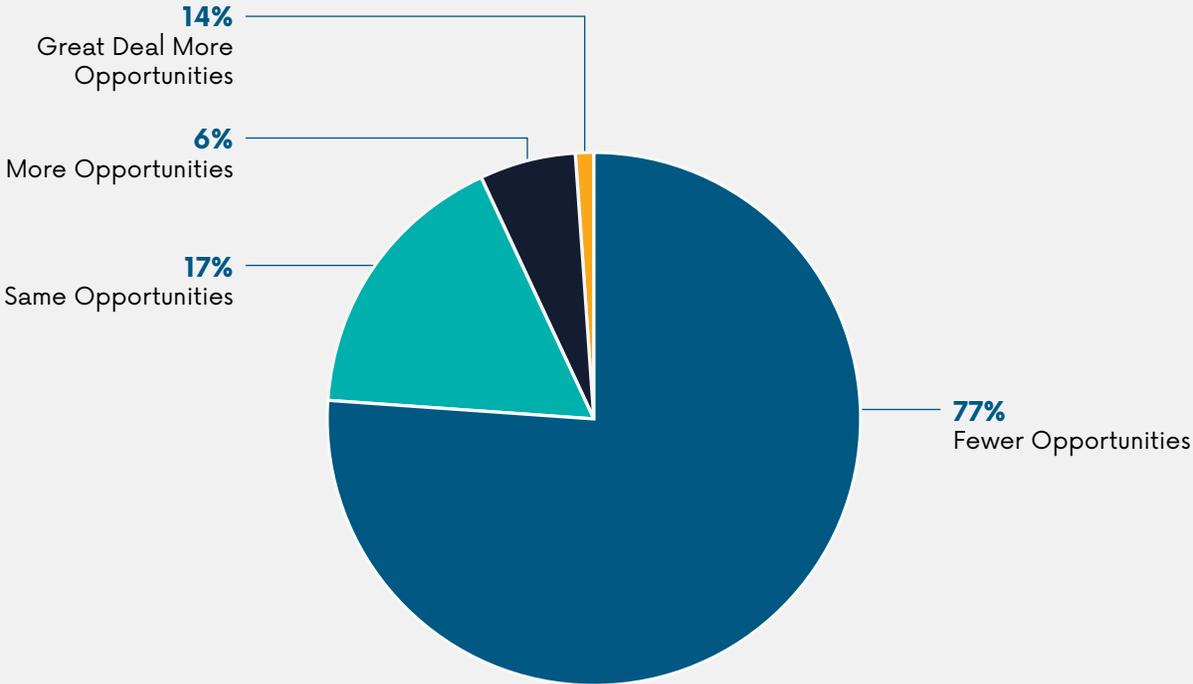
4

DOCUMENTARY PROFESSIONALS ARE NOT OPTIMISTIC ABOUT OPPORTUNITIES IN THE FIELD.

Global documentary professionals generally express a dismal outlook about the opportunities for the field and its shifts over the past several years. Perspectives about “documentary opportunities” have changed since 2020, during which only a quarter of documentary professionals (26%) reported “fewer opportunities” for documentary makers and professionals. In 2025, more than three-quarters (77%) of documentary professionals believe there are fewer documentary professional opportunities than before.

Which statement best reflects your perspectives about opportunities for documentary makers and professionals, over the past two years?

[DOCUMENTARY PROFESSIONALS]



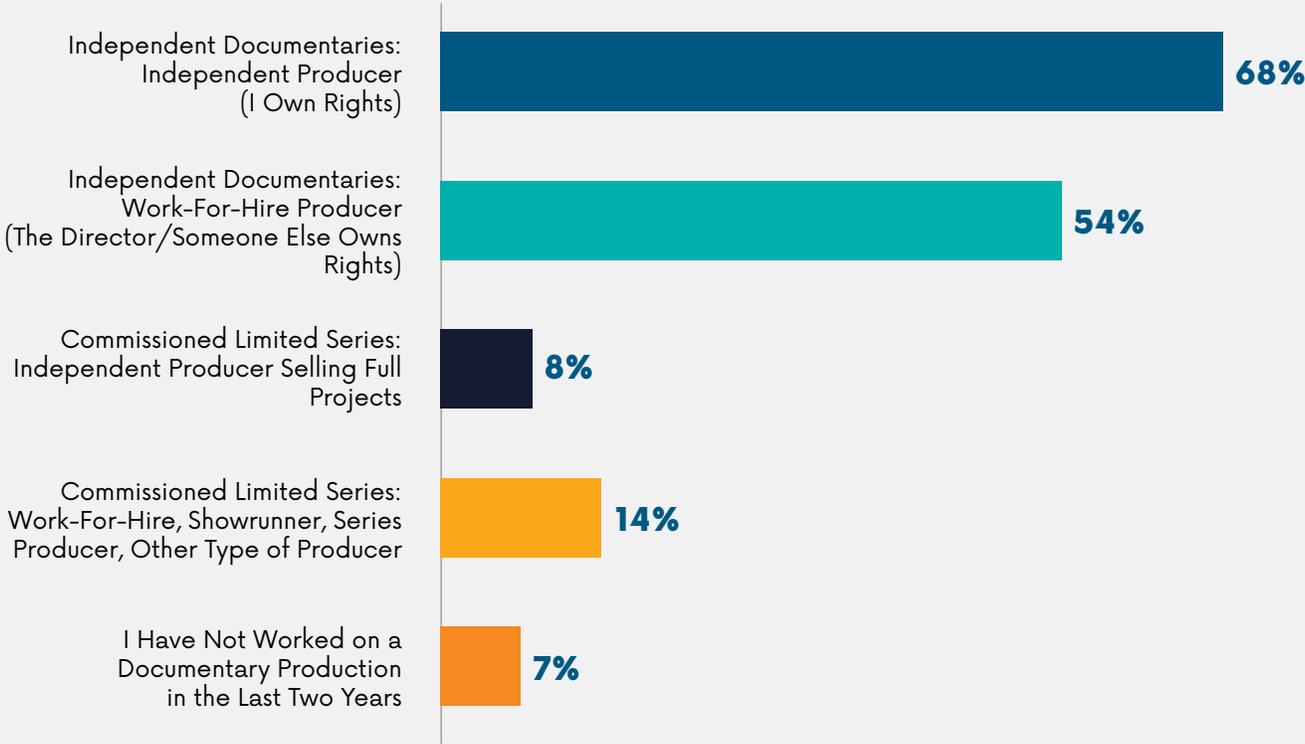
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EDITORIAL INDEPENDENCE IS A KEY VALUE FOR DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKERS.

Documentary makers see editorial independence as crucial to their work today. Nearly 7 in 10 (68%) of global documentary makers worked on an independent documentary over the past two years, compared to a much smaller group that worked in a commissioned project for a media company.

What kinds of documentary productions have you worked on within the last two years? [Select all that apply.]

[DOCUMENTARY MAKERS]



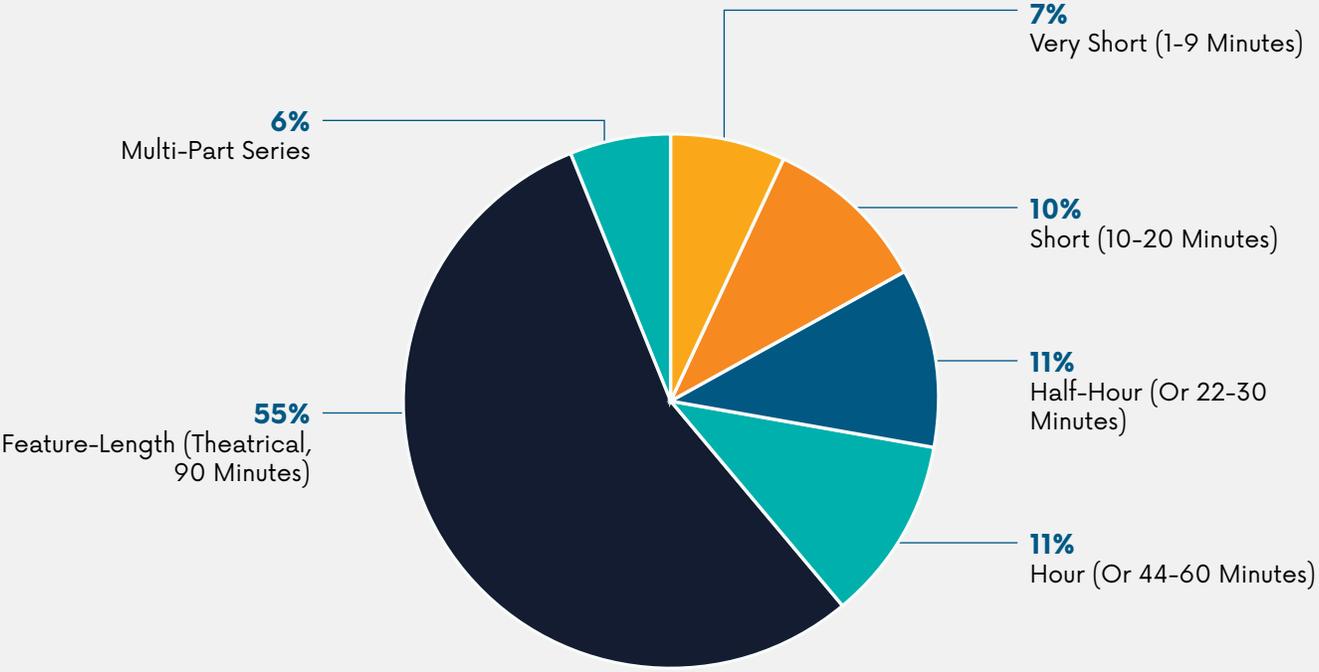
6

FEATURE-LENGTH FILMS REMAIN THE DOCUMENTARY NORM FOR MAKERS.

Documentary makers (directors and producers) are still making feature-length documentary films more than other types of nonfiction stories. Nearly 6 in 10 (**55%**) of global documentary makers' most recent documentary was feature-length (90 minutes), overwhelmingly more than all other lengths, including multi-part series, 60-minute programs, or half-hours.

How would you primarily characterize your most recent documentary in terms of length?

[DOCUMENTARY MAKERS]



PESSIMISM ABOUT DOCUMENTARY DISTRIBUTION—PARTICULARLY VIA COMMERCIAL STREAMING NETWORKS—IS ON THE UPSWING. INTEREST IN COMMUNITY SCREENINGS IS UP.

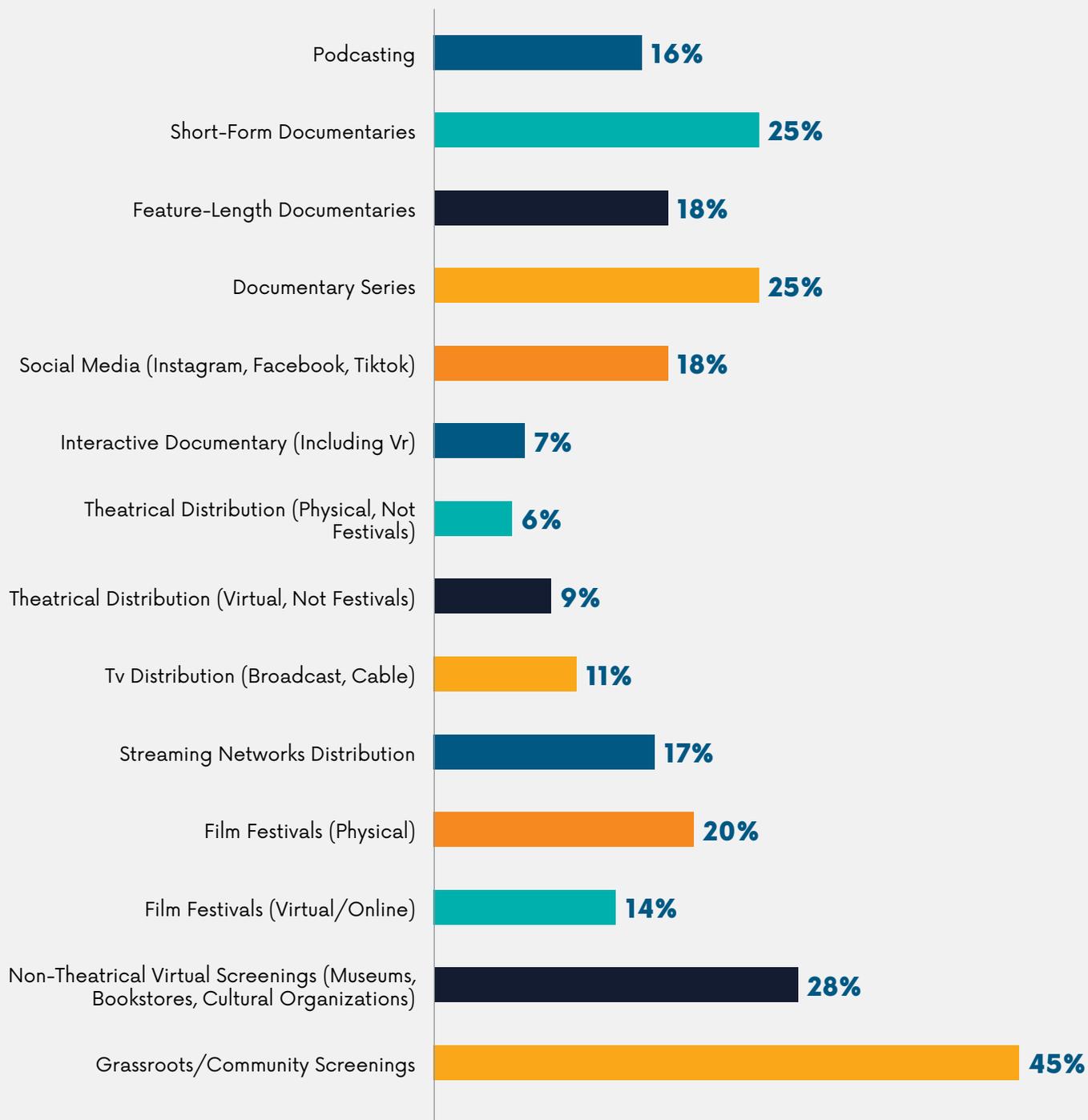
Compared to 2020, global documentary professionals express a general trend of pessimism about future opportunities in nonfiction storytelling across distribution avenues and format types. The most dramatic shift and story here is the feeling of documentary professionals about positive future opportunities with streaming networks distribution. In 2020, fully half (**50%**) of global documentary professionals saw streaming network distribution as a positive future opportunity for themselves. Today, less than 2 in 10 documentary professionals (**17%**) see the positive possibilities for streaming distribution. And in a parallel shift, nearly half (**45%**) of documentary professionals regard grassroots/community screenings as a positive future opportunity, compared to **36%** five years ago.

In terms of format, perspectives have changed about feature-length documentaries in particular. Today, less than one-fifth (**18%**) of global documentary professionals see feature-length documentaries as a positive future opportunity, down from **35%** who felt that way in 2020 (even though feature-length remains dominant). Optimism about documentary series is also down from five years ago; today, **25%** of global documentary professionals feel that nonfiction series are a positive future opportunity for them, compared to 50% who felt that way in 2020.

In terms of format and distribution, to what extent do you feel these offer positive future opportunities for documentary? (Percentage who said "a great opportunity.")



[DOCUMENTARY PROFESSIONALS]

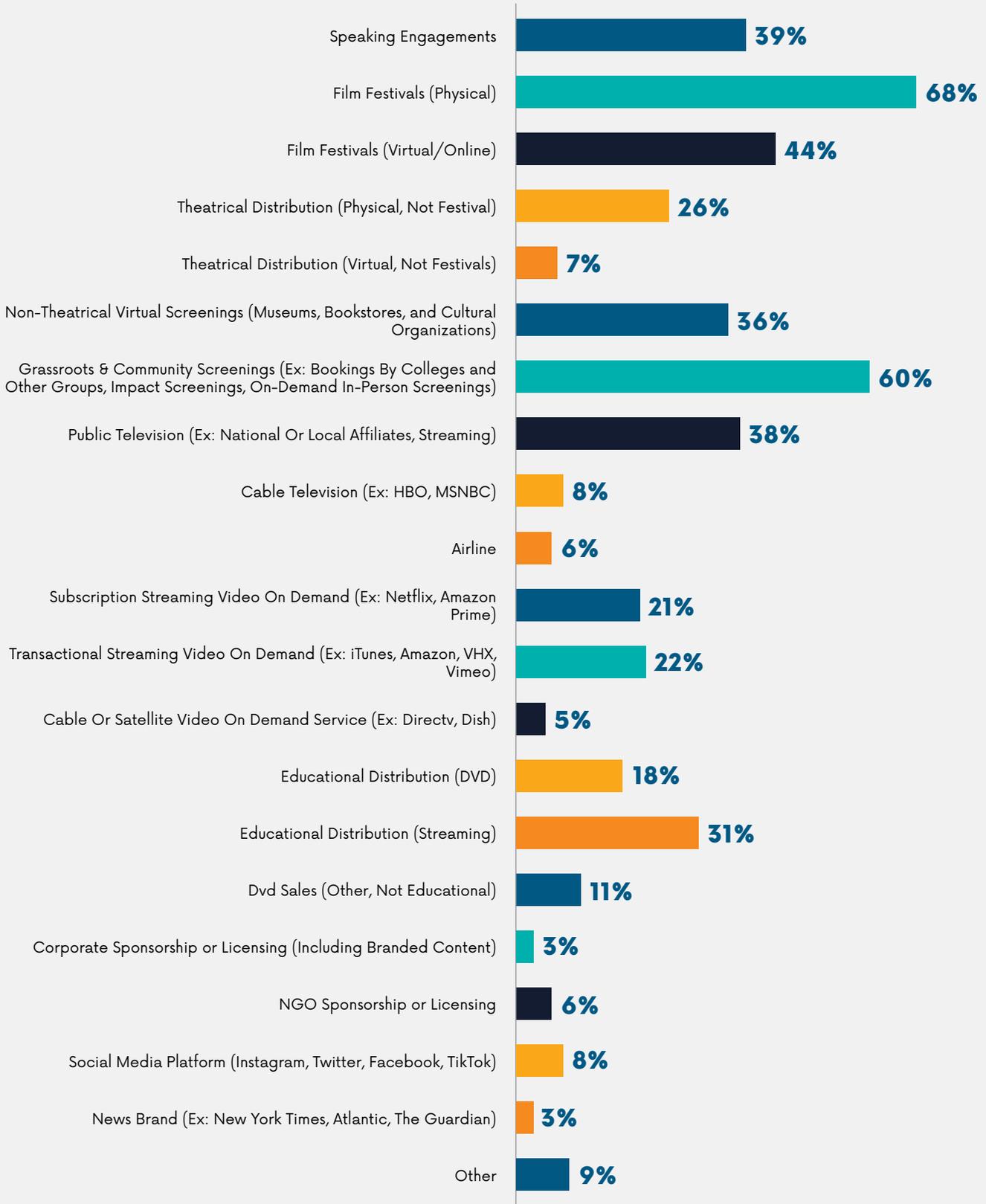


INDEPENDENT GLOBAL DOCUMENTARIES ARE FOUND IN FESTIVALS AND COMMUNITY SCREENINGS, BUT MUCH LESS ON COMMERCIAL MEDIA NETWORKS.

For these global documentary makers, their nonfiction stories are still most likely to circulate through film festivals (**68%** said their most recent film was distributed in this way), along with grassroots and community screenings (**60%** of respondents). This is a notable difference as compared to recent documentary projects that were distributed by cable or streaming networks.

How was your most recent documentary distributed? [Select all that apply.]

[DOCUMENTARY MAKERS]



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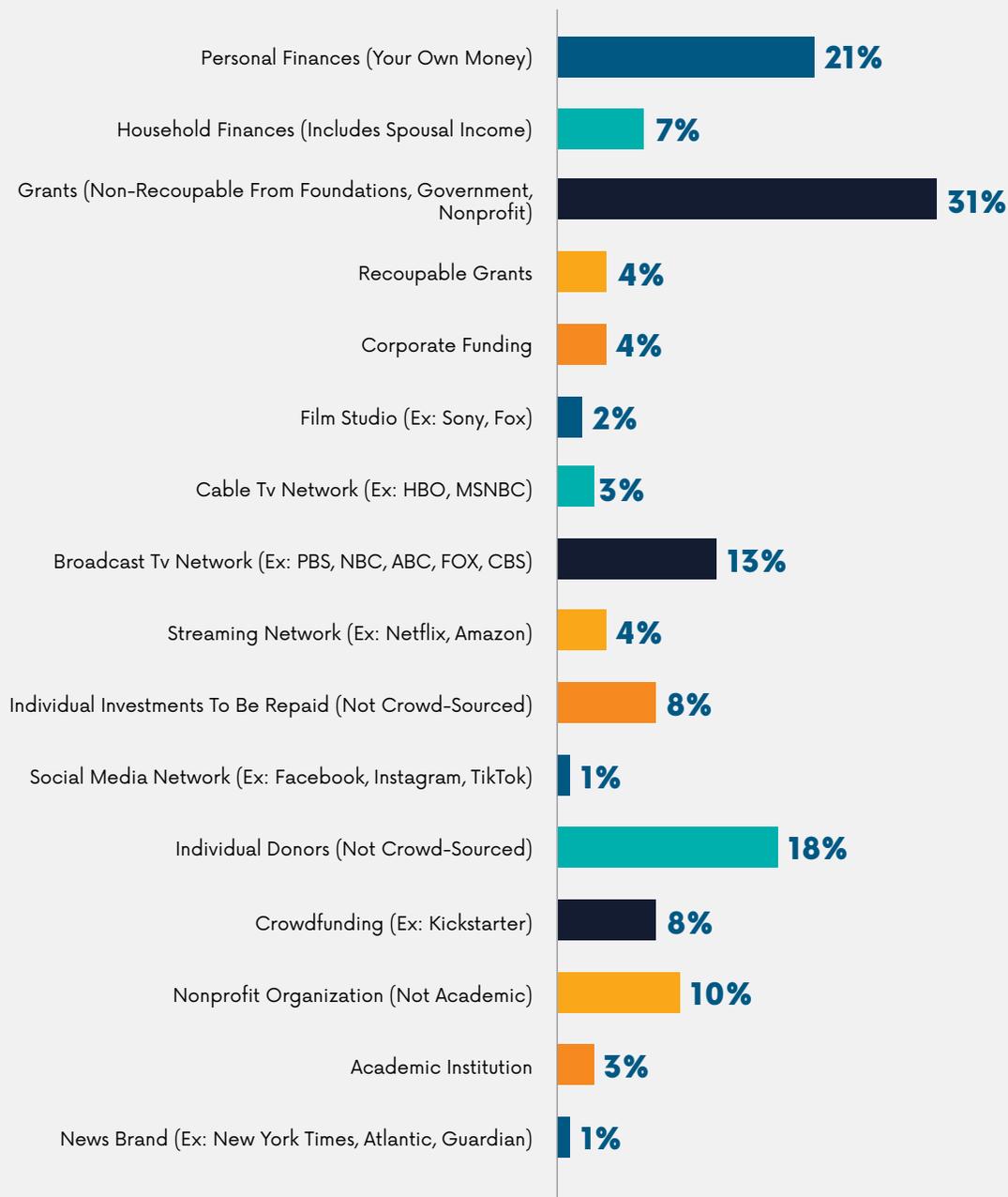
PHILANTHROPY AND FOUNDATIONS ARE VITAL, DOMINANT SOURCES OF DOCUMENTARY FUNDING.

Philanthropic grants remain the top source of funding for documentary makers around the world. About **31%** of global documentary makers said non-recoupable grants funded their most recent films; the next primary form of funding was self-financing (**21%** said this), followed by individual donors (**18%**). Despite the explosion of commercial media outlets that distribute nonfiction storytelling, they are not predominant sources of funding to make independent documentaries.

How would you characterize each source of funding to produce your most recent documentary? (Percentage of makers who indicated "main source of funding.")



[DOCUMENTARY MAKERS]

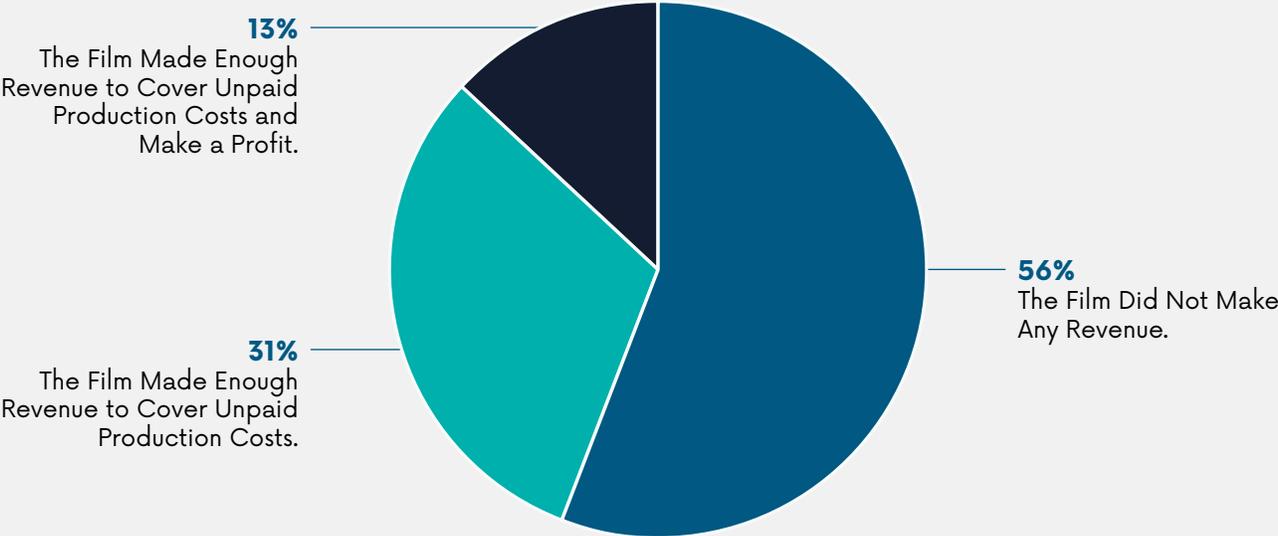


MOST DOCUMENTARY FILMS DON'T PRODUCE REVENUE FOR THEIR MAKERS.

In a consistent pattern over the last decade, the majority of documentary films reported by global documentary makers did not make any revenue at all. In 2025, more than half (**56%**) of global documentary makers said their most recent nonfiction projects did not produce any revenue; five years ago (2020), **42%** said the same thing.

Describe the amount of revenue from your most recent documentary project?

[DOCUMENTARY MAKERS]

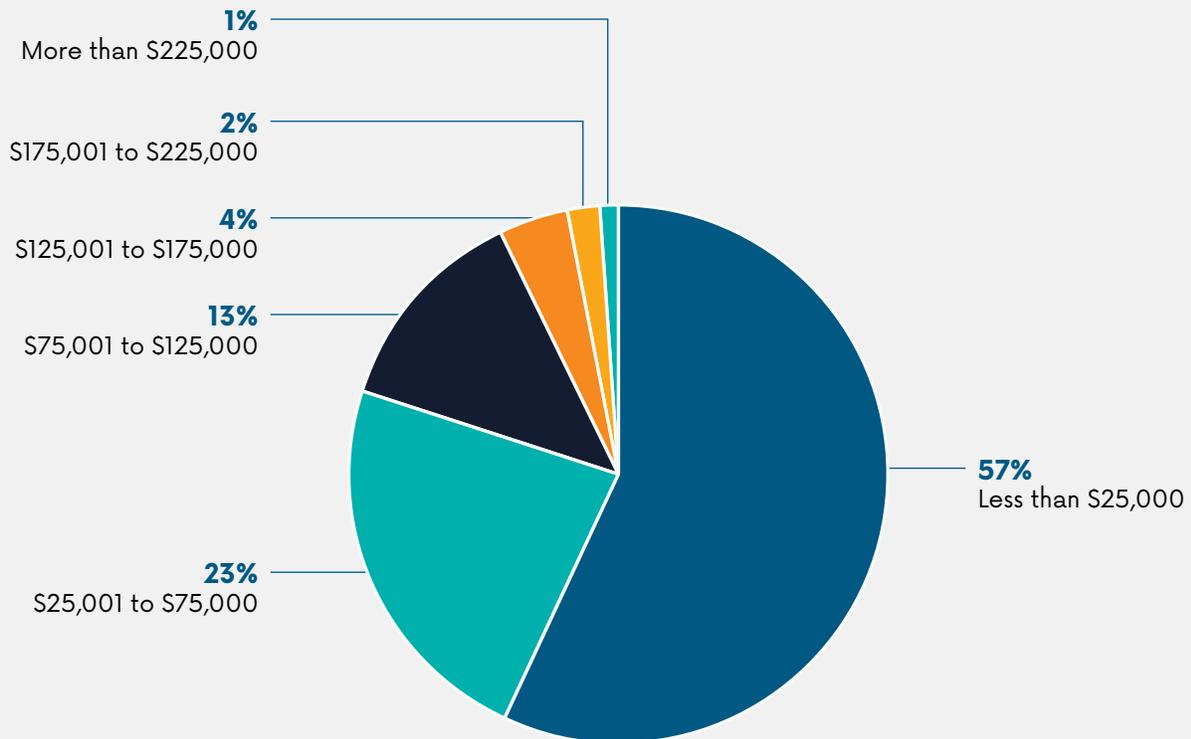


DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKERS GENERALLY DO NOT MAKE A SUSTAINABLE LIVING FROM THEIR NONFICTION WORK.

The majority of documentary makers that responded made less than \$25,000 in income from their films.

In total, how much money did you personally get paid—as income, not reimbursement for costs—from your most recent documentary?
(Estimated as the gross amount, not net after taxes, with currency calculation to U.S. dollars.)

[DOCUMENTARY MAKERS]

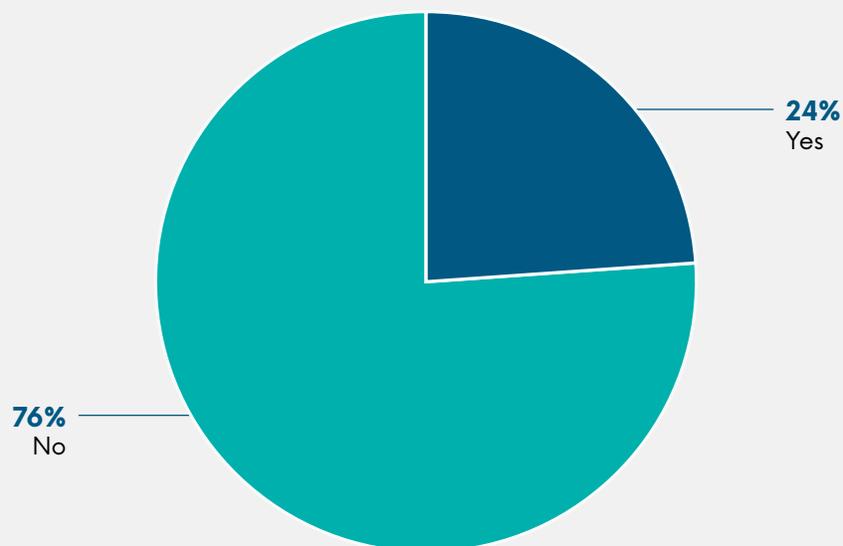


FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND CENSORSHIP IN DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKING IS AN INCREASING CHALLENGE.

Censorship or other suppression is a challenge in contemporary documentary filmmaking. In their most recent documentary project, almost a quarter (**24%**) of global documentary makers reported facing censorship or suppression of their work. More than 7 in 10 (**71%**) of global documentary filmmakers report that efforts to censor and suppress their nonfiction stories have gotten worse over the past two years.

In the last two years, have you faced any direct or indirect censorship or suppression efforts related to your work (not including self-censorship)?

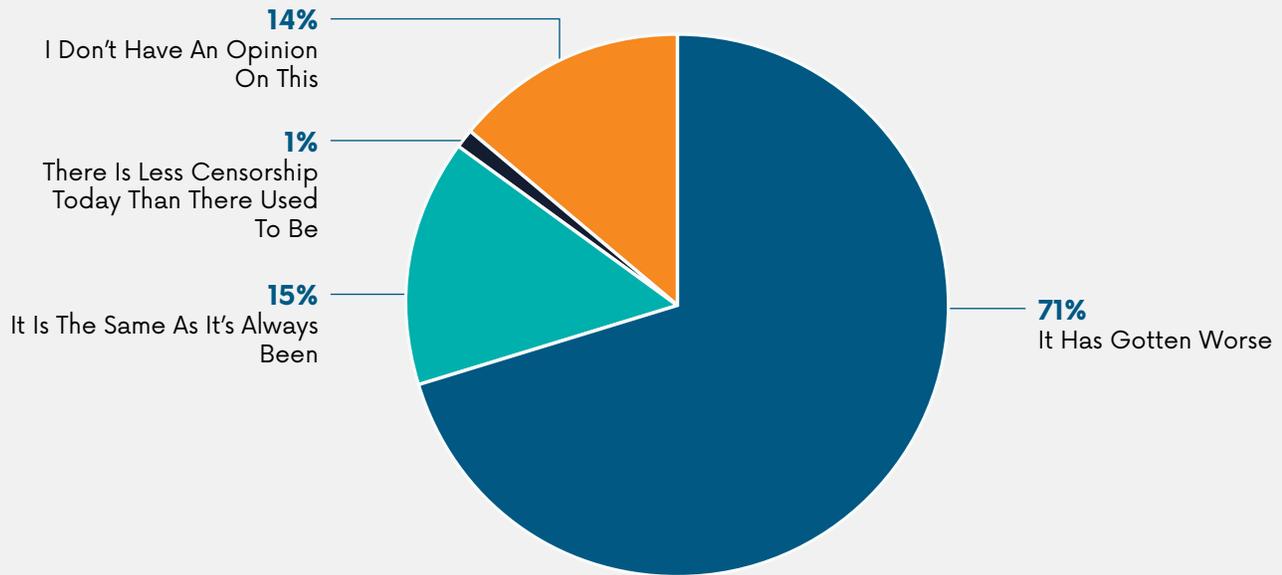
[DOCUMENTARY MAKERS]



How do you feel about censorship and suppression efforts (related to the documentary industry in the countries where you work) over the last two years?



[DOCUMENTARY MAKERS]



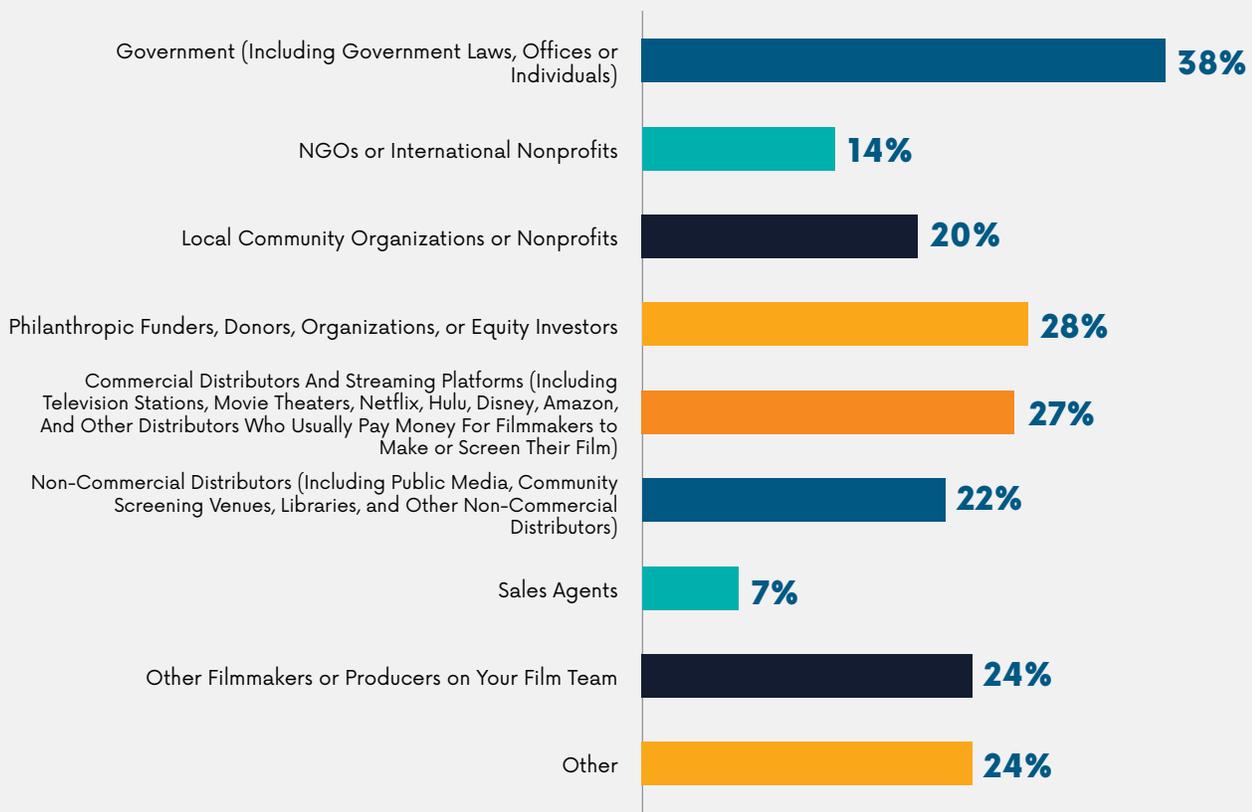
GOVERNMENT SOURCES ARE REPORTED AS THE GREATEST PERCEIVED CENSORSHIP AND SUPPRESSION THREAT.

Of the global documentary filmmakers who reported efforts to censor or suppress their films, the greatest source of the experience with censorship or suppression was government. Nearly 4 in 10 (**38%**) global documentary filmmakers reported government attempts to censor or suppress their stories, followed by philanthropic donors or investors in their work (**28%**), and commercial media companies (**27%**).

Efforts to censor or suppress documentary storytellers primarily happened during the production of the stories (**65%** of global documentary makers say this), which underscores the importance of editorial independence for documentary filmmaking.

From what type of source did you experience censorship/suppression?
[Select all that apply.] (If "Yes" selected in "censorship" question.)

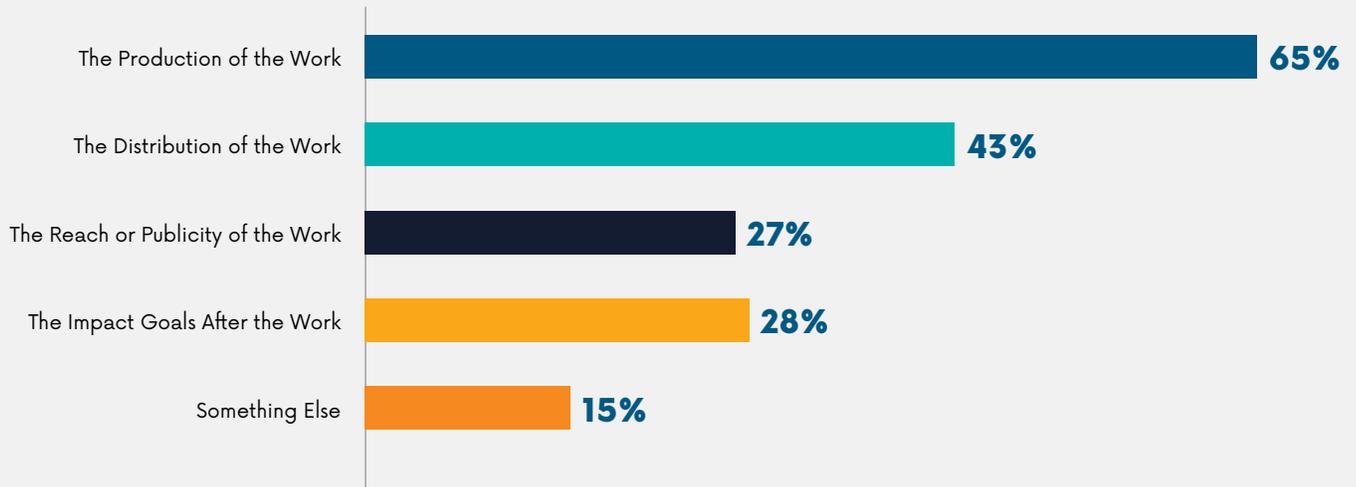
[DOCUMENTARY MAKERS]



Were these censorship/suppression efforts related to...
[Select all that apply.] (If "Yes" Selected in "censorship" question.)



[DOCUMENTARY MAKERS]

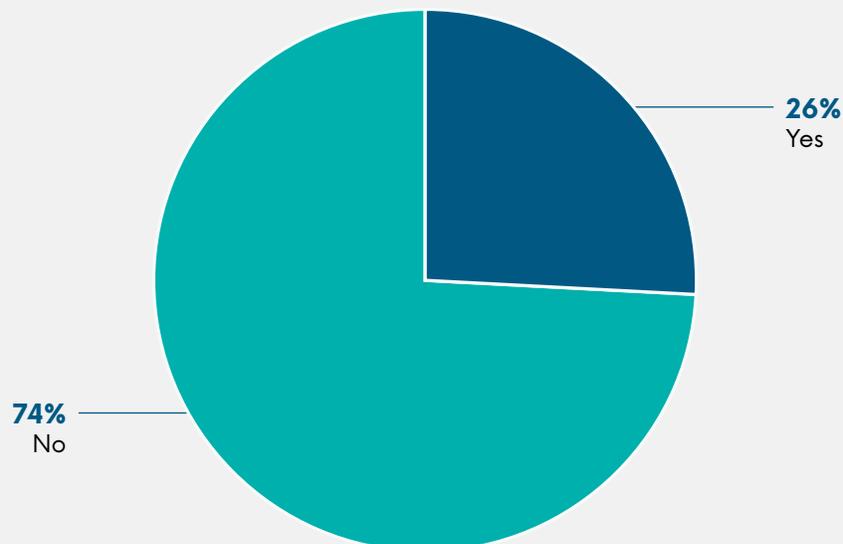


DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKERS ARE ALSO ENGAGING IN SELF-CENSORSHIP, LARGELY IN RESPONSE TO PERCEIVED POLITICAL OR GOVERNMENT REACTIONS.

More than a quarter (**26%**) of global documentary makers report self-censoring their films. (Here, “self-censorship” means “any restriction of creative expression, including limiting politically actionable beliefs, opinions, storylines.”) The majority of the self-censorship is related to perceptions of government or political actors.

In the last two years, have you engaged in self-censorship in your documentary work?

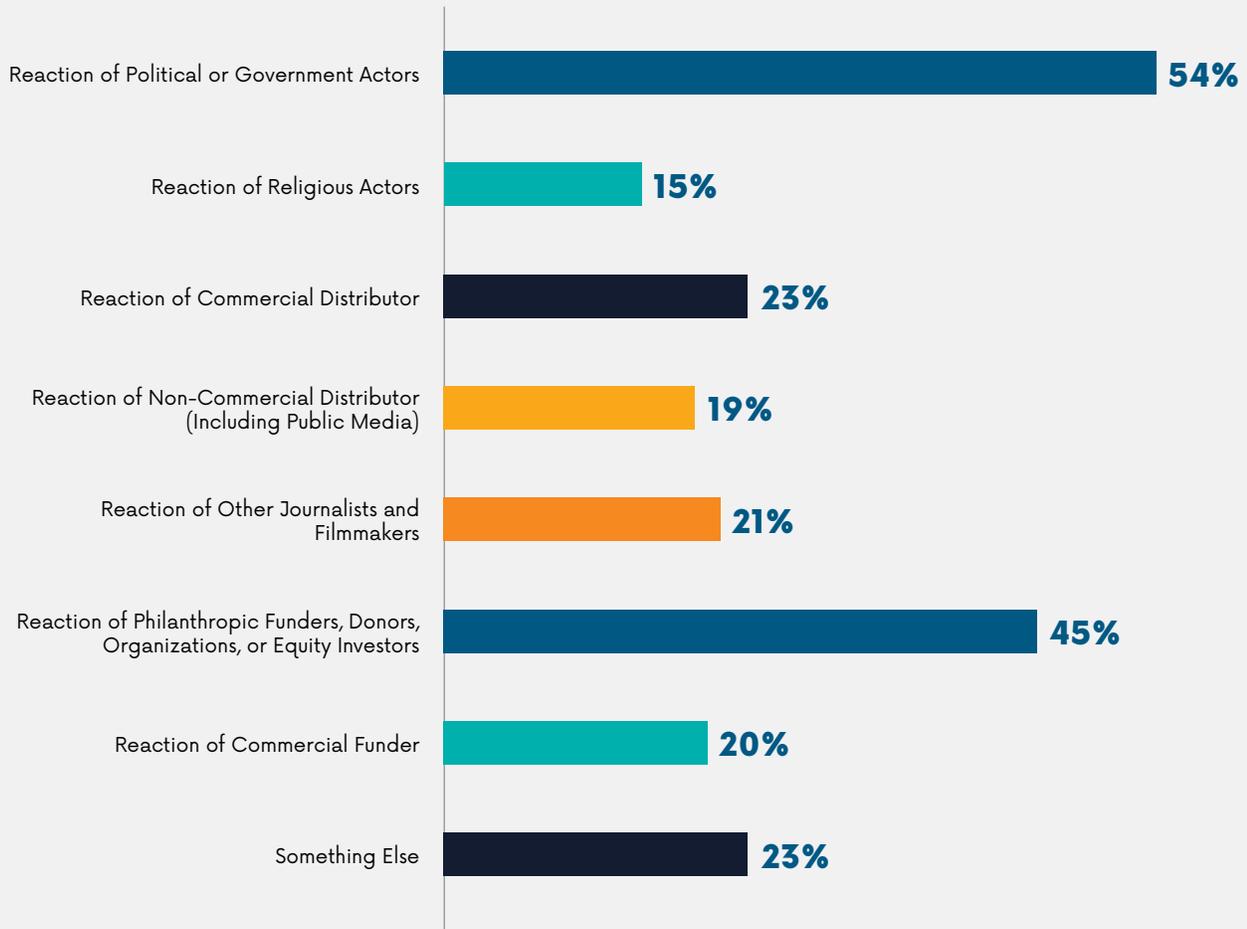
[DOCUMENTARY MAKERS]



Which of the following sources most contributed to your self-censorship?
[Select all that apply.] (If "Yes" selected in "self-censorship" question.)



[DOCUMENTARY MAKERS]

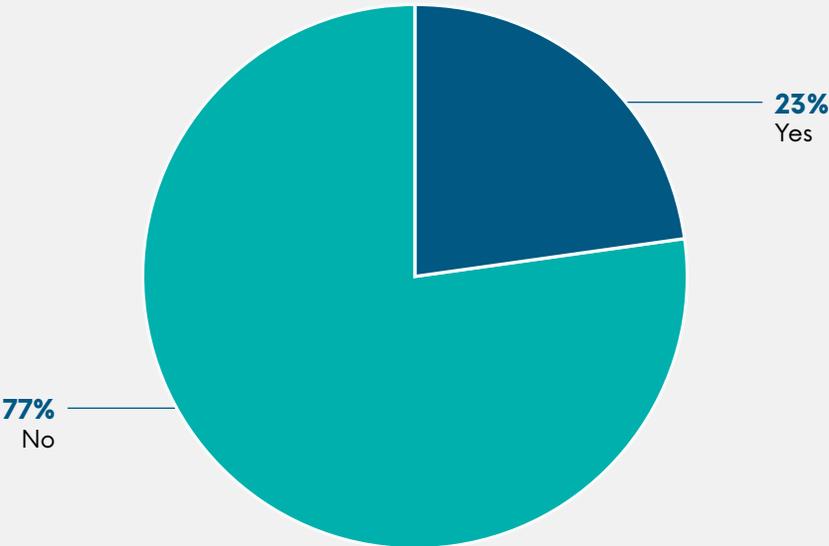


USE OF ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) IN DOCUMENTARY FILMMAKING IS A MIXED BAG OF OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES.

A little under one quarter (**23%**) of documentary filmmakers used AI tools in their most recent documentary films. Those global documentary filmmakers who reported using AI in their work say they primarily use the tools for interview transcriptions (**74%**) and research purposes (**43%**). About half of global documentary makers see both opportunities and challenges in AI.

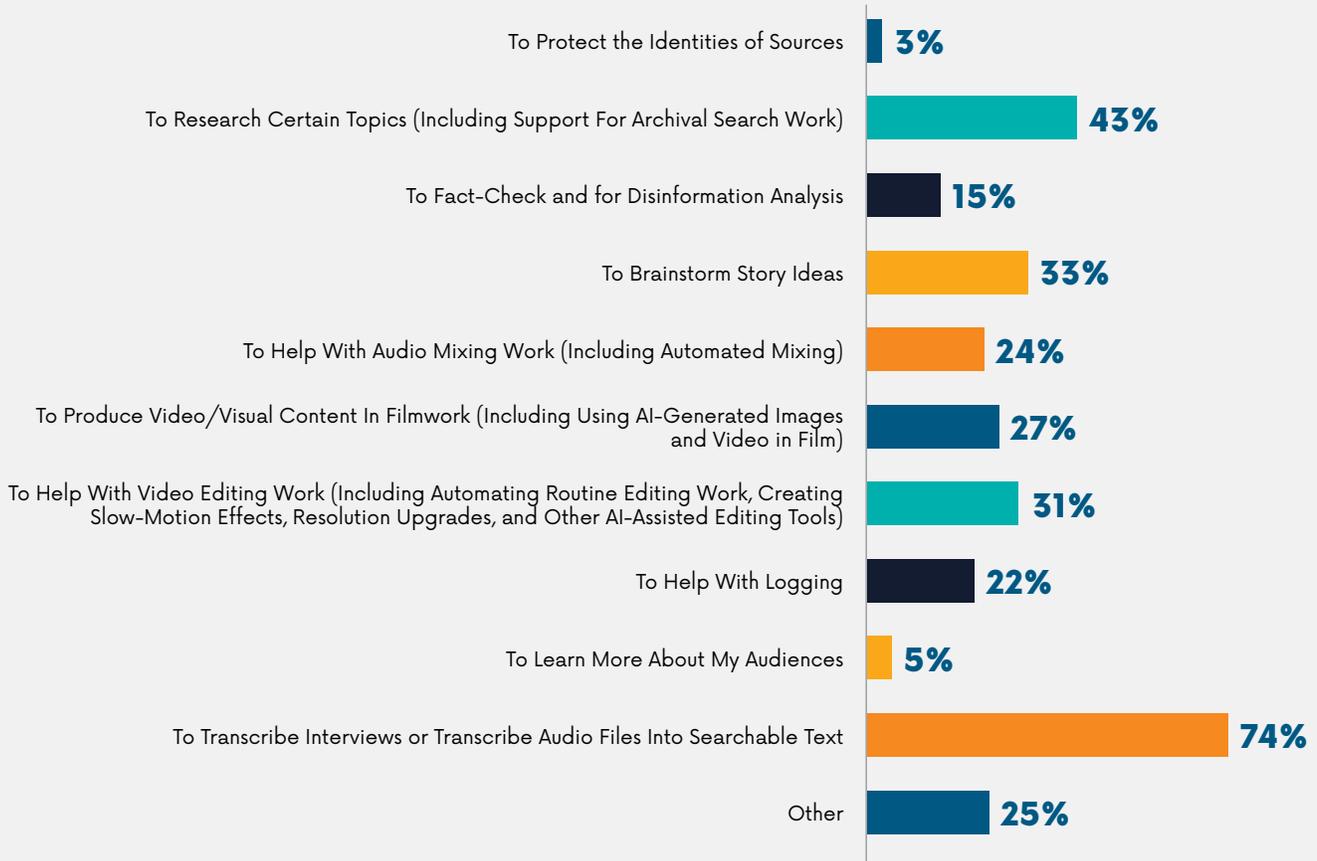
Did you use any artificial intelligence (AI) tools in your most recent documentary work?

[DOCUMENTARY MAKERS]



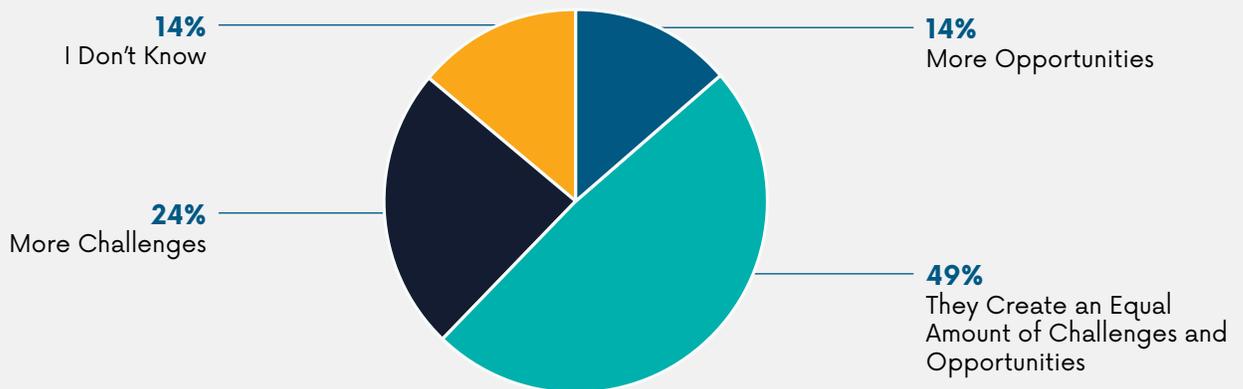
To what capacity have you used AI tools in your work? [Select all that apply.]
 (If "Yes" selected for "AI use" question.)

[DOCUMENTARY MAKERS]



Do you think AI tools create more opportunities or challenges for documentary filmmakers?

[DOCUMENTARY MAKERS]



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