

Written evidence submitted by Doc Society, Sheffield Doc/Fest, and Scottish Documentary Institute

Who we are / about independent documentary film

We are an informal grouping of sector organisations whose principal remit is to support UK independent documentary film. The three submitting organisations are Doc Society, Sheffield Doc/Fest, and Scottish Documentary Institute.

Doc Society is a not for profit organisation founded in 2005 committed to enabling great documentaries and connecting them to audiences that matter. A team of 25 based in London, New York and Amsterdam, we engage and support the global network of documentary filmmakers with direct grants and editorial expertise throughout the life of their film. We work relentlessly to explore new models of funding and distribution to make the projects reach their full potential. To connect filmmakers to new partners from across civil society. To explore how documentary can create social impact and work with change makers on major social justice campaigns.

Our major funders & partners in this work are foundations, state bodies, and individual donors. This includes support from Creative Europe and the Swedish Postcode Lottery in the EU. We are also recipients of public funding in the UK where we manage the national documentary film fund on behalf of the British Film Institute. In the US, we are supported by the Ford Foundation, Compton Foundation and Wyncote Foundation amongst many others.

Sheffield Doc/Fest is an independent registered charity whose mission is to advance the art of film, education and training in the art of documentary filmmaking. We offer filmmakers and artists a place for inspiration, debate, growth and challenge, providing an international platform to launch their works as part of a carefully curated programme that challenges trends, brings diversity and enriches engagement.

Sheffield Doc/Fest is a film festival and marketplace, celebrating, sharing and debating non-fiction arts as a collective form of engagement. It is a space for freedom and for exploration of the ways in which filmmakers, artists and public may reinvent meaning and new possible worlds.

We champion and push forward talent, ideas and interaction for the future of film and the arts. We are an open, inclusive festival, bringing together veteran creatives, new voices and our city to shape and question the world we live in, creating a sense of community and the potential for change.

In 2019, Doc/Fest welcomed over 28,000 general public admissions and 3,489 individual industry delegates from 59 countries to Sheffield.

Scottish Documentary Institute was established in 2004 by Noe Mendelle to nurture documentary filmmakers and audiences in Scotland and beyond, SDI specialises in documentary training, production and distribution, supporting filmmakers through its diverse programme of international activities and high quality training programmes. Based at the Edinburgh College of Art, University of Edinburgh, SDI has produced over a hundred films, screening in sixty countries worldwide, garnering international recognition as being at the cutting edge of the documentary sector. Bridging art and industry, SDI is committed to supporting authored films driven by content and emotional experience.

Scottish Documentary Institute is a non-profit organisation, with charitable status since April 2019, delivering a ladder of development opportunities to benefit all Scottish filmmakers and producers, in addition to running Scottish delegations, in collaboration with Screen Scotland.

Independent documentary films are not fully commissioned by broadcasters; most often they are financially stitched together with a multiplicity of funders, including broadcasters and foundations, sourced from across Europe and North America. It is a distinct subset of the film industry and has much in common with indie fiction film, although it also has some of its own particular characteristics. The independent media content which is produced by our sector is crucial to civic participation by informed publics and contributes towards a healthy democracy comprised of multiple viewpoints.

Whilst contributing to the country's soft power globally, British independent documentaries and British documentary makers are regarded as amongst the best in the world. Therefore, the benefits British documentary film and filmmakers enjoy go way beyond any financial GVA calculation in terms of cultural identity, cultural production and cultural reach. This artistic and intellectual respect and influence is severely threatened by the current crisis.

1. What has been the immediate impact of Covid-19 on the sector?

The global independent documentary ecosystem is a delicate one, with many for profit and not for profit players existing alongside each other. The plethora of organisations in the independent film ecosystem ranging from co-funders, festivals, cinemas, distributors - are co-dependent. We are only as resilient - and able to serve and support filmmakers, as the health of the system.

Each individual organisation within it will be impacted by COVID-19, the ripple effects leading to a loss of capacity across the whole sector; at the end of May Tribeca Film Institute and Vulcan Productions have announced their closure. Although US based, they fund globally. Other international funds are reducing budgets and laying off staff. High net worth individuals who fund this work have already started defaulting on contracts with filmmakers. The result of this is that filmmaking will be for the few, not the many, with a knock on of what stories are told with a narrowing of perspective and representation.

The sector's overall weaknesses on diversity and access to funding (as outlined in the University of the West of England's UK Feature Docs report "[Keeping it Real: Towards a Documentary Film Policy for the UK](#)", published on June 11, will be exacerbated by COVID-19.

To take distribution as an example, documentary – and fiction / non-fiction combined – festivals, a crucial launch pad to a film's commercial & audience engagement journey, have had to be cancelled, starting with SXSW and CPH Docs from mid March onward. The effects result in a significant disruption to the way in which documentaries are launched into the market, with knock on impacts on sales, distribution, press, and exhibition.

Most festivals since mid March have transitioned online to some extent, resulting in a plethora of films being available online ahead of striking distribution deals. This is good for audience choice and accessibility (for those that have access to begin with) but negative for artists and the audience experience as work is not being viewed in the way it was originally intended and in many cases it has devalued documentary by making it available for free. The rule book is having to be re-drawn regarding premiere status, online/theatrical rights, and the theatrical rights windows and it is unclear if filmmakers will benefit.

In some cases, these marketplaces have successfully pivoted online, enabling projects in production to meet funds, foundations, sales agents etc in order to help them secure finance and make their next steps, albeit virtually and through navigating time zone differences.

1. How effectively has the support provided by DCMS, other Government departments and arms-length bodies addressed the sector's needs?

This sector is overwhelmingly comprised of freelance contractors. To take festivals as an example; they are in the main staffed by freelance contractors, usually for short periods in the lead up to delivering a festival, to supplement the festival's year round / permanent staff. With no festival to deliver, this has led to the laying off of a great many freelance contractors. The government support for freelance contractors has been invaluable, although incomplete.

We refer to BECTU's statement on the matter and urge DCMS to listen to their solutions: "Like many other parts of the economy, the employment structures used across this sector are highly flexible, very complicated, and offer very few protections. As a result, the two Treasury schemes intended to support employees and the self-employed fail to cover thousands of Bectu members."

For those festivals with a significant income coming from private sponsorship and from ticket/pass sales – such as Sheffield Doc/Fest – turnover has suffered along with most. Sheffield Doc/Fest is immensely grateful for the ongoing support of our core public funders: Arts Council England, BFI, Sheffield City Council and Wellcome Trust; it is thanks to these organisations and their support that the majority of Doc/Fest's core staff remain in full time jobs (with one furloughed and a couple going part time), and we can deliver activity in 2020 - honouring commitments to films, artists and audiences, while planning for 2021.

Doc Society has been able to open a fund for production support due to the generosity of the BFI, but there has not been an overarching response to the creative sector from DCMS with the vision and funds to match, for example, [Germany's support for the creative sector](#).

1. What will the likely long-term impacts of Covid-19 be on the sector, and what support is needed to deal with those?

The impact of COVID-19 is most acutely felt amongst small production companies and freelance filmmakers who have caring responsibilities, or are new or young filmmakers - particularly those from ethnic minorities and low income backgrounds. In an already precarious sector, many of these filmmakers are considering leaving documentary filmmaking. Some are retraining in other creative work (such as animation), while others are looking to leave creative industries completely. This has serious implications for the documentary sector and the films made, which, before COVID-19 did not reflect the diversity of our society. The risk is that we lose our existing BME and female documentary filmmakers, and any documentary filmmakers on low incomes, and work to increase diversity is reversed. It's their voices that need to be heard the most.

Independent film distribution is disrupted. There is a lack of clarity for how long. Films are struggling to get public attention without theatrical release press reviews. Impact screenings, events that shine a light on the issues within documentary film through structured Q&As (so crucial to many of our community) bring people together, but they can't be so easily replaced with digital distribution. Impact strategies that purposely connect films to specific audiences need major adaptation for a virtual world.

Streamers (Netflix, Apple, Disney and Amazon) are pulling ahead. We are heading for a monoculture of “output” that excludes independent and under represented viewpoints, and may eschew public service values.

Public service broadcasters could be strengthened from the public health crisis but still face long term challenges - political and economic. Independent production could become de-prioritised. Commitment to independent documentary is already patchy.

One of the biggest concerns for filmmaking and festivals is for our friends: the cinemas. We will rely on the good health of our venue-partners, primarily cinemas – which will involve them being financially supported not only until they are safe and ready to open, but possibly partially supported until they are closer to being able to open at full capacity. In particular cinemas and the exhibition sector need to be able to receive government support for them to remain closed until it is proven safe for them to reopen. For example, unrestricted, flexible funding to support staff until end of 2020, future emergency protocols, meeting community demands on re-opening, particularly those that are struggling to respond to health and safety and social distancing measures, e.g. procuring equipment and supplies such as masks, hand sanitiser, gloves, operational signage and cleaning supplies, additional cleaning services to augment in-house operations etc. Technology to support remote work delivery and services—along with staff training, particularly for volunteers. Financial support for temporary staff support to cover for shortages caused by employees who may have to stay home to care for family members or children during school closures.

Women going back into the industry following a career gap have lost career progression and contacts and this has been exacerbated by the lockdown. For those who are looking after children during lockdown, it has been a challenging time to be productive. The WFTV membership survey says that two thirds of freelancers have been left without government support.

New filmmakers are often balancing part-time casual work with short film commissions and initiatives from funds and foundations such as SDI and Doc Society. The lockdown has resulted in a loss of income, momentum, contacts and opportunities to make and screen their films. Filmmakers from BME communities, with disabilities or from low income backgrounds already struggle to access the industry. With reduced ability to make films, and fewer sources of funding, saved or regular income there is every likelihood that we will move backward from where we are now. We could find our documentary sector more white, male and middle-class than it was before.

“I think this is a dangerous time for diverse voices in documentary - there is a danger the virus could undo the necessary work being done to make the sector more inclusive and accessible as the only people left standing are those like myself that have other sources of income to fall back on. If people leave they probably won't come back, and that is not good for film generally, and documentary in particular.”

1. What lessons can be learnt from how DCMS, arms-length bodies and the sector have dealt with Covid-19?

A lot could be learnt from the Arts Council's response to this crisis: they were prompt to issue 100% reassurance to all NPOs that grant money would not be clawed back, and to push back all reporting deadlines across the board, but that in return, funded organisations

should honour all its financial commitments to artists. In particular, extensions to grant terms and targeted project budget reallocations not necessarily tied to KPIs.

Screen Scotland's response was also immediate by setting up two funds: one supporting freelance filmmakers out of work and two applications for project development in order to make sure that Scottish filmmakers will be ready to move to production once the lockdown is over. Screen Scotland was also happy for SDI to re allocate their undespent funding for travelling/accommodation to new online activities to keep the filmmakers connected.

The BFI has been coordinated, organised and pragmatic and also flexible and generous to its grantees, of which Doc Society is one. But there is real peril for the sector in the current situation.

1. How might the sector evolve after Covid-19, and how can DCMS support such innovation to deal with future challenges?

Independent documentary film is one of the arts and sits in the cultural sector. Support for the cultural sector needs to be wide ranging and purposeful and include film. This support should have representation from and be directed towards the grassroots and independent sector as well as the big players.

We support the following policy initiatives:

Replacement for the EU Creative Media funding must be a priority as should further tax incentives for artists, including an uplift of tax credit.

Working with OFCOM to incentivise more support for independent feature documentary from the PSBs

An innovation fund prioritising diverse voices. This has been put forward in the UWE report, which is undergoing consultation currently and will result in an agreed set of policy proposals in the Autumn.

Finally, philanthropy will have a major role to play in independent documentary as well as for the arts more generally, but this needs to be incentivised in a strategic manner for the benefit of all.