

The Current State of the International Marketplace For Documentary Films

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INTRODUCTION

Just recently, at the Sundance Film Festival, Robert Redford announced a major new initiative that signifies a very encouraging development in the documentary world. We think it's appropriate to start this report with this news.

(indieWIRE: 01.14.02) -- With its festival, its institute and its channel, Sundance has become the driving force behind the country's awareness of American independent film. It is about to try to do the same for documentaries.

Sundance has increased the documentary presence at the festival with each successive year, but the organization has taken that commitment to a new level with Robert Redford's announcement that the Sundance Channel will create a new station devoted entirely to documentary programming. He also formally announced the establishment of the Sundance International Documentary Fund. "This is the natural evolution for Sundance," Redford said. "This is really putting our teeth into a long, standing commitment to documentaries."

Redford said the new entities are only the first step in a broad initiative to raise the profile of documentary film in this country. In addition to the fund and the channel, doc labs similar to the organization's screenwriting and directing programs will be established. "The way it is now documentarians are just tossed to the dogs," explained Redford. There will be no formal tie between the new station, the institute and the festival, but when Redford was asked if there would be any spill over between the three, he replied, "I hope so!"

Since the events of last year, the attention paid to non-fiction storytelling has intensified. With Sundance's backing, that momentum can only build. "There's going to be a search for issues to be dealt with in a way other than what comes out of some country's propaganda machine," said Redford. "People are going to want to see what people are doing and thinking." [Maud Kersnowski]

Much of what follows is an update of an article Diana Holtzberg and Jan Rofekamp wrote more than a year ago for DOX Magazine. We have made some adjustments to it and have expanded it by elaborating on a number of important subjects, such as film festivals, markets & conferences, pre-sales, co-productions, etc. This report focuses on the international marketplace for documentaries from the perspective of who buys and who sells them. However, we have also attempted to describe the types of docs that sell today.

LOOKING BACK:

The world of international documentary sales was quite simple in the early 1980's. Clients were a group of friendly and well-organized Public Television stations which existed in every major country. It was relatively easy to sell to them. The borders of the licensed territories were clearly defined. The contracts were just two pages long and the deals were generally good, at times even quite good. If you got yourself a BBC, Channel 4, WDR, or Canal Plus sale as an independent filmmaker (on top of your domestic deal) your year was made since they all paid good money in return for license terms of up to 7 years- for sometimes as many as 5 broadcasts. Filmmakers and their sales agents did not really worry about the future. With such good terms and so little competition (the MIPTV guide was not even one inch, or three centimeters thick), why should we?

Then in the early 1990's things became more complicated. This was due to several factors: Privately owned commercial television started to take off. More important, we witnessed the advent of a totally new phenomenon: thematic specialty channels, which began to spread rather quickly across the globe via cable and satellite. Signals started to reach across national borders. These thematic channels began to segment the market. Instead of offering a broad range of information and entertainment to a large audience, traditionally the task of the public stations, thematic channels introduced narrow, theme-driven programming geared to the specific interests of smaller audiences.

Filmmakers and sales agents that wanted to sell their films to this new cable and satellite market were forced to accept their lower license fees, given their argument that they were new, had low budgets to start up with, etc. This was even the case with some that penetrated larger geographical areas covering more countries — and therefore had potentially far greater audience!

The common practice where buyers bought a film simply because they liked it, worrying later where to program it, became less and less the norm. Buyers were now sent out into the field with specific directives from their program schedulers and net managers. If the sales agent or independent producer did not have what the buyers were looking for, then NO DEAL. It became a 'buyers' market with the terms set by the stations. If you wanted to sell films to them you were generally forced to play by the new rules.

Issues of exclusivity also grew in importance as it became clear that documentaries could now be sold for a second time, after their first window, and even for a third time with the expansion of theme-driven cable stations, where exclusivity is less of an issue.

Then, in the mid 90's, due to the continuing rise in popularity of thematic channels and the subsequent increasing global demand for the genre, DOCUMENTARY became a hot commodity. International film festivals started to pay more attention to their doc programming as they found out that great docs performed well with their audiences. Documentary festivals gained more prestige, attracted new audiences, and as a result some of them established a market (buying and selling element) as well as new event formulas to add co-production platforms, such as the Financing Forums in Amsterdam (IDFA) and more recently Toronto (HOTDOCS).

The terms FACTUAL PROGRAMMING and FACTUAL ENTERTAINMENT were introduced to reflect this phenomenon. FACTUAL, which for so long was hidden away in the far corner of daytime and late night scheduling became a key word in the international television community. Markets like MIP-TV, NATPE and MIPCOM where documentary had always been a sideline, became major exchange points for the new industry.

Independent documentary producers have been finding that while there continues to be lots of interest in docs, there is often less money per sale. What's happened? Without a clear announcement or loud bang the market for documentaries has split into two distinct areas, each with very specific demands and rules. One area remains more or less constant and the other is experiencing healthy growth.

THE FIRST MARKET

The primary area is what we call the FIRST MARKET. The FIRST MARKET is broadcast via the principal terrestrial public and private networks in each country. For example, in Holland this is NPS, in Denmark it is DR and Tv2, in Sweden SVT and Tv4,

in Finland it is Yle 1 & 2, MTV, in Germany ARD and ZDF or Spiegel, in France TF1, F2 and F3, Canal Plus and La Sept/ARTE, and in Canada the CBC and TVO. In the USA where the networks ABC, NBC and CBS rarely play documentaries, the First Market is composed of PBS and the major cable players such as HBO, A&E, Bravo, Discovery, TLC and more recently CourtTV. In the UK it is the BBC, Channel 4 and Channel 5. The FIRST MARKET generally ensures a doc good placement, exposure, reviews, and decent money.

Documentaries that are sold in the FIRST MARKET are usually high profile, deal with subjects and issues that have world wide appeal, are impeccably made, internationally promotable, award-winning, edgy, have a strong story, or are character driven. They usually are one TV hour in length, although feature docs are not excluded here.

HIGH AND LOW IN THE FIRST MARKET

When pursuing both sales and co-productions, it is important to concentrate one's efforts on the principal broadcast channels in the FIRST MARKET, as it is here where the money is. We have to make clear, however, that there is a further distinction within the FIRST MARKET itself; we call it the HIGH and LOW end.

The high end of the FIRST MARKET consists of principal channels in the following countries: the USA, UK, France, and Germany. And, in a lesser way, Spain, Italy, Japan, and Australia fall in this category too. The countries that fall in the lower end of the FIRST MARKET are the Scandinavian countries, The Netherlands, Canada, Belgium, Greece, South Africa, Poland, New Zealand, etc.

If, for instance, the budget for a feature doc costs approximately \$500,000 to \$800,000, and you have commitments for half the budget, it is clear that making a pre-sale in Norway and Greece will not really help you. So, an American producer who has a deal with a domestic broadcaster such as HBO, ITVS, or A&E for their project (and they are not financing it completely) will have to look to the high end of the FIRST MARKET to add serious money to their budget.

In some cases it is possible to obtain more money from a country if one does a formal co-production. In such a case the client/ broadcaster will often be willing to put up more money if the producer finds a partner in the country of the broadcaster. These co-production deals may be made for strictly financial reasons, but those co-productions where there is an actual reason to co-produce (such as a shoot to be done in the country of the broadcaster) are better. In some cases the co-producing producer is also able to find additional production monies by accessing local production funding mechanisms.

THE SECOND MARKET

Then there is the more recent SECOND MARKET, now firmly established and consisting of the ever-growing cable (basic and pay) and satellite channels. Examples of this market are: Canal Plus in northern Europe, GloboSat in Brazil, Rai-Sat and CNI in Italy, HBO in Eastern Europe, Noga in Israel, TV1000 and TV3 in Scandinavia, stations such as Planete Multi-thematiques, Histoire, Voyage, Discovery in France, Germany and Italy, Documania in Spain, Discovery Channel, Bravo and HBO in Latin America and Asia, National Geographic worldwide and so on.

This SECOND MARKET has become very documentary-hungry and quite eager to get strong FIRST MARKET films as these titles serve as locomotives in their programming. But they pay significantly lower rates per hour. To effectively strategize and maneuver

through the windowing from FIRST to SECOND MARKET requires considerable experience. In the SECOND MARKET there are significantly more slots for documentary series.

Working in the SECOND MARKET often involves longer contracts with unlimited plays. In many cases, since signals are receivable in more than one territory these sales infringe on previously sold licenses in neighboring territories, making them complicated to execute. There is also a lot of servicing work involved, which is labor-intensive and can be very time-consuming. A typical example: since they need a lot of programming SECOND MARKET buyers often ask for 20 to 30 preview tapes, then take many months to decide and ultimately only buy 6 films, each with a different delivery date.

On top of all this, another unsettling change has recently occurred in the SECOND MARKET, but also more and more in the FIRST MARKET. While previously never discussed, some clients have begun to ask sales agents and filmmakers to pay for certain costs. For instance, with an \$800 sale in the SECOND MARKET the independent filmmaker may be required to provide the broadcast materials (a \$200 Beta tape), pay one-way of the transport (\$100), and/or accept withholding tax on licenses and royalties. Many clients deduct between 10 and 15%. This is like an income tax because you are earning income in a foreign territory, and the tax people are not so sure that you will voluntarily report it. Finally, if you have a sales agent he or she requires a 25% commission.

Given the above, it is therefore obvious that sales agents prefer to acquire FIRST MARKET films as this is where the real money is. Filmmakers have no choice but to try and produce FIRST MARKET films if they want to recoup their production investment (not to mention earn a living).

Here is what we see happening:

The enormous increase in worldwide interest for documentary and the greatly reduced costs of filmmaking equipment has caused hundreds (possibly thousands) of new producers to enter this arena. While available slots for documentaries are significantly on the rise in the low paying SECOND MARKET, there is little increase in the independent doc slots in the FIRST MARKET.

Consequently, the competition for FIRST MARKET programming slots has become fierce. Additionally, there seems to be a general tendency by Commissioning Editors to commission from and co-produce with their home-based filmmakers, with the oft-heard argument that their viewers want home grown and indigenous stories.

WHAT SELLS – AND TO WHOM

Below is an attempt to lay some ground rules for what sells, and where it sells. This is not about content specifically; this is about general content and markets.

1) Docs for the "home" market. These are social, cultural, historical, and political docs that are made for the home country. These films are necessary, however, are destined for a 'home' audience. Most will not travel. Attempting to export them is a waste 99% of the time.

2) Docs for the global specialty channel market: low budget, reasonably well made docs of any kind, often in series for the Discovery, History, Exploration, Cooking, Lifestyle, etc. channels. These channels need a lot of docs, and so the production community

produces a lot of them. Being hired to produce for this genre means you're getting paid, and you often don't own the rights so don't have to worry about selling them.

3) Last but not least, there are the single docs that are destined for the FIRST MARKET, to the BBC, HBO, Ch4, Arte, public stations in countries like the US, Germany, France, the Netherlands, Sweden, Finland, Australia, Switzerland, etc. This is the market that often pays serious money. But it's not really growing, and the number of producers trying to get their film sold in this market has grown ten-fold over the last few years. As a consequence, only the top documentary films worldwide get sold in this market. In other words, one MUST make a VERY POWERFUL, UNIQUE, AND VERY WELL MADE FILM to make it in this market, preferably with some major awards attached to it as well: A DOC THAT KNOCKS YOUR SOCKS OFF.

CONCLUSIONS

Today, many filmmakers who have produced a decent doc, received some visibility and won some nice awards still find that FIRST MARKET sales can be few and far between, with the bulk of their sales coming from the low-paying SECOND MARKET. Since the financial side of the SECOND MARKET is completely out of sync with the cost of making these docs, this is a very serious dilemma! Here's an example: a filmmaker spends 4 years of his or her life and \$300,000 or more (of mostly borrowed) dollars, getting at best 10 sales each worth between \$750 and \$2000, most for a minimum of three years and unlimited runs! This just does not make economic sense.

To compound matters, we are more frequently being forced to accept shorter deals in the FIRST MARKET, which would be fine if this paid the same money. But it doesn't. Where the deals were \$50,000 and up for five years, four runs, today we get offers of \$20,000 for one or two years with one or two runs. Yes, you will get the rights for your film back quicker and it will become available sooner for the SECOND MARKET, but for what kind of second deals: a \$2000 contract with unlimited runs?

There are those who feel that producing for the SECOND MARKET offers work opportunities to the independent production community, but we are of the opinion that this is an illusion as you are entering an incredibly competitive market with more and more production handled in-house. Whereas many of the SECOND MARKET channels still (and will continue to) buy lots of documentaries, they are also launching low cost in-house production. This way they can control content, shape it to fit their programming philosophy and look, and own the copyright. With an eye on the future, ownership of content is going to be a key issue. Controlled, formatted, indigenous and low cost production of documentary is where the SECOND MARKET is headed. And, since there are many young and eager men and women who are willing to work for little money for what looks like a ticket into the industry, it appears there will be no shortage of personnel for these productions. Sadly, these filmmakers are often hired guns that are given little artistic freedom, harried production schedules, and heavy budget constraints. While the word 'industry' has been used exclusively for the feature film business, SECOND MARKET documentary production is fast becoming a strong industry in its own right.

Bottom line: The HIGH END market has too few sales, and the LOW END market pays too little!

For sale agents (who by the way, do NOT own the docs they sell) creating volume for the SECOND MARKET is clearly not the answer. To survive and make money for their filmmakers, it has become a necessity to be more selective in the films they take on. Representing feature docs that can play for sometimes more than a year on the

international film festival circuit, often starting at Sundance, Amsterdam, or Berlin, is becoming an even greater priority since, once having gained a solid reputation, these films sell well to the FIRST MARKET.

PRE-SALES AND CO-PRODUCTIONS

There are three groups to target:

- 1) Buyers and commissioning editors
- 2) Producers you may want to co-produce with
- 3) Non-broadcast funders (thematically driven foundations, such as the National Endowment of the Humanities in the US, and development aid driven organizations, such as UNESCO).

Foreign buyers (whoever they are) will generally be reluctant when filmmakers come to them first and no money is in place. It's advisable to have a domestic deal in place that's already committed to funding at least 50 to 60% of the film's budget before you approach foreign buyers. The "pitch forums" in Amsterdam and Toronto REQUIRE that at least 25% of the money be in place. When a foreign buyers commitment is 'last in,' there's a good chance that a film will be fully financed and therefore get made.

A PRE-SALE is a financial commitment for a simple purchase based on a pitch, a demo, a rough-cut, etc. This is an easy deal: they promise, and you deliver.

A CO-PRODUCTION is much more complex. In many cases, a lot more money is at stake, it means co-ownership of the film (therefore also a share in the film's eventual revenues). It also means that more voices determine the final shape and content of the film.

Very strict written agreements have to be made in order to avoid trouble at the tail end of the production. Co-productions are often engaged in because from a content point of view there is reason to shoot in another country. It is typical that co-production money must be spent in the country with which one co-produces. The co-production partner can be a TV station (Commissioning Editor) or it can be a production company in a foreign country, who then in turn will seek funding from local TV or other funding mechanisms.

A US based production looking for foreign money (pre-sales and co-production \$\$) should aim for a partner in the bigger countries: UK, France, and Germany.

A good commission out of the FIRST MARKET, such as BBC, Canal Plus, or Arte in Europe can in combination with a domestic commission from say HBO, CourtTv, TLC or A&E, can make up the budget of any decently budgeted feature documentary. If you have a good domestic commission, and the clients overseas you are after are of the above caliber, you can actually count the number of them on the fingers of two hands. This means there's not too many around that can complement your budget. The more thematically organized SECOND MARKET also commissions, but as the license fees for purchase are low, the commissions are low budget as well. So, a decently budgeted feature doc with, let's say, an HBO domestic deal, is not helped by a SECOND MARKET deal from overseas. It's simply too little money. It is therefore important that the buyers and CE's who are invited to events like the IFP Market and festivals like Sundance come from the FIRST market.

FILM FESTIVALS

We believe it will continue to become even more important for FIRST MARKET films to enter internationally prestigious competitions, and to win AWARDS, or at least get nominations, hopefully from the big ones: Oscars or Emmys, Prix D'Italia, the Joris Ivens Award at IDFA, etc.

Film festivals are important vehicles that can serve to promote and sell films (as well as find potential partners for future productions), and this obviously includes feature documentaries. Each year there are about 15 to 20 feature docs that appear at almost every major festival on the circuit, and these films have the opportunity to gain a strong reputation and get sold. There are many festivals and one needs to determine which are the essential ones that can further the career of your specific film.

There are three types of festivals that make sense for the independent documentary filmmaker:

1. Launch Festivals

These are the places where the careers of many feature docs begin. They are:

January: Sundance (American docs only)

February: The International Berlin Film Festival (Forum and Panorama sections)

May: Hotdocs, located in Toronto

September: The Toronto International Film Festival (Reel to Reel Section)

November: International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam

When looking at the international festival circuit, one must realize that many of the festivals have different sections. Being in the main COMPETITION assures a film the best position. Most of the launch festivals have competitions.

Some festivals are really broad and even if at first sight the Toronto Film Festival, for example, is a prestigious festival to be in, one might end up in a Midnight Madness slot: Monday night at Midnight. If your film gets selected but does not make it into competition, you might want to gamble on submitting it to the next launch event instead. Why? Because from a strategic point of view competition is always the most visible position your film can be in. If your film is in competition half the job is done, as audiences and potential buyers all automatically track the competition section. Therefore, it's worth careful consideration whether to try for a competition slot somewhere else, should your first choice NOT offer you the competition position. Examples: IDFA (There are two main competitions) Hotdocs (competition) Toronto Film Festival (Reel to Real slot), Nyon and Marseille (competition), Sundance (competition for US produced docs).

Receiving a top award at Sundance or Amsterdam, for instance, will, in addition to creating notice and prestige for a filmmaker, generate sales.

2. National Festivals

These festivals are part of the circuit that establishes a doc's international reputation throughout the year. They can also help a film make sales, but more often only in the

country where the festival takes place. We have compiled a list of the most important ones below.

Among the main national film festivals, there are a number of strictly doc events: Visions du Reel in Nyon, Doc Aviv in Tel Aviv, Saloniki, Cinema du Reel in Paris, Munich Documentary Festival, It's all True in Sao Paolo, Encounters in South Africa, and Yamagata in Japan, are some of the most important ones. Then there are a number of general film festivals that include a strong doc section, as you can see in the list below. Obviously the big prizewinners from the doc festivals will get noticed and many will then find their way into the international film festival circuit. As a result, they too can be instrumental in starting a doc's career. In rare cases a documentary can also attract a tremendous amount of attention at general film festivals that focus primarily on fiction works and in so doing begin a career. Promises, for example, jump-started its career in Rotterdam (a primarily fiction film festival) by winning the Audience Award in 2001.

January:

Rotterdam Film Festival (The Netherlands)
Goteborg Film Festival (Sweden)
Fipa Festival for Television Productions (France)

March:

It's All True/Kino Forum (Brazil)
Thessaloniki Documentary Festival (Greece)
Cinéma du Réel (Paris, France)

April:

National Film Festival (Denmark)
Visions du Réel (Nyon, Switzerland)
Hong Kong International Film festival
Munich Doc Film Festival

June:

Marseille Vue sur les Docs (France)
Banff Television Festival (Canada)
Sydney Film Festival, (Australia)
Munich Film Festival, (Germany)

July:

Jerusalem International Film festival (Israel)
Melbourne Film Festival (Australia)
Wellington Film festival (New Zealand)
Galway Film Fleadh (Ireland)
Encounters Documentary Film Festival (South Africa)
Brisbane International Film Festival (Australia)
Karlovy Vary International Film Festival (Czech Republic)

August:

Edinburgh International Film Festival (UK)
Festival films du monde. (Montreal, Canada)

September:

Helsinki Film Festival (Finland)
San Sebastian Film Festival (Spain)
Vancouver Film festival (Canada)

Taiwan International Documentary Festival

October:

Sao Paulo International Film Festival (Brazil)
Warsawki Festival Filmowy (Poland)
Cork Film Festival (Ireland)
Festival of New Cinema. (Montreal. Canada)
Sheffield International Documentary Festival (UK)
Hamptons International Film Festival (US)
Bergen Film Festival (Norway)
Valladolid International Film Festival (Spain)
Vienna Film Festival (Austria)
Rencontres Cinéma de Paris (France)
Pusan International Film Festival (South Korea)
Yamagata Int Documentary Film Festival (Japan)
Ghent Film Festival (Belgium)

November:

Torino Film Festival (Italy)
Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival (Taiwan)
Rencontres International du Documentaire de Montréal (Canada)
Stockholm International Film Festival (Sweden)
London Film Festival (UK)

3. Constituency or Specialized Film Festivals

If your film has a specific theme or falls within a specific category (such as ecology, human rights, art, music, gay and lesbian, Jewish, Third World, etc.), there may be a number of specialized film festivals out there that would be appropriate to submit your film to. Specialized festivals attract specialized buyers.

Beyond the above-mentioned festivals, there are undoubtedly many more, but one should carefully consider whether the time and money required to submit and attend them is worth it. One really has to weigh this. There are indeed many advantages to attending festivals in addition to launching your film. Among them: they are great places to network and are platforms for young talents to meet older professionals.

Regarding the submission of films to festivals we feel it appropriate to touch on the costs involved. Since festivals have existed, documentary filmmakers have given their films free of charge. This continues to be the case, particularly when films are invited into competition or the main section. However, when films are not invited into competition or the main section, it is no longer unheard of for filmmakers to charge a rental fee for their films, to help pay for some of the expenses they incur (the design and production of postcards, posters, stills, press kits, transportation, lodging, etc.). A positive trend at festivals is how they are increasingly switching over to projecting films on DIGITAL or SP format, rather than projecting on 16mm and 35mm. This inevitably reduces the financial worries of making expensive prints.

Looking at the role of film festivals from their own perspective, Eugene Hernandez wrote an article in indieWIRE on December 4, 2001 about a gathering of festival chiefs in Berlin that met to discuss the state of their industry. An interesting statistic offered at the summit: “There are 663 film festivals in the world, nearly two every day of the year”. Hernandez reported on the many challenges festival directors face: how they have to be good jugglers, able to keep many balls in the air at once, since they’re trying to please

their audiences, corporate sponsors or government funders, the media, as well as the entertainment industry. Other noteworthy issues covered included the evolving role of film festivals, how technology might change the festival experience, how they can be used as a medium to facilitate production and distribution, their importance as a place for discovery, and how festivals must serve as a place for movies that are challenging or that don't have access to audiences via traditional means. It was brought out that each major festival has developed its own brand identity, and that as an industry festivals compete vigorously to keep their standing: for movies, for sponsors, attention from the press and entertainment executives. Also discussed was the continued commitment to introduce new talent, and how important festivals are for world cinema.

EVENTS, CONFERENCES, MARKETS, AND TRADE FAIRS

In addition to having an appointment with a foreign buyer or Commissioning Editor in his or her office or meeting them at a festival, another good way to find them is on the ever-growing track of events & conferences.

They are not festivals, although some have competitions attached to them. They are primarily pre-programmed networking events that feature panels, seminars, and information sessions. If you are lucky, buyers and Commissioning Editors who attend them will schedule one-to-one meetings.

Some of the events are thematically oriented. They may deal with indie films in general, meaning narrative/fiction films are part of the event. Some have video libraries where you can enter your doc. Events and conferences may be expensive to attend and geared towards experienced producers. They are full of people who have known each other for years and wine and dine together. One can check websites to determine who is planning to attend, and try to make appointments in advance via email.

Here are the most important events, conferences, markets, and trade fairs throughout the year for those working in the documentary world:

January:

Sundance, House of Docs. Filmmakers without a doc in the program can pay a fee to attend.

Natpe Market (Las Vegas, NV)

February:

Reel Screen Summit (Washington DC)

American Film Market (Santa Monica, CA)

World Congress of History Producers (Berlin, Germany)

Australian Documentary Conference

April:

Mipdoc + MipTV (Cannes, France)

May:

Hot Docs+ Documentary Forum (Toronto, Canada)

Input Conference (Rotterdam, Holland)

June:

Banff TV Festival (Banff, Canada)

Sunny Side of the Doc (Marseille, France)

PBS Annual Meeting (Different cities)

September:

IFP Market (New York)

October:

Mipcom (Cannes, France)

Sheffield Docs (Sheffield, UK)

November:

IDFA + Forum (Amsterdam, Holland)

FILM FESTIVALS, MARKETS, AND EVENTS: A SERIOUS NOTE

Having studied a number of the documentary meeting places, conferences, and film festivals throughout the world, and after speaking with several people that attend them, we feel it would be a healthy exercise for those who cater to documentaries to also take a look at and ask themselves serious questions to determine their effectiveness -- and possibly re-assess their roles in the doc world somewhat.

Is their primary role that of offering documentary filmmakers a place to have their films seen in theatres with an audience? Or is it to seriously assist in the domestic and international marketing and selling of these docs? Or is it to educate? Or is it all three? We are of the mind that some film festivals, markets, events, and organizations may be fostering an illusion that making FIRST MARKET feature documentaries can be a viable business for many rather than a select few. In the United States at least, a large number of even established FIRST MARKET independent documentary filmmakers must support themselves with other freelance work to make ends meet, unless of course they're independently wealthy or have a partner that's the breadwinner.

Should these organizations shift gears a bit and reposition themselves to assume that their main task is to educate filmmakers and prepare them for the real world out there? At IDFA in Amsterdam (in November 2001), during the three days of public pitching at the Forum, it was distressing to see that hardly any commissioning editors committed to a project. And there were 500 docs in the video library. (How could serious buyers find the time to see everything?) Amsterdam is a serious festival and its program seems to grow every year. Yet there was serious buzz on only a small number of films. What does this say?

There are largely two groups of producers/ clients out there: the novices and the established, as well as FIRST MARKET and SECOND MARKET producers. We should not be hesitant or ashamed to make these clear distinctions. It's important to help established (and novice) producers who are striving to make great FIRST MARKET films, make them. It's also essential to craft environments that foster the creation of strong international co-productions and sales. And it is equally crucial to help newcomers first of all learn about the doc market, since there is little use helping a newcomer to sell an unsellable film.

By making the distinction between newcomers and established, as well as FIRST and SECOND MARKET films, the function of events like the IFP Market, Hotdocs, and IDFA will become clearer and more effective. Further, if all the doc-oriented events and film festivals strive to do their utmost to cater to the needs of those who attend to conduct

BUSINESS (as well as those who are there for an EDUCATION), this can only make things better for everyone.

As a positive endnote, we are continuing to see growing cinema/festival audiences for documentaries worldwide. And, the recent announcement by Sundance that they are creating a national doc channel not only reflects greater interest in the genre right here in the United States, but it will likely in time create even more interest in and larger audiences for top quality documentaries...thereby creating greater demand for (and money for those who make) them.

Q & A's with Commissioning Editors

We asked Commissioning Editors from four countries — Denmark, Canada, the UK, and France (all of whom represent broadcast channels in the First Market...two from the High End and two from the Low End) — the following questions:

Q: Regarding the number of films commissioned and purchased: is it increasing, decreasing, or has it remained constant?

- It is more or less the same as last year.
- The number of documentaries we are acquiring has increased, at least on the international front. This year the Passionate Eye (our international showcase) has between 50 – 60 documentary slots for 1 hour and feature length docs on Monday and Tuesday nights in prime time. A third night is being considered for next season largely due to the incredible success of documentaries in the aftermath of Sept. 11th. Our commissions at this point for both the Passionate Eye and our Canadian independent series of co-productions remains constant at between 15 - 20.
- We have an enormous increase in slots - from around 8-10 to 55. But most of the new slots are on the new BBC4 - a cultural digital channel.
- For Canal+ France, the number of films commissioned & acquired has decreased. This is due to a decrease in both the network's overall budget and the number of documentary slots. For Canal+ Nordic, Poland, Belgique & Benelux, and Tele+ Italia, the number of films acquired has remained constant.

Q: Are the budgets per film decreasing?

- No. They have increased.
- Our budgets are remaining relatively constant for our co-productions, however there is some flexibility for those commissioned for the Passionate Eye.
- Not yet - because we tend to do more co-productions. But it is not easy to fund films, ever. Unless someone is capable of doing a film for around \$125 k, co-production is needed. Films costing more than \$400,000 are hard to finance - even with American money. My policy is to do either cheap dv films - or quite expensive ones. I am trying to cut out the middle range. Cheap means you can experiment, expensive means it looks better - but must be 'international' in scope.
- They are not increasing, no.

Q: Since the cost of documentary filmmaking is increasing on all fronts, do you feel that if you can't pay as much for films than you have in the past that it will inevitably result in lower production values and films made by less experienced crews?

- Yes
- At Newsworld, we are experiencing the reverse trend. When we began commissioning for the Canadian series Rough Cuts, we were operating at the low end of the documentary market, working almost exclusively with young relatively inexperienced filmmakers. In fact, we had made a commitment to developing filmmakers. What we're beginning to see happen, particularly with the series the passionate eye, is that more experienced filmmakers are coming our way... Attracted by the success of the series, the flexibility in accommodating different lengths (from 40 - 80 min.), and more creative financing on both the domestic and international front.
- Not yet - because we tend to do more co-productions. But it is not easy to fund films, ever. Unless someone is capable of doing a film for around \$125 k, co-production is needed. Films costing more than \$400,000 are hard to finance - even with American money. My policy is to do either cheap dv films - or quite expensive ones. I am trying to cut out the middle range. Cheap means you can experiment, expensive means it looks better - but must be 'international' in scope...
- No, I think that networks such as Canal+ can by no means afford to lower their quality standards: if we cannot produce as much as before, we must produce less, but best. We will always try to provide a realistic budget that respects the objectives of the accepted proposal and assures its realization, that takes into account the length of the film, filming conditions & locations, the importance of the production in relation to the network, the skills and experience of a producer/director/distributor etc, etc. Obviously, we tend to avoid giving loads of dosh to inexperienced crews, inept producers and lousy directors that all tend to cost a lot of money and give disappointing results.

Q: When/if you finance productions that require a substantial outlay of cash, in what ways do you try to ensure that the receiving producer is able to deliver – both in the physical sense and the level of content?

- We make cash flow budgets and that is not a problem
- As commissioning editors, we keep in close contact with the filmmaker offering editorial advice and reaction at various stages from development through shooting and editing. The financing is paid out according to a pre-determined delivery schedule, which involves an approval process in various stages of production.
- By keeping on the case. By telling people what I want - as precisely as possible. One should ultimately let people alone - but only when they are on the right track.
- Canal+ has always worked closely and tirelessly with its partners to assure that the production goes according to plan. On any co-production, we follow the project from its development onwards, follow the editing and scripting closely, consulting with director and producer on a regular basis. We must give approval on the final cut.

Q: Do you tend to work with a relatively small group of filmmakers and producers, those you know and trust? If this is the case, how can someone break into your system?

- Yes. You can break in with a good story or to work with a producer with a long and professional track record. Just did that with 2 young English directors just out of film school. Found a Danish and English producer and set up a co-production. Worked well.
- Our doors are open
- No. I try to keep an open house. We work with many filmmakers...as many as is reasonable.
- Canal+ has always allowed for both: and newcomers break into the system regularly. We are willing to take a risk on new talent, if the subject matter and/or talent of the individual warrants it, but are delighted and committed to continuing collaborations with established producers and filmmakers who provide us consistently with excellent programs.

Q: What is the best and fastest way for a filmmaker to reach you and get the most attention possible for his/her project? For instance, should they send a synopsis with a short bio by email?

- Send an e-mail or call. Or meet me at markets or festivals
- Yes... although we do have a backlog. If I'm interested I'll ask for more or consider development.
- Yes...and maybe sample material...I need to believe in them, after all.

- Synopsis and bio are obviously required – any available footage can help as well.

Q: Do you feel that television is turning inward, where you are increasingly paying more attention to national issues and your own people, and that you want them made in your own language? (If so, this leaves less room for imported programming).

- My brief is to find foreign stories. And the number has increased.
- I think this is generally true, and it's certainly being influenced by "Canadian" content guidelines required/preferred by Canada's various funding agencies. However, at Newsworld, our appetite for international documentaries is increasing, at least on the acquisition front. I am however, finding myself more reluctant to program heavily subtitled docs in longer than a one-hour slot. There are always exceptions, but what I'm finding is that the North American viewer has so many choices, he/she is getting lazy, and often will not stay with a heavily subtitled doc unless it's exceptional (or dealing with sex).
- I have given up thinking about TV. To do so is to invite despair. I try to think of all the good films made each year, all over the world. I try to buy them. I try not to get discouraged by the contemporary state of mass culture - and there are reasons not wholly to be discouraged.
- To the contrary, we are very interested in international, universal issues that are accessible to all audiences.

Q: Are there “national” content quotas emerging? Please state what percentage (%) - even if it is an approximation - of your completed film purchases, pre-sales, and co-production budgets goes to domestic programming.

- 70%, approximately. No quotas.
- Our Canadian independently produced series, Rough Cuts - 100% - acquisitions & co-productions. [████████] Our international showcase, The Passionate Eye - 100% of our co-productions need at least a Canadian co-producer so that we can access [the] various funds that are available for production here in Canada.

I'd estimate between 15 - 20% of our acquisitions and pre-sales are Canadian, although [there] are no fixed rules. Our channel does have to deal with Canadian content rules. At present Newsworld [is] committed to including [90] % Canadian content in it's schedule. [So] as you can see documentaries are making up the bulk of our non-Canadian programming.

- No - we don't operate quotas. The BBC has never needed to. In my view this is one of its greatest strengths - it (and therefore I) can commission anything from anywhere in the world.
- In France, yes. There is a requirement that 60% of all programs be of European production origin, and that weighs heavily upon the documentary dept. For the moment, our choices are much less restricted in the rest of Europe. We work with

many different countries and many different languages, and not all of them have the same opinion regarding programs whose original language is anything other than English. For example, the Scandinavians are not very interested in a program in which the original language is French – particularly if it contains talking heads - they prefer an English v.o. with subtitles.

Q: Are there certain subjects or themes in which there is always interest or that you are most interested in?

- Human stories, to understand our lives and reasons for living the way we live... Political topics.
- Strong character driven stories dealing with political, social issues...stories/profiles that have an "edge"
- I vary - big, bold things made by bold people.
- Yes! Everyone is always and forever hooked by a good story, whatever that story may be. To entertain, to inform and move our audience – these are the basic principals. Fairly classic in that sense – but there are so many mediocre documentaries that seeking out the good ones becomes a very rewarding process.

Q: Are their subjects that you don't or no longer have interest in?

- There are some subjects that I've grown weary of, but generally I find these are cyclical... and dependent on what's happening in the world. Last summer, who would have guessed that some of our top-rated docs of the year would have dealt with a bearded guy hiding out in Afghanistan?
- Where to start - the media fads: dolphins, transsexuals, Plains Indian movies, lesbian stripper's epics...correctness has taken its toll on docs...also (I hate to say this) holocaust movies....
- We are moving farther and farther away from ethnographic, cinema verité and dv/home-movie type docs...

Q: How are films looked at? Is the most efficient way (and the one that occur most) still via sending a VHS videocassette to you? Are you equipped with DVD?

- VHS
- VHS either PAL or NTSC. I am not equipped for DVD.
- US DVD is not always compatible with UK...VHS ok.
- We are not equipped with DVD, and all documentaries are screened by each individual responsible for the acquisition of programming. So there must always be a consensus. We are very tough on the opening section of a doc – it must have good exposition and drawing power.

Q: Do you buy films at festivals - where they are shown with an audience? One walks less quickly out of a cinema than switching to fast forward while watching on one's own. Please provide an approximate percentage of films you buy at festivals.

- I sometimes do. Did at Sundance last year where I bought, Startup.com; Go Tiger; Southern Comfort and Chain Camera
- I do buy at festivals, because this is when the filmmaker gets "my" undivided attention, where they're not having to compete with all the other pressures I deal with on a daily basis in my office. There are always docs that you know will work no matter what the medium... Around which there is a "buzz". However, I'm very aware that the demands of television viewing are very different than those in a theatre... So in the majority of cases, I try to view the films I have discovered at festivals on a TV monitor before finalizing the purchase.
- About 10%...yes, festivals are flattering to films...the trouble is that docs ultimately live and die on TV - whether we like it or not...
- Festivals are of utmost importance for picking up the buzz on new releases, and having an intense, concentrated time to screen and feel the vibes, baby – you absolutely must get out there and find it!! We have so much administrative, organizational & lobbying-type activity that weighs on the office and festivals provide a free-zone for exploring creatively. Thank god! From the IFP, for example, there may be a limited number of films that I will buy directly (I wasn't enthralled by most of what I screened), but a handful of producers of talent have come out of it, and we will definitely pursue our working relationship and develop it. A lot of conversations and card swapping has led to the discovery of several, surprises – and good docs that we will buy. Furthermore, I am convinced that there are more surprises to come...you never know what is going to take off...just look at the success of “in the bedroom” the fiction that was screened in NYC. Everybody is talking about it now.

Q: How important are the first 15 minutes of a film? When a tape arrives in your office, do you generally only watch the first 15 minutes?

- Sometimes only the first 5 minutes.. So very important to have a clear, strong start, where you make a contract with the viewer.
- Crucial. If it doesn't engage me in the first 15 minutes, I definitely won't make it to the end. If it doesn't engage me in the first five to ten, it's already in trouble, unless I think there's a possibility it can be re-worked or radically cut down. No TV viewer is going to hang around for more than about 5 minutes, if the film's not working. Those that I like or am intrigued by I will view to the end.
- Can depend...sometimes I watch five minutes, or only one...films with loose first fifteen minutes do not survive.
- We are absolutely brutal on the first 15 minutes of a film. Without mercy. If the filmmaker can't construct the first 15 minutes, I am not going to hang around to see the rest. If the rest is so brilliant, why couldn't the director pull off a decent opening?

Q: What about in market situations? Do you watch the first 15 minutes and then decide if you want to ask for a tape? Or do you watch the whole film?

- Depends on the quality of the film...
- Both... There are many factors that influence how much I will watch in a market situation. These include my immediate programming needs, how much I like the doc... Whether or not I think it will be sought after by my competitors...the amount of time I have available for screening.
- Can depend again. I try to watch it all.
- I will not watch the whole film if I am bored out of my mind – however, even if the film is not exactly what I am looking for, I may watch it through if I feel it has something. Who knows what could happen in the future...maybe there will be some programming opportunity, and I would hate not to have lodged a new idea in some little corner of my brain ! But honestly, I don't always feel the luxury of time. One thing is clear : I would never buy a film that I had not watched from beginning to end. That would be irresponsible, wouldn't it?

We also spoke with Sales Agents and Producer's Rep's

Q: When you assist financing of productions that require a substantial outlay of cash, in what ways do you try to ensure that the receiving producer is able to deliver - both in the physical sense and the level of content?

- I try to become part of the production as associate producer: require complete budget structure and look at the first cut.
- I don't do that
- Make progress to production benchmark payments.

Q: Do you tend to work with a relatively small group of filmmakers and producers, those you know and trust? If this is the case, how can someone break into your system?

- Obviously people I know is more secure, but I do take risks and support new people. I'd say 50/50
- Knowing someone who knows me is the best way.
- Yes. But if someone has a great and compelling project and they can't afford our services, we will discount them.

Q: Regarding the number of films you acquire each year: is it increasing, decreasing, or has it remained constant?

- Slightly decreasing: I find it more interesting to make 20 sales with one film then 20 sales with 20 different films.
- Decreasing
- Remained constant.

Q: Do you find that budgets per film are decreasing?

- Yes, this is very true: both in first and in second market productions.
- Yes, at least my products.
- I find them to be decreasing all across the board. I find that buyers are generally being more discerning these days, have tighter pockets, and are less interested in American films.

Q: Do you feel that television is turning inward, where buyers are increasingly paying more attention to national issues and their own people in their own language? If so, do you find it more difficult to sell foreign programming? Are there national content quotas emerging?

- Turning inward: yes that is a tendency. More difficult to sell foreign programming: yes, films must be more universal and dramatically stronger. Also well made. Quotas: I don't think they are formal, but I feel there is a tendency to a certain level of national programming.
- Yes, absolutely.
- NA

Q: Are there certain subjects or themes in which you find there is always interest or much interest? Are there subjects you find buyers no longer have interest in?

- Interest: cultural icons, major historical programming, international politics/current affairs. Less interest: social issues such as drugs, street kids, aids, welfare related issues, crime: these are all issues that become less and less sellable as they are made in each country within each cultural and socio-political contexts. The American Indies have been strong at these issues, and there is strong interest domestically. But I am finding them less and less sellable overseas.
- Sex is always selling
- Music related films are universal. I find smaller, b/w films less interesting.

Q: What is the best and fastest way for a filmmaker to reach you and get the most attention possible for his or her project? For instance, should they send a synopsis with a short bio by email?

- Email first, then I react, then a phone call
- Find someone I know who introduces him to me
- Email first, and then send a bio with footage.

Q: How are films looked at? Is the most efficient way (and the one that occur most) still via sending a VHS videocassette to you? Are you equipped with DVD?

- 95% of the time on VHS, 5% in cinemas during festivals.

- No DVD today, but it will come soon. So it is still VHS.
- We have both.

Q: Do you acquire films at festivals - where they are shown with an audience? One walks less quickly out of a cinema than switching to fast forward while watching on one's own. Please provide an approximate percentage of films you acquire at festivals.

- See above
- I acquire films at festivals (30%) but i don't see them on screen. My business is TV, so I look the films on TV
- No. We acquire clients at festivals and markets.

Q: How important are the first 15 minutes of a film? When a tape arrives in your office, do you generally only watch the first 15 minutes and then if your interest is aroused, you watch the whole film later?

- It is a combination of the topic (subject) and the first 15 minutes. Very important
- No but the first 5 minutes are the most important ones, like for the TV audience.
- I give a film 15 minutes to see if I'm interested.

Q: What about in market situations? Do your clients/ the buyers watch the first 15 minutes and then decide if they want to ask for a tape? Or do they watch the whole film?

- They very rarely watch the whole film, at most 15 minutes.
- At markets I watch either the first 10min. And decide for a no – or I watch the whole film but then it is in 80% already a yes.
- We watch the whole film if are interested.

Q: Are you in a position to give advances or MG's (minimum guarantees) to producers? Which elements help you make that decision?

- If I give a MG, I must be the last in line, after all the other financiers: that means end financing. I cannot afford putting money in a film that then takes 2 years to be made (or not at all)
- No.
- We can discount legal services and offer strategic advise.

Q: Do you always take world rights, minus maybe the country of production or maybe some pre-sold territories?

- Yes

- Not always – sometimes I am only interested in Europe.
- We work with int'l distributors.
Finally, we spoke with several filmmakers:

Q: Do you tend to work with a relatively small group of stations/commissioning editors/ producer's reps/sales agents, those you know and have worked with before?

- Yes
- I work with a pretty wide group, but of course some relationships are better than others.
- Yes
- Yes but we are always interested in working with a wider pool. However, when it comes to stations/commissioning editors, they tend to prefer working with a pool of those they have worked with before.

Q: Are you having trouble breaking into the system? How are you trying? Do you approach buyers?

- Yes. It's very difficult to get either jobs or money from production companies or broadcaster who haven't worked with you in the past. People hire and fund the same people again and again. If you have a good idea for a film and use your own money to shoot a sample reel that is very compelling then you may get funded but often a broadcaster or production company will insist that they assign either their own producer or editor to work with you if they haven't worked with you in the past. Sending resumes or proposals to people you don't know is often a waste of time. You need to have someone who personally recommends you. These days I am strictly for hire. I've worked on a ton of proposals that haven't gone anywhere in part because it took me a while to realize that it's very hard to get 'in' with broadcasters.
- It's not hard to break into the system for me, but it is hard to maintain relationships with competitors and still make them feel that you're treating them extra special.
- No, but. We have existing relationships, but they are entirely based on individuals. If they are fired or change jobs, we are back to square one with that broadcaster.
- It is easy to get a meeting but hard to have a project green lit. We phone people and pitch them, then try to find some excuse to stay in touch

Q: Since/if you need to finance your productions, in what ways do you try to ensure that you will deliver - both in the physical sense and the level of content - what the buyers want and are expecting?

- You maintain a dialogue with them. You hire good people. You try to do things you're passionate about. It's good to speak regularly with the account 'executive'/executive producer on each project, although I'm not that good at it. You sometimes fail and move on to a new client.

- We are professionals, we tell people what we are going to do, and then we do it. The only comments on expectations we hear is that we always exceed them.
- We try to get them to focus on the project and get their input along the way, this way there are few unhappy surprises. They often have a difficult time figuring out what they want and sometimes resist committing, and then they change their mind at the last moment. Because of budget and time constraints, that most often they are controlling, this tends to create unnecessary problems. Go figure, but what's new?

Q: Do you find the amount of money buyers are willing to pay per film is increasing, decreasing, or remaining fairly constant?

- Decreasing.
- Money is decreasing over the years or staying the same at best.
- Constant to decreasing
- Overall, decreasing. Most everyone is into fast and cheap, which we are not interested in making or watching.

Q: Are you finding that the costs of making films has increased, decreased, or remained fairly constant?

- Increased.
- The costs have increased over the last five years due to: 1. Editors now generally ask for 25% more weekly than they did. 2. Digibeta as an alternative to beta is significantly more expensive for stock and dubs.
- The cost of filmmaking is the same. The cost of TV making has gone down. New technologies have made it both inevitable and possible.
- It was increasing due to wage inflation. The recession may cut that back now.
- Overhead has increased, skilled labor has increased (as it should) with the times, otherwise, the costs of making films have remained fairly constant.
- Now, if you use an inexpensive dv camera, that line item is reduced, but otherwise, all the other equipment rental stays the same if one wants to get high quality production values.
- What we see happening is that untrained people decide to shoot themselves because they have low budgets; companies like NYT television buy the cheapest cameras they can find, use cheap on camera mikes, and no sound person at all. So it sounds like hell and the stations accept it! Where have standards gone? It is an embarrassment.

Q: Have your production values changed? Are they influenced by decreasing budgets? And, do you find it has now become necessary to work with less (or more) experienced crews?

- Yes. The bar is often very low when it comes to cable. For e.g. they accept work with very low production value. Budgets are smaller but more importantly schedules are much shorter. Often you are expected to do the same work in half the time. On some shows it is not uncommon for producers to be working 60-80 hrs or more a week and of course all of this is without overtime or any health benefits, etc. Production companies hire inexperienced crews because they cost less. Producers are often expected to be line producers, directors, camera and sound operators and their own associate producer (associate producers are becoming an increasingly rare position - instead you get given a production assistant who may have never worked on a production before).
- If you are making your own film (with even less money) you also might be the editor, distributor and marketer of your own film.
- Decreasing budgets do affect production value and, as the question mentions, generally require us to use less skilled crews from time to time. Usually, when a choice has to be made, we tend to not pay ourselves instead of paying for a lesser cameraman.
- Of course production values have gone down. For example, we rarely hire sound while before that would have been critical. It is still critical, but the budget forces cuts and the equipment makes it possible to cut corners.
- Our production values remain the same (high), but we are pitching concepts which are less complex to allow for more streamlined production.
- I try desperately to hold onto my production values, otherwise, the thrill of making films/videos is killed. Yes, we don't make as much profit but that is the choice we are faced with. We often have to hire less experienced crew members and support staff, which is very, very frustrating!

Q: Are you finding it more difficult to sell your films outside the US than in the past? If so, why do you think this is?

- Yes, it's harder to sell projects. Mostly, because my company does more series or limited series and these are harder to sell than the one off, heart felt personal project. That said, even those are harder to sell.
- I think it's a question of the marketplace making it harder to find slots abroad.
- Yes. There are fewer stations interested in the type of programs we make.
- Yes, they are buying in increasing volume from the big guns and less from the indies.

Q: Regarding the number of films you produce each year: is it increasing, decreasing, or has it remained constant?

- Constant
- I've produced more.

- It has been increasing, but we don't know what the future holds.
- Remained constant, but we seem to be in dead-end development too often.

Q: Are there subjects you find buyers have a particular interest in, or no longer have interest in?

- In particular, there seems to be less interest in music/cultural themes than there used to be.
- Often buyers want fast cut reality-based docs. - emotional porn.
- Subject changes. One year it's prison (or a few years) and now people are curious about world issues.
- The same subjects remain a focus, but the pressure is increasingly for simpler storytelling.
- I have no idea. I cannot figure programmers out when I watch TV. Too often, we will pitch ideas a little before their time but when the idea is 'hot', a big gun can pump a show out cheaply and quickly. Otherwise, someone like HBO will buy the film that you took all the risk in making, pay you a bit, and call it their own production. Oh well.

Q: Do you submit your films to festivals? Have you found that having your film in festivals helps to sell them?

- Without question, a film festival showing seems to be a must for finding buyers and a broadcast audience.
- I have in the past. It hasn't helped to sell them.
- I send it to some festivals, but I haven't noted a great increase in their ability to help sell to TV. The buyers in TV are so few and so well known that it's usually unnecessary.
- Yes, no.
- Always. I love the attention the films get. It helps but unless the show is perceived as the 'next big thing,' it is unclear to the degree it helps.

Q: Do you submit your films to markets? Have you found that having your film at markets helps sell them?

- My one experience at a market leads me to believe that you need to have a distributor.
- Too expensive so no.
- Yes. Yes.

- No, they are too much like a dog and pony show. Few filmmakers that I have talked to are impressed with the results. They seem best for making contacts.

Q: How much importance do you place on the first 15 minutes of your films?

- I don't place undue importance on the first 15 minutes, but everyone else does.
- Important!
- A lot of importance. As well as the last 15 minutes.
- A lot.
- A lot! But we place just as much emphasis on the remaining minutes.

Q: Do you now or did you in the past make films that you financed 100% on your own and then tried to sell to the industry? If this is so, how long can you realistically (or did you) continue this practice?

- For PBS producers, this is the general model -- finance it yourself and the broadcast (including PBS) will follow. There is no other business model that is as secure for independent documentary filmmaking other than to finance it yourself.
- Yes. Will not do this ever again.
- I have never fully financed my own film, but even deficit financing is a bad idea.
- Never, and we doubt we ever will.
- Yes, we did most often. And all the films were very successful in terms of awards and in terms of television purchases. They are our most successful films to-date! Now I refuse to put any of my own money into my films. I have a 15-year track record and am tired of sacrificing the rest of my life. I must sustain myself as a filmmaker, and awards don't pay my bills. It is frustrating and sad to have to draw the line, but unless I did so, I fear I would always be broke and would grow bitter.
- Indies are at the mercy of the system. It is a drag but it has always been this way.

