

Documentary Distribution Primer

Part One: Public Television

When it comes to wide, national broadcast exposure the choices of distribution for an independent documentary producer in the United States are relatively clear—either public television or cable television. The options for access to these markets are numerous, and are less clear. If previous work has already had some exposure (broadcast, cable, internet, theatrical or film festivals), the distribution and marketing efforts are made somewhat easier. If your program or previous works have had no exposure, the task is considerably more difficult and challenging.

Whatever the distribution method, each program should be carefully evaluated for its market potential in a particular distribution arena. That evaluation should include the following questions: Where will the program get the best exposure to the widest possible audience? Where is the best financial return for the producer? What are you prepared to invest in promotion, marketing and outreach? How strong is your website, outreach, community engagement and education potential? Should ancillary product sales be considered as part of the distribution package?

Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) is the most commonly known distribution mechanism for public television exposure. In addition to PBS, there are a few other distribution sources that serve public television stations which should be considered: American Public Television (APT), National Educational Telecommunications Association (NETA), and self-marketing your program by purchasing satellite time directly via the distributor (PBS, Westlink, etc.).

PBS

The Public Broadcasting Service is a membership organization based in Arlington, Virginia, just outside of Washington, DC. Its primary purpose is to acquire and distribute programming to its 356 member stations. As an organization, it does not produce any product. However, it will work with producers and sometimes provide financial support

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for programs and series being produced. PBS seldom funds a single program, such as a one-hour documentary. As a novice producer in the public television arena, it is possible to sell your program to PBS via one of its umbrella strands (P.O.V., Independent Lens, etc.), however most of its acquisition dollars go to the major producing stations (WNET, New York; WGBH, Boston; WETA, Washington, DC and KCET, Los Angeles) and high profile series such as those produced by established independent producers who have a history with PBS.

PBS' arena for lesser-known independents is PBS Plus. This department offers programming free to the PBS stations, and it must be offered to PBS fully underwritten. The same evaluation process at PBS takes place whether your documentary is considered for the National PBS schedule (NPS) or PBS Plus.

APT

American Public Television (APT), based in Boston Massachusetts, is also a membership organization, whose principal service is acquisition and distribution. However, in recent years it also has become more involved in co-production ventures. Originally known as the Eastern Educational Network, APT is an important player in the distribution of programming to public television stations. It is a place where independent producers (both known and unknown) can have their programs distributed through a selection of broadcast services. APT offers a free distribution service to public television member stations who want to offer independents work. APT occasionally will sponsor a documentary or series themselves, in which case there are fees to the producer for distribution. All of the above mentioned avenues through APT fall into their service that is free to stations called **Program Exchange**. They also offer a service where member stations pay for programs called **National Syndication Service**. As an independent producer, it's important to determine your goal: is it exposure, or financial return? If the former is most important to you, then Program Exchange is the best service to choose. APT distribution covers all of the same public television stations as PBS. One of the primary differences for a producer looking to APT for distribution is that your program will not carry the PBS logo.

ADDITIONAL DISTRIBUTION METHODS:

NETA

The National Educational Telecommunications Association (NETA) is a professional association located in Columbia, South Carolina that serves public television licensees and educational entities across the country. They provide a no-fee distribution service for members, and a low-fee service for non-members.

DIRECT SYNDICATION:

By selecting this method of distribution, you would purchase satellite time directly from an uplink facility (PBS, Westlink, etc.). No services (other than the uplink) would be provided and you would market your program station-by-station throughout the public television system. While the other distribution methods offer minimal services to the independent producer, this method offers none, and therefore may be the least desirable for a novice producer.

Bunny Tavares, TavaresMedia is a broadcast marketing and project management consultant living in California. For additional information on distribution and marketing of your programs contact Bunny Tavares, TavaresMedia at 831/462-6004, email bunny@tavaresmedia.com

Look for part two of the Distribution Primer, Program Licensing Fees, Marketing to Cable and the world of internet marketing and other Distribution pointers.

Documentary Distribution Primer

Part Two: Marketing Your Program

This is the second of a two-part “primer” for independent filmmakers. In Part One, we outlined options available for distribution on public television. In Part Two, we’ll talk about cable distribution and public television syndication and “dip our toe” into the enormous world of Internet and social network marketing. We’ll include some marketing pointers in this ever-changing media world. Given all the new digital capabilities and choices in both public broadcasting and the cable industry, the field of opportunities for independent film distribution keeps getting wider.

Whatever the distribution method, each program should be carefully evaluated for its market potential in that particular distribution arena. The evaluation should include the following questions: Where will the program get the best exposure to the widest possible audience? Where is the best financial return for the producer? What are you prepared to invest in promotion and marketing? How strong is your website, outreach and education potential? What role should ancillary product sales be considered as part of the distribution package?

The primary outlets for documentary programming in the cable marketplace remain the following cable networks:

- Discovery Channel (Discovery Communications, Inc.)
- The Learning Channel (Discovery Communications, Inc.)
- Home Box Office (HBO)
- HBO/Cinemax
- Showtime
- The History Channel (A&E)
- The Sundance Channel
- Independent Film Channel (IFC)

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Most of the programming on any the primary cable networks (HBO, Showtime, Discovery,) is originally produced or commissioned. The channels focused a bit more on independent works (Sundance, IFC, etc) do acquire a greater percentage of documentary programming directly from the filmmakers.

In today's multi-channel cable and digital environment there are a number of other avenues to explore for your documentary program or series. Unfortunately, most of them (other than those mentioned above) have extremely low viewership. So, the choice then comes back to a question: What do you want to accomplish?

Program Licensing Fees for Cable and Public Television

The fees paid for documentary programs either in public television or cable are minimal in comparison to the costs to produce the programs. If you're successful enough to secure an acquisition commitment from a cable network, you can expect the licensing fee paid to be anywhere from \$25,000-\$50,000 for a one-hour documentar. It's sometimes, but seldom higher, and can even be lower—depending on the network. Commissioned, original productions will draw higher fees, however, as the producer that usually means you will relinquish control of the production.

In public television there are limited options that yield compensation for your documentary program or series. The best way to ensure payment for your work is to make certain you write yourself into the budget. Become a “part” of the funding, so that you pay yourself for the work you do. Outside licensing fees are limited, with only a few avenues available to you to secure a fee: APT, National Syndication; PBS' two “umbrella” series Independent Lens or P.O.V.; or marketing your program yourself market by market. If you sell your program to APT for National Syndication here's how it works:

A fee is set for your program. An example of a standard fee for a one-hour documentary might be \$40,000. That doesn't mean you'll get the \$40,000.

Each of the nearly 360 public television stations (translates to about 200 licensed stations) has a formula that helps determine what their specific fee

will be for that one-hour (negotiable). For example, a large station like Thirteen/WNET in New York might pay \$3,000 for your program, while a small station like WGBY in Springfield, Massachusetts might only pay \$225. So, you can see that unless 100% of all the stations buy your program you won't get too close to \$40,000—but a percentage of it, based on the number of stations (and their market size) who buy the program.

Both P.O.V. and Independent Lens pay a licensing fee to acquire finished programs. Outside of these two options, the scenario becomes even more limited. It's "market-by-market" distribution. You can hire a marketing person or company, or do it alone. You may be able to secure a larger per market fee by "shopping" your program, but what you won't have any additional services that APT or the other "umbrella" PBS series may provide.

Some producers will also want to explore the ancillary product market. While these avenues (DVD, books, educational materials) may not yield a huge dollar amount, they may provide some revenue stream that will help you regain a small portion of your production costs. Pre-sales for international distribution may also help yield additional funds to augment production budgets.

Social Networks, the Internet and the world of Gorilla Marketing

The web provides enormous potential for distribution—and changes daily. It can be both a valuable adjunct to broadcast, cable and/or theatrical distribution and important exposure especially for the novice producer. The choices are many and the goal is ONLY exposure...as there's no financial compensation directly attached to this exposure. (Georgiana, if you want to consider a separate article on social net and internet sites use the following and you might say that you'll be posting a separate article on the subject of internet distribution).

Here are just a few, (very few) of your options—some are universal sites not specific to the documentary arena and others some of the new avenues for documentary distribution:

YouTube.com
Facebook.com
Flickr.com
Freedocumentaries.org
National Film Board of Canada www.NFB.ca
Onebigtorrent.org

MakeUseOf (www.makeuseof.com) has an interesting combination of documentary sites referenced that can help you narrow the field and find the right place for your film.

SnagFilms (www.snagfilms.com): In a partnership with the Paley Center for Media, the blurb on their website states: *SnagFilms is committed to finding the world's most compelling documentaries, whether from established heavyweights or first-time filmmakers, and making them available to the wide audience these titles deserve.*

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