

How I Learned to Stop Directing and Think Like a Commissioning Editor

The backbone of European documentary financing, i.e. public service broadcasters, are less well funded, more nationally focused, and increasingly averse to risk. This reality forces filmmakers to also become businesspeople like never before.

By Jonathan Goodman Levitt

At HotDocs' closing night in Toronto, Director Geoffrey Smith accepted his award for Best International Feature Documentary by asking rhetorically whether it is better to be a filmmaker or someone higher up on the decision-making ladder, such as a Commissioning Editor (CE). His question referenced the comments of the main character in his film *The English Surgeon, Dr Henry Marsh*, who proclaimed that he would rather serve as a doctor than in any other healthcare role.

"It's the process – the catharsis in the cutting room, engaging with something real – that's meaningful, and it's important to be reminded of that," Smith told me. "If you're a filmmaker telling stories without cheapness, exploitation, or 'Schadenfreude', morally you never have to question what you do...I couldn't risk becoming a factory hand, and in that sense I'm not a professional." Yet as a professional, Smith is aware of "living in a buyer's market" and recognises why *The English Surgeon* – filmed in just three weeks and focused on one central character – is just the sort of film that broadcasters are ready to fund. "Broadcasters also have to know you," he continued, "because people in power [often] take the path of least resistance – [it's as if they are saying] 'We'll go with him because he's delivered to us successfully many times before'."

Indeed, the time when filmmakers, especially but not exclusively newer filmmakers, were simply trusted by broadcasters to go out into the world and follow their artistic and journalistic instincts is long gone, replaced by an increasingly competitive and fragmented marketplace. Being a successful filmmaker today means being business-savvy to an extent heretofore unimaginable. A strategy for marketing and an awareness of branding are practically prerequisites for selling your film, as opposed to simply part of its distribution. And partly as a result of the decreasing and insecure nature of financing, films' pedigrees,

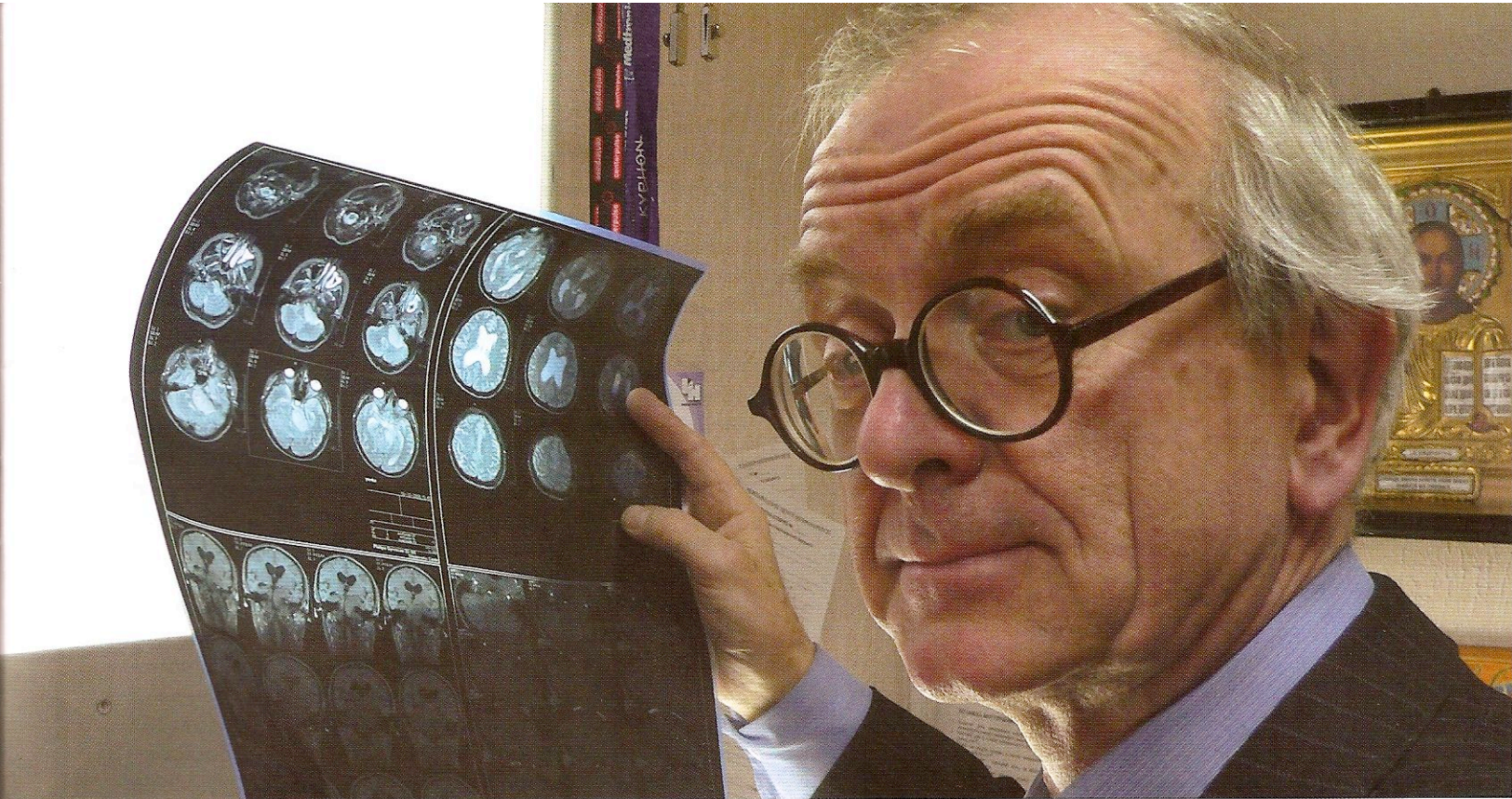
how they are packaged, and personal relationships have taken on an unprecedented importance.

Market Intelligence

With less funds to go around, increased co-financing by broadcasters and production companies in multiple countries has become a general rule in recent years. As funding at home in each country has decreased – with restructuring at BBC and Arte among others this year alone – filmmakers and commissioners are working with foreign broadcasters more than ever before. Partly as a result, we've seen a swift rise in the existence and significance of market events and pitching sessions, which allow cost-effective opportunities for directors, producers, and commissioners to meet each other more regularly.

The Toronto Documentary Forum (TDF) is North America's largest such event. According to TDF's director, Michaelle McLean, buyers and producers come to do business and also for general "market intelligence" that informs their decisions in a "convivial...yet commercial environment...where buyers' jobs are on the line [based on the decisions they make]." For directors such as myself who moonlight as producers out of a combination of necessity and stubbornness, this reality of the business being done is at first somewhat obscured by the warmth of such events.

To be successful in selling your work there, you need to see yourself first as a Producer with a capital P, as in someone who makes a product for sale. Where a director might ask how to turn his idea into a "good" film, as a producer you need to couch this question within the context of the marketplace by asking different questions, such as: What commissioner needs am I addressing, and how does/do my



Still from *The English Surgeon* by Geoffrey Smith.

product(s) meet these needs? Who else is operating in this particular space, and what are the benefits of my approach? Informed answers to these questions require a specialised understanding of the marketplace, channels' brand identities, and individual buyer tastes. Fulltime jobs for distributors and sales agents, developing this knowledge base can take years, yet is increasingly essential even for filmmakers.

Effective Packaging

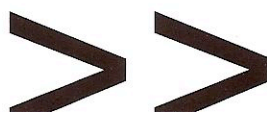
In recent years, the rise of the multi-channel universe has led to not only more channels, but also to needs for greater distinctiveness among broadcasters, according to BBC's Eamon Hardy, an Executive Producer for Independents' Factual Commissioning. Speaking at a conference organised by the Discovery Campus last November in Leipzig, Hardy spoke of an increased need for "repeatable, bigger impact programming with a hook, a broad basket [that] identifies it" because people come to television seeking out channels' and strands' unique brands more than ever before given the wider competition. Within broadcast organisations themselves, decision-making has also become more diffuse, and CEs' roles involve more persuasion of colleagues and other executives to support projects than ever before.

For this reason, some CEs serve partly as gatekeepers between filmmakers and higher powers that be at broadcasters, and it becomes your job as a filmmaker-producer to help create an attractive package for them to sell. If you can outline convincingly your project's relevance to their personal tastes, their own national interest, and also the "brand" that is the channel or time slot they represent (or even two of these three), then you are ahead of the game. Indeed, broadcasters may even pay a premium for a product that fits perfectly with their brand image. Veteran CE Rudy Buttignol (now CEO of Canada's Knowledge

Network) put it simply when speaking on 'Scheduling in a Digital Age' in Timisoara, Romania: "Not all hours are created equal – those that extend the brand are what matter."

Beyond merely a product, funders have also become more demanding of an entire package they can trust – not just the film, but also the production company and even other broadcasters behind it. On this point too, Buttignol related an analogy that argued why the personal matters more in documentary. "In fiction, they (the CEs) buy the script, and it can only get worse," said Buttignol. "But in documentary, the script – the treatment – is only the beginning, so the business is more about relationships." Because relationships strengthen over time based on trust, attending these events over any less than a few years may not be sufficient for success, without a reputation to help you along more readily.

If you haven't worked with someone before or sold a film to his or her channel, the next best thing is to have the support of someone who is a known quantity they already trust. Working with a known producer or production company naturally lends legitimacy to many filmmakers in the eyes of funders, though directors who have originated projects face additional risks. It is difficult for director-producers to be dispassionate about their own work and to approach buyers directly, but sacrificing control and ownership can still be harsh penalties for the privilege of making films. For those considering going it alone, backing in one's home territory seems practically essential for gaining support internationally at the TDF or in the autumn at IDFA's FORUM, where it was once easier to pitch as a relative newcomer. Just as a known production company can be vital in attracting a broadcaster, broadcasters naturally attract more funding as "families" of commissioning editors often work together.



Transatlantic Difference

For Europeans, the assumption is typically that a director will have someone else produce a film through a production company known to the broadcasters, who have supported this longstanding tradition. Christilla Huillard-Kann, CE at Arte France, described a “tripartite contract” between the director, producer, and broadcaster as a natural method of producing effective and focused documentaries. She described how in ideal circumstances producers manage outside influences to allow directors “great creative freedom...to go after their desires,” while “the broadcaster maintains a panoramic vision according to his editorial guidelines and shares the artistic responsibility with the producer and director.”

One example of this process in action from this year’s TDF is Nora Meyer’s film *The Director*, a portrait of founding father King Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia, who also happens to be the country’s leading film director. After developing the project, Meyer teamed with acclaimed producer (and also director) Tom Roberts at October Films in the UK. With the support of Nick Fraser and BBC Storyville, which had already committed over 30% of the budget, *The Director* generated significant interest in Toronto, though deals will take longer to agree. Meyer commented on the value of having others represent filmmakers’ business interests because directors “are not ‘big-in-the-room’ sorts of people – they’re not showbiz or businesspeople,” who are more comfortable with self-promotion. Geoffrey Smith agreed, and added that European cultures themselves typically frown upon self-promotion, which is why “compared to the Americans, we’re socially handicapped.”

In the United States, where television has long offered less support than in Europe for long-form independent documentary production, filmmakers more often work as their own producers out of necessity on long-term projects. At the TDF this year, the majority of projects from the States are the work of independent director-producers, or being made by teams that share these roles. It is perhaps not surprising then, that it is typical of successful American documentaries that they involve following characters over extended periods – just the sort of films that would be largely un-fundable by European broadcasters (which insist on a predictable turnaround time), but which are not handicapped in being funded by issue-driven foundations. The absence of public service broadcasters and high cultural value for risk-taking in business also make Americans more likely than Europeans to leverage themselves on credit cards and otherwise.

Risk-Averse Environs

Meyer and Smith also noted that broadcasters are requiring more footage than ever in advance of committing to a project, shifting even more risk to filmmakers. Broadcasters are under increasing financial pressures themselves and are hedging their bets, in some cases agreeing to pre-sales soon before completion, so that their risk is minimised while they also get their name on the film. Importantly, while the difference between a pre-sale and an acquisition may seem trivial because neither grants control in the production to a broadcaster, the price paid for a pre-sale usually dwarfs that for the acquisition of a completed film. For example, according to CE Caroline Behar (speaking at the Real Screen Summit in January), a pre-sale to France5 pays EUR 30,000–40,000,

while an acquisition typically fetches about EUR 13,000 per hour. Such basic dynamics of the current market are important to master, even for those not conducting their own business.

Because commissioners are requiring more footage and more convincing than ever, experienced producers are also coming to projects later and sometimes serving primarily as financiers who, credit notwithstanding, may not be involved in other aspects of production. This relative lack of “producing” by some Producers, who are themselves struggling in an increasingly cash-strapped environment, undermines the traditional contract between director, producer, and broadcaster previously mentioned. If a Producer is not active from the start, a director must effectively self-produce for much of the filmmaking process and therefore risks having “enough distance to concentrate on [the creative aspects of] his film,” according to Huillard-Kann.

Yet even at a late stage in production, as a little-known filmmaker your best chance for funding may be to attach yourself to a more established producer or company. Commissioners, pressed for time and laden with increasing administrative responsibilities, moderate risk by relying at times on the judgment of proven producers and others whom they already know well, just as they deal primarily with distributors when making acquisitions. The diffusion of buyers’ decisions in this way is not itself the problem – much of the time such people’s judgments are respected for good reason. But as a result, the odds are further stacked against newer filmmakers and those unwilling to submit either personally or by proxy to the demands of marketing.

Worldwide, the systems in practice are also set up to fund companies with multiple films in production concurrently, because these larger entities can shoulder financing projects for longer periods. Even after a CE has said “yes” to a film, it may still take four to six months or longer to agree contracts and gain approval before financing occurs; a filmmaker with a family, for instance, simply can’t wait this long. So enhanced pressure to work with larger companies exists, even after bearing the risk of developing a project personally. Meyer said that filmmakers typically can’t help themselves from investing in their own work because “good filmmakers are obsessives...who stalk their characters”; but such personal qualities are arguably at odds with the purposes of nurturing broadcasters’ confidence and business in general.

Likewise, outspokenness, personal openness, and professional self-doubt may help you as a director to capture and craft your film, but they’re not the first qualities that you should advertise at a market. Buyers are looking more for a detached confidence to reassure them of a safety that ironically cannot entirely exist on a film with significant potential. Jenny Westergard, a commissioning editor at Finland’s YLE, added that having a producer to do your film’s business can be equally important for reasons more important to filmmaking itself. “You (directors) need a shield between you and all of this,” Westergard told me amidst a sea of private meetings taking place in Toronto. For Westergard, what is most important is to be assured that directors will not be distracted by the business-driven or other questions commissioners might ask.

Risk Management

In spite of the trends, Commissioning Editors for documentaries remain some of the greatest advocates for pushing the boundaries of form and subject. Positions of influence within the industry include many former (and indeed current) ‘revolutionaries’, who have chosen to work within the broadcast systems to motivate change and to support important filmmaking internationally, even as they recognise that all roles in the documentary industry are simply less secure in the current climate. In response to these new developments, which taken together have had a professionalising effect on the creative documentary production, new opportunities have been developed to serve filmmakers and help them to compete. Among these are various European training initiatives, workshops, markets and pitching events. In different ways than before, good producers must be effective risk managers – expert at evaluating the breadth of opportunities available and at reassuring commissioners of their and their projects’ low-risk status.

According to Louise Rosen, a distributor who has developed a niche for herself in helping American filmmakers secure co-financing deals abroad, “You need to have a long-term strategy, and you need to do your own market research – you need to know the previous films on a subject, what degree of success they’ve achieved and who has supported them in the past.” Indeed, knowledge in such domains is part of what allows distributors to command their commissions (typically 25–35% or more for television sales), and a major reason why filmmakers who self-distribute are rarely as successful. Kim Christiansen, former Head of Sales at Danish distributor TV2 World, unique in being a commercial distributor within a public broadcaster, suggests that filmmakers need to be more realistic in approaching the changed 21st-century marketplace. Unlike before, and partly because the market has become increasingly public through pitching forums, conferences, and festivals, it has also become more important to involve distributors earlier; before films are even completed, in many respects the ‘game’ is already over.

“There’s a tendency now for commissioners to broadcast films from within their own region, which also makes things more difficult,” said Christiansen. Despite increasingly international collaboration, public broadcasters across Europe see a primary part of their remit as preserving local culture, and as a result they are dedicating more of their premium dollars to programmes and documentaries that have direct relevance to national interests.

“TV2 World [was often making] deals with secondary channels, for less money,” Christiansen continued, “and this does mean that few people will watch [artistic or authored] documentaries.” This shift in the market is one reason that TV2 World announced in May that it was discontinuing its activities and entering into agreement with Oslo-based distributor Nordic World.

In such a crowded marketplace, those who acknowledge the primacy of marketing and distribution early are always going to be a step ahead. If, like me, you’re not a natural producer and prone to expressing the doubts that will help you direct the film successfully, you need to try to flip a switch in your brain and become a Producer when business requires. It is next to impossible to produce from a director’s point-

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Still from *The Director* by Nora Meyer's. Pitched at TDF 2008.



Still from *Follow the Leader: Young Presidents in Training*. A film in the making by the author of this article, Jonathan Goodman Levitt. It is being made in association with Channel4/More4, VPRO, and other broadcasters.

of-view alone, although Smith – with his *English Surgeon* poised to be a rare favourite for audiences and CEs alike – pointed to a paradox. “When asked for their favourite films, all commissioners, even ones making [the worst of reality television], will reel off these esoteric, arty, challenging films...the likes of which they would be unlikely to fund,” he said. And yet, if you recognise the unfortunate primacy of marketing and can see yourself as someone playing a salesman-like role, you may be able to adapt your project presentation to appear as safe a bet as possible. With that capacity and a topical project, you’re well on your way to thinking like – and becoming an attractive package to – those who hold the keys to your financing and creating your vision. ☒