

This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published in DVD, Blu-ray and Beyond in 2017 available online:

<https://www.palgrave.com/gb/book/9783319627571>

## **The Rise of the Feature Documentary – Fact or Fiction?**

Shane O’Sullivan, Kingston University, UK

The last fifteen years have seen the relentless rise of the feature documentary - from four titles released in UK cinemas in 2001 to one hundred and seventeen in 2015. Since Michael Moore’s muckraking polemics *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) and *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) made a compelling case for documentary’s place on the big screen, Asif Kapadia’s success with archive-driven biopics of *Senna* (2010) and *Amy* (2015) has shown how strongly sport and music documentaries can perform at the UK box office. But without a ‘name’ director, star or subject, most documentaries struggle theatrically - a short platform cinema release provides the oxygen of press reviews and publicity to drive DVD and video on demand (VOD) sales in an increasingly saturated market.<sup>1</sup>

This chapter analyses key trends in documentary distribution since Michael Moore prised open cinema doors to nonfiction film in the early noughties, charting the rise of Dogwoof, the UK’s leading documentary distributor; the mechanics of documentary distribution and the strategies used to engage new audiences for documentary beyond its niche market; and the emergence of the Picturehouse chain as a powerful force in the fast-changing landscape of documentary distribution, where screen space is increasingly squeezed and releases are increasingly event-driven.

In the literature on film distribution, Bloore (2009) and Finney (2010, 2014) apply Porter’s concept of the “value chain” (1985) to the independent film and the international film business. Gubbins (2012, 2014) explores the impact of digital distribution on this value chain and Kehoe and Matter (2015) study its effect on British

---

<sup>1</sup> Films are listed by year of UK release

independent films. While Finney briefly alludes to Dogwoof's success in delivering "special interest content" to a niche audience, critical writing on documentary distribution has focused on audience engagement and social impact, with seminal papers by Barrett and Leddy (2008) and Verellen (2010) for the Fledgling Fund proving highly influential on the later work of organisations like BRITDOC, as discussed below. This chapter brings these two strands of research together - the "independent film value chain" refined by Bloore (2009) and the Fledgling Fund's "Distribution to Audience Engagement" circular flow diagram, seen below in Table 1.

< TABLE 1 HERE >

Source: Verellen, E. (2010) From Distribution to Audience Engagement – Social Change Through Film. The Fledgling Fund.

As Finney (2014) notes, historically, producers and consumers have been at opposite ends of the value chain, with distributors acting as gatekeepers, "essentially selecting and determining which films get made, marketed and distributed" with little input from filmmakers. Crowdfunding and social media campaigns are now connecting producers directly with their audience (and, as Finney notes, "potential revenue streams") much earlier in the process and more cheaply than traditional marketing campaigns. As Verellen (2010) notes, the audience outreach and strategic communications traditionally done by distributors long after a film's completion are now seeded in a project's early development stage, with crowdfunding campaigns and a social media presence building an audience and driving engagement while the film is being made.

In a sector with transparency issues around commercially sensitive data, the film industry statistics collected by comScore and published by the British Film Institute (BFI), the Film Distributors' Association (FDA) and the European Audiovisual Observatory yield a range of important data, which underpin the findings in this study. Home video sales are rarely disclosed by distributors, so published box-office figures remain the most reliable indicator of a film's commercial performance, with a strong correlation drawn between the success of a theatrical campaign and projected home video sales.

Documentaries now account for one in five feature films produced in the UK but only 1.3 per cent of total spend - the most prolific genre but also the cheapest to produce. Thirty per cent of all UK independent films released are documentaries but the surge in the number of films being made has not been matched by a sustained rise in box-office revenues. "In recognition of the greater volume of applicants with theatrical documentary proposals [and] the current industry interest in the form" (Documentary Funding, 2016), the BFI recently increased its funding for feature documentaries, perhaps recognising that their social impact and cultural value outweigh their modest commercial returns.

### **The Tale of the Box Office**

Despite the almost thirtyfold increase in documentary releases since 2001, if we strip out the highest-performing titles each year, the underlying box office returns have grown very slowly. Without *Fahrenheit 9-11* and *Super Size Me*, the other twenty-one documentaries released in 2004 grossed £1.6m. Ten years later, in a year of no major hits, total box office was £3.2m across ninety-eight films. 2015 has seen a notable rise

- *Amy* aside, the adjusted documentary gross was £4.5m – suggesting that the audience development initiatives discussed below are beginning to bear fruit.

As seen in Table 2, the top-performing non-concert documentaries in the last five years have been either sport or music titles; or 3D arts documentaries by ‘name’ directors Wim Wenders (*Pina*, 2011) and Werner Herzog (*Cave of Forgotten Dreams*, 2011). The sole exception is *The Imposter* (dir. Bart Layton, 2012), whose dramatic reconstructions and clever marketing campaign - like *Man on Wire* (dir. James Marsh, 2008) before it - disguised the fact that it was a documentary.

< TABLE 2 HERE >

Source: comScore, BFI RSU analysis from the British Film Institute Statistical Yearbook (2016)

It’s also notable that while more and more political documentaries are being released, none have had the box office impact of Michael Moore’s early films. Ken Loach’s *The Spirit of ’45* was the most successful non-concert documentary of 2013, earning just £235,855. The film was Dogwoof’s biggest hit to date but, as seen in Table 3, it was surpassed in 2015 by the fashion-focused *Dior and I* (dir. Frédéric Tcheng), one of six Dogwoof titles in the top twenty.

< TABLE 3 HERE >

Source: comScore, FDA Yearbook (2016)

In an attempt to reconcile the sharp rise in the supply of films, press and industry excitement about the form and the slow growth in audience demand, I interviewed key

figures at Dogwoof and Picturehouse, two leading players on the UK documentary distribution scene.

According to its website, Dogwoof was founded in 2004 as an art-house distributor in “a highly crowded market.” After a low-key start, the company’s second documentary release, the coffee industry expose *Black Gold* (dir. Mark and Nick Francis, 2007) became their biggest hit, with over 10,000 admissions, and “changed the way Starbucks trade coffee.” Dogwoof decided to specialize in documentaries – “the first theatrical distributor in the world to do so.”

*Black Gold* was the seed for the wave of social issue documentaries that followed. It was the first film funded by the Channel 4 British Documentary Foundation (now called BRITDOC), whose money, partnerships and documentary festival would play a leading role in the resurgence. In 2009, Dogwoof’s niche documentary strategy paid off with the successful release of *The Age of Stupid* (dir. Franny Armstrong), *The End of the Line* (dir. Rupert Murray) and *Burma VJ* (dir. Anders Østergaard).

*The Age of Stupid* was one of the early crowd-funding success stories, raising £450,000 in production funding on Kickstarter in 2005 around the issue of climate change. Following the global success of the similarly-themed *An Inconvenient Truth* (dir. Davis Guggenheim, 2006), the filmmakers raised a further £180,000 for their UK launch in March 2009, when a “green-carpet, solar-powered” premiere was beamed from a cinema tent in Leicester Square to 61 cinemas around the UK (The Age of Stupid website). Dogwoof received £99,360 from the UK Film Council’s Distribution Fund to support the release and the film grossed £190,000.

Howell (2011, 2012), Tryon (2011) and Sorensen (2012, 2015) have since examined the film’s social impact in changing audience attitudes and behaviour; and

the participatory nature of its crowd-funding model, building community engagement and offering a new model of “impact distribution.”

By 2009, Chris Harris was a year into his job as a programmer at Picturehouse and impressed by the range and quality of feature documentaries engaging industry audiences at the annual BRITDOC documentary festival. After the success of *The Age of Stupid*, he suggested a new documentary strand, Picturehouse Docs, to screen in a monthly Tuesday night slot at sites across the country.<sup>2</sup> First up was the BRITDOC-funded *The End of the Line* – released by Dogwoof and trailed on Facebook as “screening alongside a fantastic campaign to raise awareness about the choices we make as consumers when buying seafood.” Dogwoof and the filmmakers recruited an impressive range of partners to support the campaign, from Greenpeace to the World Wildlife Fund (who contributed production funding) and Waitrose, who provided distribution funding and in-store support. As Harris notes:

[They] organised Q&As with experts in their field at cinemas around the country and they kind of sold out everywhere, really. It was clear that there were audiences out there who were looking for these types of films. They wanted this engagement. They’re not just turning up and seeing a film. They’re having a discussion with someone about the issues in the film. And I guess it’s kind of grown from there, really.

Next up was the political protest film *Burma VJ*, also released by Dogwoof and accompanied by a live satellite Q&A. This also did very well, showing that event-

---

<sup>2</sup> Chris Harris interview, 8 April 2016

driven “impact distribution” could successfully bring challenging documentaries to UK screens.

In 2011, BRITDOC published a social impact evaluation of *The End of the Line* - the first such film-specific study. Whilst the film had a modest box office return of £54,718, mostly earned on its opening weekend, “there was prolonged press interest...Public awareness of over-fishing was raised. Only 2% of the adult public in the UK watched *The End of the Line* but 9%, or 4.7 million people, heard about it.” Prêt A Manger announced “a total change in its fish buying policy...on the day the film opened” and Marks and Spencer followed suit a week later.

As Table 4 illustrates, most people saw the film on television or through a *Sunday Times* DVD giveaway rather than in the cinema or through retail DVD channels. But the theatrical release was a crucial catalyst in generating the initial press interest and marketing support from NGOs and supermarkets that drove the campaign.

< TABLE 4 HERE >

Source: *The End of the Line: A Social Impact Evaluation* (2011). Reprinted with the permission of BRITDOC.

As Verellen (2010) notes, a compelling story can raise awareness of an issue and emotionally engage an audience to take action. Post-screening events offer a “small but critical window of opportunity” to harness this engagement and move passive consumers to activists seeking social change - sharing information about the film and the issue with friends and on social media, generating strong word-of-mouth.

The success of *The Age of Stupid* and *The End of the Line* impressed South African pharmaceutical billionaire and philanthropist Tony Tabatznik. In 2009, he founded the

Bertha Foundation to fund documentaries “as a tool for social impact.” It now runs four film funds, supporting the work of Dogwoof, BRITDOC and the Bertha Dothouse in the UK.

In 2011, Dogwoof had their biggest hit to date with a British drama-documentary about urban isolation, *Dreams of a Life* (dir. Carol Morley), which grossed £179,125. They established an international sales arm, Dogwoof Global, and were the documentary launch partner for Netflix in the UK (The Raygun Newsletter – January 27 2012). But not every social issue film worked for Dogwoof - the Oscar-nominated *Food Inc.* (dir. Robert Kenner, 2010) grossed \$4.4m at the US box office but had only 4,227 admissions in the UK. While continuing to release environmental films like *Chasing Ice* (dir. Jeff Orlowski, 2012) and *Blackfish* (dir. Gabriela Cowperthwaite, 2013), the company’s focus soon widened to include documentaries on war, politics, human and animal rights, music, art and fashion.

2011 also saw Picturehouse move into distribution, with Picturehouse Entertainment going on to release three of the most successful documentaries in recent years: *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2011), *The Imposter* (2012) and the Nick Cave documentary *20,000 Days on Earth* (dir. Iain Forsyth, Jane Pollard, 2014). Their release strategy was again built around event-driven satellite Q&As. According to Harris, the fixed cost of these is around £16,000 for the satellite truck, satellite time and film crew, “if you want to beam into one cinema or a thousand, so the more cinemas you get it into, the cheaper it becomes.” The *20,000 Days* Q&A from the Barbican was interspersed with live music from Nick Cave, “so you were kind of getting a Q&A and a gig and a film all in one.” The DVD was released a month later to capitalise on the PR Cave was doing for the theatrical campaign (The Raygun Newsletter - September 20 2014). A key enabler for Dogwoof’s expansion and Picturehouse’s entrance into the

market was the BFI Prints and Advertising (P&A) fund, which invested £24,500 in the release of *Dreams of a Life*, £130,100 in *The Imposter* and £80,000 in *20,000 Days on Earth*.<sup>3</sup>

2013 was another banner year for Dogwoof, as they released the most successful documentary of the year (Ken Loach's *The Spirit of '45*) and the most acclaimed, *The Act of Killing* (dir. Joshua Oppenheimer). According to Harris, Picturehouse recommended *The Act of Killing* to Dogwoof when it didn't find a UK distributor after its premiere in Toronto:

We were working on a project with the Bertha Foundation where we were getting grants to do outreach work with NGOs around interesting documentaries. And we said to Dogwoof, 'It's a tricky film, but it's getting five-star reviews, and it's absolutely wonderful. Would you look at picking it up?' And they did and it did really well. We had lots of sell-out screenings, and it ran for week after week.

Picturehouse, Dogwoof and the filmmakers worked on a 'Say Sorry for 65' campaign with TAPOL, a human rights organisation trying to get the Indonesian government to acknowledge the massacre of one million alleged communists after the military coup in 1965. Director Joshua Oppenheimer did a two-week Q&A tour with TAPOL to support the release and free postcards were distributed to encourage audiences to write to the Indonesian ambassador demanding action. The film played for a year at the ICA in London, grossing £133,016 by the end of its theatrical run.

---

<sup>3</sup> The BFI Film Fund replaced the abolished UK Film Council in 2011

With the renewed interest in feature documentaries, the BFI Film Fund launched the first of two annual pitching sessions for non-fiction features at Sheffield Doc/Fest, the UK's leading documentary film festival, in 2013. Two of the eight selected pitches were funded at each session and Picturehouse invested in the first two projects chosen – *Dark Horse* (dir. Louise Osmond, 2015) and *Confessions of Thomas Quick* (dir. Brian Hill, 2015). Alongside the BFI's production initiatives, its Distribution Fund has also played an important role in supporting new distribution models. By 2013, it was investing £4m a year to support the release of “specialised film [documentaries and foreign art-house films] and independent British cinema...to boost audience choice across the UK.” Its New Models strand called for “original marketing strategies and creative audience building,” encouraging distributors to work with new partners in the value chain and explore ‘day and date’ releasing across multiple platforms. Among its research questions were:

Does a choice of platforms erode cinema attendance? What is the effect of simultaneous releasing on home entertainment revenues? Are consumers open to a premium priced window [for VOD in the week of release]?

Three years on, these questions are still being asked due to a lack of transparency around VOD data and the resulting difficulty in tracking consumer behaviour across digital platforms.

### **Acquisition**

How do you distribute a documentary in the UK? Who are the gatekeepers and how do you gain visibility in a crowded market? As we've seen, Dogwoof and Picturehouse

are two of the main players. They see films at the major festivals – Sundance, Tribeca, HotDocs and Toronto in North America; and Cannes, Sheffield and IDFA in Europe. Some of these festivals have co-production markets, where filmmakers pitch their projects to distributors to attract pre-sales that will cash flow production. Picturehouse draw up a hit list of key targets before major festivals, split up to go see them and then meet up to discuss them at the end of day. “You run comparisons with [similar] films,” says Harris, “and then look at what that film took at the box office, and could we make this work to the same level?”

Dogwoof normally acquires all UK/Ireland rights from a film’s sales agent or producer. It pays a minimum guarantee (sales advance) against future revenue from releasing the film across a series of “windows” - theatrical, non-theatrical, digital, home video and television. If a broadcaster like the BBC has co-produced or pre-bought a title, television rights are excluded, so the cost of a theatrical release must be recouped through VOD and DVD sales. Dogwoof acquisitions are made by a team of four – Head of Distribution Oli Harbottle, head of international sales Vesna Cudic, founder Andy Whittaker and CEO Anna Godas. But according to Distribution Manager Patrick Hurley, when a film is under consideration - at Sundance, for example - staff “are frequently instructed to stop whatever we’re doing and watch a Vimeo link or go to a press screening and report back and give feedback.”<sup>4</sup> Dogwoof are “subject agnostic,” says Hurley. “We just want to represent the best in documentary” - great films with a clear audience and theatrical and/or global sales potential. The company release around twenty films a year and take six to nine months between acquisition and release to develop a campaign.

---

<sup>4</sup> Patrick Hurley interview, 18 March 2016. Hurley left Dogwoof to become head of marketplace at Sheffield Doc/Fest at the end of 2016.

## **Distribution Plan/Strategy**

After acquiring a film, Dogwoof “spend a lot of time discussing and defining who the audience or audiences are,” usually finding there are a number of “different and distinct target audiences and we’ll have a few different tabs along the bottom of a spreadsheet, catering to slightly different communities.” Hurley cites *The Act of Killing* (2013) as a successful title “that got a lot of tremendous press through its merits as an incredible piece of cinema, so immediately the film can be pitched or positioned as important cinema that anyone who’s concerned with critical discussions around cinema would be interested in.” There was also the political pitch to students of politics and international relations, and partners from think tanks and United Nations groups; promoting a film about Indonesia to Asian studies departments; pitching the strong human rights agenda; and selling the film to fans of executive producers Werner Herzog and Errol Morris.

After defining the audience, the key artwork and presentation of the film are discussed, as well as opportunities for events and bringing talent over for Q&As or panel discussions. If the film is acquired at Sundance in January, it might be launched at Sheffield Doc/Fest in June. Dogwoof launched nine films there in 2015, all scheduled for release later that year. In advance of Sheffield, the team brainstorm about “long lead opportunities in press and partnerships” – monthly magazines that might feature the film; and brands, NGOs or interest groups who might sponsor events or publicise the film to the “niche, special interest communities” targeted by the campaign. With relatively small marketing budgets for paid advertising, partnerships broaden exposure but take time to build. As the scale of their releases increase, Dogwoof recently hired a Marketing Manager to focus on partnerships while an in-house Publicist works on generating publicity in print and online publications, television and

radio - targeting film magazines like *Little White Lies*, *Time Out* and *Total Film*, “but also pitching different angles to journalists writing feature articles, and giving access to talent, so it can break out of the film pages.”

Dogwoof have a full-time Social Media Manager, working with an in-house designer to create images and content that are “very shareable and very likeable” on social media platforms. They create a dedicated website for each film, as well as a page on the Dogwoof site, and websites are updated with “a steady stream of really interesting content that’s not just ‘sell, sell, sell’.” With a background in e-commerce, Dogwoof co-founder Andy Whittaker constantly reminds staff to “think in terms of the user journey and how people are finding their way to the film,” optimising websites “for high-ranking Google pages” and eliminating gaps between mentions of the film online and links where you can buy the film:

Our goal is to get people’s attention and once you've done that, it’s about creating the shortest journey so that anyone hearing about the film online will find their way to a page where they can book cinema tickets or consume the film on digital platforms like iTunes or Amazon or purchasing DVDs.

Exit polls for the Dogwoof title *Cartel Land* (dir. Matthew Heineman, 2015) show that half the audience discovered it by “seeing the trailer before a film” or “being told by a friend or relative.” Online articles, reviews and social media accounted for another thirty per cent, so Hurley’s role as Distribution Manager is about “outreach”:

It's about taking a film, figuring out which communities are going to be interested in it and contacting the people who manage communications within

those communities - whether it's mailing lists, NGOs or brands on social media  
- so that they become strategic allies of the film.

### **Working with exhibitors**

The most important exhibitor for documentaries in the UK is Picturehouse, with nine cinemas in London, fourteen regional sites and programming responsibility for forty-one other cinemas around the country. In a team of eight programmers, Chris Harris is in charge of documentaries - seeing films, meeting producers and distributors, discussing their plans and working with his team to book them in across the country. Curzon Cinemas are also important - with fourteen sites (mostly in London) – as well as BFI-supported venues in key regional cities and a long list of independent cinemas and non-theatrical venues in the BFI's Film Audience Network.

Oli Harbottle has regular meetings with Curzon and Picturehouse to discuss the Dogwoof slate, plan release dates and agree marketing campaigns. If they haven't already seen a film at a festival, programmers are invited to press screenings or sent screeners. Chris Harris looks at all aspects of the campaign, from the poster to the trailer, and asks:

What support is there? Who's coming over? How many Q&As can we have?  
What's the media spend going to be? Is there anything different [or] special about this release? A lot of these films get BFI funding to help with distribution, and the BFI is always looking for something innovative.

In working out a film's theatrical strategy, Harbottle decides which cinemas are most likely to reach the film's audience and how many screens to release it on. "Sometimes, you want to keep it a little bit tighter to start with," says Hurley, "so that

you get a good screen average. Other programmers see that it's performed well and programme it in, off date.”

About six weeks before release, Dogwoof will get “a pretty strong date sheet” from Curzon and Picturehouse, confirming which cinemas will screen the film on its opening weekend (‘on date’). Picturehouse will usually open the film at “eight to twelve sites” and regional ‘off date’ bookings follow. Until 2015, Central London screens were at a premium for documentaries, with the ICA cinema a key venue for Dogwoof and the documentaries I distributed. The recently opened Bertha Dochouse screen at Curzon Bloomsbury and a new screen focused on documentaries at Picturehouse Central have increased access to the West End screen that distributors need to anchor a theatrical run.

## **Previews**

A week or two before the release date, Dogwoof will usually “bring talent over for lots of preview events and lots of press,” says Hurley. The BRITDOC-funded *Speed Sisters* (dir. Amber Fares, 2016) is a recent example - a film about the first all-women race car driving team in the Middle East. Dogwoof pitched it as an upbeat, refreshing film “about these women and their positive attitudes, with the politics kind of in the background.” They partnered with festival programmers and industry groups championing women filmmakers and launched a week of preview events with an International Women’s Day Gala Screening at the BFI, with their partners publicising the film in their newsletters and on social media.

There was an invite-only parliamentary screening for “movers and shakers in the policy sphere”; and two midweek screenings in non-Central London venues - one hosted by *Huck*, an alternative, counterculture magazine; the other targeting students of

Middle East language and politics, developed through meetings with the Arab-British Centre months before. On Thursday night, there were free pop-up screenings at the House of Vans in Waterloo – “their newsletter has tremendous reach” – and a pop-up in East London “with Middle Eastern food and music and DJs that was run by a cool marketing and events promotional outfit.” On Friday, the film previewed at the Vanity Fair Film Club in the Mayfair Hotel, “an enhanced-price ticket [with] drinks and a curated programme.” Dogwoof received a screening fee and a feature on the Vanity Fair website, “so it’s good branding and an all-round good deal for the film.”

A busy week of previews ended with a Q&A at Picturehouse Central, where the film opened two weeks later, “to get people talking and to put it on the radar”. The film went on to earn £10,070 from seven screens on its opening weekend – a success, by documentary standards.

### **Opening Weekend**

A week before release, the Film Distributors’ Association (FDA) coordinate national press screenings in London, guaranteeing press attention and reviews in the quality press, which Harris believes are still very important:

The dream is to come into the office on Friday morning and something’s got five stars across the board. It doesn’t guarantee success. There have been plenty of very well-reviewed films that nobody comes to see. But you want that film to be the must-see, as *The Act of Killing* was really.

A film lives and dies by its weekend numbers on a Monday morning:

If a film hasn’t worked, then more often than not, it will come off. It’s pretty brutal if it’s ripped off after the opening weekend. If it is sort of working and

the figures aren't huge, we will look to try and protect that film and keep it going for a second week, because it can take a while for word to spread.

The one hundred and seventeen documentaries released in 2015 accounted for fifteen per cent of films released but just 0.6 per cent of the total box office. The lack of 'name' cast, access to screens and short theatrical runs are factors, and Harris thinks mainstream audiences still "have a bit of a mental block" about seeing documentaries in the cinema:

You turn up on a Friday or a Saturday night and you've just had a long week of work and you can see why people want to go see *Batman* or *Victoria* or *High-Rise*. It's tricky to get documentaries to work within that framework. There are documentaries that can sustain a 7-day release and go on to play for weeks but hits like *Amy* are few and far between. I think that was the first documentary that broke £1 million in about three years, wasn't it? So those are anomalies really. So many of the documentaries that we play work better for more focused events, be it a satellite Q&A or an in-person Q&A.

Harris is open to direct approaches from filmmakers. If he likes the film and sees an audience for it, he works with them to schedule Q&As around the country. He cites the recent forty-date Q&A tour for cycling documentary *Battle Mountain* (dir. David Street, 2016). The filmmakers and their subject committed to six weeks on the road with the film, working hard to drum up audiences, often at smaller, provincial cinemas that don't normally get Q&As, and the film sold out several screenings. Like many independent releases, *Battle Mountain* worked with veteran booker Martin

Myers, who knows all the cinemas and has the “foot in the door” needed to plan a successful release.

### **Shortening windows to home video**

For Dogwoof, “the theatrical release is just a big song-and-dance to make the audience aware of a film they’ll later consume online. It’s not the place where you make your money back or even try to,” says Hurley. After “drumming up as much noise, as much press, as much buzz and as many events as close as possible to the cinema release date,” Dogwoof release films online “as quickly as possible” – on the same ‘day and date’ as cinemas or with very short windows to iTunes and DVD:

If a film’s only going to do a couple of weeks and programmers from Curzon and Picturehouse aren’t too bothered by it being on other platforms...we’ll do that because we can’t run two campaigns. If the film’s going to have a really strong theatrical life, maybe we would wait a month or two.

While the big multiplex chains insist on an exclusive 14-week theatrical window, arthouse chains are more relaxed about multiplatform ‘day and date’ releases. “We would always prefer a couple of weeks of exclusivity,” says Harris, “but sometimes, the film being on VOD at the same time helps the campaign and helps to raise the awareness of the film, because you’re tapping into different marketing channels.” While Q&As are an incentive to see the film in the cinema, Harris feels it’s important to develop documentary audiences by giving them a choice of platforms and “a chance to see [a film] how and when they want to see it.” Looking to the future, he advocates a more “joined-up” approach between distributors, exhibitors, VOD

platforms and broadcasters in cross-marketing a film's release across all platforms – connecting historically disparate competitors in the value chain to maximise a film's reach, impact, audience and revenue.

While *Amy* was the bestselling documentary video title of 2015, selling 123,000 units, documentaries account for just 0.9 per cent of physical video sales – a market whose value has halved since 2008. Sony DADC and Technicolor handle the replication and physical distribution of stock, working with distribution agents like Network Distribution, who market titles to retailers on behalf of labels like Dogwoof. As DVD sales decline, the VOD market has risen threefold since 2011. Dogwoof work directly with all key platforms, from iTunes in the transactional VOD space to Netflix in subscription VOD. After the theatrical release, Dogwoof try to keep social media buzz going by continuously updating their website with new shareable images and clips to announce DVD releases. The day I spoke to Hurley, the team were writing content for the *Blackfish* website, a hit release in June 2013 now back in the headlines as Seaworld announced they would stop breeding killer whales.

### **Cartel Land**

A recent BFI report (2016) on the release of *Cartel Land* – a film about civil resistance to Mexican drug cartels – gives a rare insight into the correlation between theatrical performance and home video sales for a Dogwoof title. The film opened in 27 cinemas in September 2015, supported by a £65,000 grant from the New Models strand of the BFI Distribution Fund (half the total P&A budget). The release trialled the Superticket concept popular in the US – vouchers “were to be given to every customer who bought a ticket...in the first week of the film's release...[with a code for] a free download of the film...[and] exclusive extras upon the digital release” a month later. According to

exit poll data, ten per cent of eligible customers registered to download the film but forty per cent either didn't receive a voucher or didn't understand the Superticket offer. Almost half of the younger audience (16-34) said a Superticket would encourage them to see the film at the cinema but few were aware of the offer before their visit, so customers who might have bought the film again on home video were given a free download. One in four surveyed said they would see the film again via download; ten per cent would watch again on DVD/Blu-ray.

The film took £68,407 at the box-office and made £22,000 in VOD sales in the first month - with two-thirds coming from iTunes, where it broke “the top three as their Film of the Week” (The Raygun Newsletter – April 23 2016). The DVD was released three weeks after digital platforms, with 753 units sold in the first three months.

## **Conclusion**

The BFI Film Fund recently recognised the increasing interest in feature documentaries by adding a third pitching session to its calendar, increasing the number of films funded to six. Dogwoof has also launched a film investment fund to vertically integrate its sales and distribution business into production. From doing a film a month when Hurley joined in 2012, “we’ll probably do 24 films this year,” he told me. “There just seems to be a growing audience for it and a growing community of important gatekeepers and programmers who are willing to give it a go.”

Harris agrees the range of films being produced has never been so diverse, “from issue docs more about audience engagement than the filmmaking per se, to works of art and beautiful pieces of filmmaking.” With clever, energetic marketing campaigns, the rise in revenue and dedicated documentary screens in 2015 suggests the audience for creative documentaries is growing but without a steady stream of hits

like *Senna* or *Amy*, revenue for the sector remains modest and a large section of the cinema audience remains untapped.

“It takes time to build audiences,” says Harris, “and I think we’ve been steadily building quite a dedicated documentary audience for these films.” While documentaries traditionally skewed towards older viewers, Harris has noticed a rise in the “young audience out there that’s hungry for these films, that wants to engage with [them] and learn about the world around them.” He thinks the growing popularity of documentaries like *Making a Murderer* (2015) on Netflix and other VOD platforms “will switch more people onto the idea of what documentaries are and leave them wanting more,” with social media feeding audience engagement with the films and their subjects.

Key to building audiences is innovation and Harris pointed to Dogwoof’s plans for the release of *Versus: The Life And Films Of Ken Loach* (dir. Louise Osmond) in June 2016. On the opening Sunday, “they’ll buy up all the cinema seats and invite audiences to pay-what-you-want. Little things like that can help the film’s campaign stand out.” But it doesn’t always work - the film couldn’t build on the success of *The Spirit of ’45*, grossing £12,454 on its opening weekend. The following week, Dogwoof released Michael Moore’s *Where to Invade Next* (2015), their first collaboration with the filmmaker who kickstarted the feature documentary boom in the UK with the politically charged *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) and *Fahrenheit 9-11* (2004). It was the first Dogwoof home video release to have its own London Underground poster campaign (The Raygun Newsletter, August 6 2016) but the opening weekend gross was disappointing - £85,505 from 127 screens – and the film ended the year in sixth place at the documentary box-office, behind studio-released Beatles and Oasis documentaries and *Louis Theroux’s My Scientology Movie* (dir. John Dower, 2015) - the first feature from British television’s most popular documentary filmmaker.

As Nash and Corner (2016) note, the “strategic impact production economy” that has grown up around social issue documentaries – pioneered by Dogwoof and now exemplified by BRITDOC’s Good Pitch initiative – remains a mainstay of the sector. These films harness the publicity offered by a theatrical release to achieve undeniable social impact but in discussing the BRITDOC Impact Field Guide (2015), Nash and Corner also highlight the tension between a filmmaker’s artistic vision and the impact goals of their sponsors. Films risk being subsumed into branded content designed to maximise impact for social issue campaigns.

In conclusion, the headline-grabbing, highest-grossing documentaries of the last fifteen years give a distorted impression of the market. Behind the rare million-selling hits lies a fragile ecosystem heavily dependent on distribution support from the BFI, charitable support from the Bertha Foundation and supportive gatekeepers like Picturehouse to sustain its niche in the market. Dogwoof have prospered by successfully refining the ‘impact distribution’ model to broaden their slate and develop new audiences in the worlds of art, music and fashion. Their two biggest recent hits were fashion documentaries - *Iris* (dir. Albert Maysles, 2015) and *Dior and I*.

Public funders like the BFI and BBC continue to recognize the cultural value of feature documentaries. Since Channel 4 stopped buying them in 2013, the BBC’s *Storyville* strand has been the only home for creative documentaries on British free-to-air television, acquiring forty films a year. After seventeen years as *Storyville* commissioning editor, Nick Fraser recently left the BBC to head up documentary SVOD start-up Yaddo, pointing to a new potential source of cash for filmmakers competing for dwindling pots of European co-production money or crowdfunding their films. It will be interesting to monitor the impact of this new ‘non-fiction Netflix’ on

the feature documentary landscape – will it erode the theatrical market or help bring in new audiences?