

To the documentary community...

I recently delivered a keynote at IDFA festival, to open a half day conference on the subject of Livelihood in our industry. I've decided to publish my words, because while I wrote this for filmmakers, using their words and capturing their experience, I think this was really meant to be heard by people in our industry who are making decisions, who are distributing funds, who are in positions of power, who are developing talent, who have the financial capacity and job security to take risks and demand that we do things differently.

So here it is...

Normally I begin a talk by saying what a pleasure it is to be here and it is...but I'm also noticing a strong feeling of apprehension - over the responsibility of saying all that I feel needs to be said about what it is to make a living as a documentary maker, while also capturing the mood of this moment, in this time of crisis that we find ourselves in.

When the festival approached me asking if I could speak about the relationship between mental health and livelihood, my mind literally exploded with all of the thoughts and feelings that I wanted to express. I'm still pinching myself sometimes that documentary festivals are now prioritising talks about mental health and filmmaking, it still feels so new and it's so essential.

We are people working in a profession of care, compassion and activism. We are changemakers, space holders, community leaders, healers and storytellers. How do we attend to all of these roles that we play? We talk about business and creativity a lot. We're good at that, but not so much about our psychological welfare, our state of mind, our vulnerability and our need to protect ourselves while we do this work.

Right now, we are responding to crisis after crisis. Conflicts all across the world that are painful, urgent and shaking us to our core. I'm aware of the pain in this room and the escalating tensions and heartache unfolding during this festival. I've just come from the room upstairs, a place of protest, of expression, of voice. I hope all the Palestinians who spoke just now feel heard. And there are so many urgent issues within our own filmmaking community that I wanted to address here and I know I can't in the time I have.

Much of what I will share today comes directly from filmmakers. I use that word to describe anyone involved in the making of a film - producers, directors, editors, cinematographers, impact producers. It's coming from qualitative research me, and my

collaborators on the DocuMentality project are about to release, in the form of a report, about the mental health experiences of filmmakers working in independent feature docs.



(A mental health report. Due - December 2023)

THE STATE OF THE INDUSTRY

So, I'm going to start by providing a little context about the current landscape - the one we're trying to make our living in. I've mentioned the documentary industry a few times already and yet I wonder if we can truly say this 'industry' is a thing that exists?

Various reports have been released over the last few years gathering data on the state of our industry. Two reports in 2019 and 2021, by UWE on the UK's documentary film industry found:

"the sector lacks structure and coherence" and that for many people, 'documentary filmmaker' is not a viable career due to the "chronic lack of public funding across the board."

[\(Making it Reel, 2021, UWE\)](#)

Existing production funds are concentrated in too few organisations and budgets for feature documentaries, as we know, are incredibly low. Their research found that most documentary films are funded with personal funds, while foundations, private investors and tax relief are the next most common sources. And these are statistics from a country that has historically been envied for our access to public funds.

Subsequent studies in Europe and the US have shown similar findings and, as documented in the US-focused 2020 CMSI report

“75% of documentary makers do other work to make a living and only 2 in 10 documentary filmmakers made enough money to cover production costs and make a profit from their most recent film.”

‘State of the Documentary Field 2020, CMSI)

In other areas of the world, we know that funding for docs is even harder to find, in many countries access to public funding or grants is non-existent, certainly, the funding for research isn’t there for us to even know what those statistics are and begin to advocate for their needs.

THE MENTAL HEALTH IMPACTS

But we’re here to talk about mental health. Even reading these statistics makes me feel so powerless and I am no longer producing films. The short answer is that it impacts us greatly and many of us don’t realise it, can’t even give a name to it because to say it aloud would make us question why we keep going. And keep going we will because we don’t make docs for the money.

I want to share some anonymous quotes with you that will be featured in our pending report. These are all from filmmakers that gifted us their time and went deep into their experiences. It didn’t take much to encourage them to speak out. We created some small focus groups, we asked the right questions and with the support of some funders, we also paid them for their valued contributions.

So I extracted the quotes that were specifically about livelihood:

“There are completely unrealistic expectations of the work you need to put in before you are even able to apply for funding. We spend enormous amounts of money and hundreds of hours on applications, only to be rejected.”

Overwhelmed by applications, funders rarely give feedback on why an application is rejected, leaving you, the filmmaker, feeling devalued and depressed.

The scarcity of resources and opportunities, and the imbalance of power means there is no job security for you. You are fighting to stay in the industry, operating with a level of stress akin to fear for your survival.

One filmmaker describes it as:

“It feels like we’re crabs in a bucket, just trying to make it out alive.”

Now you add that to other types of risk you take to make your films, that’s a lot to handle. Even having a permanent position does not create security.

"I've personally been told a million times '1000 people are lined up ready for your job if you're not going to step up,' It puts on this pressure that you can't crack. You can't have that moment of weakness, because then you're just seen as not resilient enough."

Another filmmaker shared:

"To get to that next step in my career, sometimes I've had to sell myself out on my principles. I've felt shameful and it induced low self-esteem. I started walking around with all this internalized anger."

"I've had moments where I've hated myself for not standing up for myself or someone else because in that moment, I didn't feel secure enough to do that."

These issues are further exacerbated for filmmakers from underrepresented communities. We ran focus groups specifically for filmmakers of colour, disabled filmmakers, queer filmmakers and women and non-binary filmmakers. Across the board, they spoke of having to fight harder for space in this industry and the discomfort over now being pitted against each other for funding pots that have been created specifically for them.

It adds to the exhaustion already felt by filmmakers who are carrying the weight of undoing colonialism, racism, patriarchy and many other biases besides, in their work.

To put it simply, this is a poor industry for the filmmaker.

The language we use and the grants based system we have is more akin to the charitable sector and yet we have none of the frameworks that make charitable industries successful. Funding streams are often linked into return. Who here hasn't made a desired budget that you present to the industry and then another budget, the one you know you will realistically have to deliver your film on, the one where you don't get paid? We're complicit in holding up this system in the way that we have to bend ourselves and deceive everyone around us to fit into it. Deception is exhausting and it doesn't pay the bills.

So we compromise our work. we make peace with our powerlessness, minimise harm where we can, meaning that we can't prioritise protection and safeguarding, we can't prioritise self-care and ethics. We feel we have to stay silent.

THE ILLUSION OF SUCCESS

Something that keeps cropping up in my client sessions, particularly with filmmakers I work with who have been making films for a number of years now, is the belief that 'success is an illusion.'

Filmmakers discussed how exhausted they feel in an industry that equates productivity and visibility to 'success.' One director shared,

"I'm coming out of a year and a half of hell that I needed to be medicated to get through. On the outside I look like I'm doing really well. I've released so many hours of content, but personally, financially and for my mental health, it's been at a huge cost."

Success requires competing against each other, for the funds, the grants, the pitches. It reinforces this idea of scarcity and that one person is better than the other.

"It's hard living in a society which values people's earning power, not what they can do. I'm so excited about what I'm doing, but I'm often in a very dark place because I am comparing myself to other people and have no self-worth."

There is no career path here. Filmmakers making their 5th or 10th feature are struggling just as much as a first-time filmmaker to get their project funded, they are wondering why decades dedicated to this work has not made things any easier for them. They are asked to be on juries, mentor emerging talent, sit on panels, and the majority of time this is unpaid - and it comes with the indication that it's a privilege to be asked so they should be grateful. On a basic human level, this is de-valuing. It's not a reciprocal system where the value flows back and forth. For the filmmaker, all of the energy is going out and it's hard to find a source to restore it.

I'm also conscious that things don't feel straightforward for the funders, for the organisations positioning themselves to support the filmmaker, that also comes with it's own exhaustion. Granted they at least are being paid and yet, this sense of powerlessness, or exhaustion seems to pervade the whole industry. I wonder if part of that is because we don't know how to value everything that goes into this beautiful, painful and complex work?

Me and my colleague Malikkah Rollins ran 2 focus groups in CPH:DOX earlier this year with funders. We shared our Documentality findings with them and invited them to respond, holding a shared space for how this impacted on them also. What surprised us the most was that this was a new experience for them. To come together as a group of people doing similar work and talk about what that was like, in a focused, confidential and intentional space. All of this energy, time and money spent on attending film festivals and they never come together as peers to reflect on their position in this ecosystem, in the responsibility of their role to look at their own position of power.. All of this needs to be attended to.

I think what we know is that the system isn't supporting us. It seems that for independent doc makers you have to choose between earning a living or having agency

over your project. Very rarely are you afforded both and because of the passion and need for sense making that drives our work, we will choose agency most of the time. This is the complexity of being in love with something that doesn't nurture us.

RE-EVALUATION

So, if this is how someone is feeling - exhausted, powerless, diminished - they begin to say to themselves, 'I am not good enough' 'What am I doing wrong' This keeps happening to me, so it must be me.'

In my work as a therapist, this is when clients reach out to us. Most people seek therapy when they are in a process of devaluation, they feel a sense of failure within themselves. They are not thriving, they are barely striving and this is internalised and often comes riddled with a deep sense of shame.

So they seek therapy to re-evaluate. Themselves, the systems they belong to. What I know to be true about my client work with filmmakers is that they do not want to leave this system they are part of. You are committed to it, you are in love with it.

So, let's re-evaluate the industry. What can we do differently to bring in the confidence and value that filmmakers deserve? I want to ask everyone reading this to take a moment to reflect, what changes can we start to make to end this process of devaluation?

What we've been talking about here today is livelihood and how the lack of it affects us psychologically. We haven't even touched on all of the other deep challenges that filmmakers are grappling with. The frameworks we need to support us as we deal with trauma, our own and others, as we push for social, political, environmental and cultural change; as we undergo processes of personal and collective growth. This work is expansive, vital, and we need to alter how we value it. On Saturday, I was at a talk that launched the DISCO project. They discussed the need to really think about how we define independent documentary and I fully support this. Only a small part of what we do is about creativity, is about art. It also includes large processes of care and healing, of understanding and undoing trauma and with any process like this the healer needs a foundation of support, space for introspection, reflective practice and nurturing.

When I set up Film In Mind, I used all of the resources I'd been given as a therapist to consciously create a practice that was ethical, sustainable and most of all, enjoyable. I surrounded myself with a support network that could nourish me, challenge me and

constantly keep me asking questions and interrogating my role in this ecosystem. I had been helped to see that I deserved it.

My peer support group, my two supervisors, my therapist. This type of support is completely normalised in the therapeutic industry and so it was normal for me to include it all in the cost of my business, I see it as a priority and of great value and I wouldn't run my practice ethically without it. Don't we need the same thing here in filmmaking? Aren't we dealing with the same pressures, the same levels of responsibility, the same duty of care requirements, to our contributors, to our stories, to ourselves?

The filmmaker can't abolish this broken system and build something new in silo and they won't leave the system so they accept it, discount their discomfort and keep going. 'The industry' however it currently exists needs to step up and support them in that. This will take a collective effort, an overhaul of old practices and a new way of valuing docs and the people who make them. In order to do this with strength, resilience and optimism, we need to get our own house in order.

To sign up for the release of 'The Price of Passion: How our love of Documentary Film Impacts our Mental health' Report, head over to the [DocuMentality](#) website. The report features a section called 'A Brighter Future' where we share the ideas generated by all of the filmmakers we spoke to for this research - their vision of what our industry can be.

To find out more about therapy, supervision and other support services, take a look at the [Film In Mind](#) website.

To join the online documentary Community, visit [The D-Word](#) website, our collaborators on Documentality.

