

The view from the funders: An interview with Doc Society's Sandra Whipham and Lisa Marie Russo

Steve Presence and Alice Quigley

Introduction

The following is an edited transcript of a semi-structured interview with two key members of Doc Society's UK team, Sandra Whipham and Lisa Marie Russo. Whipham is a former documentary producer (*Enemies of the People*, *Burma VJ*) and Channel 4 commissioning editor (True Stories) who has been with Doc Society since 2012. Currently one of Doc Society's four Directors, Whipham oversees the organisation's UK-facing activities and its relationships with funders, broadcasters and philanthropists. Russo moved to the UK from Philadelphia in 1994 and forged a successful career as an award-winning producer (*The Spirit of '45*, *Of Time and the City*). She joined Doc Society in 2018 to lead the new BFI Doc Society Fund and is currently working as a consultant executive producer on the Fund.

The interview was conducted by Steve Presence and Alice Quigley, researchers from the UK Feature Docs (UKFD) research project – a three-year study of the evolution of the feature-length documentary film industry in the UK (ukfd.org.uk). By the time this interview took place, the researchers had already interviewed several members of the Doc Society team as part of the cultural history strand of the research. The UKFD team had also worked with Doc Society on the more future-facing, policy-development aspects of the project (explored in chapter X), almost all of which – from a major survey of the production sector launched in 2019, an industry-wide consultation in 2020 and two policy-oriented reports published in 2020 and 2021 – had taken place in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.¹ Thus, though the interview below was carried out under the aegis of the UKFD project, it is part of a wider effort to record and understand how the UK documentary industry experienced and responded to this unprecedented and unforeseen context.

The interview is significant in several respects, not least because it presents a view of the pandemic from what has become the largest funder and sector development organisation in the UK independent documentary landscape. Doc Society was 'spun out' of Channel 4 in 2005 as part of the channel's broader process of commercialisation, a process set in train by successive pieces of neoliberal legislation (particularly the 1990 Broadcast Act and the 2003 Communications Act). Founded as the Channel 4 British Documentary Foundation – a title soon shortened to BRITDOC – for the next twelve years the organisation played a key role in cultivating an independent documentary film culture in the UK, one more oriented towards the international independent film sector than to broadcast television. This process culminated in late 2017 when BRITDOC, having rebranded as Doc Society in July, won the tender from the BFI to distribute funding for documentary on its behalf.

The interview offers a striking insight into the ways in which Doc Society worked to keep documentary on the agenda during a crisis in which screen industry policymakers were understandably concerned with sector-wide issues – particularly those in the independent sector – and especially the challenges facing drama production more broadly given the larger sums of money and people involved. However, it is also true that policymakers in the UK are at the best of times overwhelmingly preoccupied with fiction and that documentary is overlooked as a result. Indeed, as

¹ The two reports, *Keeping it Real: Towards a Documentary Film Policy for the UK* (2020) and *Making it Real: A Policy Programme for UK Documentary Film* (2021), are available to download from the project website: <https://ukfd.org.uk/policy-reports/>.

Steve Presence argues in his chapter in this collection, this is a major problem for the UK documentary sector and we can see the implications of it in the interview here, with documentary initially excluded – albeit unintentionally – from the BFI COVID-19 Continuation Fund (set up to support productions interrupted by the pandemic). As the interview makes clear, Doc Society were instrumental in amplifying the objections of documentary filmmakers and securing funds for a dedicated documentary ‘Production SOS Fund’.

The interview also provides a fascinating insight into how hierarchies of power and flows of information operated in the UK screen industries during the first phase of the crisis. In the UK, the Screen Sector Taskforce – originally convened by the BFI in response to the previous crisis of the Brexit referendum – functioned as the primary means through which government liaised with the screen sector via the Department for Digital, Media and Sport (DCMS). From an original membership of thirty organisations, the Taskforce now consists of more than 100 senior representatives from across the screen industries, which are in turn organised into five sub-groups: distribution and exhibition; inward investment; independent film production; television production and broadcasting; and video games (BFI 2020). Doc Society joined the Taskforce’s independent film group in April 2021 and, as the interview shows, was able to develop bespoke initiatives for the documentary sector that would otherwise have been overlooked. ‘The Corona Protocol’, for example, was an international initiative developed by Doc Society in partnership with Field of Vision and the Sundance Institute to provide guidance, advice and a checklist specific to documentary filmmakers in the form of a living document that could be updated as the pandemic evolved.² Similarly, Doc Society was also instrumental in the emergence of the UK Doc Group, a sector-wide initiative designed to increase coordination among sector support organisations in the documentary sector. Doc Society convened the group initially as a forum to share the findings in *Keeping it Real* (2020). As COVID-19 engulfed the UK, the group quickly became the means through which sector organisations coordinated their response to the pandemic. The UK Doc Group has since become one of many organisations and working groups that have together helped form the emergent Documentary Film Council (DFC) structure (see chapter X).

The interview also reveals some of the dramatic ways in which the industrial dynamics of the documentary sector are being disrupted – perhaps irrevocably, and often in positive ways. As Russo puts it, ‘the rule book has been ripped up’. For example, *Bank Job* – Dan Edelstyn and Hilary Powell’s playful and provocative film about community-based currency generation, banking and debt – premiered to an online audience of 1600 people in December 2020, prior to its theatrical run in 2020. As discussed below, other films also supported by Doc Society – such as *Locked In* (2020) or *African Apocalypse* (2020) – have helped disrupt and break-up the classic value chain and windowing models in exciting ways, and have found some distributors, broadcasters, cinemas and VOD platforms such as BFI Player to be willing partners in the process. In this respect, for all that the pandemic has amplified existing challenges in the industry, there are also, to be sure, some silver-linings to be found.

Finally, the interview also helps remind us of the wider environmental, social and political contexts that framed the pandemic and how the industry is trying to respond to them. The pandemic itself is a direct consequence of humanity’s destruction of the natural world, with coronavirus and other wild-life-to-human diseases originating from animal populations under extreme pressures from deforestation and habitat destruction (Carrington 2020). The climate emergency was further dramatically illustrated by the Australian wildfires of 2019-20, which peaked during December and January as COVID-19 arrived in the UK, and which killed or displaced nearly three billion animals and emitted 306 million tonnes of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere (Vallis 2020; Lee 2019). Then

² The second edition of this initiative, entitled *Independent Documentary: Filming in the Time of Corona*, was published in August 2020 (Doc Society 2020).

in May 2020, the murder of George Floyd re-ignited the Black Lives Matter movement, sparking protests against racism and inequality around the world and widespread interrogation and self-reflection among civil society organisations. The interview explores Doc Society's perspective on some of these issues and the ongoing ways in which the organisation is responding to them, incorporating anti-racism into Doc Society's structure and developing interventions such as the Climate Story Lab. It is also worth noting that Doc Society's Head of Film, Shanida Scotland, has since become the diversity working group lead in the DFC.

Interview

Steve Presence (SP): *Could we start by getting you to think back to the start of the pandemic and give us Doc Society's point of view on that moment? When did you realise how significant this was going to be? Can you talk us through your initial response and what your immediate concerns were?*

Sandra Whipham (SW): Sure. So, two weeks before lockdown, we held the Climate Story Lab in London [10-13 March]. That was obviously held in the context of COVID, but it was still at the point where everyone was leading their normal lives and no one had changed any plans. It's funny to look back on it, because everyone knew we shouldn't be shaking hands or hugging or kissing, and we made this little jokey video which was really cute, with different ways of saying hello, just as a reminder. Now, with all of the swabbing and the COVID secure protocols and so on, that feels very naïve [laughter] but that was where everyone was at, at the time.

The lab ran in central London over five days. The Friday was meant to be an in-person speed consultancy dating event with numerous funders and the film projects who had been selected. I think on the Wednesday we took the decision that that would be online, and we had international guests and some of them went home early. So, it was really during that week that everyone realised what was happening. We all just went home at the end of that week without going back into the office, and we didn't go back into the office until July. That was the week that most major companies said, ahead of the government, work from home – that wasn't government advice at that time. I remember, all the chat was like, 'why isn't more being done? Surely we should take measures now?' Everyone who had teams working in offices took that decision prior to the government. Then a few weeks later it was lockdown.

SP: *What was the experience like from your point-of-view as a funder? I imagine you had a lot of very concerned filmmakers getting in touch.*

SW: Yes, we did. I think we were on the front foot with the BFI Doc Society Fund. We just went to all our grantees right away and said, 'Let's put in a meeting and talk to you about what's happening'. That probably took a couple of weeks because they were scheduled in as meaningful, hour-long chats, so it was part of a company-wide information gathering exercise.

As a company I think we realised immediately that this pandemic was going to have a permanent, long-lasting, dramatic effect on everything we knew about the world and the film and documentary industry. We were also really lucky in that coincidentally we had our board meeting scheduled for that week. So, we were able to draw on this amazing bench of expertise in terms of thinking strategically about what this all meant. We drew up this grid (see fig. x) which looked at the potential impact on our team – the Doc Society team – in terms of who we are and how we work, and focused on three major themes: 1) potential impacts on us as an organisation; 2) impacts on those we serve: filmmakers and our sister organisations – we were super-aware that this could mean that other doc organisations in our ecosystem could actually go under and that this would have big implications for the field; and 3) impacts on the ecosystem as a whole: independent film festivals, cinemas, audiences, funders and so on.

So, we basically mapped that out in that very first week with a whole set of mitigations, and we discussed that with our board. That was really helpful because we felt like we were taking back control of the situation a little bit, when everything felt very out of control and unpredictable and things were changing on a daily basis.

SP: *Can you tell us about the SOS Fund and how that developed?*

Lisa Marie Russo (LMR): Well, we actually had a features round first. Because people had applied before COVID, and then we were making decisions right when the virus hit. So, we did ask, on the films that we ended up funding, what they could be doing during lockdown – development, editing and so on. The idea that anyone was going to be running around shooting was mad. Nobody could see that happening right then, unless, of course, you were on a news crew or something.

So, we asked people in the interviews to really think about the plan. We looked maybe six months ahead, with a vision of it opening up in six months. And we changed our financing structure for that round in that we released the financing in slightly smaller chunks, because we just didn't know where it was going and how long it would take. So, while we still made the full commitment, the funding was released to enable a particular activity that could be done in a particular time period.

SW: We also tried to fund more filmmakers than usual, too, because we felt like filmmakers were going to struggle throughout this year and that our obligation was to support as many as we could.

LMR: Yes, so we did nine films in that round, which is a lot for us. But then the BFI announced the Continuation Fund. It was marketed explicitly for fiction and animation, which had people in our sector – notably Jeanie Finlay – speaking up about why they couldn't apply to it. So, we went to the BFI and explained to them that the documentary sector was being left out of this. I don't think it was intentional, and when we pointed it out they were like, 'Oh, okay, what do you want us to do?' So, we went away and thought about it, and ended up developing the BFI Doc Society Production SOS Fund, which I jokingly call the Jeanie Finlay SOS Fund now. We ended up granting just over £200,000 in non-recoupable grants to seventeen projects out of fifty applications.

Alice Quigley (AQ): *Can you situate these Doc Society initiatives in relation to the wider response to the pandemic in the screen industries and the documentary sector more broadly? You're part of the Screen Sector Taskforce and the UK Doc Group, which was formulated around this time, too. Can you give us your perspective on those developments?*

SW: The Screen Sector Taskforce was a BFI Initiative initially set-up to deal with Brexit, and is now a huge group of around eighty people. I represent documentary on that and came on to that group near the beginning of that process. It's a way of the screen sector putting forward their needs to government, via DCMS.³ So DCMS came to the meetings and briefed the group on what was happening within government to support the creative industries. But it became quite focused on issues like Production Restart,⁴ insurance and other really big issues. Documentary was sometimes a little bit tangential by virtue of the independent nature of what we do.

³ The DCMS (Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport) is the UK government department with responsibility for culture, sport, tourism, the digital economy and the creative industries in England (although many decisions regarding culture, tourism and sport are devolved to governments in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, key decisions regarding film and media policy are 'reserved' and made by central government).

⁴ Launched in July 2020, Production Restart is a government scheme designed to help film and TV productions that were halted or delayed by the pandemic to get back up and running. For more information, see <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/film-tv-production-restart-scheme#:~:text=The%20Film%20and%20TV%20Production,losses%20are%20incurred%20due%20to.>

So we became much more focused on how we could help independent documentary filmmakers, who tend to be much more entrepreneurial and fleet-of-foot, which is how the Corona Protocol came about. Because there are these huge pieces of guidance that the TV sector and the British Film Commission have put together, for example, but they all are focused on crews and sets. We wanted something that was much more practical and rooted in independent doc filmmaking.

AQ: *Tell us about your experience with the Doc Group – we’re interested in your point-of-view of that initiative, given that responsibility for convening it has fallen on Doc Society.*

SW: Well, we’ve discussed with you guys in the context of your research the lack of coordination in the sector and how that could be resolved, so this felt like a no-brainer. And I guess COVID forced our hand because we were wanting to gather intel on all the other initiatives that were happening across the sector. Also, we were aware that maybe some organisations could be vulnerable so we wanted to make sure that we were all in a mutually supportive space together where any issues could be raised and addressed. Because it is a very fragmented sector with lots of really small organisations all doing their own thing, it’s been really good to get in the same space together and have representatives from other organisations who also work in the fiction space but have documentary as part of their portfolio, so it is both those things.

AQ: *You mentioned how documentary can seem almost tangential in terms of the wider screen sector, but of course documentary also has its own specific set of concerns. Could you say a bit about what the challenges the pandemic has posed for the documentary community?*

SW: I think it’s just amplified existing challenges, which is how to be sustainable and make work and how we ensure, as a sector, that we have got that breadth of perspective and opportunity for everybody in what is a very precarious business.

LMR: I also think the effects of isolation, if you are already working on your own, can be amplified. Because the income one makes in our sector can be quite small, and then that very quickly would have knock-on effects – particularly for filmmakers with families. One thing we did was help people who were eligible get journalism passes – we supported the cost of that so that those that could go out and film in a COVID-safe way were doing that legitimately and getting back out there. That felt like a very proactive intervention that wasn’t something people thought of before because they didn’t need that kind of documentation.

SW: Some films we’re involved with have had to change their filming plan, so we’ll see what the impact on the films is from that. There will certainly be an impact on how stories are told at a filmic level. Then, of course, there is the question of getting films out there. We’ve just released *African Apocalypse* and *Locked In*, and on Friday, *Bank Job* is having its premiere online.

LMR: I think the big takeaway for us here is that the rule book has been ripped up, new ways of doing deals are happening, people are asking broadcasters to rethink their relationship to releases, and BFI Player has been great and just stepped right up. We’re like, ‘Hi, we want a theatrical release. It is all about you and our existing relationship with you, where we had maybe imagined we would be coming to you after a broadcast.’ They are like, ‘Yes, what do you need?’. So something like *African Apocalypse*, which was in London Film Festival, it is also on BFI Player and it’s also going to have a whole series of screenings supported by the Bertha Fund as well as The New Black Film Collective from next week, before the broadcast in January.

The film, *Locked In*, the broadcasters wanted to get it out for Disability History Month. We said, ‘Okay, but we want a theatrical component as well.’ So it has gone out on BFI Player and Lindsey Dryden and Forward Films are doing a whole series of Q & As and community building within the disabled film-making community to broaden its reach. That has just happened really quickly. The pivots are happening really quickly.

There is also more space for press coverage, because other big films aren't coming out. Documentaries are getting more coverage online. I mean I have never seen so many reviews for our films [laughter]. Distributors are also thinking 'how can we do this differently? How are we working with exhibitors?'. Exhibitors are working directly with groups like The New Black Film Collective, and producers are looking at different models. *Locked In* is for free on BFI Player because that is what the producers wanted to do. It also happens to be on BBC iPlayer for free so why not do it that way? It is a bit bespoke, but it is really, I think, about people gathering the research to go, 'Okay, this could work for us'.

And being online means you can reach people in different communities. I think it really helps being able to reach people who might feel isolated, in these times particularly. It's a little branch out into the world. Also, as with *African Apocalypse*, there will be different panels, really community-based panels, with leaders from the communities hosting these Q & As. It is really being able to bring people together despite the restrictions of corona. So that positive aspect of things going online, that is the democratising of the experience, has been really great. I mean to have 1,000 people coming to that screening is phenomenal.

SW: Yes. I would also mention the consolidation of the streamers. There is a lot of talk about the role of public service broadcasting and also independents within that context. Also, within a very specific political context where public service media is facing coordinated attacks. So this isn't just about market dominance. It is about a politically motivated, coordinated undermining of public service media globally. I think anyone who works in the independent space would fully acknowledge how important public service media is to our democracies and our ecosystem. So that's the other thing that is percolating.

Also, I know we're talking about COVID specifically, but I think the bigger context in which corona has happened is political authoritarianism, a resurgent civil rights movement and the climate crisis. All of these things are happening all at the time and they all reinforce each other in a kind of asymmetric way and you can't look at one without looking at all of the others. So it's a time of unprecedented challenge where new partnerships and cooperation is needed more than ever.

LMR: I was speaking to a really experienced producer yesterday, somebody we aren't working with, but I had the opportunity to get some intel from her. She works internationally and this is what she said. Because I found it so staggering I wrote it down: 'It is pretty much impossible to finance stuff that isn't in a big commercial box. If you are lucky enough to get a UK broadcaster, that can turn off the other taps for you. So everything in the US is about the streamers'. It was striking to hear that right off the frontline in the US. This is someone who is working internationally and making big films, but has got it really hard.

SP: *Can you tell us a bit about how Doc Society has worked internationally through all this – not just the pandemic but the murder of George Floyd and Black Lives Matter and so on? Probably many people in the UK don't realise the extent to which Doc Society is an international organisation with sites in the US and Amsterdam and so on. To what extent did that shape your response?*

SW: So we always think of Doc Society as a global organisation, not a UK organisation. We have a 501(c)(3) in North America and we have a Stichting – which is a Dutch not-for-profit – in Amsterdam as well, all with separate boards. So they file their own accounts and are separate companies but under the Doc Society umbrella. In moments of crisis that structure really gives a breadth of perspective that helps us carve out a strategy that is global rather than UK-focused. So following George Floyd's murder, for instance, because we are a global team with an office in New York and a board that's very rooted in civil rights, we were able to hear the insights and bring that experience and perspective into our thinking early on. Because of that, I think we realised very quickly that it was something we had to respond to meaningfully, beyond the necessary but ultimately limited statements of solidarity.

AQ: *Can you tell us a bit about what that response involved? What did the changes look like for Doc Society?*

SW: We put out a statement as part of our newsletter, which probably came out a bit later than when the big glut of statements that came out, because we actually wanted to commit to action and we needed a bit more time to figure out what those actions should be. We wanted it to be a public commitment that we could be held to.

So one of the first things we did was to change our mission statement to explicitly include anti-racism. We also included economic justice and climate justice in that, as an expanded way of envisioning what drives us as an organisation. In that statement, we also committed to making space at senior level within Doc Society, because we were acutely aware that, as a founder-led organisation, we were, to some extent, limited by the fact that the founders are all white and are all directors of the company.

So we had to actually change the structure of Doc Society to address the structural racism that exists in our society, and so we committed to hiring a co-executive director in New York. It was a new post that we have created and we are still ongoing with that. We also created a new post across the whole of Doc Society – Head of Film – because, again, decision-making and who gets to make decisions is ultimately at the heart of all equity and inclusion.

There are other things we've committed to that are ongoing. Early next year we are going to be doing a racial equity assessment of the organisation, carried out by a New York based organisation called Liberation House, and that is going to look at power structures and decision-making across the whole company, which is exciting.

We have also diversified our charitable trust board. We have had a great board who were actually all coming to the end of their terms anyway, and so we have taken that as an opportunity to diversify that board. I mean our other boards are already quite diverse, but that was one board where we could definitely take more positive actions. As a company, we've also committed to mentoring a range of Black-led, UK-based organisations who are starting their own organisations (though this mentoring work isn't public, it's just something we're doing).

SP: *It's been interesting to see how this particular moment has made organisations in almost every sector reflect on their practices. One of the problems for documentary is doing this in a sector which is already – as has come through quite strongly in our research – so financially insecure. To what extent does this make it harder to address the diversity issues?*

SW: They are also part and parcel of the same thing for us. I mean, the amazing thing about your reports is that we actually have data on who is making documentaries. And it's clear that we have an inclusion problem in the sector in terms of who has made those finished films. As a company, we have to double-down on that and look at how we can contribute to sector-wide solutions, as well as making sure our own house is in order. That work is ongoing. I mean it is everything. It's about how we communicate with filmmakers, how filmmakers come to the fund, how we make the decisions, who makes the decisions. It's so multifaceted and we are looking at all of that.

Conclusion

Closing the interview by considering the wider contexts in which the pandemic has taken place provides a crucial reminder that for all the ways in which it is unprecedented, COVID-19 is also inextricably interwoven with the broader political, economic, and environmental conditions of our time. Indeed, as noted, the pandemic is a direct manifestation of the environmental crisis in our midst,

a crisis that is itself fuelled by an exploitative, racist economic system structurally unable to conceive of any value beyond the relentless pursuit of profit. Viewing the pandemic within these wider contexts reminds us that COVID-19 is symptomatic of wider problems in society. Thus, as the transcript indicates, it would be a mistake to fixate on the pandemic as the cause of the problems in the screen industries when in many ways its devastating impact stemmed from pre-existing issues in the industry, such as the almost total reliance on precarious, freelance labour in the production sector.

Of course, the interview above is with some of the most senior executives in the documentary sector, not the precarious workers that bore the brunt of the crisis. Still, while accounts of the pandemic are needed from freelancers and below-the-line workers (a focus sometimes referred to in media industries studies as ‘studying down’), interviews with funders and executives (‘studying up’) are a vital part of the puzzle. Even though interviews, like documentaries, can only ever be representations – accounts of the past rather than the past itself – they nevertheless provide insight into critical industry processes and cultures that would otherwise remain unknown (Cornea 2008; Bakøy et al 2017, 9-11).

Arguably the key insights here refer to the importance of building new forms of community in the documentary industry and to the ways in which new forms of collaboration and partnership are emerging across the documentary value chain. After all, crisis can create opportunity, and not only for ‘disaster capitalists’ (Klein 2007). As Russo says, the rule book has been ripped up, and – while Disney and other studios are using the turmoil in the windowing system to their advantage, potentially wiping out chunks of the commercial exhibition industry in the process – this can also benefit the independent sector. New models of marketing, distribution and exhibition are demonstrating how VOD can be an ally to the production and exhibition communities, for instance. Moreover, as the interview makes clear, documentary is all-too-easily neglected by those charged with looking after the screen industries overall. Overcoming the fragmentation in the documentary sector – a pervasive problem in other small but culturally vital parts of the creative industries (BFI 2018, 18-20) – is a critical part of countering this process. A more cohesive sector is necessary to undo some of the damage done by the pandemic, to facilitate the community to advocate in its best interests, and to enable it to benefit from those opportunities that have emerged in the wake of the virus.

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