The Documentary Film Council: developing nonfiction policy frameworks in the COVID-19 pandemic

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Introduction

This chapter provides an account of an ongoing process of policy research and development in the UK's independent documentary film sector, almost all of which has taken place in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. The documentary film sector has grown significantly in the UK in the past two decades or so, and the sector now constitutes a significant and distinct part of the UK's wider independent film culture and industry. Yet the expansion and evolution of independent documentary has not been matched by a corresponding development in policy support – an oversight that appears to be a problem overseas as well as in the UK.[1]

Consequently, when work began on the policy development strand of the UK Feature Docs research project (about which more below), there was a real sense of unearthing a crisis in the sector – a crisis regarding funding in particular, but also with regards to many other interrelated issues such as coordination, equality and diversity, data, training, and transparency. One of the arguments I wish to make here, then, is that while the pandemic has wrought havoc in the documentary sector as it has elsewhere, the real source of the damage lies less with the pandemic than with the structural problems in the industry that rendered it so vulnerable to begin with. As the UN Secretary General has argued of the pandemic more broadly, COVID-19 has acted like an X-ray, exposing the fragilities and fractures already present in society and the dangers of leaving these unchecked (Guterres 2020). As the screen industries are rebuilt, there is an opportunity not just to undo the damage done by the pandemic but to develop policy frameworks that will address some of those more fundamental problems that pre-dated it.

This chapter presents an account of ongoing efforts to do that in the UK documentary sector, reflecting on a two-year period that begins in April 2019, with the development of a survey of documentary producers and directors, and ends in May 2021, following the first meeting of an emergent Documentary Film Council. The chapter presents original qualitative and quantitative findings on the challenging conditions that existed in the in the documentary sector prior to the advent of COVID-19 and reflects on the process of acting on those findings during the pandemic, working in innovative ways with stakeholders across the sector and beyond to address the industry's many complex and intersecting problems. In so doing, the chapter also provides a potentially transferable model – albeit one developed under extraordinary conditions – of grassroots policy development in small but culturally vital sectors.

[1] Policymakers in several other territories have acknowledged the need for bespoke policy frameworks for documentary and have begun collecting documentary-specific data. For example, the Documentary Association of Europe (DAE), founded in 2020 to replace the European Documentary Network, immediately announced the need for data-gathering projects on the industries it represents (Brigid O'Shea cited in Ravindran 2020). The Documentary Organization of Canada (DOC), which has released intermittent reports on documentary production since 2013, recently noted that, given increasing audiences and the cultural importance of nonfiction cinema, it is 'timely to examine the policy frameworks that support independent documentary' (De Rosa and Burgess 2019, 9). Caty Borum Chattoo at the Centre for Media and Social Impact has been leading the generation of data on nonfiction film in the US since 2016 (Chattoo 2016; Chattoo and Brown 2019). For the latest report, see Chattoo and Harder (2021).

First, a brief note on terminology. I focus here on the independent documentary film sector but recognize that 'independence' is a highly contingent and complex concept (see, for example, Bennett and Strange, 2018) and that 'documentary film' encompasses a wide range of forms and institutional contexts across film and television. There is not space here to explore the complex boundaries of this field, but it is useful to note some general or dominant characteristics. Here then, 'independent documentary' usually refers to the more creative and innovative end of the nonfiction spectrum. Most of the films in this sector tend not to be obviously commercial (but can be highly profitable) and are typically financed from a patchwork of sources rather than from a single studio, SVOD platform or broadcaster. Running times vary from short to feature length, but many projects developed in this sector are intended for release on the festival and theatrical circuits as well as for broadcast.

The UK Feature Docs research project

The UK Feature Docs (UKFD) project was a three-year research project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (2018-2021).[2] The project was primarily a cultural history initiative in that two of its three core objectives – 'industry landscapes' and 'industry histories' – were concerned with exploring the evolution of the independent documentary sector in the thirty-year period to 2020. It is during this period that many organizations dedicated to independent documentary were established – such as Sheffield Doc/Fest (1994-), BBC Storyville (1997-) and BRITDOC (2005-) – and when feature-length nonfiction films established themselves on the theatrical circuit, increasing from just four releases in 2001 to 117 in 2015, 110 in 2018 and 99 in 2019 (O'Sullivan 2017, Stoll 2021). Historicising the expansion and evolution of this sector and exploring its contemporary formation was thus the primary focus of the project's first two years and drew on a range of methods from Media Industries Studies, Production Studies and Organizational Studies, including semi-structured interviews, archival research and analysis of trade press, grey literature and scholarship (Paterson et al 2016; Freeman 2016).

The UKFD project's third strand – 'industry futures' – focused on policy development. This strand began in earnest in early 2019 and aimed to investigate the current problems and challenges in the sector and how these might be addressed. By that stage, we had conducted around fifty interviews with active and retired stakeholders from across the sector, including commissioners and executives from various broadcasters, screen agencies and institutions as well as several freelance producers, directors and CEOs from a range of production companies, distributors and film festivals. Qualitative data from these interviews provided strong evidence of major problems in the feature documentary sector well before the pandemic struck, ranging from the low cultural status of the form and a paucity of funds for development and production to a widespread lack of understanding in the wider UK screen industries regarding the particularities of documentary and its nature as a unique and distinct cultural sector.

Despite these strong indications in our qualitative data, however, there was a striking lack of quantitative data on the documentary sector on which we could draw to cross-reference these findings. While the BFI's Statistical Yearbooks provide valuable headline statistics on the numbers of documentaries released and the performance of documentary as a category of 'specialized' film, other data on documentary is merged with that on fiction films, making it difficult to get a sense of the

[2] The project was run by Dr Steve Presence (Principal Investigator) and Professor Andrew Spicer (Co-Investigator). From 2020-21, the project benefitted enormously from the support of a Research Associate, Alice Quigley, who joined to support the policy development work outlined in this chapter. More recently, the project has been supported by Alex Wilson, who provided partial maternity cover for the final months of Quigley's post in early 2021.

documentary sector specifically. For example, there is no documentary-specific data on employment issues (such as the gender of documentary directors or producers), or on the UK film economy (such as import and export data or information on leading production companies). Similarly, there is no data available on documentary projects that access the UK's Film Tax Relief, or on the proportion of development and production funds allocated to documentary from different sources. More specific data on documentary is provided by The Whickers' *Cost of Docs* reports (based on an annual survey conducted since 2016) but, useful as these are, they include responses from nonfiction filmmakers all over the world (The Whickers 2020). The Scottish Document Institute (SDI) has also generated valuable data on gender participation in the documentary sector in Scotland, and there is some data on gender inequality in the doc sector more broadly (Follows and Kreager 2016, Directors UK 2018). Overall, though, there remains a significant lack of data on the documentary sector in the UK. This gap is itself indicative of documentary's under-valued status which, again, is a fundamental problem for the industry that pre-dated the pandemic.

Keeping it Real: The UKFD producers and directors survey

Given the lack of data from elsewhere, it became increasingly clear that the policy strand of the research required us to generate our own original, quantitative dataset. This was not part of the original plans for the project, partly because the extent of the data deficit was not as apparent at the proposal stage and partly because the time and resources required to conduct a national survey – and secure a high enough response-rate for the results to be meaningful – was beyond the scope of the research team. However, by this stage in the research, the project team had developed good working relationships with several key organizations and individuals in the sector, many of whom had been interviewed during the cultural history phase of the project. With these organizations' support, surveying the sector became a feasible option.

The research team had a particularly good relationship with Doc Society, having interviewed several members of the organization about its history and evolution into the largest documentary funder in the UK. Doc Society was founded in 2005, when Channel 4's Independent Film and Video Department was 'spun out' of the channel as the British Documentary Foundation – a title soon shortened to BRITDOC. In 2017, BRITDOC rebranded as Doc Society and won the tender to distribute documentary funds on behalf on the BFI later that year. Partly as a result of winning the tender but also because Doc Society has played a major role in shaping the development of the UK sector over the last two decades, Doc Society is arguably the most prominent documentary-focused organization, funder, and field-builder in the UK (see our interview with Doc Society in this volume for an account of the pandemic from its perspective). When we discussed with the Doc Society team the need to generate original quantitative data on the documentary industry, they agreed to partner with the UKFD project on a survey of the production sector, and to use their extensive reach and communicational power to drive responses to it.

The survey focused on the production sector (by accepting responses only from feature-length producers and directors) because this allowed a depth and granularity of response that would have been impossible had the survey also sought responses from personnel working in commissioning, distribution, sales and exhibition. Of course, any coherent film policy must consider the value chain as a whole but, because these other parts of the industry are considerably smaller than the production sector, we decided to tackle them separately. The raw data was accessible only to the UKFD team, but the survey was designed in collaboration with Doc Society with support and feedback from several other organizations in the sector, including The Grierson Trust, SDI, Sheffield Doc/Fest and The

Whickers, as well as the Center for Media & Social Impact in the US. The survey launched at a policy-focused panel session at Doc/Fest in June 2019 ('Cinema and state: Developing policy frameworks for feature docs'),[3] ran for just over eleven weeks, and secured exactly 200 responses, making it the largest survey ever conducted of the UK feature documentary industry.

The results were staggering, if not altogether unsurprising, and provided a valuable snapshot of the industry and the myriad problems it was faced with immediately prior to the pandemic. In terms of diversity, the sector was lacking in almost every respect. Ninety-one per cent of respondents were either upper or lower middle-class (located in NS-SEC categories 1-4) and eighty-one per cent of respondents identified as White British, a striking over-representation given that almost two-thirds of respondents were based in London – by far the UK's most ethnically diverse region (ONS 2018). While the survey results seemed to suggest the sector was approaching parity in terms of gender participation (fifty per male; forty per cent female), inequalities appeared when the results were analysed in terms of role (director or producer), budget levels and income. Women were more likely to produce than direct, particularly at higher budget bands, and while we cannot prove this is women producing male-directed films, this is certainly indicated by other research in the field that shows female directors account for just a quarter of documentaries made for cinema and television alike (Follows and Kreager 2016, 70; Directors UK 2018, 8). Several of our interviewees also emphasized both that it is 'much easier' to finance feature docs with male directors, and that budgets accepted for male-directed films are significantly higher than for those with female directors.[4]

In terms of the pre-pandemic funding landscape, the survey also revealed a sector that was in crisis well before the advent of COVID-19. Again, this was expected given the strong indication in interviews that a lack of production funds was a key issue, something that was also borne out by our analysis of the BFI's Financial Plan and screen sector production statistics. The BFI's Statistical Yearbooks, for example, show that documentaries represent around a quarter of all films made (BFI 2018, 164), yet the current Financial Plan allocates less than ten per cent of the total production funds to documentary. In 2020/21, for example, the BFI allocated (via Doc Society) just £1.8m (9.1 per cent) to documentary out of a total fund of £20.9m.[5] This problem of under-funding documentary in the film industry has intensified as funding from broadcasters has declined, a process that has seemingly occurred under the radar of policymakers. Series such as *Viewpoint* and *First Tuesday* (ITV, 1983-93), *Modern Times* (BBC, 1995-2000) and *True Stories* (Channel 4, 1993-2012) have gradually shut down, and have not been replaced. Only BBC *Storyville* remains (1997-), and its budget of less than £1m is widely acknowledged to be inadequate. ARTE France's documentary budget is more than four times that amount, for example. Had the health of the documentary sector been assessed prior to the 'X-ray' of the pandemic, the lack production funds would have emerged as a major source of the sector's problems.

[3] The panel was chaired by Dr Steve Presence. The panel consisted of two producers, Christo Hird (Dartmouth Films) and Elhum Shakerifar (Hakawati), a distributor and exhibitor, Jason Wood (Anti-Worlds/HOME), the BFI Doc Society Fund executive, Lisa Marie Russo (Doc Society), and the documentary consultant and researcher Jörg Langer (AG DOK).

[4] The survey also revealed clear pre-pandemic correlations between respondents' income and their gender and class identities. The mean income for female respondents was almost £3000 less than the mean income for men, and twice the number of women than men reported making no money at all from their films. Middle-class respondents of both genders, meanwhile, made significantly more money from their documentaries than their working-class counterparts, with those in SC-SEC bands 1-4 earning thirty-eight per cent of their income from filmmaking, compared with just thirteen per cent of working-class filmmakers.

[5] The BFI's five-year Financial Plan is available here: https://www.bfi.org.uk/2022/financial_plan.html. The £20.9m cited above has been arrived at (in dialogue with colleagues at the BFI) by combining the annual BFI Production Fund (£15.9m) with the annual budgets allocated to the 'Development Fund' and the 'Talent Development and iFeatures' funds (£2.5m respectively). For more detail, see Presence et al (2020, 67).

Perhaps the most damning indication of a lack of production funding prior to the pandemic was that filmmakers' own income was cited as by far the most common source of film funding (cited by forty-three per cent of respondents), with foundations and private investors the second most common source of funding (cited by twenty-seven per cent of respondents). With so many documentary projects dependent on personal wealth – respondents reported investing anything from £1000 to £20,000 – those without that kind of economic privilege simply cannot participate. Furthermore, the correlation between economic, social and cultural capital means that those with private incomes typically have better access to other sources of private wealth – foundations, equity funds and rich individuals – a sector which producer/director Lindsay Dryden describes as 'opaque and inaccessible' to those unfamiliar with it.

The UK Film Tax Relief (FTR) was the third most common funding source (cited by twenty-two per cent of respondents). Introduced in 2007, the FTR is now the largest source of public funding for film in the UK by far and has become the economic foundation of the industry, largely via the large sums of inward investment it attracts from Hollywood.[6] In 2018/19, for example, the FTR accounted for seventy-eight per cent of all public film funding, some £595m (BFI 2020, 4). However, the survey demonstrated a range of problems that limit documentary filmmakers' access to the FTR. Many of these problems stem from the FTR application process itself, which has been designed exclusively for fiction films. For example, to even be eligible for the FTR, principal photography must not have begun before the FTR application is made. This rule is relatively easy for fiction films to accommodate, which are meticulously planned and which include clear shooting schedules. Documentaries, however, are often less predictable and filmed over several years, well before any application for tax relief can be made. Several other criticisms of the FTR related to the time and cost required to access it. Fundamentally, documentary projects have significantly smaller budgets than fiction films and yet the fees and administrative requirements involved in FTR applications are the same, making the process disadvantageous for nonfiction filmmakers.

A range of qualitative responses to the survey also depicted a sector in crisis well before the advent of COVID-19. Again, respondents were at pains to emphasize funding as the key problem – 'the amount of public money invested in UK documentary is a scandal' that makes documentaries 'near impossible to finance properly' – and to connect this to the sector's problems with equality and diversity. Respondents were extremely conscious of working in a largely middle-class, white, London-based industry in which women, people of colour and those with disabilities or caring responsibilities were disproportionately impacted by under-funding. As one respondent explained, 'it's worse than ever for those on regular incomes and without elite backgrounds'. Furthermore, while recognising the 'gulf' that has developed between independent documentary and 'commissioned TV', directors were keen to underscore the knock-on effects that squeezed budgets in the television industry have had on documentary filmmaking:

> Directors in TV have much less creative autonomy, shorter editing times and lower wages that twenty years ago. It takes huge investment of time and capital to establish oneself as a feature documentary director, which is why the field is overwhelmingly privileged. Directors are still, overwhelmingly, from privileged backgrounds.

The qualitative responses also connected the fundamental issue of under-funding with a range of other related problems. For example, respondents noted a pressing need for enhanced training provision, particularly with regards to supporting new entrants to make a living amidst such harsh economic conditions. There was a widespread feeling that the loss of 'the "master/apprentice" system' that existed when broadcasters were still regularly commissioning long-form nonfiction had not been

[6] For a critique of automatic funding in Northern European countries, see Sørensen and Redvall (2019). See Magor and Schlesinger (2009) for historical analysis of the UK tax relief system, and for critiques of the UK FTR and its relationship with Hollywood, see Steele (2015) and Newsinger and Presence (2018).

adequately replaced either by ScreenSkills (the skills charity for the UK screen industries), or by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). HEIs were deemed to be largely out-of-touch with the realities of the industry, while ScreenSkills focused on crew training over producers' skills and neglected the particularities of producing for the documentary sector.

This sense of an unrecognized decline in support for the documentary sector connected to a more fundamental perception that documentary was a significantly under-valued film form in the UK: 'we are invisible', said one respondent. The widespread lack of understanding among UK industry executives regarding the international status of independent documentary as a globally significant and interconnected ecosystem was cited as evidence of its low cultural status. Respondents noted that this was a pronounced problem in major organizations that do not work exclusively with nonfiction, and that the issue was compounded by the widespread notion that we are living through a 'golden age' of documentary. This phrase is often justified with reference to the success of certain films theatrically – *Three Identical Strangers* (2018), *Free Solo* (2018), *RGB* (2018) and so on – and the vast sums various SVOD platforms have paid to acquire them, such as the $10m Netflix paid for *Knock Down the House* (2018), for example (Fleming 2019). Yet the survey underscored how this so-called golden age applies only to a small minority of projects: typically English-language films with popular appeal or critically-acclaimed titles that have had success on the festival or awards circuit – many of which are made by US filmmakers or, like *Listen to Me Marlon* (2016) or *Three Identical Strangers* (2018), by UK filmmakers representing American subjects or culture. Those UK filmmakers interested in telling stories from elsewhere in the world, exploring challenging or marginalised subjects, or in experimenting with content and form, are having a much harder time. Consequently, the pre-pandemic documentary industry was split into two decidedly unequal halves. According to one respected producer:

> there are two parallel industries running now – the high-end celebrity filmmakers/celebrity subject world, and then the smaller work made by piecing together tiny sources of funding. There is a 'golden age' if the first industry is considered. Otherwise, it feels like it is very much getting harder.

Finally, the qualitative data generated by the survey demonstrated that these interconnected issues – unchecked decline in the broadcast space, a lack of cultural status and skewed perceptions of a booming sector that is in fact experiencing a crisis of under-funding – have eroded capacity within the sector. While respondents did praise organizations such as Doc Society and SDI for doing 'great work' with limited resources, the overwhelming impression was that the UK no longer supported a fully-functioning independent documentary ecosystem. Instead, too few resources were concentrated in too few, predominantly London-based organizations, resulting in the consolidation of decision-making power, a lack of transparency and poor coordination between both regions and nations and between production, distribution and exhibition. Regional filmmakers felt that they were perceived as 'less cosmopolitan' by those based in the capital – findings corroborated elsewhere (Spicer and Presence 2017, 46-7) – and respondents overall described an insular institutional culture that presented itself as a 'closed shop' and a 'closed world' that lacked 'even the most basic' transparency in decision-making: 'It is very difficult to discuss with decision makers and meet in open fora. Transparency is a real concern'.

Clearly, there were serious problems in the UK documentary sector well before the advent of COVID-19. Coronavirus hit the UK in early 2020, as the results of the survey were being prepared for publication. By mid-March the country was in its first lockdown. All cultural, educational, leisure and social venues were closed down, and the impact on the screen industries was of course enormous: by April, ninety-three per cent of the UK's film and television freelancers were out of work (Rosser 2020). The survey report, *Keeping it Real: Towards a UK Documentary Film Policy*, was finally published in early June (Presence et al 2020). In that context, in some respects it felt odd to be

publishing a report on the state of the industry before the virus struck. Yet in many ways the data for *Keeping it Real* was collected in the nick of time. While the various problems identified in the sector would have been exacerbated by the virus, it could not be argued that the pandemic was the cause of those problems – a clear evidence base demonstrated unequivocally that dire conditions existed in the UK documentary industry prior to the pandemic.

The consultation: *Making it Real*

The opening and closing sections of *Keeping it Real* included fifteen preliminary recommendations based on the survey's findings. These were organized under three headings – diversity; sector development, and funding – and were used as the basis for an eight-week sector-wide consultation that took place following the report's publication. Launched as the UK tentatively emerged from the first lockdown, the entirety of the consultation's various activities were conducted online. These included a launch event and panel session at Sheffield Doc/Fest;[7] a series of twenty-five semi-structured interviews with distribution and exhibition organizations (cinema programmers and curators, distributors, film festivals, sales agents); several items of individual feedback submitted via the UKFD website; a meeting of commissioners representing broadcasters from Europe, the UK and the US; and a meeting of the research team with the BFI. The consultation also included twelve themed focus groups, held simultaneously on a single day, with more than sixty stakeholders from across the industry. The groups were mainly organized by sub-sector – funders, agencies and broadcasters (two groups); archivists and heritage producers; directors (two groups); distributors and sales agents; exhibitors; film festivals; and producers (two groups) – as well as two groups focused on diversity, equality and inclusion.

Judging the impact of the pandemic on these activities is difficult, and inevitably speculative given that we cannot know how the consultation would have unfolded in a different context. Arguably the major loss was to the quality of relationships that develop via face-to-face interaction. It is often in the informal moments of events – coffee and lunch breaks, wine receptions and so on – that participants deepen their familiarity and understanding of one another. That kind of relationship can be hard to build online. However, the documentary industry is a relatively small world, and many participants were already familiar with each other. Moreover, while face-to-face interaction is obviously preferable in some respects, in other ways the consultation was more accessible by virtue of being online. The flip side of losing those informal moments was that there was also limited time for more private kinds of exchange to occur, which could potentially undermine group cohesion and the sense of a collective, shared experience. Interviews and meetings with executives and commissioning editors were certainly easier to coordinate, and online meetings also enabled the participation of executives from different time zones, something that would have been much harder in person. The focus group session was by far the most complex part of the consultation to organise, but this would have been the case had it taken place in-person, and the absence of a physical venue meant that barriers to participation posed by travel expenses were eliminated (as were the costs and complications of venue hire). It also meant that the recording of each focus group was considerably easier and more accurate than had they taken place in-person (like the interviews, focus group conversations were recorded and transcribed for analysis by the UKFD team).

[7] Entitled 'Documentary utopias: Rebuilding feature docs post-pandemic', the Doc/Fest panel session was chaired by Mia Bays (BFI Film Fund, then director of Birds Eye View) and consisted of Steve Presence from the UKFD research team and four producers and directors that contributed to the survey and/or were interviewed as part of the research process: Lindsey Dryden (Little by Little Films), Eloise King (VICE/PrettyBird), Paul Sng (Velvet Joy Productions) and Rachel Wexler (Bungalow Town). For a write-up of the event, see Morgan (2020).

In any case, the pandemic meant that we had little choice to conduct this phase of the research in any other way than online. By the time it was over, the consultation alone had generated another large and unique body of collective expertise on the UK documentary industry. The UKFD research team then analysed this dataset during the winter of 2020 and translated it into seven sections of detailed proposals. These were published in January 2021 – at the start of the UK's third national lockdown – as *Making it Real: a Policy Programme for UK Documentary Film*.

The seven sections of *Making it Real* targeted distinct but interrelated sectors or areas of need in the industry: 1) diversity, equity and inclusion; 2) sector development; 3) training, education and research; 4) funding and production; 5) broadcast; 6) exhibition and distribution; and 7) screen heritage. At the heart of the programme, however, was a proposal for a new organizational infrastructure for the sector: a Documentary Film Council (DFC) comprised of representatives from ten working groups based around the following issues and sectors:

1. Broadcast documentary
2. Directors
3. Distribution and exhibitors
4. Diversity, equity and inclusion
5. Documentary Tax Relief
6. Mental health and wellbeing
7. Organizations
8. Producers
9. Screen heritage
10. Training, education and research

Organizations and producers in the sector had already organized themselves into the UK Doc Group and Doc Producers UK (DPUK) respectively. The UK Doc Group emerged in early 2020 from a meeting organized by Doc Society that was originally intended to share findings from *Keeping it Real* with sector support organizations. The group eventually met for the first time in March and quickly became the means through which both documentary-specific organizations and other screen sector bodies that work with documentary could coordinate their response to the pandemic (see the interview with Doc Society in this volume). DPUK was founded in May 2020 as a membership-based organization designed to represent producers' interests in the sector and was partly inspired by the Documentary Producers Alliance in the US. All the other groups originated with the DFC itself. From the perspective of the UKFD research team, the final stage of the policy development strand of the project became clear: to work with stakeholders to try to establish the initial framework for this fledgling organization.

Building the DFC

This process was planned to unfold in two stages. The first was to establish the remaining working groups, a task we decided was best done on a group-by-group basis given the differing and complex concerns and composition of each group. Assuming the first stage was successful, the second stage would then to bring all working groups together in the inaugural meeting of the DFC. With the UK still in lockdown, all meetings were again held online – indeed, at that point it was inconceivable to do it any other way.

The first stage took place between March and April 2021, during which the UKFD team convened preliminary meetings of the eight working groups yet to be established, using the participant lists from the focus groups as a guide to each group's initial membership. To ensure the process was as clear and inclusive as possible, the research team circulated to all participants a one-page 'Working Group

briefing' which outlined how the team envisioned this next phase developing.[8] Each working group meeting also began with a recap of the policy development phase of the project so far. The remainder of the meeting consisted of a structured discussion that focused both on the specific recommendations in *Making it Real* that pertained to that group as well as to the wider proposal to establish the DFC itself.

On reflection, these preliminary meetings were a critical part of the DFC's development. Not only were they the means through which the basic framework of the DFC was established, but they also provided another point of consultation with the community the process was designed to serve. The meetings enabled that community to feed into and reflect on the process, and to explore with the research team the various questions raised by the initiative: what is the most appropriate structure for such an organization? How should it be funded? Who should lead it? What should be its core values? These preliminary meetings also provided another opportunity for those involved to give their consent to the process. This was critical for the research team, who were able to see again the enthusiasm for this work on behalf of the documentary community.

By mid-April, the initial working group meetings were complete, and each group had one or more nominated Working Group Lead (WGL). The WGLs were to act as the point of contact between the members of their respective groups and the research team, with the latter temporarily occupying the DFC's centre (see fig. X). The first meeting of the DFC was hosted by the research team on Zoom approximately six-weeks later, on May 26. In preparation for that meeting, each working group drafted a Terms of Reference (ToR) document that outlined the group's purpose, while the research team drafted a 'DFC Position Paper'. This paper outlined again the context of the initiative and, drawing on the initial conversations with the working groups, proposed some ideas about the DFC's purpose, organizational structure and funding options – all of which were to be debated at the meeting. The position paper and the ToR documents were uploaded to a shared DFC Google Drive, which was set-up by the research team prior to the meeting and which included separate folders for each of the groups, a spreadsheet of the groups' members and WGLs and other relevant documents such as the two UKFD reports, the organogram from *Making it Real* and so on.

Participants in the initial working group meetings had expressed a strong desire for democracy within the DFC, an issue intimately related to its organizational structure and modes of governance. At the first meeting of the DFC, several potential legal structures were considered – a limited company, a Cooperative, a Community Interest Company (CIC) and so on. With no clear winner, an additional 'Structure and governance' working group was established to explore these options and their respective advantages and limitations in more detail. One factor to consider here was the relationship between the DFC's core team – deemed to require (at least) a manager with administrative, operational and communications support – and the working groups. With the WGLs acting as representatives of their respective groups (and thus of the different sectors and issues in the industry), the working groups are arguably the most democratic element of the DFC. However, the core team will likely occupy the most powerful position in the DFC and control most of its resources. Developing a structure that privileges the working groups over the core team and ensures WGLs remain representative of their groups will therefore be critical to the DFC's democracy. As envisioned in the position paper, one option would be to have the DFC's manager report to a board comprised predominantly of the WGLs, and to hold elections or operate role-rotation systems for the WGLs. These are issues for the future, however, once the DFC secures its funding (see below). For now, while the entire endeavour is voluntary, a key step for the first meeting was for the research team to pass responsibility for coordinating the DFC to a representative from the industry. This was achieved

[8] The briefing document is available here: https://drive.google.com/file/d/1_ieBd4HstRZe0nwtvFizPEkqtV4HrM9h/view?usp=sharing.

when Sarah Mosses, CEO of marketing and distribution company, Together Films, volunteered to take over as coordinator for the setting-up phase.

The inaugural meeting explored a range of potential options regarding funding for the DFC. The research team could potentially contribute via an application to the AHRC's Follow-on Fund for Impact and Engagement scheme, which is designed to support impact work arising from AHRC-funded research projects. The BFI was mooted as a potential funder but the regulations that govern BFI funding prevent it from funding organizations which in turn lobby the BFI – something the DFC would be sure to do. Corporate sponsorship is another model, and DFC members certainly have a wealth of contacts on which to draw, particularly within DPUK. However, members were concerned about two things here: first, there was a strong feeling that the DFC should be, and should be seen to be, independent. Sponsorship by any commercial organizations, such as Netflix or the studios, for example, may result in the DFC being compromised in perception or practice, and was deemed a risk. The other drawback of this approach was that sponsors are likely to require measurable outcomes in return for their support, which would place pressure on a nascent organization. Finally, the group considered the possibility of generating its own funds from a membership model – citing PACT (the Producers Alliance for Cinema and Television), the trade body for the commercial television sector, as an example. Disadvantages here included the exclusionary elements of establishing a paywall, as well as pressure to then deliver benefits for the paying membership – especially complex given the DFC's sector-wide scope. In any case, with funds unlikely to be forthcoming for at least the next six months (a combination of there being no provision to support these kinds of initiatives at such short notice and everyone involved being too busy to act sooner), the group resolved at this stage to form a second additional working group to develop options for financing and to develop a budget to raise funds against.

As these issues suggest, building the DFC will be a complex process involving the negotiation of many different factors. Building a large, grassroots, sector-wide organization on a voluntary basis is a challenging task at the best of times, let alone when compounded by the myriad impacts of the pandemic, which continue to be felt in different ways throughout the various sectors of industry. Although production has resumed it has come with intense pressures caused by the bottleneck in delayed 2020 productions and the subsequent boom in demand for content that has seen production levels in some quarters skyrocket. In the exhibition sector, meanwhile, many venues are still operating with restrictions that keep them below capacity. All the while, the structural weaknesses in the documentary sector that were so exposed by, but which predated the pandemic, remain. Whether it will be possible to build the DFC is this context is uncertain. Nevertheless, the DFC's inaugural meeting ended positively. With an acting convenor in the form of Sarah Mosses, two new working groups exploring structure and funding, and dates for subsequent meetings in place (six-weeks for working groups and quarterly for the council), the future of the organization, at this early stage at least, seems bright.

Conclusion

This chapter has provided an account of the twenty-four-month policy development programme carried out as part of the UKFD project. Describing it as a programme, however, suggests that we knew where the process was going at the outset, when in fact the reality involved considerable amounts of improvisation and co-creation, not least because the entirety of this phase of the project took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Clearly, this context impacted upon almost every aspect of our activities, but evaluating the consequences of that impact is difficult. As I have argued, the complete absence of any in-person meetings during the entire process was possibly the major

difference occasioned by the virus. Without the pandemic, there would obviously have been a lot more face-to-face contact, with all the intimacy and trust that comes with building relationships in real life. Again though, it is hard to gauge the impact of this. As noted above, many people in the sector already knew each other and at least knew of the research team by that stage in the project, and by the time the consultation took place, people in the industry were well familiar with attending meetings, conferences, and festivals online. Furthermore, as noted, because all meetings were online, there was none of the informal, more private kind of exchange that takes place in corridors or coffee breaks at conferences in real life. Though these moments can be some of the most generative in terms of networking and relationship formation, they can also potentially detract from the sense of group cohesion – something that is particularly important when new organisations are taking shape. Running all meetings online meant that every attendee was privy to the entirety of those meetings – something that is often difficult to achieve at conferences in real life – and could clearly see and contribute to the process of decision-making and deciding upon the next steps. These factors arguably meant that the process was more inclusive than it would have been otherwise. Thus, while in some ways the development of the DFC was made more complex by the pandemic, that context possibly helped facilitate it, too.

Nevertheless, co-creation and improvisation are surely critical ingredients of any successful grassroots policy development process, irrespective of context. Policy change – particularly that which ultimately seeks system change – should be a collaborative and iterative process. Indeed, if there is a lesson here regarding the role academics can play in this kind of policy development, it is perhaps in the reminder that listening can be more important than speaking. To be sure, the research team carried out a significant amount of analytical work to digest and articulate the volume of data generated by this strand of the research. Yet arguably our key contribution was to act as a sounding board, to facilitate those at the coalface of the industry to stand back and reflect – even if only for a moment – and to dialogue with each other. As those of us working in higher education know only too well, time for dialogue and reflection is as rare in academia as it is in the creative industries – rendered all but extinct by the neoliberal culture of speed and competition in the academy (Berg and Seeber 2016). In the unique context of the past few years, it has been a privilege to be able to help find some of that time for newfound friends and colleagues in the documentary sector – hopefully, the DFC can help them find some more.

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