

Curating the Digital Documentary

Heather L. Barnes
UNC Chapel Hill School of Information &
Library Science
Society of American Archivists Conference
Friday, August 2, 2019

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34mm



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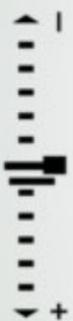
The film is no longer a “film.” A movie now usually comes to a theatre not on reels but on a matte-finish hard drive the size of a big paperback. The drive houses a digital version of the movie, along with alternative soundtracks in various languages and all manner of copy-guarding encryption. Instead of lacing a print through rollers and sprockets, the operator inserts the drive into a server that “ingests” the “content.” (Bordwell, 2013)



50mm 1/80 F4.0

ISO 100

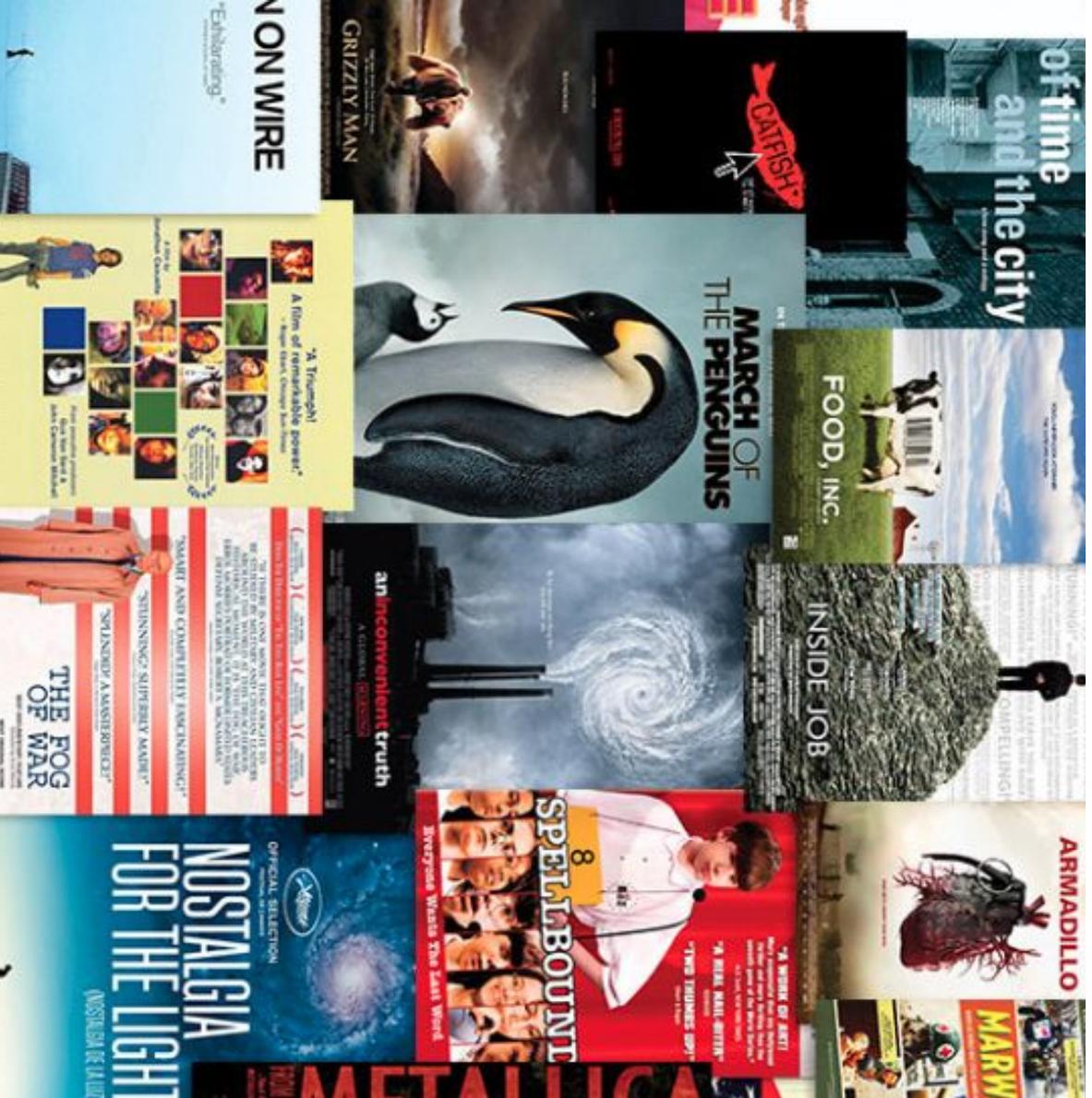
+ -0,3EV



4K | 3840 x 2160

30FPS | 70Mbps

16:9 HEVC

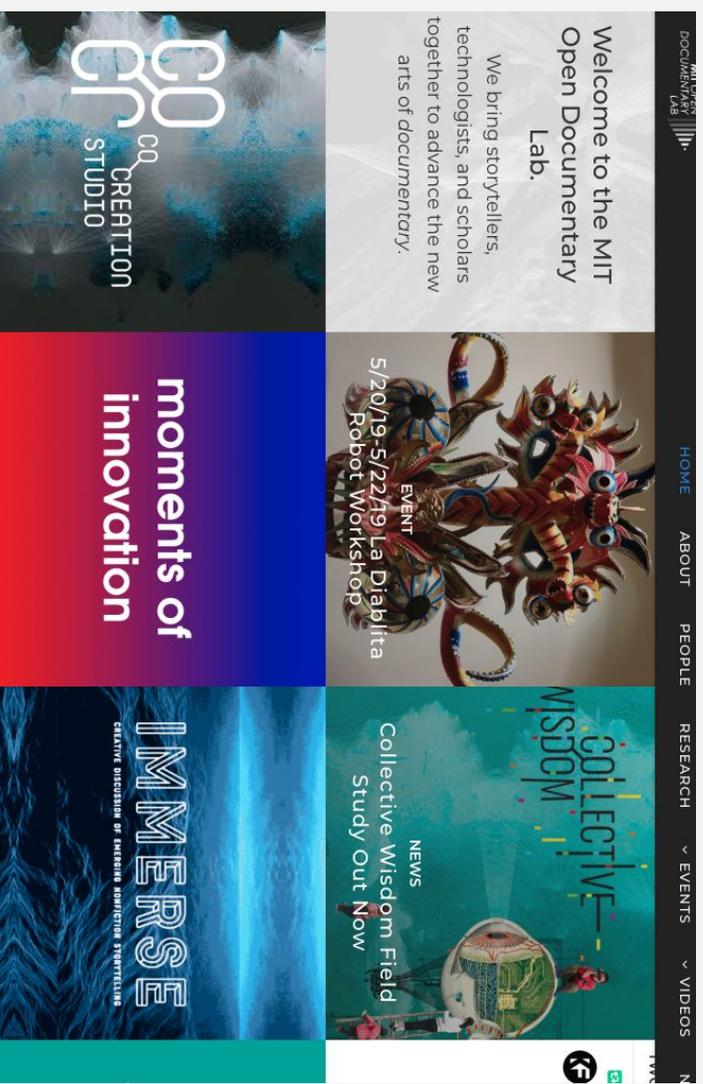


Why study documentary?

- Important for **historical and cultural documentation**
- Often produced independent of major studio support = **limited funding**
- Have been identified as part of an **at-risk genre for preservation** by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) report, *The Digital Dilemma*
- Documentaries and **film archives** intersect in many ways
- No small potatoes: Between 1995 and 2019, over 2,200 documentary films were produced, grossing more than **\$2.2 billion**.

What is a digital documentary?

- Uses digital production, editing, and distribution/marketing
- Uses both linear and emergent forms: nonlinear, interactive, and participatory (“i-docs” and webdocs)
- Lives on a wide range of platforms, from Vimeo to Facebook and Netflix
- Is faster, cheaper, and easier to produce than film, but fragile in terms of preservation
- Formats and lengths are all over the map, from minute-long shorts to features



Creative platforms like MIT's Open Documentary Lab feature innovative nonfiction storytelling

Research questions

- 1) What patterns emerge from a comparison of documentary filmmakers' **digital production and distribution workflows**?
- 2) Which **digital tools and platforms** are most commonly mentioned by documentarians? What is the information infrastructure (hardware and software) used for production, distribution, and consumption of digital documentaries?
- 3) What types of **contextual information** accrues to digital documentaries as they progress through their digital lifecycles? What additional contextual information is produced as part of the **marketing and distribution** of a digital documentary?



WORKFLOWS



TOOLS



METADATA

Methods

Semi-structured interviews with 12 filmmakers who have recently screened a documentary at a film festival

Assessment of existing metadata and contextual information for documentary films produced by interviewees

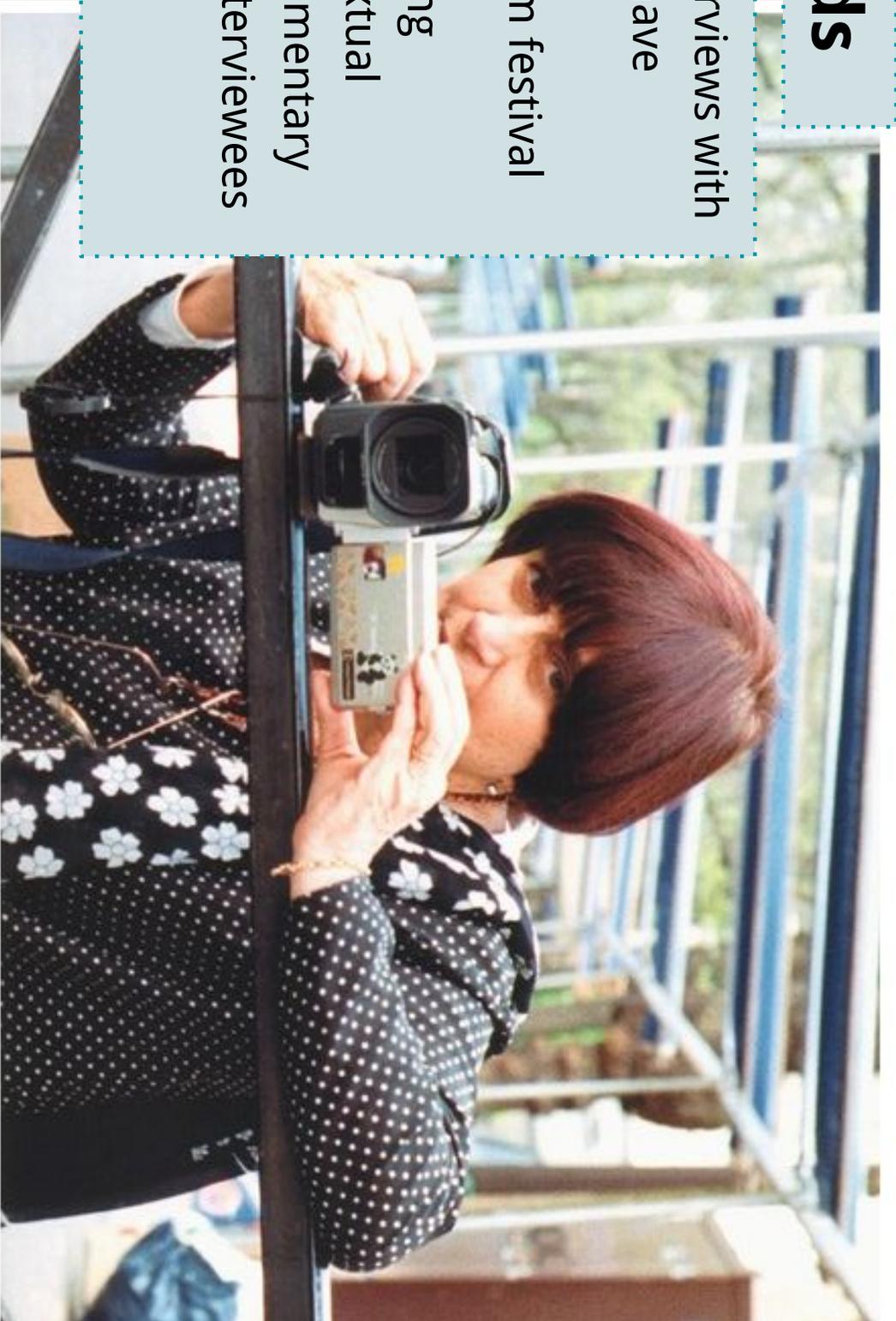


Image: Agnes Varda, *The Gleaners and I*



Interview topics

Digital workflows

- Production to distribution
- Software and platforms used
- Festival presence
- Affordances and challenges of digital tools

Information management, archiving

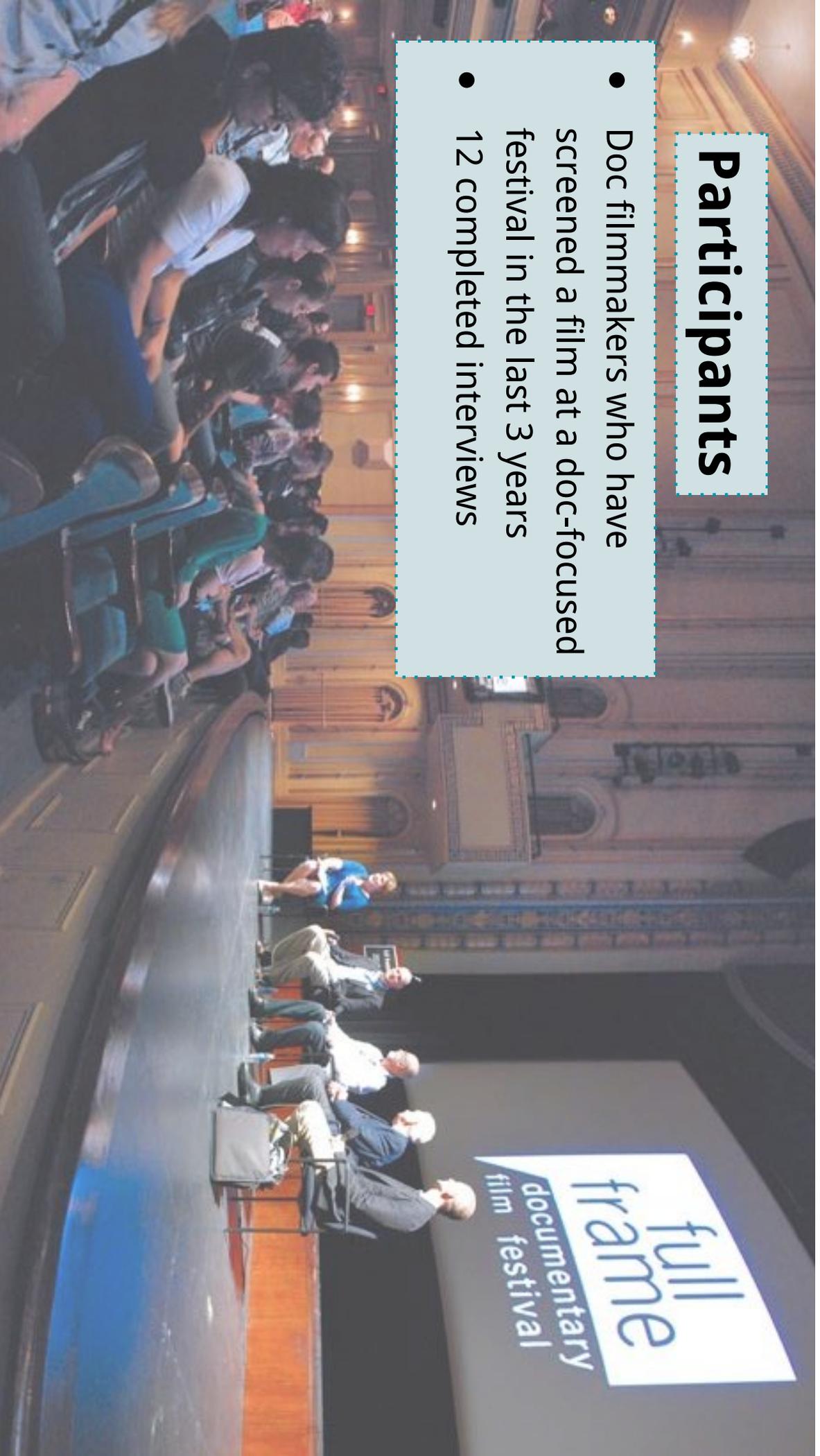
- File structure, organization, and backups
- Tech problems and challenges

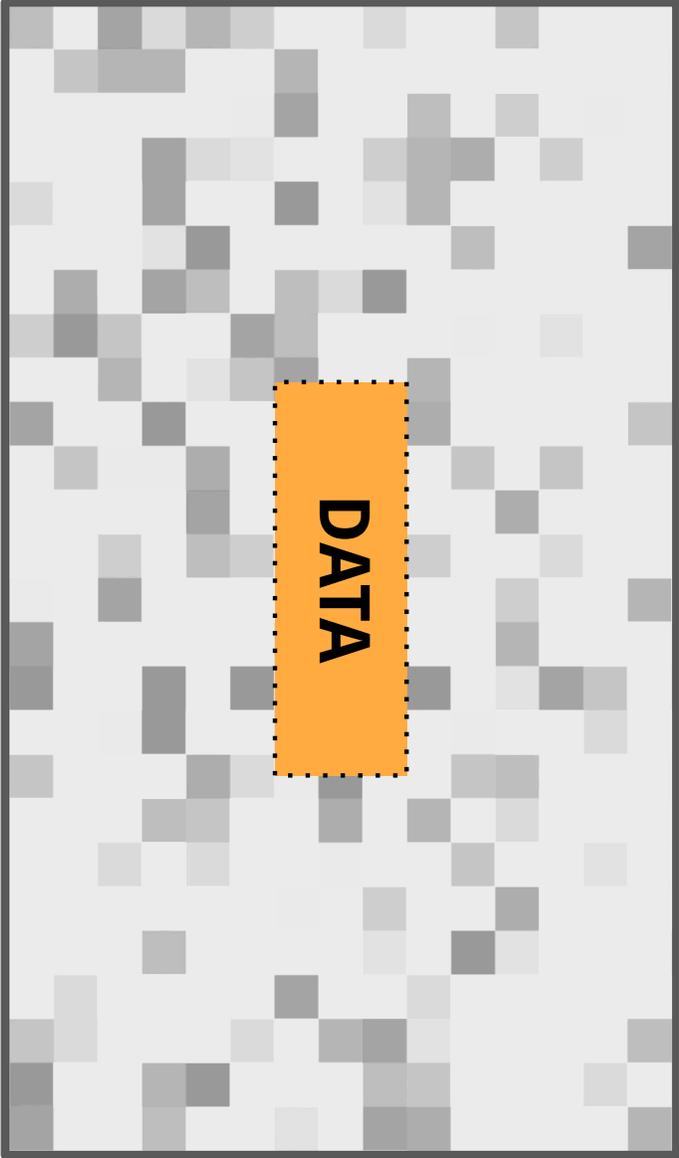
Impacts of digital

- Nature of filmmaking
- Distribution platforms (i.e. the “Netflix effect”)

Participants

- Doc filmmakers who have screened a film at a doc-focused festival in the last 3 years
- 12 completed interviews





Initial themes

Filmmaking production & distribution is 100% digital; only one respondent reported using film.

Digital distribution and production is cheaper, faster, more accessible

Digital allows docs to reach new audiences.



DIGITAL WORKFLOWS

We were a two person crew on location. It was the two of us. Um, one of us would shoot, one of us would do sound. **[B]oth of us basically wear the hats of directors, producers and a photographer, sound recorders.**

For us we felt it was important to have a camera that did higher resolution, um, above 1080. The Standard HD a 1920 by 1080 is standard HD. **We felt that, because technology is always changing fast and we didn't know how long the film was going to take to shoot, where things would be by the time we finished it.**

So that's another important part of like the process during production is **it's important that each card you make two copies for safety before you erase and reformat it.** And you can imagine during, you know, 14 hour shoot days staying late into the night backing everything up. It's very grueling and that would have been easier if we had been shooting at a lower resolution that took up less space and had fewer gigabytes that we needed to back up.

THEMES

One person, many hats

Difficult to keep up with technology

Challenges related to size of video files

DATA MANAGEMENT

...[We] are among the most obsessively conscientious and organized filmmakers you can find when it comes to like technical data and like preventing problems because a lot of problems will happen because people's files aren't organized well or you know, they have, they know, **not packing up properly, things like that.**

We just have a folder for each memory card that's labeled with the date and the card number. It guess it sort of depends on the camera and way to the camera structures files, but like for our camera and I think a lot of professional cameras, like **you don't want to go in and ever change like the names of the files or the like the file structure within one card of data. Like you want to name the overall card, but because you know the data can be sensitive to moving things around or changing things.**

THEMES

Importance of well-organized files

Quirky file naming conventions driven by software behavior

IMPACTS OF DIGITAL

I think that it's a little bit challenging and scary because it's like, you know, do you need to be affiliated with, you know, Netflix from the beginning of your project, in order to get distribution and you know, that obviously would affect the subject matters being covered.

think that that people still really aspire to like having a 90-minute film that like has a theatrical release that even though like things are moving in the digital direction, filmmakers really value, on an emotional level, like having their films be seen in movie theaters on big screens and like in a dark room with like a group of people, myself included. [...] But it's really the ideal setting of a movie theater where you have it on a big screen so you can really appreciate the cinema and the sound. **Without the distractions of, you know, looking at your phone every 30 seconds. [F]ilm is I think mostly best experienced as a group and with the collective energy. And so I think people are still really attached to that being a part of their, their film's life.**

THEMES

Impacts of Netflix on documentary filmmakers

Filmmakers still want to make films that have an impact - not just thinking about digital tech

Comparative analysis

Most filmmakers are “self-taught” in terms of information management, archives/backup processes, and keeping up with new digital production technology.

Workflows are highly variable and are driven by the needs of the project and preferences of the filmmaker.

Filmmakers care about preservation but are often uncertain about best practices.

Comparative analysis

The Netflix Effect: Platforms like Netflix are having huge impacts on documentary distribution, although most filmmakers have said they don't like the idea of changing their workflows to suit Netflix.

The film comes first; technology is employed in the service of storytelling.

Comparative analysis

Metadata and original files/media exist

- 1) on filmmaker-owned drives,
- 2) film festival submission platforms, or
- 3) websites and social media channels.

Sources of contextual information for docs

Vimeo and YouTube sites

- Film trailer, clips
- # of views
- Filmmaker's other films (context)

Social media sites

- Social mentions
- Sharing stats
- Analytics and search data

Film festival & filmmaker websites

- Synopsis
- Awards & press
- Trailers
- Screening info
- Filmmaker bios
- Social media links
- Distribution info

Filmmaker files

- File names and directories
- Log files
- Notes and Final Cut timelines
- Rough cuts
- Trailers and preview cuts
- Email records from production phase

Next steps

Understand how film archivists approach web and interactive video

Identify emerging initiatives for preserving independent films

Explore preservation strategies and models that could support independent videographers

There's no hope that these production materials can be preserved -- it's too complicated. Emails documenting the process are too complex to save... paper records are easier.

Paper trails are easy. Digital trails are difficult.

- *Filmmaker/Interviewee, January 2019*

Thank you!

Questions and feedback:

4storyfilms@gmail.com

[@4storyfilms](https://www.instagram.com/4storyfilms)