

DOC GOES DIGITAL PHASE 1:

ASSESSMENT OF REMOTE AND RURAL NEEDS

PRELIMINARY REPORT

DOC

DOCUMENTARY
ORGANIZATION OF CANADA
DOCUMENTARISTES
DU CANADA



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INTRODUCTION

Over the course of February and early March 2021, 12 filmmakers in remote or rural areas from across Canada were consulted in order to assess their needs with regards to multiple aspects of their filmmaking experience. This effort is part of a longer-term organizational strategy of using digital technology to help address issues of unequal access to resources, decision-makers, professional development, and community faced by members from different parts of the country, different socio-economic groups, and Indigenous and racialized communities.

The interviews were conducted primarily over 30-minute video calls, while some were conducted over the phone as internet connectivity remains a challenge in the more remote regions of the country. One respondent preferred to submit written responses to a fixed set of questions.

The determination of subjects was significantly assisted by Vincent LeClair, who was the Project, Communications and Operations Manager for DOC National at the time, Martyna Czaplak, Jason Blackman and Marina Dodis (DOC BC + Yukon + Northwest Territories Coordinator, Committee Chair of Memberships and BC Rep of the Advocacy Committee, respectively).

A cross-section of filmmakers of diverse regions, age groups, career development profiles, languages and identities have contributed their time and insights on the following areas of their experience as documentary filmmakers:

- Impact of remoteness and rurality on their professional experience in multiple regards: financial, knowledge exchange, education, professional development, networking, collaboration and support;
- Exploration of tools, mechanisms and services that could improve the professional experience of filmmakers in remote and rural settings;
- Assessment of the work of DOC, if the surveyed filmmaker is a member;
- Determination of interest in joining DOC, if the surveyed filmmaker is not a member, and reason for not having joined.

MAIN FINDINGS

I. POSITIVE ASPECTS OF RURARILITY OR REMOTENESS

The totality of the respondents found that their rurality or remoteness was a particular asset to their perspective as filmmakers. Being rural or remote, in most cases, is considered to lead to a slower pace of work than in the city, which was a desired outcome for the overwhelming majority of respondents.

Not all remote or rural filmmakers agree on what makes them classified under such a category. The definition of rurality or remoteness was taken up by some filmmakers residing in cities that are otherwise administratively important, such as Ottawa ON, Dartmouth NS or Edmonton AB. In the latter city, a filmmaker refused to be surveyed because of what they considered an inordinate classification of their experience and that rurality or remoteness shouldn't apply to a provincial capital.

One of the often stated advantages of being a rural or remote filmmaker is having a more advantageous and intimate relationship to rural and remote subjects. Such access gives them better and less ethically ambiguous claims to stories in their region, that filmmakers in urban centers may not be entitled to tell. This issue presents itself most importantly with Indigenous respondents, who have a privileged relationship with tribal bodies that need to act protectively towards their elders and knowledge keepers. The intimacy of access is also an advantage in the new context of Covid-sensitive filmmaking, where smaller crews are necessary.

In the case of Northern filmmakers, remoteness is perceived as a distinct advantage as filmmakers retain a certain uniqueness and charm that decision makers, be they funders or programmers, sometimes state as giving them an edge over urban filmmakers. Stories in the North are highly regarded. This also appears to be an advantage if and when filmmakers succeed in having contact with programmers and decision makers as they are told that the vast majority of proposals are from urban filmmakers and that perhaps their remoteness opens the gates that much wider for them.

Covid has been a great and positive leveler for the remote and rural filmmakers with regard to access to decision makers, as long as they already know how to make those connections (an issue that will be touched upon in the following section, "Challenging aspects of rurality or remoteness"). Considering the distance and cost of getting to the nearest filmmaking epicentre, which for some residents of the Yukon and islands off of British Columbia can mean one meeting can cost over \$2000, the new prevalence of virtual meetings and exclusive use of them places such filmmakers at no disadvantage over urban filmmakers for the first time in their careers. Broadcasters who wouldn't have previously acquiesced to virtual pitches are now operating exclusively with them. Getting their proverbial feet into the door is another question, however.



II. CHALLENGING ASPECTS OF RURALITY OR REMOTENESS

There are many aspects of the experience of filmmaking from the perspective of rural and remote residents that pose challenges of equal importance or significance. The principal ones are as follows: production costs; access to skilled crew members and post-production services; connectivity, both Internet and cellular; access to decision makers; and for Indigenous filmmakers, production speeds pose challenges to funding paradigms.


Working on projects in remote and rural settings entail higher spends on travel, lodging and food. The greatest challenge is when productions happen during higher tourism seasons, which happens a high percentage of the time, and lodging is at a premium – sometimes 400% higher than during a low season. This is a reality that is not expected to change and one that isn't entirely applicable during Covid, as productions are not taking place at the same frequency or with out-of-area crew members. A lack of accessible public transit makes travel costs prohibitive in many areas.

Access to skilled crew members and post-productions services in the region is problematic for all but a few respondents. Urban crew cannot necessarily travel during Covid, nor are they welcome in remote communities without a mandatory quarantine. Remote and rural regions are qualified as “resource deserts” “devoid of technology and skill”, according to a few respondents. Not only are crew members difficult to locate given a lack of directories, but they are also generally less skilled than in urban centres given the lack of remote and rural training options. Post-production services exist almost exclusively in urban centres and require travel.

The lack of high-speed Internet and reliable cellular service in remote and rural locations can hinder access to online services, file transfers, streaming projects and access to meetings. Some respondents can't easily make phone calls from their own homes given the lack of existing infrastructure, which has an impact on their professionalism.

As previously mentioned, rural and remote filmmakers often see themselves as having an uphill struggle to connect with decision makers, both for financial reasons (in pre-pandemic settings) as well as for the lack of both formal and informal networking opportunities outside of urban centres. Some regions struggle with establishing legitimacy in the eyes of their respective provincial funding bodies due to structural and political issues[1]. Some respondents made the distinction between traditional broadcasters, who are more difficult to connect with, and Telefilm, who seem to be more approachable.

A financial obstacle to some Indigenous stories being told by Indigenous filmmakers is that budgets impose rigid understandings of production time frames based on normative understandings of communication styles. It has been reported that working with elders and traditional knowledge keepers takes a significant length of time given the sensitivity to the process: in some situations, subjects do not wish to be recorded with boom mics, making more costly or less invasive solutions necessary; and conversations can take far longer to have than in time-pressed English/colonial settings.



[1] One respondent from the Yukon Territory decries the lack of a film commissioner in that government, leaving filmmakers with bureaucrats with no discretionary ability as liaisons. Another respondent from a northern predominantly French-speaking area of New Brunswick despairs of the lack of interest and will to support French-language productions by the provincial government.

III. WHAT REMOTE AND RURAL FILMMAKERS WANT FROM DOC

Engaging in conversation with these 12 remote and rural filmmakers revealed a trove of insights into what DOC can engage in to better serve the needs of this diverse community. The suggestions range from specific lobbying targets (mainly regionally-specific), mentorship opportunities, an interactive directory of documentary filmmakers across Canada, skill-building workshops and guidelines, unstructured networking opportunities, and improved services to the francophone minority filmmakers across Canada.

A. Lobbying targets

- For the BC/YT/NWT chapter: pressure on the Yukon Media Development Fund to better recognize the importance of documentary film as an industry would be appreciated. Greater attention could be paid to the particularities of documentary production as opposed to the commercial productions that generally frame spending and policy. On the spending side, given the lack of skilled help available in the territory, the territory-specific spending requirements are hard to meet as skilled labour needs to be engaged from outside. Also, the requisite regional training component of major commercial shoots sees lower skilled regional help being trained as PAs, whereas it would be of greater help to the region's own filmmaking community if training in more specialized roles were to be made available.
- Financial incentives for inter-provincial co-productions should be sought, particularly to support the survival of French-language documentary production outside of Québec. This could also support Indigenous productions.
- Working with film festivals to normalize screening fees and revenue splits with filmmakers considering the shift away from physical box office revenues.
- Urging the development of programs that promote intergenerational collaboration, between emerging filmmakers and seasoned ones.

B. Mentorship Opportunities[2]

- Sharing knowledge with others, mainly youth and novice filmmakers, is seen as a great tool for encouraging the exploration of new tools and ideas, helping seasoned filmmakers rethink how to do things.
- Young and novice filmmakers want mentors in a variety of roles in order to more easily access scheduled one-on-one time with skilled professionals.

C. Interactive directory of documentary filmmakers across Canada

- Considering the challenge of connecting with other filmmakers and crew members across the country, particularly in remote and rural communities, this tool has been recommended by nearly the entirety of respondents.
- Very general information about the location, experience, interests, skillset and desired new skills would help filmmakers build their own networks and create virtual gatherings.
- Such a project could build on existing directories assembled by film offices both urban and remote, and other hubs who are already doing the work.

D. Skill-building workshops and guidelines

- Many requests have been made for topical workshops that would preferably be also available non-synchronously and possibly with transcripts[3]. Here's a non-exhaustive list of suggested topics: Pitching practice (note that some filmmakers would pay for such a service), how to navigate film festivals, budget building, navigating interprovincial co-productions, successfully working with the new broadcasting landscape.
- A note on the structure of workshops and webinars: breakout rooms came up frequently as sites of the most interesting relationship building and knowledge exchange. Most respondents would like to see these built into online events more considerably.
- Written guidelines, such as the DOC guide to filmmaking during Covid, would be helpful to consult on topics such as those suggested above.

[2] A novice filmmaker in Ontario suggested studying the Toastmasters Odyssey project as a possible lead for how to organize such a platform. <https://tm.odyssey.today/>

[3] Luckily, Zoom will be offering free transcription to all users by fall of 2021 <https://blog.zoom.us/update-on-live-transcription-for-free-accounts/>

E. Unstructured networking opportunities

- As per the note above on breakout rooms, intimate spaces are highly valued as sites of greater learning and connection.
- One regional chapter (possibly BC/YT/NWT) held a brunch event in the earlier days of the pandemic and it was mentioned repeatedly as an event of great enjoyment and connection. There was something about the open, unscripted nature of the space that made filmmakers wish that more events of that nature took place.
- c. The frequency of such spaces or events could be once per month per chapter (one participant's suggestion).

F. Improved services for francophone minority filmmakers across Canada

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IV. DOC'S STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Respondents are generally approving of the services that are available through DOC. What resonates the most with the respondents is the fact that regional events are now available to everyone across the country since the beginning of the pandemic.

The Meet the Funders events (DOC, Hot Docs and otherwise) are the preferred events for respondents. The Covid guide to filmmaking (it's hard to tell the difference between DOC's own publication and the resource list offered) was mentioned by the majority of respondents as being of great use still today.

One respondent had not joined DOC, a mid-career franco-Ontarian filmmaker, because she couldn't see a justification for the expense. She felt that the FRIC was doing a better job at representing her interests and needs. The incentive of the savings on insurance coverage would persuade her to join.

CONCLUSION

DOC remains an organization of critical importance to the respondents of this rural and remote needs assessment. No filmmaker would see a move to the city as a way to improve upon the challenges that they face. The key areas of lobbying, mentorship opportunities, online resources, access to skilled crew and networks, a sense of community through unstructured virtual spaces and greater integration of the francophone reality outside of Québec are seen as being crucial for maintaining the interest and participation of the respondents.