

Camden International Film Festival Remarks by Brian Newman

The below text represents Brian Newman's prepared remarks for a Town Hall convening organized by the Shorenstein Center's Documentary Film in the Public Interest Initiative, Points North Institute, International Documentary Association, and Doc Society for the 2023 Camden International Film Festival. The convening was formally canceled due to a hurricane, but Brian's remarks were shared in smaller groups at different sites who gathered at the festival during the storm.

We should not be surprised that the documentary distribution system is in disarray. What follows every boom? A bust.

The “explosion of docs” was fueled by Netflix and others buying up more docs than they needed, until they didn’t need us anymore. As things boomed you got new investors, lots of extra money for production, inflated Awards campaign budgets, new platforms, new companies, and more. But it made us lose sight of reality, and more importantly, it made us lose sight of our audience.

Everyone is talking about blowing up the system, and starting fresh, and even I am guilty of saying something like that at times. It’s broken and it’s not coming back. We can’t wait on the major streamers as they are not going to suddenly change their minds. We have to come together as a community and advocate for the changes we want, and to build better models. But these models also must be duplicable and scalable. Going direct to fan is great. But if we’re building our audiences from scratch every time, or just paying some other impact consultant to do that for us, every time, it’s not sustainable. If we build another platform, we’ll be facing audiences who already have too many of them. If we don’t advocate smartly for what we need now, we won’t see it magically appear in five years.

My challenge for us today is to figure out ways to connect disparate groups around the globe – all of whom are trying to build a better model – and figure out ways to share these learnings and work together better. And to focus on better solutions than one-offs – how can we develop, cultivate and serve audiences consistently without starting from scratch. And last – with any business that’s ever succeeded you have to focus not on your problem – how to get your one film seen – but on the audience or consumer’s problem. What are the stumbling blocks to audiences consistently finding your good films. The answer is going to lie in solving the audience’s problem first.

Brian Newman

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