WHAT FUTURE FOR SINGLE DOCUMENTARIES?

Working with the Grierson Trust, *Televisual* hosted a roundtable in the breakout space at Picture Shop to discuss the future of single and observational documentaries; documentaries that reflect our communal experience or shine a light on social change and injustices.

THE ROUNDTABLE PANEL

BEN ANTHONY freelance director (*7/7 One Day in London*, *Grenfell*, *Life & Death Row*)

HARJEET CHHOKAR unscripted development executive, Amazon Studios (*Clarksons Farm* and *The Grand Tour*)

GUY DAVIES commissioning editor, Channel 5 (*Michael Palin: Into Iraq*, *Bargain Brits on Benefits* and *Playgrounds of the Rich and Famous*)

LORRAINE HEGGESSEY chair of The Grierson Trust

DANNY HORAN chief creative officer, Blast Films (as commissioning editor, BBC *24 Hours in Police Custody*, *24 Hours in A&E* and *The Dog House*

ELOISE MILLARD DocLab Alumni, currently at BBC Studios. Crew on *Life & Birth* and *Inside Our Autistic Minds*

MAXINE WATSON managing director, Black Ruby Productions (*A House Through Time*, *The Boleyns: A Scandalous Family* and *Bad Boy Chiller Crew*)

ANDY WORBOYS editor (*Hillsborough* and *Tell Me Who I Am*) NFTS head of editing

MODERATOR

JAMES BENNETT md *Televisual*



Lorraine Heggessey, chair of the Grierson Trust

As most UK documentary filmmakers will attest, this has been a very challenging year with spiralling costs, static tariffs and with little end in sight.

These issues are compounded by pressures on future PSB commissioning budgets with lower advertising revenues reflecting the cost-of-living crisis for the commercial broadcasters and the BBC beset by escalating pension funding, increased operational costs, a license fee freeze for the past two years and as this issue goes to press an expected below inflation increase next.

To further compound the challenges facing documentary makers, ITV and the BBC, most notably, have shifted their commissioning imperatives from a linear scheduling model towards the platform, where 'less is more' and content needs to be better able to compete for viewer engagement. While with shrinking war chests, the PSBs increasingly expect Indies to bring additional funding with them to the commissioning table and are arguably more risk-averse when it comes to what might get greenlit.

Perhaps the most compelling part of the discussion centred around the funding of single and observational documentaries and the current reliance on celebrities and brand within the commissioning process to get a programme away.

Might that funding be incumbent on introducing further conditions to the PSB licenses, like those imposed for current affairs and news? Might single documentaries be protected in some way to ensure their future? Why is there currently such a focus on celebrity, brand and IP? Does that focus limit what might be made and is it always necessary?

How will single documentaries get commissioned?

GUY DAVIES It's really a question about commitment, isn't it? To a large degree, our schedule dictates what we can do. We have commercial pressures.

There's a place for documentary programming in the mix, in the texture and in the kind of subjects we do. We need to find the money in our budget, and we are exploring other sources of income, not just straight co-production but also international deals.

The distributors and the companies that are both distributors and producers, are a good source, often in specialist factual. They can make a significant difference to whether the project happens or not.

DANNY HORAN There are loads of genres of documentary which are very well-funded. They don't need any more funding, and many that are big access, big celebrity-driven shows.

The problem that we're facing is that social documentaries are not being funded. They represent content that holds power to account.

As an industry, we need to talk about protecting them. To do this we need to find separate funding.

The truth about the PSBs is they are the ones that have the greatest relationship with the people in power and they are the decision makers. It's important that this aspect of documentary is somehow preserved. We all have a collective responsibility to it, even if we don't make it ourselves.

Is the idea that PSBs lend single documentaries a 'special status' difficult to reconcile?

DANNY HORAN I don't think it's just the PSBs responsibility. It's everybody's responsibility including programme makers, super indies like All3 and Fremantle and the streamers. We all have a part to play. It's good for the ecosystem.

We then have to have conversations with DCMS and the government.

LORRAINE HEGGESSEY The PSBs do their best to champion and commission a lot of documentaries including some of the harder hitting, longer investigations. Who can afford to do an investigation, or who will put the resources in, if it's not the PSBs?

With a licence fee funded model, which we have, comes certain obligations.

The commercial PSBs want a due prominence. They already have certain obligations and all we're saying is that, potentially, documentaries on important social issues that matter to the people of Britain, should be part of those obligations.

Super Indies will only champion it if they can get the commissions.

HARJEET CHHOKAR I look to the PSBs, especially for those kinds of social documentaries, and I think it's important that they should do them. That's again a point of difference of how PSBs stand apart from commercial and SVoDs.

We could never do a Russell Brand type of documentary for lots of reasons - a lot to do with legal and compliance because if that goes to court, we would have to take it down and that's something we try not to do. That becomes a point of difference between Channel 4 and Prime Video. Also, we have a different model. Launch days are planned way in advance.

I personally want the PSBs to thrive because it creates a better eco-system. It creates more content. It builds more talent up. So personally, no, I wouldn't look at the PSBs and hope they make worthy content so that it fragments the audience.



The *Inside Our Autistic Minds* team at the Grierson Awards 2023 © Victor Frankowski Hello Content

Should single documentaries be 'enshrined'?

BEN ANTHONY I think that social documentaries do interest a huge proportion of the British public and they like seeing themselves represented back. They don't necessarily have to have a celebrity at the helm. They don't necessarily have to have loads of stylised, high production value reconstruction. People like seeing the world in its gritty, unfiltered form and if you look at a lot of the films that young people are making and putting on YouTube and TikTok, they are the most un-glossy things you could ever see.

I think that there's a perception out there, whether fair or not, that the PSBs are chasing the streamers in terms of production value and the subjects they go after, like true crime and past tense storytelling.

What tends to happen is that independent companies who've had commercial success tend to commission films for reputational reasons. So, they'll go for an unglamorous subject series because it will enhance their reputation as a company and perhaps put them in contention for winning industry recognition for documentary filmmaking. There is inherent value in films that reflect the lives that we lead and that give opportunities for filmmakers to have a platform to express themselves and share their experience and their world view.

LORRAINE HEGGESSEY The Grierson Trust exists to champion the art of the documentary in all its forms. I think all of those forms are equally valid. It's not that one type of documentary is superior to another. But what we want is that full range.

And, because we are based in the UK, we want to see UK produced documentaries that are predominantly aimed at a UK audience in addition to all the other documentaries that we see.

The fact that companies want to make serious documentaries to enhance their reputations shows that we still have a culture where those things are valued. If we didn't, they wouldn't want to make reputation enhancing shows.

What we're trying to do at the Grierson Trust through championing excellence in all its forms - and bringing new voices like Eloise Millard into the sector - is to keep that culture alive, to continue to highlight the significance of the documentary form, in every schedule.

I think it's great that Amazon Prime commissions the sort of documentaries that work for their audience in the same way that BBC 3 commission different kinds of documentaries to BBC 1.



Inside Our Autistic Minds

What does 'enshrining' documentary making, supported by the PSB, look like to Channel 5?

GUY DAVIES There is a good argument for some kind of move towards documentary being enshrined, but it has to be relative to what you spend and what space you have in the schedule. We're not going to fill our schedules every week.

There is an argument that that sort of content is enjoyed by the audience. There is a curious audience out there who want to see the world reflected back.

At Channel 5 we have proved that sometimes it sticks and rakes and sometimes it doesn't, probably 50/50. But that's not the main drive. It may be that it's a ten o'clock show and not a nine o'clock show. It may be that we can run it on a Thursday night and not a Monday night.

There are all sorts of considerations, but the principle of somehow protecting it is something that I think is admirable.

MAXINE WATSON PSBs are the place where you are getting Ben Anthony's documentaries and all the documentaries that we're talking about that Grierson wants to hold. We need to hold those broadcasters' feet to the fire. I wouldn't say we're enshrining them, but I think we are certainly protecting that genre.

What does that protection look like from a financial perspective?

ANDY WORBOYS I don't like the idea of enshrining. I think money would dwindle and people would get paid less and then the only people who would be making it are the people who can afford to be in it in the first place. That's always been a perceived problem with the industry.

I don't know how it looks financially. What I do know is that if you go to the BBC and say, 'I've got this massive thing and it's half entertainment and it's this and it's that', they're going to say, 'have you got a partner? Because we can't afford this.' They expect you to have some kind of co-production or partnership in place before you even start talking about that kind of idea.

MAXINE WATSON If you go with a documentary single or series, they are going to look at it. They will still fund it. They will still support it.

A strong documentary culture defines our television and our industry. PSBs know that and I think they have to continue supporting and protecting it.

CELEBRITY CULTURE

LORRAINE HEGGESSEY It started with travel really. It was travel that set the trend if you like. It continues to make places accessible and interesting if you've got somebody like Michael Palin or Joanna Lumley. The audience will come to a series on India that they might not have come to.

HARJEET CHHOKAR The travelogue we do with James May is not what you would expect. It slightly breaks a genre. We always ask, 'what's our point of difference?' But that's serving a purpose for our customers because James is a big personality on Prime Video. He brings in a loyal audience and we use that as a way of not only doing the travelogue, but also working with different and new talent.

In terms of the presenter-led documentaries, if you watch our KSI documentary, that is a documentary with a massive personality. But it became a documentary about being a second-generation immigrant and the complexities that brings.

As a second-generation immigrant myself, I did relate to that. I saw a topic being uncovered in a way that I've never seen before.

It was pure documentary at the heart of it. It wasn't a fluff piece. It uncovered personal stuff that JJ was feeling. For his audience, they will never see that side to him anywhere else. That came from us, as commissioners, wanting to deliver something that felt bespoke and different, that only people could watch on Prime Video.

Fozia Khan commissioned it, and it came from Fozia's own background as both a programme maker and a PSB commissioner at the BBC and Channel 4.

Are there other routes into a subject beyond the celebrity? Is attaching a celebrity critical to the commission?

ELOISE MILLARD When I'm on social media, BBC and Channel 4 content is constantly being used without copyright. Social media users take a whole episode and break it up into 10 parts and put it on TikTok, and that's how young people are watching content. They're not going to go to iPlayer and watch it, and I don't think attaching Chris Packham to it is really going to change anything.

The reason that *Inside Our Autistic Minds* was so successful is because of the social media push the BBC did. The comments read, "where can I watch this?"

Young people don't think to go to iPlayer. They're going to YouTube, Netflix and TikTok.

I don't think attaching a celebrity really makes a difference unless it's a celebrity that is going to bring in a new audience. If you're making a film about autism, why aren't you making it with someone who's popular with young people?

LORRAINE HEGGESSEY Social media was part of the whole marketing strategy for the Chris Packham series. It helped to bring in a wider audience and reach, but it wouldn't have been able to do that if the BBC hadn't commissioned it in the first place.

MAXINE WATSON But would the BBC have commissioned it without Chris Packham?

ELOISE MILLARD Probably not, and I think that's a lot to do with the people who are in development. They're all very much the same type of person. It's lacking in regional diversity, in age diversity and in race diversity. I think that's the problem.

HARJEET CHHOKAR Ten years ago, we were commissioning shows about real families and real people and viewers loved it. And then we got to a point where we're seeing Emma Willis in the maternity ward.

Do these things go in cycles? All it takes is for a PSB or platform to be brave and commission a single or series that is based on a non-celebrity tackling issues. When Danny and I were at Channel 4, Danny was always thinking about *Born This Way*, which was a warm, insightful series from the perspective of contributors with Downs Syndrome.

How we engage with viewers is obviously slightly different now than what it was ten years ago. But all it takes is for someone to see that end goal, to work with people that we think viewers will relate to.

ANDY WORBOYS I think the material and the content we're making for American audiences doesn't mostly have celebrities in it. If you look at the Raw TV model, they're creating content that never has celebrities in it – shows like *Gold Rush* and *Paranormal Witness*. It's the UK audience that seems to have celebrities as a way that they access documentary now.

In my experience the only way to get things commissioned these days, without a celebrity being attached, is through random bursaries.

Or events. Whether it's miners or moon-landings or whatever it is, you can take the celebrity out of that because you know you're going to get an audience. But failing that, it seems to be very difficult.

BEN ANTHONY I think that the bulk of commissions will have some well-known person at the heart of it as a way of insurance; insurance that you're going to get X number of viewers because they're interested in that person. The audience is prepared to tolerate what they're investigating because they're quite curious to watch them being themselves.

LORRAINE HEGGESSEY But it's also easier to market something. If you have a name, you don't really have to think about how you're going to sell the story. You sell the person. And clinically, I think that's what most streamers and broadcasters will think about.



Lyra

DANNY HORAN The trend feels not necessarily celebrity led, but IP attached, about brand recognition. It's got to come with a bit of IP, whether that is a celebrity name or an institution.

Have we reached peak celebrity?

HARJEET CHHOKAR Do you think there is a bit of fatigue with them?

Those celebrity docs that properly land are the ones that have actual revelation at the heart of the show, like *The Real Mo Farah*.

MAXINE WATSON I think we're fame obsessed. I watched *House of Kardashian* (and thoroughly enjoyed it). I think that combination of celebrity and social media is the way that commissioners are going to get cut-through, a way of landing the subject and especially a tough subject. And this is through a name, or brand recognition or some kind of IP.

If you're pitching something, it's important that you should have somebody attached to it and have it furnished.

BEN ANTHONY There's no doubt that Kim Kardashian talking about eating disorders will raise the issue of eating disorders and it'll get way more coverage than if some ordinary person who has an eating disorder talks about it. It's not going to provoke the same level of discussion. So, it does have its uses. It has a purpose, and it can draw attention to important issues.

But it can't be the only way you can go into raw subjects because then it means that a subject is not deemed worth talking about unless you can put a bit of stardust on it.

That's true of both streamers and PSBs as well. They will increasingly add a footballer to an issue because they think that we need insurance to make sure that people are going to watch it. 'We believe this is an important issue that needs to be addressed. But we don't feel confident enough that people will care about it and watch it.'

DANNY HORAN In fairness though, you've got more chance on a PSB of finding content

that doesn't have celebrities attached.

I recently came out of a conversation with the BBC with the documentaries department who are doing a real drive for big state of the nation observations access series and they're putting money behind it. Let's see whether that'll really come off, but that's what they're saying.

We are developing something in a hard, chewy space, which is proper access and feels very old-fashioned in terms of the subject, although we've got a more modern approach. But still, it feels like this would've been a call-out ten years ago or even five years ago. Not in the last twelve months.

LORRAINE HEGGESSEY I think it's the PSBs not the streamers that have become fame obsessed in terms of covering serious subjects, whether it's eating disorders or autism or domestic violence.

What's quite interesting is how the traditional documentary presenter has almost vanished from our screens. If you look at our presenter category in the Griersons, and who's won it over the past few years, a lot of them have been either celebrities or people with lived experience of what they're talking about, like Duwayne Brooks on Stephen Lawrence.

There are very few of the traditional type of presenter now, apart from people like Louis Theroux and Grayson Perry.

There's been a sea change.

Is the increased use of celebrity and brand helpful?

GUY DAVIES There's nothing wrong with celebrities being a way in. It's also a way of bringing important and difficult subjects to people who will be interested in that person's view of it. I wouldn't diss it at all.

There is a different way of doing those stories, about being brave and thinking we should do this anyway, regardless.

I might think to have a celebrity for a travel show because there's an entertainment function there. If you have an Alexander Armstrong or a Michael Palin show, it's about seeing it through their eyes; a very mainstream way of looking at a place, but that is not the same as exploring an issue.

Having a celebrity generally makes programmes for PSBs that rate and raise issues in a popular way. BBC3 have worked in this way. That's a good thing by and large.

The worry is that the only way into those difficult subjects is via a celebrity. That's the only thing I would go against. There's nothing wrong with the genre, it just feels a little bit ubiquitous.

MAXINE WATSON They work well if they have skin in the game and if they're not plumped onto it - if they have some kind of connection with the subject and there's a real good reason for them being there.

LORRAINE HEGGESSEY Would anybody be talking about the menopause if Davina hadn't had championed it?

When you've got somebody who's either passionate about an issue or they have a lot of lived experience of that, they can bring it to life for viewers in a way that nobody else can.

And in a way that helps the broadcaster bring an audience to it and to get publicity for it.

GUY DAVIES Now it's established as a genre of documentary, along with other types of documentaries, it will remain, but it probably won't be quite as ubiquitous in the future because people will get bored.

We only commission a small number of presenter-led documentaries each year and for us it's always about how do we get people to it? We probably would lean more on the talent side of things. But our sensibilities and our ambition of how we want to impact are still the same as something you would put on Channel 4 at nine o'clock.



The Real Mo Farah

Thank you to Picture Shop for the use of their breakout space to host this roundtable.

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