



**Wales Documentary Support Network  
Transcript  
Episode 5 – Laura Taylor-Williams**

**Introduction**

Hello and welcome to the *Wales Documentary Support Network*, a podcast that celebrates non-fiction filmmaking. In each episode, our guest will share their tips on how to make award-winning documentaries.

I'm your host Angela Clarke, and this series is a Screen Alliance Wales & Wheesht Films Partnership, made with the support of the BFI Doc Society Fund.

My guest today is Distribution Executive Laura Taylor-Williams. Having worked in international sales and distribution for over 15 years, Laura's worked for a number of high-profile companies such as Warner Brothers, NBC Universal and Aardman.

We discuss how best to prepare your film for sales and distribution agents, the myriad of ways to sell your documentaries online, and the benefits of planning your sales strategy from the outset.

I hope you enjoy listening... (music ends)

**Angela Clarke** - So hello Laura nice to meet you. Thank you so much for having a chat today. How are you?

**Laura Taylor-Williams** - Yeah, I'm really well thank you!

**Angela Clarke** - Thanks so much for agreeing to talk to us. Having a good sales and distribution team attached to any project can just make a massive difference. But that world of sales and distribution can be a bit overwhelming when you're a first-time filmmaker, so, hopefully you can help demystify that and explain in a little bit more detail what a filmmaker can expect from a distribution deal or a sales agent. But before we get rolling, how did you end up in the world of distribution and sales?

**Laura Taylor-Williams** – So, in many ways I came into the profession accidentally which I think is common for a lot of people in the industry really. But when I think about it, my core interest in distribution was there from a young age. So, as an example, I was the type of kid who would ask the neighbour if I could pick apples from their tree and then I'd use the apples to make pies and cakes (*laughs*) and sell them to all the neighbours including the neighbours that I'd picked the apples from...

**Angela Clarke** - Hopefully at a discount!

**Laura Taylor-Williams** – Yeah, of course (*laughs*) that's bit of a random story isn't it? But the reason I say that is because in essence the packaging of a product, like knowing your audiences and your customers and working out how some great core ingredients can be packaged into something even better is at the heart of what salespeople and therefore distribution is all about. And so, I did a marketing degree at UWE in Bristol and immediately got a job at Allied Domecq which at the time were the second biggest alcohol company globally.

So, my job was to work with ace brands like Maker's Mark Bourbon and Perrier Jouet Champagne and it was about encouraging independent bars and chains to use these brands in their cocktail menus and to collaborate and get an awareness out there, which straight after university is an incredible job.

Then within this company I got promoted and I was moved on to do bigger deals, so I was then selling container loads of alcohol around Europe and negotiating in tough situations, and the reason I say that is because it's that reason that I then moved into film. Because at the time, it was around 2006, DVD's and soon to be Blu Rays were becoming a huge part of the industry.

**Angela Clarke** - Yep.

**Laura Taylor-Williams** – A very profitable part of the industry and to be really successful studios were building relationships with the grocery retailers like Tesco and Asda. So, they were looking to what's known as the FMCG sector, like alcohol, to see who the people like myself used to doing those tough negotiations and shaping innovative commercial deals

were, and so there were real parallels. They looked to recruit in that way, and I got head hunted to work at Warner Brothers, to manage Zavvy, which if listeners aren't familiar with is like HMV, it was an entertainment specialist and my role was to manage the commercial relationship with Zavvy, of Warner's content portfolio, so across film and TV of all genres.

**Angela Clarke** - Yep.

**Laura Taylor-Williams** - And your role as a sales team is to work out what the film is, where the audience is going to be most easily reached for that film and create compelling sales reasons for the audience to part with their money and for your clients like the retailers to stock that film or TV show. And you do that across new release content but also the huge raft of back catalogue products, which is the tougher but a more interesting way to sell sometimes, because it's a harder thing to create interest in.

So, after Warner I spent a big part of my career at NBC Universal, firstly in their DBT Team, again managing most retailers in the UK. But then I moved into digital distribution which was an international role and so I managed the UK but also the Nordic region, Italy, other various markets like the Middle East and Africa for instance and you'd work with global clients like iTunes and Amazon and Google and the likes. But then also local to that territory too, so the Sky store and BT for instance in the UK and the likes of those across the regions I would deal with.

Since then, I've moved into selling all rights, so all broadcast for SVOD and AVOD, and TV rights across broadcast but whatever role in a distribution and sales capacity that you do really the fundamental principles are still the same.

**Angela Clarke** – Yeah.

**Laura Taylor-Williams** - So you're working with the acquisitions and marketing team to fully understand the best way to position the content, which clients will help you best reach that audience, when is going to be the best date to release the content, what price is going to be sweet spot etc. Plus, you're always looking to ways you can add greater value to consumers, to give extra content, what innovation can offer to consumers and then obviously in the form of compelling marketing, creatives working with communities on an outreach basis partnering with brands who share similar target audiences. And fundamentally, what's going to drive most profit for the studio.

**Angela Clarke** - Once you'd made that shift from food and drink into film, I guess in those early days you would have covered fiction films as well as probably documentary films. And I guess probably around about that time because you referenced 2006 or 2007, you would have started to see more documentary features starting to edge their way into the territories. I'm trying to think what would have been under the portfolios of those companies that you mentioned at the time. What factual docs were on sale for those companies that you were working with at the time that you can allude to?

**Laura Taylor-Williams** - Yeah, more so at NBC Universal because when you work for a big studio, you work across all types of content. So, juggernauts like *Jurassic World* and their

back catalogue of award-winning films like *The Birds* etc. But then also Universal had what they would call an indie within a big studio where they would acquire more specialist content, so they'd work like an independent distributor within a big company and that group started acquiring a lot more documentaries like *Cobain: Montage of Heck*, *Meru* about the adventures of Jimmy Chin and Kevin McDonald's *Marley*, so some great documentaries and really varied. But I think the turning point for me when we really started to see a pivot was 2010, when we released *Senna*. So, this was about the racing driver Ayrton Senna. If you don't know it's an amazing documentary. I'd recommend it. It's directed by Asif Kapadia who went on to release *Amy*.

**Angela Clarke - And Maradona.**

**Laura Taylor-Williams** - And the way in which *Senna* was made was incredibly cinematic. So, the producing team behind it, James Gay-Rees but also importantly Eric Fellner and Tim Bevin, they run *Working Title* and they'd produced and made beautiful award winner features like *Atonement* and *Les Misérables*. So, they took a thrilling story of a Brazilian story sporting hero and made it absolutely perfect for the cinema. It followed his battles on the race track, I'm sure you've seen it right?

**Angela Clarke** – Yeah.

**Laura Taylor-Williams** - So it's full of emotion and the film released brilliantly in UK Cinemas. At the time it was the biggest British documentary grossed in cinemas, so it did around £5million and I'm not sure if any documentary has done that much since. But my role then, at that point in time, I was still managing the UK market for DVD clients and managing Asda and aside from HMV and specialist retailers, no other retailers stocked documentaries. It was a niche audience, and they weren't going to stock it and so it was a big thing to try to convince the retailers to stock it.

So, the rest of the market if you like, when you took out DVD's, and when you took out the specialist retailers was around 50%. If a film was going to be successful, you needed to get that chunk of market, you needed to get your DVDs into all stores. But because of physical production timelines we would have to do the sell into those retailers before a film had come out in cinemas to make sure we could produce enough stock on time to get it in stores. So even though our buyers liked it, and you could see it was beautiful, they were not convinced that a documentary was going to sell, like they didn't think the audience was broad enough, or in fact was a supermarket shopper interested if you like, so it was risky for them. But we convinced them and of course once the results came in from the box office then everyone was scrabbling around to get stock on shelves because they were selling out so quickly and so it becomes a whole different story.

So that was probably the one-time things changed for distribution strategies for documentaries because it really demonstrated that there was a real appetite for documentaries and that audience interest was much broader than we had thought. It wasn't niche, especially if it was a cinematic release and of course if you get the marketing campaign right. But now obviously things have massively changed in the market, DVD's aren't so important, they're only a tiny portion of the market and a big box office for

documentary is often not as attainable or even the goal for documentary release these days. There are lots of other avenues, so the advent of big streamers like Netflix makes a big difference as they focus on buying the rights to documentary plus now there are specialist platforms like MUBI and Dogwoof on demand. And of course, paid TV broadcasters which traditionally have been broad like Sky, they've got specialist standalone documentary channels and even Sky Arts is a free to air channel now since the pandemic. So, all these platforms popping up and focusing on documentaries is meeting consumer demand and creating more desire for it.

**Angela Clarke** - When you look back at the evolution of the sales of feature docs back in the day, around the beginning of 2000, I think there was about 4 or 5 feature docs released that year in the cinema. And then nearer to 2018/2019 you're talking around 100 plus docs released theatrically that year. What shift did you see as documentaries started to take a bigger share of that market? What did that mean for distributors? Did you have to tweak how you were doing things because you had more docs coming through? Was it a significant shift, and if so, what exactly shifted within that world?

**Laura Taylor-Williams** - Docs like *Touching The Void* or *The Impostor* really showed that there's an audience demand and they played to those fiction type narratives which broadened them and showed that emotion but I truly don't think it's about a specific doc phenomenon really because those broader market changes around new platforms launching were really the driver, and that's kind of came hand in hand. So, if you think around that same time of docs becoming more prevalent Netflix was just so huge and so I think that was the biggest seismic shift really and people started to get interested and then Netflix focused in on documentary and gave it that global home if you like and that was across all genres.

Documentary obviously benefited from it but the appetite for content is at its biggest ever across the board isn't it. We've got an insatiable appetite for things we want to watch, especially during the pandemic. But I think in the past studio agreements with cinema chains and just the way in which business was done generally meant that consumers were forced to wait for certain lengths of time until they *could* watch content. And it wasn't really a consumer first model. I mean that wasn't because we wanted our consumers and audiences to have to wait, you know we far prefer it now when you can watch content at home that you can also watch in the cinema. So that flip was the biggest change there but then during the pandemic, with the collapsing of windows, and what I mean by windows is that when you release in exhibition, in cinemas then it used to be that you would wait for months until you could buy it on DVD or buy it digitally. And then it would become a rental and then after some time it would then be released on a streamer or a broadcast platform.

There were certain windows of opportunity is what that means, and the cinema chains were obviously very protective of their business. And it meant that studios couldn't release films in innovative ways. But obviously as studios we were all discussing could we release digitally at home at the same time as cinemas because it's more inclusive. Not everyone can afford to go to the cinema, you know to book a babysitter and get to the cinema, and so this was a real struggle for studios before.

But with Covid, that's changed and now obviously it's much shorter. Actually that day and date model, it still exists and there are types of films that you will want to watch at home or you will want to go to the cinema for and so it's much more puts the onus, or the decision-making into the hands of the consumer and that's a much better marketplace I believe and much fairer for consumers to decide where they want to watch their content and so it just opens more avenues of opportunities if there are more places to watch content, but it does create issues.

You know, it used to be get it in cinemas right now. Then buy it at home after a certain amount of time, but now for marketeers it could be in cinemas at home and very shortly afterwards on a subscription model or a pay channel. But then it's quite hard for marketeers to form their marketing campaign and be communicating to audiences when and where they can get it. It's very much to do with data reliance on the digital data of consumers really and understanding where the audience is for the film at specific times and how they can reach them and then retargeting them as the consumer moves through distribution windows and moves across platforms on the internet.

**Angela Clarke** - Before we dissect some of those points, I think especially if people haven't dabbled too much in this world, it can be quite overwhelming to understand, so I just wondered if you were a filmmaker and you were trying to reach out to sales agent or a distribution arm to discuss something you're developing, could you talk through some of the key phrases that would be used in those conversations I guess and just explain a little bit what they mean to those people that maybe haven't done that before?

**Laura Taylor-Williams** - Yeah, sure. I think the best way to do this is, looking at the value chain. So, what that means is the steps that a film goes through to reach its end consumer. Even in the development of your feature, that's when you can start thinking about distribution. I would really encourage filmmakers to start thinking at that point what is your package, because that's how distributors are going to be assessing the value of your project.

Who is the producer or the director, it could be the same person which is often the case in documentaries. What is the topic and access like for a documentary? Who are you to tell this story? Why now? Why tell this story now? What access do you have? What's different about your story? So, thinking about all of that during the development will really get your pitch ready for distribution and for speaking to sales agents and distributors because that's what how they'll be assessing it really, looking at what are similar types of stories.

So, it might not be the same topic but has a similar type of documentary been done before for example? How did that perform? Did it have similar levels of access? So certainly, from the off I'd start thinking of the distribution strategy within the development process. Obviously, the financing of a feature, you can do that in a variety of ways. You can do soft financing, film financiers, high net worth individuals, banks or you could secure a presale. What does a presale mean? Ultimately it means that you're selling some of the rights to a specific platform. So generally, what happens is you might sell the rights to a broadcaster, so you may sell to the BBC or Channel 4 and in that case your TV rights would be sold up front. And the reason why you do that is because they'll give you a cash injection and it means you can close off your finance plan and get the film into production. And obviously if you close

the finance plan, you've got your film and you move on to, the fourth step being sales agents.

So, the sales agent's role can be to find or to bridge some of that finance gap. So, if you still have a gap in your finance plan or you haven't presold some of the rights, then sales agents can help fund a project so they can be part of your finance plan. But whether they are or not they're going to be representing your film and they're potentially going to design a festival and market strategy to create lots of buzz and get it into the right festival. Strategically they determine which ones are going to give you the best shout, the best buzz created for your film, and importantly, they'll be introducing you to a distribution network with the aim of getting you a distribution deal and they can help advise on the distribution deals at certain points.

I think sales agents in the past have got bit of a bad rap. But if a sales agent does something well then, they can be super helpful and they take a commission. They're taking a commission of whatever the film is bought for, so it's in their interest to get the best deal for you as possible. Next, you'll speak to a distribution company and that's where all the rights terms come in. The first team within a distribution team that you're going to come across is the acquisitions team and they're looking to acquire the rights to sell your films to other companies. So, the typical rights that they are going to want to buy are theatrical, so cinema and the right to sell it to a cinema chain. Transactional video on demand and ownership rights, when you're buying or renting a movie on iTunes for instance, the right to sell your film to free-to-air broadcasters like the BBC or pay for view channels like Sky, or subscription partners like Netflix and then AVOD, which is advertiser video on demand which is ad supported channels like YouTube. Obviously, you probably would have heard in the press recently that Netflix have kind of moved on to that model too, as have the likes of Disney.

So typically, a distributor wants to pick up all those rights, because then they can safely make a profit. If you've only got one or two rights and you're doing some marketing like normally your marketing campaign is quite front weighted, and you ride off the coattails of that great marketing campaign through the whole lifecycle and windows of opportunity of a film's lifecycle. But if you've only picked up one or two rights, it's just harder to make it profitable and so you want as many rights as possible.

You also want to understand the language that distributors want to pick up, so if that suddenly new platforms are created, then they have the right to exploit on those platforms as well because who knew before Netflix, that was a model that people would want to go after. So, they must cover themselves in that way so that they are game and can exploit all opportunities. Then in terms of which rights not to sell before, if that might be helpful to share, if a distributor thinks that they can get an audience into cinemas to watch your film, then you need to make sure that you haven't exploited the rights on transactional video on-demand and ownership and physical before that.

So never do a deal where it's transactional VOD or VOD first because you'll just really hamper your ability to get a wider distribution deal. Also, a lot of times now you've hurt the ability to get on to Sky Documentaries which could be a first window, and of course Netflix and things. These days it is really good for a distributor to have all the rights so they can

manage that when they carve out the windows they see best for that title. When you referenced a territory, it essentially means a country or a defined area to exploit your rights in.

**Angela Clarke** - Okay.

**Laura Taylor-Williams** – A UK distributor will generally pick up UK, Ireland, and Malta because that's how platforms link those countries together, those three countries. You'll specify within the distribution deal; you specify which language rights you're happy for the distributor to take and generally it's all languages. And then the distributor decides whether to dub across all their platforms, and you'll specify how long a distribution agreement is for and generally they're like 10 to 15 years because a distributor wants to ensure that they have enough time to recoup the deal. And by recoup, I mean how long it takes for a distributor to make what they spent on acquiring the film from you in the one place....

**Angela Clarke** - And the marketing etc..

**Laura Taylor-Williams** – Yeah, and the contract will specify the fee that you're happy to take for these distribution rights. It will be the license fee plus you could specify if you can get some of the backend. And the backend basically means that if a distributor sells your film, and it does well across many windows or it has a really successful box office that you get to share in those spoils. You hear lots of talk around there's no backend anymore and that's true to certain extent because with the likes of Netflix and their models, it means that they essentially pay a producer's fee.

Once you sell a title, so a film doc or TV show whatever to Netflix, if they're buying it then they're just giving you that license fee and within it is baked a producer's fee. But if a film does well, you don't see any of that benefit and so that means there's no backend. But if it doesn't do well, you've got a great licence fee potentially and Netflix have lost out, so you know there's a risk for both sides really.

**Angela Clarke** - One of the things that probably people get confused about is that notion of distribution companies that also have a sales arm attached to them! Let's say you're making a particular genre of documentary film, are there some sales agents you think well actually they tend to cover sports films or they tend to cover unfurling narratives or whatever. Are sales agents always aligned to a particular distributor? Or do you have sales agents that are a bit like independent mortgage brokers that go to whatever distributor they think is the best fit for your film because I think that's always what's difficult if you're a filmmaker you're never quite sure who's aligned to who and how that process works.

**Laura Taylor-Williams** - So firstly, there's no right way to skin a cat – I hate that phrase. But every documentary release or distribution strategy will be completely different from the next. I made it sound like the value chain is quite a linear process. You go from one step to the other. But it can be done in a variety of ways and no way is better than the other really, it's just different. So, with sales agents, you can have both. You can have pure sales agents who have simply taken that commission. They don't distribute and they would take all sorts of features. They're not going to specialize in just documentary. They'll specialize in lots of

genres generally. And then you also have distribution companies which will have sales agents attached, and then you have distribution companies which will work globally.

It tends to be that independent distributors, say for instance Altitude, they will have a sales arm attached now. They will distribute within the UK; they'll buy their domestic rights to the UK and then their sales arm may or may not represent your content internationally and try and secure distribution deals with other independent distributors globally. You can do it that way, but it tends to be that there's certain documentaries and certain distributors that specialize really well in certain topics.

It's important to think about what kind of documentary your documentary is. Obviously, you want to know if it's like a social impact doc or if it's a sporting doc or a music doc, you're going to know what type of documentary it is but it's useful to look at what's similar, that has been released before in that category and which company has distributed it. Because if you know that X company for instance, say Fulwell 73, they've released lots of music documentaries and sporting documentaries so you would know that would be a good home. They might be interested because they've already built-up awareness, on how to reach and create community outreach and advertising campaigns that worked well for other sporting documentaries might work similarly for this sporting documentary in a different sport so they will have a much better understanding and expertise in that particular category of documentary.

So, if it's a sporting documentary Fulwell is a great example or Noah Media Group are an interesting company now. They're very data led, and their marketing campaigns are really data led. If your film has a social impact angle, then *Together Films* which is headed up by Sarah Moses or *Modern Films* which is headed up by Eve Gabereau. They've released a lot of social impact documentaries and they really know how to build that non-profit angle campaign for your documentaries and really understand how to go after philanthropists and to get marketing monies and that community outreach is important. And they know how to do it. They've done it for x number of documentaries, so they know how to do it for yours. So, it's useful to look around the marketplace and see what other companies have released similar docs to you. But a company like Universal Pictures, so NBC Universal they will release all genres, from natural history to personal biopics to music. They'll release everything, so it really depends on where you want to go.

**Angela Clarke** - And is there a particular place to look if you wanted just to try and check out which distributors do what, and you thought well I've got a sports doc or I've got this doc, who would be the best people to align myself with or who would be the best people to reach out to. What's the easiest way for somebody to figure out where's my starting point at least?

**Laura Taylor-Williams** - I mean Google is your friend and literally googling I've got a music doc and I'm going to Google music docs and see who released them. But there is the FDA the Film Distributors Association and that is a UK body that works with all the distributors. If you go onto that website, there's a list of all distributors featured on there and you could click through from each of their logos to their websites and look at what the type of content they've released before. And I'd say people are friendly, especially in the independent sector

so reach out to people on LinkedIn or Google to find their email address or whatever. People want to hear from filmmakers with interesting projects. Don't be shy. I know it's hard when it feels like people are in a different world to you, but people are helpful and will want to give advice. So yeah, that would be a good place to start.

**Angela Clarke** - So are there any common mistakes that people make sometimes when they're getting to stage of reaching a sales agent or things that maybe they haven't done?

**Laura Taylor-Williams** - I'd say even in the development stage, it's never too early to start speaking with sales agents and distributors. Obviously if you need finance then it's doubly important. But even if you don't need finance, I'd start speaking about your project to people because they'll give you ideas and they'll give you nuggets of information that you haven't thought of, and you'll just start to build those relationships, so that you can use them a bit further down the line. If you've come to somebody to ask for a bit of advice, then they slightly invested in your project from the off. So, if you come further down the line then when you've moved the project on and you're keeping them updated then they'll feel part of the journey. It's just natural I think as a human emotion so getting in early is great.

And, because they'll give you those nuggets of information for instance, you could be planning a budget of X for your documentary and from speaking with various sales agents or distributors, you might get a sense that the budget's too high and it's not going to be attractive to buy and it's not going to make a profit for distributors. So immediately if you get that sense, you'll bring the budget down and that's from the off and you haven't even got into production so your project going to be much better.

On the contrary, they might say your project doesn't feel quite right yet, you haven't gotten enough access, keep working on it. They might give you the sense that you need to spend more or wait longer. Or they might say you probably haven't got enough experience. You might need to bring other people on to elevate this project and make the package better, or just give it a better chance of success. But I'd say don't always listen to everybody though. That's just somebody's opinion. Listen and learn but also say true to your story.

When you get into production, certainly making sure that you have a photographer and pictures being taken, so you're not reliant on just stills taken from AV because to get a film featured on a platform like Apple you need a load of stills and images to create the marketing campaign. And it might not always be the greatest. It's important to have photography taken throughout the process, and make sure that's built into the budget so that you can do that properly. And get somebody you know, a photographer specializing in documentary, that would be important within the process.

And then I would say once your film is made and you've got a sales agent for it, don't just then think okay, my job's done here. You can still be getting that film out there and speaking to distributors and talking to people. You know if you sell a couple of markets, and then your sales agents say they sell to the US and UK and then your title isn't as fresh anymore and your sales agent might have moved on to other projects and it's a bit old hat for them, in some ways you need to keep talking about it. Don't just think okay, that's my project done. There will be appetite somewhere else in the world for it. You've made it, don't just

sit on it. Like time and time again, people are sat on the rights of their films and not monetizing them.

And now there are platforms to really help with that. For instance, a company which, full disclaimer, I do some work with, and consult for, called *Vuulr* but there's also other platforms which are similar and do the same thing for example *Rights Trade*. But essentially, they are rights marketplaces for your content. So as a content owner, if you're the producer, or if you're a distributor or even a production company, you upload your content onto these rights marketplaces, the online marketplaces and then there are buyers all around the world buying content, and so these platforms are live 24/7.

So even if you've got a sales agent attached, and you get offered deals you can direct them to sales agent. Obviously, you could then have a conversation and say well I've directed you some business so your cut's going to be a lot lower, if at all. But they're good platforms. They help to really democratize the rights marketplace and I think demystify the whole process. Even the process of up-loading a film on to there as an individual filmmaker will help you understand what a distributor is doing because you'll see the terms, the rights, it's all there on the platform....

**Angela Clarke** - What you're giving away?

**Laura Taylor-Williams** - Yeah, and so some of these platforms they charge a subscription fee or some of them charge a flat fee, a monthly subscription, or a flat fee. But *Vuulr* which is a strong platform and I think I would probably say is the biggest, they don't charge a fee at all. They are only charging a fee if the deal is done because they're so confident in their platform. The likes of BBC Studios now have hosted around 3000 titles recently, across all genres and documentary is a massive seller on *Vuulr* because stories that are, and this is a general point really about documentary, but you want stories that are culturally specific with great access, but they've got universally loved themes.

So, themes about things like identity, or is it about grief, or is it about love, you know these are universal themes that people are attracted to beyond just the initial story so the films will travel. Encouraging people to use platforms like that, just to make sure you're monetizing all the rights because time and time again, you will sell some rights, but then you're think that's all I can do and then you'll move on to your next project and that's such a shame because there'll be other platforms that want to buy your content.

**Angela Clarke** - Yeah, and that's the thing it is a confusing world and as you say it's about trying to get your head around the order in which you don't give things away so that you're not leaving yourself short changed by giving a big right away for a small amount of money. I think that's the tricky thing in terms of trying to get advice independently. What in your opinion are the benefits between going to a bigger distribution agency versus a smaller distribution agency? What are the pros and cons to both approaches?

**Laura Taylor-Williams** - I think like all things there are positives and negatives for each and it could be very project dependent. I think everyone thinks a larger studio and a bigger name is usually going to be best for a project. You could think wow NBC Universal are going to

release my film or Studio Canal is a big name and so you would think it would be a lot more kudos and their global studios are doing an amazing job, and their marketing teams are exemplary. But what I would say is that a big studio could be releasing 60 releases over a year or even more and there'll be alongside huge budget features. So documentary, although it's grown and it does great numbers these days compared to other documentaries of the past, alongside a juggernaut feature film or just lots of releases, your documentary could get lost alongside those other releases on the slate.

I mean it won't always be that and those distributors are not going to admit that but it's just the nature of things isn't it, if you've got lots to focus on it can be quite hard. And on the contrary, an independent studio, any release that they take on can make or break that studio. So, they've got I guess a lot more skin in the game to make sure that your project does well because they don't release as much. They're a smaller company, so any project they're going to take on, they're really believing in it because they don't release as much. I'd say there are those two distinctions.

But regardless, whoever you go to, I think it's gut instincts. You want to know that you've got a lot of cheerleaders and believers in your project with whatever company you're dealing with. Make sure they love it; they need it and are really going to give it a great pair of hands to see it through that life cycle. And to give it the love it needs and deserves to reach the right audiences and in a big enough way, so just make sure that you really like the people as it's a people business as well isn't it. Make sure you're working *with* them and feel that you can trust them. I know it can feel scary if you've not done it before and sometimes it's a learning process and you must make some mistakes or do things you wish you hadn't done.

But it's about going with your gut sometimes and just whether the people are nice, and you think that they're really passionate about your project. I think that is important. And I think sometimes indie films can be a lot scrappier and often they go after every opportunity more than some of the big companies and if it is a specialist company they will as I said before, they'll be well versed in that community outreach which is important for your feature. So yeah, I'd say that.

**Angela Clarke** - And if you were doing the festival circuit, I take it, it's better to do the festival circuit first and then would you have distributors or sales agents I guess looking to see what films have done well on the festival circuit? How much of a difference does that make if something's played well in a festival or if it's been well received by an audience? Does that also help in that process in terms of is it worth looking at doing that model first and seeing what feedback your film gets? We know any chance that you can get to elevate a film gives critical kudos attached to it as well. Does that make it more of a sellable beast, I guess?

**Laura Taylor-Williams** - Certainly you want the festival strategy to be good so that it creates as much buzz as possible for both consumers, and potential distributors. But if you don't feel confident to know what festivals this film is going to be good at, it's expensive to apply to be in festivals so if you're just a bit confused about which one then that's when going to a sales agent well versed in that field is best. And if somebody wants to represent your

content as well, they obviously they believe in it and think that they can sell it, they only make money off a commission then they will help hone and develop your festival strategy, and as I say that where to get the best distribution deal. So it depends how confident you in that in are in that level of negotiation.

I think if you are going to do your own festival strategy, I'd encourage you to look at the British Arts Council website because you can apply through there and they get cheaper rates and they do specialist rates and specific screenings for the key festivals, so your film will get seen by Sundance and certain festivals that were listed. All the information's online so have a look rather than applying individually otherwise I think that you'll end up spending more and I wouldn't do that.

But you hear a lot about films being picked up before festivals and that's important too because as I said there's no one way to skin a cat. So, if you need advice with festivals then get help. You can get that through sales agent and they will help you get a distribution deal. But if it got a lot of buzz at the festival then that's when you hear about, you've probably heard a lot about big bidding going on with the likes of Netflix and Amazon Prime and Apple.

Coda being picked up for crazy money at Sundance and you hear that a lot now. If you as the filmmaking team have taken all the risk and completed production without having the needed to have, a distribution or a pre-sale done before you filmed then you're shouldered the risk and that's when you will tend to get, if it's good, you will tend to get the biggest bidding wars going on because then companies are acknowledging and that you've taken the risk on.

**Angela Clarke** - Well, that's the thing. It's a big gamble isn't it in a way? It's like you're trying to hedge your bets all the time, working out what's the best thing for you to do to get the most bang for your buck. Because filmmakers will use whatever money they can make from those sales to try and help get their next project off the ground. So, I suppose it's difficult in that respect. Then the other thing I wanted to ask was obviously a lot of what you've spoken about concerns feature docs, but as you mentioned earlier...

**Laura Taylor-Williams** - Totally.

**Angela Clarke** - The world of as online & digital filmmaking has also evolved. There seems to be a bigger place for short films now. What can one do with regards to short films? What's the best process in terms of a short film sales strategy?

**Laura Taylor-Williams** - I mean when short films are made generally it's to get a bit of experience making a film isn't it or it's a showcase your skills before making a feature. I mean not everyone wants to do that, but that's tends to be the case. But I do think that's been a well-trodden path and whilst it's often just to have as a showcase, often people haven't monetized them. But there's never been a better time to monetize short films than there is now because there are a lot of platforms dedicated to short films. I would encourage you to monetize the rights. There are platforms like Vuulr which as well as having features and TV shows, you can also upload shorts and for instance the Hollywood Shorts Festival is a festival that hosts all their shorts on a platform like Vuulr.

You can also in addition push your content to other platforms as well. There are lots of internet platforms or App-based platforms - some names would be Shorts TV, Discover Film, they're huge international platforms and they're all specializing in short content. And there is Pause TV which is quite a cool new platform set up by a British guy. They're different models, for instance, Shorts TV & Discover Film, they're subscription based. I think that like £3.99 a month for consumers whereas Pause TV is a tip-based service so you can just tip the filmmaker whatever you want, and the platform take a small revenue share, I think it's like 10% which is good, and then the filmmaker would get 90% of what anyone's tipped.

And you know when we talk about getting a share of profits from distributors it's quite hard so actually getting 90% of whatever has been tipped it good. There are also some cool new innovative platforms, and you can just go onto these websites it will tell you how to submit a film to them. But obviously going back to the last question about festivals, if your film has been in festivals and I'd encourage anyone to obviously submit, but strategically select which festivals you think you're going to have the best shout in and just don't go submitting to every festival because it's expensive. Just select the right ones for you, but there are more and more platforms for you to monetize on and look at the type of content they're releasing.

So, if it's an LGBTQI story then Bohemia Media have got a platform which specialize in that type of content, and they take short form content as well. It's again thinking like a distributor, think about the audience, think about who they're going to appeal to and then strategically select the best partners to go after. Yes, there is money to be made in short films, small money, you know you're not going to survive on it. But if you've made it, why not try to monetize it? I think people don't bother and so I encourage people to do that because once you're monetizing it, you're learning these terms and you'll get used to those distribution terms again and so when you come to make a feature, you'll just be a bit more experienced with things and so it's always useful.

**Angela Clarke** - And then with regards to those platforms, if you have your film on one platform does that prohibit you from putting the film on another platform or are they all fair game as competitors? Or is it a case of if you're on that platform you can't be on that other rival platform? How does that work?

**Laura Taylor-Williams** - So with short film, it's generally totally non-exclusive so it wouldn't be a problem. I say that, but when you submit a film, it will clearly say whether that's the case or not. But generally, it's all non-exclusive because they're not going to pay enough to make you think I need to keep this exclusive. That said, if you've created your short with a broadcast company, or if you've had funding from the BBC & Channel 4 then in terms of the broadcast rights then you would be tied to a specific broadcaster and then they would release it on their platforms. But hopefully you would still have the rights to exploit on other subscription model platforms and OTT platforms because there are different rights, so a free to air platform broadcaster. So just make sure that you understand what rights you have sold and then you can exploit the rest because there are opportunities to do that.

**Angela Clarke** - Would those platforms for short form content also require things like decent stills and various synopsis and all the other stuff that you would normally need for a feature doc? Is there a similar expectation that you'll come with some assets at least to help market those films?

**Laura Taylor-Williams** - Yeah, certainly the expectation isn't the same, because it's short form so there's an understanding there. But whatever you have, to appeal to an audience, you want your marketing materials to be as great as possible. So good imagery, a concise and compelling synopsis, all those materials and being clear on the genre that you're submitting it too as well. Making sure the metadata is correct across your platforms so that it is consistent, and consumers can easily find your content and it's what they're expecting to find. So, if it's listed as a horror, then it is a horror, so they're not annoyed. These are all important selling tools that distributors use.

You know metadata is important. All these elements are called metadata and so obviously making sure that they're as good as possible is just as important for short film as a feature film, however that said, a shorts platform isn't going to expect you to have 15 images and an amazing trailer cut because it's a short film. Their expectation is lower. But we encourage you to get as many materials as you can. Not just imagery but just even focusing on the genre and the synopsis is important. As consumers we read it, don't we? You think about how you choose. Put yourself in the situation when you're choosing something to watch and examine what convinces you to watch it. That's what everybody does, think of it in that way.

**Angela Clarke** - No absolutely and it's the same with things like titles and strap lines and things....

**Laura Taylor-Williams** – Absolutely. And just to say on the title I would say as well, when you're thinking of a title make it compelling but Google it too. Is there another film, that's got the same title and that's the case for short film but always for a feature documentary. You want to make sure that you've got a unique name or at least that if it's a similar same name, that there's enough time in between both films being released for it to not be confusing. Because when you're setting up a marketing campaign, you're going to be using the keywords of your title and so if your film is easily confused, the way that digital marketing campaigns work now is that you're buying against the name and other special keywords. If your title could be easily confused with another one, then it's just going to be a waste of marketing spend so it's just going to make things more difficult. And it really does affect the marketing campaign. So doing research into that title is important as well to just make sure that you haven't got another title similar that could be confused with it.

**Angela Clarke** - In terms of buying website domains and things like that, if you start your film and you're sure that your title is unique enough and it's not similar to another film, is there merit in terms of buying web domains etc and those things sooner than later just to make sure that nobody else snaps them up?

**Laura Taylor-Williams** – Oh 100% yeah and even setting up social media channels and handles and covering those bases as well as a website. I mean probably you will need to pass those over to the distributor or whoever's doing the marketing campaign at some point

but certainly making sure that you've got them secured so that again the marketing campaign can pivot off them. And I'd say that even for short films, it's important. Some short films have really grown momentum and people who love short films have talked about them a lot then they're going onto platforms and are having a look there so be where you think your audience is going to be for sure. Yeah, making sure that's all set up would put you in good stead.

**Angela Clarke** - Also I think as you say the merits of speaking to people at an earlier stage rather than later albeit you know that doesn't kick in until you are further down the line with your own film but just to mull those things over because it helps you, I think as a filmmaker fine tune who the audience for this film is.

**Laura Taylor-Williams** - Totally.

**Angela Clarke** – And it gets you thinking how can I tap into that? Because the sooner you can hone that particular component of your film, I think the better isn't it because then you can really funnel it to work for the audience you're trying to reach as well.

**Laura Taylor-Williams** - Totally and especially if you've got those handles set up before you hit festivals as soon as you get a buzz around festivals then people are going to start looking for your social media handles. You can start building or following people from quite an early stage and distributors can then pivot from that and you're just building up data. I mean I mentioned before about how the marketing campaigns are so data led now. That's so important to build that digital audience and to create that awareness as soon as you can.

And as early as possible ideally too. It is important also as a filmmaker, you might glean insights into what type of audience you're attracting and so when you're having conversations as part of your pitch, you're going to be a bit more confident and aware of who your audience is. I mean you're not going to get thousands of followers probably at an early stage when you haven't got a distribution deal but, it certainly might give you some insights to help you speak more confidently about your project with people who may be interested in buying rights.

You know there could be a certain country that you're like whoa I never thought my film would be really big in that country and then that tells you okay I need to get some distribution in that country, and get on some platforms there because people are clearly interested in it for whatever reason from that country and that can be for reasons that you haven't thought of before and even as a distributor can be quite surprising.

**Angela Clarke** - I was going to say because you're talking a lot about data gathering and stuff like that, are there particular subject matters that immediately you think that'll be a far safer bet in terms of a sales transaction than others? Are there 2 or 3 subjects that you always think 9 times out of 10 they will sell more often than not, or what are the topics that are more difficult to shift as it were or that are maybe harder propositions that aren't immediately appealing when somebody approaches you?

**Laura Taylor-Williams** - I think a doc project needs to have the same components as any fiction film to do well. It's got to have a strong narrative, compelling characters, you might not like the characters but they're compelling. A cinematic vision and appeal are also required for feature length documentaries. All those parts need to be in the mix for a project to feel big and scalable, they are important and then there's audience. So, if it's about the UK and you want your project to appeal to UK audiences in a big way, also ideally you want it to appeal to international audiences too.

So that phrase I said earlier about being culturally specific but with a universal theme is important here. Whatever it is, make sure it can travel. Is it going to be of interest to lots of people and why? Your story can be rooted culturally, but make sure it's of interest to lots of people in other countries as well and you know for instance, a documentary like **Three Identical Strangers** was about three identical strangers in America but the themes travel amazingly well because they're about identity and family, and love. So, it's understanding what themes are in your documentary and personally I think it's quite hard these days to understand, aside from box office, what a film's done because you don't see the license fees from broadcasters and streamers unless you've worked on loads of projects.

And now, one project to the next performs quite differently depending on what deals you've got so it's hard to work out what's been a success and what hasn't. And it's hard to value content as a result, it's much more about taking a punt really and so I would say personally don't focus on chasing shiny new themes because you'll be jumping on a bandwagon. I think if you stay authentic and ask yourself, why am I telling the story? What is it about the story? What makes me a good person to tell it? What is it about this story that is universally attractive? Am I a good filmmaker to champion this story and have I got the access? I think that's almost more important. That said I think natural history always sells well, anything about the world and climate change right now is topical and people love that. I mean I think there are evergreen subjects which are always of interest like that and rightly so with climate change.

Just it's the way you're telling it overall though isn't it with those sorts of points that I said just now. I mean also with audiences; you don't always know what they're going to like before they watch it. Like did we know that a documentary about a killer whale was going to be good. You know **Blackfish** was incredible, but did we know that we needed a documentary about a killer whale in captivity? Probably not. But it's the way it's told and the importance of the story, and the compelling way in which it was told is what made that a huge success and why it got sold time and time again in the world over because it had the universal theme and it's of interest for everyone.

**Angela Clarke** - I think also that was a good example of something that took a well-worn subject, there'd been lots of animal rights focus for years, but that took a slightly more populous tone. And because its precinct was Sea Life World it was one of those popular environments where people knew what that was. They'd maybe visited it in the same ways probably most of us at some point even if it was just as a child has visited those kinds of places, you know zoos or theme parks or places where you have animals in captivity and so I think it was one of those things that everybody felt like they had some experience of it on

some level. Everyone knew that we've all been to those places where animals haven't looked happy.

**Laura Taylor-Williams** – Totally. It took a niche subject and talked about in a broad way and made it very dramatic. It was that narrative, sort of a fiction narrative really that keep creating that....

**Angela Clarke** - Yeah.

**Laura Taylor-Williams** - Momentum and drama of the story as it unfolded and so they did that in an amazing way. I haven't mentioned it but if you go on to Dogwoof's website for instance, they are an amazing documentary specialist distributor, if you go onto their website, they have a submission form and they encourage you as a filmmaker to reach out and speak to them at any stage in your development. And that's the case for any distributor but it just kind of hones the point because they describe on there what kind of documentaries they're looking for and it's completely varied. They say it's got to be compelling but when you look at what they've written, it's very broad but they just want to know that you're the right person to tell the story really and you can do it well so I would just encourage you to look on it.

It's just another way to encourage people to reach out to distributors and for documentary more so than fiction you can reach out to distributors more than sales agent because the budgets are lower so you might have a finance plan created already and you might not need that extra finance. So, you can skip that path of potentially seeking a sales agent and go straight to distributors – and they will want to hear from you. And as I say they will very much be involved at any stage of the project and so they could help hone things in the development process if you needed it. They might say you've got some really good ideas for this project here and there's some good legs for this project but let's make it even broader and even better for because of these reasons and again, you can choose to accept their advice or not, you know it's your project you can decide what to do with it.

**Angela Clarke** - Well as you said though, there's never really been a better time to engage in that world because if nothing else the pandemic has shown us there is a huge appetite for factual content out there across all platforms. I mean at the end of the day that's what everybody was doing, and people were consuming stuff in huge volumes. And as you noted earlier, the shift that's taken place in terms of it doesn't have to be a cinema first strategy which has been the default model for such a long period of time. There are more options depending on what kind of film you're making, whether it is an impact film or whatever it may be, there's a myriad of ways that you can cut your cloth these days which is exciting in and of itself.

Well thank you so much for that, hopefully there's advice there to be to be had for anybody that's doing a variety of different projects that they can come to it to try and get an understanding of that process because I think that's sometimes what's difficult to do. I don't know if people would feel as confident about reaching out, or I don't know if I would have thought of approaching somebody at an early stage just to say look this is what I'm thinking of doing are you interested in that vaguely or have you got any advice to offer because I

suppose you might feel slightly nervous thinking does that mean I have to commit to them if they've offered me advice. I think it's just always a bit difficult to know and I think sometimes because people are fearful of sharing their ideas because unless you've got really specific access to something that you've already tied up, sometimes there are subjects that are slightly broader that might be able to be approached by other people and I think that's maybe why people are sometimes nervous in terms of shading information too soon until you know you've got a done deal.

**Laura Taylor-Williams** - You know it's your project and if you think you can tell it the way you want to and it can be a success then speaking with distributors or sales agents, they might be able to explain actually we want to elevate this and if you really care about your story you might be okay to take somebody else on board with you to just make sure the project gets nurtured in a way that the project needs. You know it's your project and it's just advice and you can take it or leave it. But I think really, people want to help, and people want interesting stories and if you've come up with an idea and you're passionate about it then and you can say why you're the right person for this project and how you're going to tell it and it's interesting then reach out, I'd really encourage it.

**Angela Clarke** - Nothing ventured nothing gained isn't it. Okay, well thank you so much for your time, Laura, I really appreciate it, that's been so helpful because it is a confusing world when you're not familiar with it. I hope that's helped people understand some of those terminologies, what they mean and what order the value chain order takes and where to start, so thank you so much, hugely appreciated.

**Laura Taylor-Williams** - You're welcome. Thank you for having me bye. Bye.

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