

# DOCUMENTARY MAKING

For Digital  
Humanists

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## 24. Distribution and Dissemination

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Academic conventions for humanists remain rooted in the practices that matured in the nineteenth century. Academic histories are written, sometimes presented, but almost always disseminated via the written word, and even though quills have been replaced by typewriters, which were then replaced by word-processors and computers, the dominant dissemination practice of the historian has remained largely unchanged. Humanists write articles and books, disseminated by academic journals and publishers. Academic documentaries do not easily fit into this schema easily.

This raises some interesting questions for scholars who break from this convention and set out to produce academic films. The existing platforms of dissemination — books and academic journals — remain largely incompatible with the medium. The academic documentary is consumed on screens, but the question remains as to whose screens and where; in digital or physical spaces. Academic documentaries are currently obliged, at least at present, to find new ways to reach their target audience. This is both a challenge and an opportunity. A work in a new medium is necessarily disruptive and poses new methodological questions. Academic film also creates new opportunities to reach beyond the specialised readership of traditional academic texts.

In the absence of convention, you have the chance to propose and experiment with new conventions. How might one's work be peer-reviewed, or its impact measured? Clearly, as the producer of an academic piece, you must be recognised for your contribution.

When approaching the distribution process, you should consider the following questions:

1. Who is the intended audience for this piece?
2. Where does that audience exist or congregate, in both online and offline spaces?
3. What will be required to speak directly to that audience?
4. What message would activate interest in your film among that audience?
5. Who are the gatekeepers who control or limit access to your desired audience? What message can spark the interest of these gatekeepers; why should they promote your project or help you to raise awareness?
6. Will your film work better in mobile-focused digital spaces (such as YouTube); in the home of the intended audience (via a digital streaming service); or in a curated event or exhibition (such as a screening)?

By answering these questions, you will be in a position to begin constructing a tailored dissemination strategy for your work. Such strategies will likely vary from the dominant dissemination strategies in your field. This is no bad thing and the opportunity to reach new audiences in new ways should be embraced.

## Theatrical Release

By identifying an audience and the spaces where it exists and/or congregates, potential avenues for the film's release can likewise be identified quickly. For *Looking for Charlie*, a film about the history of the silent era, lovers of cinema were identified as a core audience. Online, these groups congregated in various internet forums and social-media groups. Offline, such individuals attended film festivals, the cinema, and cinema museums. Such venues created a clear path through which we could reach an audience most likely to respond to our work. Whilst not all academic documentaries require a theatrical presentation, *Looking for Charlie* is about the history of cinema, is a feature-length production, and has high production values. It was appropriate that it become an exhibition piece, shown in public spaces as part of a larger, immersive experience.

We wanted to exhibit the film in a series of physical spaces, to open up broader discussions about the themes and issues raised by our work as part of a larger series of events. As a documentary about the history of film, it made intellectual sense to attempt a limited theatrical run for *Looking for Charlie*; to have audiences engage with our work in the same way that they would engage with the works of Charlie Chaplin or Buster Keaton. A standard theatrical release was, of course, unlikely. Such endeavours require extensive planning, the cooperation of numerous theatres who perceive mass market appeal in the work, and, most importantly, a significant marketing budget to drive traffic into the cinemas in question. It is not enough merely to arrange a screening and hope that an audience will materialise. It is absolutely necessary to create awareness, crafting a message that is compelling enough to drive an audience to see your work.

Despite the difficulties associated with any type of theatrical release, we nonetheless set about creating an exhibition roadshow. The idea was simple: identify venues that would have some sort of natural synergy with our subject and begin building a series of screenings and events around those locations. In each location we would introduce our film and host a question-and-answer session. To drive our marketing narrative, we worked to produce a consistent body of artwork to promote the film, and a common tagline or message designed to accurately describe it to potential audience members: 'A film about the dark side of the silent era, from Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton to the forgotten clowns who inspired them'.

In order to reach a wider audience, a promotional campaign, which included local radio, television, posters, and flyers, was conducted. The flyer (see Figure 86) was produced using Photoshop and printed on high-quality paper — the quality of the design and the thickness and weight of the paper were important in reflecting the professional nature of the film's production. The same design was used on the posters; the consistency of the message and the symmetry of the promotion was of fundamental importance. In fact, extracting key parts of the film's message was key to gaining favourable press coverage. The main themes that played out across the promotion were:

- Appealing to people's nostalgia for the silent era.

- Offering a deeper understanding of the art: the DNA of comedy.
- Humanising performers.
- The mental health themes covered within the film.

Our premiere event occurred in the city of Coventry, which had recently been awarded the accolade of City of Culture 2021. As this is our home city, we were able to pay particular attention to this screening. We selected a high-quality, large-capacity venue, which we turned into a ‘pop-up cinema and museum’. We took this approach for a number of reasons. Firstly, our choice of venue allowed us to sidestep the politics of the modern film industry, with which every dedicated cinema must contend. Rather than potentially seeing our film as a nuisance — something to be accommodated between more profitable Hollywood fare — our chosen venue embraced our project, making it one of their featured events. As such, they were incentivised to make the most of the experience, recognising that it would add to the fabric of what that venue already offered. We were able to build a larger event around the screening, allowing us to create a more fully realised, immersive experience. A pop-up museum was added, as was a screening of a Buster Keaton film with a live piano accompaniment, and the sale of cocktails from the era to complement the screening of our film.

We supported our premiere with extensive promotion, much of which took the form of high-quality posters and flyers which we distributed to local businesses. We particularly targeted those businesses and spaces that our target audience frequented. We also reached out to the press and were covered extensively by local newspapers, radio, and the BBC. Turning a bar into a pop-up museum was a novel idea, which generated a lot of attention — as did our film’s focus on Charlie Chaplin, whose name and legacy continues to attract interest from a wide cross-section of people. Indeed, whilst our initial marketing focused upon college-educated people aged twenty-five to forty-five, the broad reach of the interviews we conducted with organisations such as the BBC demonstrated that college-educated over-fifties were another viable target audience.

The film’s premiere was a resounding success. Many more people than we had anticipated attended the event, resulting in a packed venue.

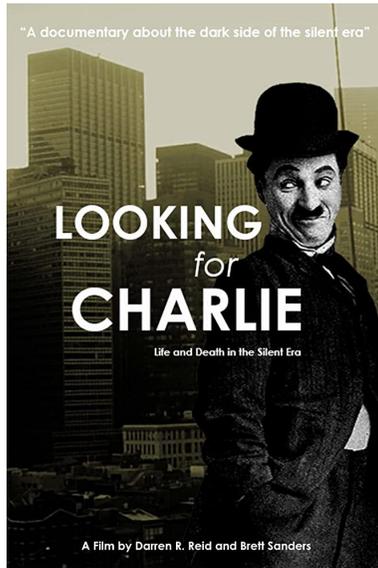


Fig. 86. Poster for *Looking for Charlie: Life and Death in the Silent Era*. This project was distributed as an 'event' film through a series of screenings presented by the filmmakers.

It also provided us with a model for how we could reach audiences in the future, as well as feedback on what aspects of our marketing message worked (and what did not). From here we continued to roll out the film, one screening at a time, picking venues that had a natural synergy with our subject, or those to which we could add entertainment and intellectual value. The result was a series of shows that allowed us to engage with a number of high-quality audiences with a deep interest in our subject and the main themes of our work.

The *Looking for Charlie* roadshow illuminated some core lessons about managing a film as an exhibition-style release. Significant promotional work is always required. Organising a screening is only one part of a much larger process, which involves creating awareness as well as the desire among potential audience members to attend a screening. On one occasion we were hosted by an organisation who had little interest in promoting our screening. It was a new organisation, which had yet to establish trust with its own customers, so organic footfall was light whilst targeted footfall (largely thanks to the dearth of promotion) was likewise sparse. Compared and contrasted with our other events, which

were appropriately managed and promoted with a consistent, core message, the difference was striking.

We also learned that our core message had to be refined. Despite making a documentary about comedians, our film focused on depression and mental illness. It was, therefore, important that our potential audience understood what this film was (and what it was not). Word about our events had to be spread effectively in online *and* offline spaces. We had to construct a model of our imagined audience member: who were they; how old were they; what were their interests; what would make them want to attend our event? The subject of our film appealed to two distinct groups — older men and women (fifty years and older) who had a lifelong relationship with the subjects of our film (particularly Chaplin and Keaton). The other group was university-educated twenty-five to forty-five-year-olds who particularly enjoyed the consumption of retro-themed products and vintage culture.

To maximise the impact of our roadshow, we also produced a guestbook to which we invited audience members to contribute. We included some questions that we asked our audience to consider: ‘In what ways did the film help you to learn more about the roots of Chaplin’s comedy?’ and ‘In what ways did this film help you to reframe your knowledge of Vaudeville and the early silent era?’. Answers to these questions helped us to measure the impact and success of our film, whilst creating empirically based feedback for future academic work. This information, combined with the knowledge we gained from our roadshow, provided us with a wealth of knowledge that we could utilise as a part of our digital distribution model, ensuring that we can effectively target future potential audiences.

## Digital Streaming

The growth of online streaming services such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, and YouTube has created new opportunities for scholars to reach very broad audiences. In reality, however, access to these channels is limited, and their broad reach may not make them appropriate for niche academic areas. Services such as Netflix tend to cultivate relationships with distributors who can offer them a catalogue of materials, rather than independent filmmakers who can typically offer them only a limited

volume of content. Whilst this does not make it impossible for you to access these distribution channels, it does severely limit opportunities in this space.

In order to appear on the leading digital streaming platforms, you will need to find a distributor who has built, or who will attempt to build, a relationship with that platform. You will then have to sign over a significant portion of your film's rights. After all of this, your piece *might* appear on the desired streaming service. Alternatively, a distribution aggregator's services can be employed. Aggregators are a type of distributor who charge for their service. They collect a variety of related films into packages, which they then offer to online streaming services. If your film is part of a package picked up by a streaming service, it will appear in its catalogue. Again, there are no guarantees. Unlike a regular distribution deal, however, it is the filmmaker who must pay the aggregator (rather than the distributor paying the filmmaker) for the *possibility* of being picked up by a streaming service. In both of these cases, you are unlikely to be paid well for your work.



Fig. 87. *Keepers of the Forest* was released primarily through online streaming services. It has been screened in Brazil, where its subject matter is most relevant, but its primary international channels of dissemination are Amazon Prime and YouTube. <https://youtu.be/ZywE92bDCrQ>.

Gaining distribution through large-scale streaming services may prove an insurmountable challenge. In that case, a more viable option may be embracing free-to-access distribution spaces, which allow for long-term, organic audience accumulation. Services such as YouTube offer a range of distribution opportunities, which can be combined, if desired,

with existing channels of digital scholarly publication. YouTube may not foster a particularly academic audience but the ability to embed content from the site into other online spaces provides a zero-cost method of integrating scholarly films into online journals and publications. Such works should, of course, speak to the intellectual aims, goals, and standards of the academic entity with which you wish to work. Scholarly presses are increasingly open to having discussions about the inclusion of audio/video content within their (digital) pages.

Whatever distribution space you choose, it is important to understand that publishing a piece does not mean that it will find an audience. Whether you release via a free-to-access platform such as YouTube or a premium streaming service such as Netflix, it is your responsibility to identify your audience, understand how your film will add value to them, and seek them out. Do not assume that your audience will discover your work amid the vast amount of content vying for their attention in the online space. Your documentary may appeal to a distinct and underserved niche, but if that audience does not know your work exists (and if they cannot easily access it) it will struggle to find traction.

To that end, revisit the questions listed at the outset of this chapter and utilise them as fully as you can in the digital space. In addition, you might also consider the following questions: to which online communities do my intended audience belong; how do they use social media; how can I introduce them to my work in a way that will encourage them to engage with it?

## Freely Accessible Digital Streaming

YouTube offers a free, easy, and accessible method of hosting videos online. There are, however, some drawbacks to the platform. Despite offering options to host HD videos, the service compresses the files that are uploaded to it. This can lower the quality and introduce unwanted visual artefacts. More problematically, the service tailors the quality of its videos to reflect the speed of the viewer's internet connection. Whilst this has advantages for the end-user, it can result in them viewing a downgraded version of your film, plagued by a lower than intended resolution or inferior sound quality. Your film might load at a faster speed, but the viewing experience will, for many, be inferior.

Despite this, YouTube remains the standard through which video content is consumed, particularly on mobile devices. Social networks such as Facebook and Twitter include video streaming and sharing services, making them ideal for simple, highly shareable (viral) clips. Social networks, however, are not built around a centralised, searchable database of publicly available video content. YouTube fills this niche and, as a result, it attracts an audience that is actively hoping to discover and consume video-based content which appeals to their interests. By placing your content on a site like YouTube, you make it comparatively easy for users to discover, particularly if your work services a specific niche not widely catered to on the site. In such cases, viewership may be small, but it is also likely to be engaged and appreciative.

Despite its apparent ubiquity, YouTube is not the only free-to-access, online streaming service that can be used to host your films. Vimeo, in particular, offers an alternative, which, for a small monthly fee, allows users to host full, non-compressed HD content which will not be downgraded to accommodate slower internet connections. In practical terms, this means that filmmakers are able to control the quality of their documentaries, removing one of the principal problems faced by producers of high-fidelity content on YouTube. Vimeo's audience is significantly smaller than YouTube's, however, and, as a result, there is less scope for an uploaded video to organically develop a large audience. If a film has been produced primarily for distribution through scholarly channels, as part of an open access article, for instance, it may be more important to control its visual and audio quality than it is to foster a broad audience. In such instances, Vimeo, rather than YouTube, may offer you a more suitable hosting solution.

Scholarly films are unlikely to attract a broad audience beyond their intended niche, unless specific effort has been expended upon creating a highly accessible survey of a popular topic. Still, there is always the potential (if not necessarily the likelihood) that works made available on sites such as YouTube and Vimeo will build a large audience. Scholarly films may not be particularly well suited to viral sharing, but these platforms nonetheless provide filmmakers with the opportunity, particularly over the long term, to grow sizeable audiences. Whether sought-after or not, filmmakers should be aware that works hosted on such services are likely to be seen outside of the academy and, as a

result, comment, discussion, and discourse may be the result. On a freely accessible public forum such as YouTube, however, user comments can be destructive as well as constructive, so thought should be given to developing a strategy for dealing with provocative, unfair, bigoted, or prejudicial comments which might be posted onto your film's page.

Scholars may choose to produce documentaries specifically in order to communicate ideas to broader audiences. Such scholars should, however, manage their expectations. Producing and releasing a film, no matter its intellectual worth, does not guarantee that an audience of any significant size will engage with it. Whilst sites such as YouTube and Vimeo offer easy access to an international audience, a vast array of competing content on a variety of topics means that, unless one's film has very broad appeal, it is unlikely to gain a massive following. Still, it is possible to use such freely accessible channels to speak to a much larger audience than those attracted by many academic journals or scholarly monographs. As with a theatrical or premium digital-streaming release, you should ask fundamental questions about the audience you wish to attract. Who is your intended audience; how do they use sites like YouTube; what type of content are they looking for; what core message from you will attract them to your film?

In a fast-changing online landscape, user behaviour should not be taken as a given. Whatever the size of the audience you hope to attract, it is the responsibility of the filmmaker to identify the most appropriate distribution channels for their work, and the best way to engage their desired audience with their content. YouTube and Vimeo are often consumed in short bursts on small mobile devices, but the rise of Smart TVs and devices such as Apple TV and Google Chromecast allow that same content to be viewed in a very different way: on the user's TV, in the comfort of their home, where they might demand longer, more involved content.

Filmmakers should assume that potential viewers will not discover their films unless their existence is highlighted. Leverage your social networks, particularly public-facing profiles on sites such as Twitter, to communicate with potential viewers about your work. Create and update a profile of your intended audience and continue to reach out to them in a way that adds value to their lives: informative or entertaining social media posts that may or may not be related to your film. Endeavour not

to over-promote your work; instead, use your film as a vehicle to drive broader conversations about its content whilst gently highlighting its existence and where it can be viewed.

Whatever approach you adopt for the dissemination of your film, understand that the distribution landscape is a fast-changing space with new developments occurring frequently. Rather than offering specific guidance, which is likely to become outmoded before it can be actioned, this chapter has instead sought to draw your attention to several broad approaches to the dissemination of your work. You, and only you, should be the ultimate author of your work's distribution model.

To accomplish that, you will need to develop a clear sense about what you wish to achieve. You will then need to consider your preferred audience, understanding where that audience resides and how you can effectively reach them with your work. You might also consider the places that this audience congregates in the real world and develop a method of reaching them there. Do you wish to screen your work in front of an audience; to what extent do you wish to interact with your audience; how do you wish these interactions to occur; is your work part of a larger, curated experience or do you expect your audience to consume it as part of a larger diet of bite-sized audio-visual content? Beginning to answer these questions will allow you to begin to understand how current distribution models can be used to most effectively to disseminate your work.

Ensure that you place the audience's experience at the heart of your model. Whilst the minutiae of the distribution landscape changes frequently, your audience should be relatively constant. Understand who you are making your film for, in order to devise the best path to connect this audience to your work. Keep your intended audience at the centre of your vision for dissemination: this will guide you far more effectively than any temporary market trend.

