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ASSESSMENT OF DOCUMENTARY FILM PRODUCTION IN NIGERIA:  
THE PROSPECT AND CHALLENGES

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ABSTRACT

*The target of this study was to assess documentary film production in Nigeria: the prospect and challenges. Documentary filmmaking is more than the smart presentation of real life events. In fact, it is more than a profession – it is a mental state committed to the richness and ambiguity of real life. The study observed that documentary film production is a non-fictional motion picture intended to document reality, primarily for the purposes of instruction, education or maintaining a historical record. Documentary film production is processed in different phases such as development, pre-production, production, post-production, and distribution phase. It was also stated in the study that documentary films production has a key role to play in how we see the world. According to the study, documentary film production encounter challenges such as deciding on a budget, on-location cooperation, rights to use archival footages, research material, and using the right equipment etc. it was finally concluded in the study that it is concluded that the better distribution a film can get, the more it can hope to make reasonable profit. Apparently, one of the recommendations made in the study was that filmmakers need to have reasonable expectations in distribution processes because distribution is required for a film to make a profit. They need to manipulate good business strategies for the distribution process.*

**Keywords:** Documentary Film Production, Prospect, Challenges and Nigeria

**INTRODUCTION**

Filmmaking is a laborious, multi-step process that might take years to accomplish. A film production is divided into five stages. The development stage of film production is where the initial details of the film are worked out before starting pre-production, which

focuses on research, casting, and location scouting (MasterClass, 2021). After pre-production is finished, shooting can begin. Shooting time varies by project, and the length of the production process is determined by the type of film you're shooting (short or feature-length). Following the completion of shooting, you will enter the post-production phase, when video will be edited and arranged into a coherent narrative. The production phase will be followed by the distribution phase, in which the finished product will be disseminated to theaters, on DVD, or via a streaming service, according to MasterClass (2021).

Finding and creating the story, recruiting a film director and actors, finding sources of finance, managing the budget, and managing the production team are the primary components of making a film at Sokanu Interactive Inc. (2022). The standard film production degree curriculum, on the other hand, covers more than just these film producer tasks. Each phase of a film production serves a different purpose, with the ultimate goal of successfully finishing each phase and finally completing a successful release. According to Charles (2020), cinema and digital media production will continue to thrive as long as people regard these sacrifices and processes as valuable. While creativity is essential, those involved in film production must also be business savvy. Even cheaply financed feature films and digital media can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars.

## **CONCEPT OF FILM**

A film, also known as a movie, motion picture, moving picture, picture, or photoplay, is a work of visual art that uses moving images to imitate experiences and express ideas, tales, perceptions, feelings, beauty, or ambiance (Severny, 2013). These visuals are usually accompanied by sound and, on rare occasions, additional sensory stimuli. Light is used to project film, often known as a series of still photos on film, in rapid succession onto a screen. This creates the illusion of genuine, smooth, and continuous movement due to the optical phenomena known as "persistence of perception" (Ralph Stephenson, 2022). The term "cinema," short for "cinematography," is frequently used to refer to filmmaking, the film industry, and the art form that results.

Film is a remarkable medium for conveying drama and, more importantly, evoking emotion. The art of motion pictures is extremely complicated, necessitating contributions from practically all other disciplines as well as a plethora of technical talents (for example, in sound recording, photography, and optics) (Ralph Stephenson, 2022). Film, or cinema, which essentially implies moving images of time, place, sound, and story, has experienced enormous popularity since its debut in Europe and America in the late nineteenth century. Film also refers to a single media or multimedia entertainment content intended for distribution or exhibition to the general public via any means and media in any digital media format, film, or video tape, including, but not limited to, a motion picture, a documentary, a television series, a television miniseries, a television special, interstitial television programming, long-form television, interactive television, music videos, interactive games, video games, commercials, internet p (Lawsider, 2022).

Film, in its most basic form, is more than just a form of entertainment. It is an art—the eighth art, according to UNESCO. Furthermore, film, like any other art form, is

influenced by technology as well as political, philosophical, and economic elements. According to Uwakwe (2010), film is made up of separate frames that, when displayed in fast succession, create the sense of motion. The motion film, according to Bittner (2013), is a medium of mass communication that has touched every segment of society, touched and dealt with every issue, and reached every audience. Film is any series of visual pictures captured in such a way that they can be seen as a moving picture by employing such recording, and includes any picture intended for presentation through any medium, including the internet or any other device (Law Insider, 2022). A film can also be a television movie, one or more episodes of a single television series, or a movie created for theatrical, video, or Internet distribution. The production of a commercial or one or more portions of a newscast or athletic event is not considered film. A "film" is a feature film, television or Internet show, documentary, music video, or television ad, regardless of whether it is on film, video, or digital medium. Film does not include news, current events, public programming, or a program that includes weather or market reports; a talk show; a production involving a questionnaire or contest; a sports event or sports activity; a gala presentation or awards show; a finished production that solicits funds; or a production for which the production company is required under United States Code, title 18, section 2257, to keep records pertaining to a performer portrayed in a production (Law Insider, 2022).

### **CONCEPT OF FILM PRODUCTION**

Photographing, filming, creating, and producing a commercial or motion picture, as well as all related preparation, set up, deconstruction, removal, or restoration tasks, are all examples of film production. Although film was originally used in filmmaking, most film productions are now digital (Film Connection Film Institute, 2013). Today, "filmmaking" refers to the process of creating a commercial audio-visual tale for distribution or transmission. Filmmaking (film production) is the process of creating a motion picture. The primary branch of cinematography is the production of motion pictures and television films. Motion-picture studios—companies that specialize in various sorts of films such as feature motion pictures, documentaries, popular scientific films, educational films, and animated cartoons—manufacture films. Filmmaking consists of several complex and distinct processes, beginning with an initial plot, idea, or commission. The process then moves on to screenwriting, casting, pre-production, shooting, sound recording, post-production, and screening the finished product in front of an audience, which may culminate in a film release and exhibition. Filmmaking takes place in a wide range of economic, social, and political circumstances all around the world. It employs a wide range of technologies and cinematic methods.

### **CONCEPT OF DOCUMENTARY FILM PRODUCTION**

A "documentary film," properly defined, is one that is based on true events. Nworgu (2010) defines a documentary as a non-fiction show that suggests reality. It could, however, use dramas, which are fictionalized depictions of true events (docu-drama). This entails dramatizing actual events. A documentary can also be defined as a creative

interpretation of reality or a creative treatment of reality. Documentaries are sometimes referred to as "present historical accounts" by academics. A documentary film production, sometimes known as a documentary film, is a non-fictional motion picture that is meant to depict reality, primarily for the purposes of training, education, or the preservation of historical records (Oxford English Dictionary, 2018). The documentary is defined by a filming practice, a cinematic heritage, and an audience reception mode that remains a discipline with no clear bounds. Early documentary films, dubbed "actuality films," were one minute or less in length. Documentaries have grown over time to become larger in duration and to contain additional categories. Educational, observational, and documentary films are among examples. Documentaries are incredibly instructive and are frequently used in schools to explain various ideas. Documentary filmmakers have an obligation to be authentic to their worldview without purposefully misrepresenting a subject. A documentary film is a motion picture that forms and interprets factual material for educational or entertainment reasons. Documentaries have been produced in some form or another in almost every country, and they have made significant contributions to the advancement of realism in film.

According to MacKenzie (2014), Polish writer and filmmaker Boleslaw Matuszewski was among those who identified the mode of documentary film production. He wrote two of the earliest texts on cinema. *Une nouvelle source de l'histoire* (eng., "A New Source of History") and *La photographie animée* (eng., "Animated Photography") Both were published in French in 1898 and were among the first written works to consider the historical and documentary value of film production. Matuszewski is also one of the first filmmakers to advocate for the establishment of a film archive to collect and preserve visual materials (Chapman, 2013). The word "documentary" was coined by Scottish documentary filmmaker John Grierson in his review of Robert Flaherty's film "Moana," published in the *New York Sun* on February 8, 1926, written by "The Moviegoer" (a pen name for Grierson). Grierson's principles of documentary were that cinema's potential for observing life could be exploited in a new art form; that the "original" actor and "original" scene are better guides than their fiction counterparts to interpreting the modern world; and that materials "thus taken from the raw" can be more real than the acted article. In this regard, Grierson's definition of documentary as "creative treatment of actuality" (History/Film, 2018) has gained some acceptance, with this position at variance with Soviet film-maker Dziga Vertov's provocation to present "life as it is" (that is, life filmed surreptitiously) and "life caught unawares" (life provoked or surprised by the camera). The American film critic Pare Lorentz defines a documentary film as "a factual film that is dramatic" (Pare Lorentz Film Library, 2011). Others further state that a documentary stands out from the other types of non-fiction films for providing an opinion and a specific message along with the facts it presents (Larry Ward Fall, 2008). A scholar named Betsy McLane asserted that documentaries are for filmmakers to convey their views about historical events, people, and places that they find significant (McLane, 2012). Therefore, the advantage of documentaries lies in introducing new perspectives that may not be prevalent in traditional media such as written publications and school curricula (Stoddard, Marcus, 2010). Documentary filmmaking can be used as a form of journalism, advocacy, or personal expression.

Documentary films can tell the story of an entire life or a series of events. There is no set format for a documentary film; each one is its own miniature movie. Documentary filmmaking or film production was born out of the birth of television when an unknown filmmaker with a burning desire to tell his or her story started filming in black and white to document life events. A practice of filmmaking that deals with actual and factual (and usually contemporary) issues, institutions, and people; whose purpose is to educate, inform, communicate, persuade, raise consciousness, or satisfy curiosity; in which the viewer is commonly addressed as a citizen of a public sphere; whose materials are selected and arranged from what already exists (rather than being made up); and whose methods involve filming "real people" as themselves in actual locations, using natural light and ambient sound.

### **THE CHALLENGES OF DOCUMENTARY FILM PRODUCTION**

Some documentary filmmakers may lack experience in visual arts and in using the video camera. Learning to use the camera and microphone, techniques to frame shots and filming in real time can prove to be very challenging. Data analysis/video editing phase can be very time consuming and challenging as well. Since the video captures moving real time images and shares with the viewer's more evidence than static images or text, researchers have to be reflexive and make ethical decisions about video clips that are included or excluded from the film. However, the most occurring challenges of documentary film production are understated as follows:

- Deciding on a budget: The concern of filmmaker before planning the shoot of a documentary film is deciding on a budget. As filmmaker, financing an entire documentary film is not possible. In addition, getting sponsors for a reliable documentary film production project is as difficult as getting blood from a stone. No matter how a film producer tries, financing for documentary film production project usually has to be borne by the filmmakers themselves. In such situations, the filmmakers cannot be as free as they want to be while shooting the documentary films. This leads to cuts and compromises at various sections such as camera equipment, gears, locations, traveling, etc (Sarang Padhye, 2021).
- On-Location cooperation: When film a documentary film, the most common challenge faced by the filmmaker is their need to be taken seriously. While the project is extremely serious for the filmmakers but not for the audiences who are being interviewed or featured. They are in dire need to be assured that their footage will not be used against them or why should they give an interview to random filmmakers?

No matter how much research and prior contacts and appointments have been made with experts and delegates who need to be interviewed, student filmmakers are placed at a generously low priority. This is not intentional but common. In such cases, having a strong sponsored connection or presentable portfolio might help in getting in touch with people. Nevertheless, the foremost quality that makes people talk to the filmmakers is politeness.

- Rights to use archival footages: Documentary film producer faces a major problem in acquiring rights to use archival footage. A professional well-known documentarian might easily get access to archival footage because of their connection and reputation. However, filmmakers are yet to gain the qualities that make it challenging them to get access. In such cases, filmmaker documentarians actually have to undergo quite some trouble to gain the right to use archival footage. The reason why filmmaker faces difficulty here is their inexperience and authority. The organization providing rights to the filmmakers has to think multiple times, about how and where the footage is being used. Not to sound negative, but trusting filmmaker documentarians for the first time is challenging for authorities. With time and experience, these tasks become easier. All the passionate filmmaker need to do is keep hustling and have patience (Sarang Padhye, 2021).
- Research Material: Documentary making is not very different from filmmaking. This also involves pre-production, production, and post-production stages. While all the stages are equally important, pre-production is the foremost stage that involves research, location race, documentary script, preparation of Master sheet, etc. Without a proper pre-production activity, the further stages of documentary filming become more difficult. Researching is not a very challenging task but without a proper plan, it might get chaotic leading to further hassles. The best way to do research is to plan the motive of your documentary. It is important to carry the documentary synopsis when the research team is approaching locations and experts. Digital media and archival footage are a great help in research work but sometimes with excellent communication skills, your team can find out unique approaches and facts about an event. Thus, good communication skills, politeness, and an open mind can make the pre-production stage successful (Sarang Padhye, 2021).
- Using the right equipment: Filmmaker documentarians may or may not have gained definite professional experience in filming especially non-scripted events. The difference between scripted and non-scripted filming defines the use of perfect equipment. Filmmaker might make a mistake in choosing the right equipment for filming a documentary or a short film that can lead to

further troubles and regrets. This might happen due to inexperience and less knowledge. Thus, it is crucial to note that the documentary is about filming real unscripted events. This involves going into locations and areas where you might not even get the chance to place your tripod. Thus, some vital factors to keep in mind while choosing the filming equipment involve the kind of location, assured facilities, the material to be filmed, the rough process of filming, and the budget (Sarang Padhye, 2021).

- **Production Management:** Filmmakers face enormous challenges during the filming of a documentary. As the coverage of unscripted footage is concerned, it is arduous to shoot for the first time. If it is a crowded place, the handling of cameras, deciding the camera movements, and getting interviews from people on the spot is quite challenging. The production team has the duty to manage the entire shoot and make sure it is smooth. Often people being filmed might have a problem with being captured on the camera without any permission. In such cases, it is the duty of the production team to take permissions and ensure stability in the shoot so that a ruckus is not created (Sarang Padhye, 2021).

A documentary might involve a number of crewmembers at different locations. Although, while directing a documentary or even a low budget film, it is not important to convey every shot's details to each other, the major updates such as coverage of locations or discovery of a new approach must be conveyed to the production manager (Sarang Padhye, 2021).

## **THE PROSPECT OF DOCUMENTARY FILM PRODUCTION**

Documentary films production has a key role to play in how we see the world, educate ourselves, and develop empathy with the lived experiences of others (Marfo, 2007). It may be their multi-sensory nature has found to be more impactful of portraying reality as well as a means for social persuasion (Nichols, 2010). It is a genre that has significantly developed and grown over the last 100 years with recent acceleration and proliferation due to advances influencing the cost and accessibility of video capture and editing technologies (Belk, 2011). Also in recent years, documentary films production is increasingly being used in academia as well for disseminating knowledge. An evolving belief is that documentaries can be valuable in the field of research to illuminate issues of social justice and existing inequities in public education as well as democratize research (Friend & Caruthers, 2016). Documentaries occupy an important place in our social psyche. Whether it be an addiction to the prolific work of David Attenborough, a sense of long-term connection with the participants in Michael Apted's "Seven-Up" series, or a pull to activism with thanks to the accessible work of Damon Gameau (e.g. *That Sugar Film*, 2014),

documentaries provide an impetus and platform for change, affirmative action and meaningful dialogue (Bacha, 2015). While their position in popular culture is undoubtedly cemented, it is really only in the last decade that the possibilities inherent in documentary filmmaking have been acknowledged as way to generate and disseminate knowledge in the academic space (Morgan et al., 2019). While questions have been raised over time about scholarly rigor of this paradigm (Webb et al., 2013), there have been substantial shifts in recognizing the value and impact of using this approach as a research lens for seeing, knowing, showing and making sense of lived experiences under study (Pink, 2013). Essentially, documentary filmmaking is a qualitative research strategy, which involves and provides an extended and intensive period of involvement in some social world (Blaikie, 2000). In many ways, it is an extension of the well-established research paradigm of ethnography and by expanding the signature data collection approach of participant observation to include filmmaking practices, this allows for the capture, documentation and preservation of data that more thoroughly maintains authenticity and, arguably, subjectivity (Kerrigan & Batty, 2015). Documentary film production which be paving a way to attempt the representation or translation of reality into a format that is accessible, familiar and relatable (Ellis, 2012). While it seems intuitive (particularly in a society drawn in by visual representations) that documentary would be an attractive way to gather and produce legitimate forms of knowledge (Nichols, 2016), there are still question marks over the rigor of this process and its subsequent ability to stake a claim as a research approach.

Societal, we are comfortable with documentary filmmaking as a source of entertainment and education, but the shift to informing research has not been so straight forward (Morgan et al., 2019). Documentary may allow us to access lived experiences in ways that are authentic and compelling, but uncertainty remains about whether this is enough when we consider research traditions and expectations, including notions of ethics and integrity. This disconnect suggests the need for further interrogation to consider whether documentary filmmaking as a research method is able to inform quality research practices. Documentary film production categorized within the genre of filmmaking research or screen production research, as its known, which could be considered a more comprehensive way to acknowledge all forms of audio-visual media and include all stages of production (e.g. screenwriting, editing, visual effects, etc.) (Kerrigan & Batty, 2015).

## **THE PROCESS OF DOCUMENTARY FILM PRODUCTION**

The documentary film production could be processed in different phases. Each phases has a different purpose, with the overarching goal to get to the next one, and ultimately on to distribution. Each process varies in length, and different roles suit different process. Sadly, some projects do not make it all the way, as some fall over in development and pre-production.



- Development: In the development project is been birthed. It is the creation, writing, organizing and planning process of a project. In development, a preliminary budget is made, key cast are attached, key creative's are chosen, main locations scouted and multiple script drafts may be written. It is all the groundwork to show what the project will be and how much it will cost to make. It starts the moment a Producer thinks of a project or a Writer starts penning words on a page.

Development can take months or even years to get the project green-lit by a studio or funded independently and move into pre-production. Green lighting a film means the studio has approved the idea and will finance the project and move into production (Indie Film Hustle, 2022).

- Pre-production: Pre-production (or 'pre' as it's called) is where scripts are amended, budgets are adjusted, actors are cast, locations scouted, the crew employed, shooting schedules amended, sets designed and built, costumes made and fitted, and everything to do with the shoot is planned and tested.

Pre-production includes all the processes taken before the actual documentary shoot:

- ❖ Casting
- ❖ Rehearsal with the actors
- ❖ Budgeting
- ❖ Scriptwriting
- ❖ Location scouting
- ❖ Wardrobe
- ❖ Prop shopping
- ❖ Set design
- ❖ Pre-visualization
- ❖ Pre-lighting
- ❖ Pre-composition

The pre-production process can last many months from the initial green lighting of a project to when cameras actually roll. As this date draws closer, the crew grows with many

people being employed about two to eight weeks before the shoot starts (Indie Film Hustle, 2022).

- **Production:** The production stage is where the rubber hits the road. The Writer, Director, Producer, and countless other creative minds finally see their ideas captured on film, one day at a time. Production is usually the shortest of the five phases, even though it is paramount to the film and where most of the budget is allotted.

Production is the busiest time, with the film crew positions swelling to hundreds and the days becoming longer in order to be as efficient as possible with all the gear and locations on hire. Let us go over a few key areas of the film production process.

## **I. LINE PRODUCER**

A Line Producer (LP) is responsible for all of the logistics of getting a film from start to finish. This includes hiring the crew, setting up the set, and making sure that the entire production is running smoothly.

## **II. FIRST ASSISTANT DIRECTOR**

First Assistant Director (1st AD) is a position in filmmaking where a person helps an assistant director and takes care of other aspects related to the film such as, production office tasks, equipment management, budgeting etc.

## **III. COSTUME, HAIR AND MAKE-UP**

The actors need to be fitted for their costumes and makeup after being brought in costume design is also key. The costume department needs to be ready with the right clothes for each scene. If you can imagine the person, you can probably make a costume that will help you get there.

- **Post-production:** So you've thought of an idea, written a script, raised the funds, employed a bunch of crew to get it made, spent most of your budget, and hopefully have shot some decent footage in the process. Now it is time to move into post-production. This is where the footage is edited, the sound is mixed, visual effects are added, a soundtrack is composed, titles are created, and the project is completed and prepared for distribution. Although the shooting crew has done a lot of hard work, now the post-production crew face arduous hours of work ahead of them to piece together the scenes and craft a stunning story (Indie Film Hustle, 2022).

- **Distribution:** Without a stringent and robust distribution strategy, the other four stages of production are somewhat redundant, at least from a business perspective. Distribution is the final stage in a project for producers looking to make a return-on-investment. This can be from cinema distribution, selling to a TV network or streaming service, or releasing direct to DVD.

Whatever the distribution plan is, the producers will have spent many hours planning and marketing their piece to ensure the biggest audience and largest return. With the digital age and rapidly converging technologies, viewers are watching content in new and different ways, meaning that the distribution phase is constantly evolving (Indie Film Hustle, 2022).

## **CONCLUSION**

Documentary films are observed to deal with stories of series of events. There is no set format attached to documentary film. Over the years, this form of documentary has taken on many forms and faces. Documentary filmmakers can now be found making home movies, music videos, art films, corporate videos, news clips, TV shows, and even stage shows. Documentary films production have a key role to play in how we see the world. Moreover, documentaries can be valuable in the field of research to illuminate issues of social justice and existing inequities in public education as well as democratize research. However, documentary film production encounter challenges such as deciding on a budget, on-location cooperation, rights to use archival footages, research material, and using the right equipment etc. In conclusion that the better distribution a film can get, the more it can hope to make reasonable profit.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Since creativity is important, filmmakers also need to have reasonable expectations in distribution processes because distribution is required for a film to make a profit. They need to manipulate good business strategies for the distribution process.
2. Filmmakers in Nigeria should never take for granted how much effort they will need to put in filmmaking. They have to take into care every part of the filmmaking process, leading up to successful distribution.

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