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Yuan-Ling Lin

has been accepted towards fulfillment
of the requirements for

 M.A. degree in Telecommunication

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**THE ENDLESS GUERRILLA WAR: CASE STUDIES ON THE SURVIVAL OF
INDEPENDENT DOCUMENTARY PRODUCERS IN THE UNITED STATES**

By

Yuan-Ling Lin

A THESIS

Submitted to
Michigan State University
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ABSTRACT

**THE ENDLESS GUERRILLA WAR: CASE STUDIES ON THE SURVIVAL OF
INDEPENDENT DOCUMENTARY PRODUCERS IN THE UNITED STATES**

By

Yuan-Ling Lin

This thesis is designed to explore the question of survival of independent documentary producers in the United States. (By "survival", the researcher is speaking of making a living doing documentaries.) It will focus on the decision-making process of the independents when balancing their creative integrities and the funding/distribution needs. The role of the independents and their relationships with society will be examined as well.

The case study method with intensive interviews were used in this study. Four independent documentary producers in the Detroit area were interviewed. They are Mr. Gary Glaser, Mr. George Colburn, Ms. Sue Marx, and Mr. Mark Kochis.

To my parents, family and
Ruei.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Sincerely, I would like to thank Dr. Gilbert Williams, my committee supervisor, who always helped me "stick it out." Without his patience and instructions, I would not be able to go through it. My appreciations are also given to Dr. Barry Litman and Mr. Bob Albers who are my committee members. Their considerations always encouraged me.

Special thanks to all the independent documentary producers: Mr. Gary Glaser, Mr. George Colburn, Ms. Sue Marx, Mr. Mark Kochis and Mr. Ben Moon, for their time and information.

Also, I would like to send tons of appreciation to every one who is important to me through this process...

To my parents, sisters and brothers, who were always there when I needed them...

To Ruei, who made me laugh when there was no fun in my life...

And to all my dear friends, who showed up all the time, when I was upset, tired, or even hungry.....

All I can say is THANKS !

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CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION

I. Introduction

This study is designed to explore the way that independent documentary producers have survived in the United States. (By "survival", the researcher is speaking of making a living by doing documentaries.) It will focus on the decision-making process of the independents when balancing their creative integrities and the funding/distribution needs. The role of the independents and their relationships with society will be examined as well.

Who are the independent documentary producers in this research? The independents are defined as those who work outside the corporate and bureaucratic systems, and have control over their creative aspects in every production stage. (Zimmermann, 1982) In this study, the researcher will focus only on the independents who have a love and commitment to documentary video and filmmaking. The documentary topics they are dealing with range from social issues, historical events, arts/culture and human understanding. Some of them work on documentaries only, others work on whatever they can make a living.

Nowadays, Hollywood and the commercial networks are still the mainstream in the film/video industry, ideologically and physically. As alternative media which always counteract the established values of society and as outsiders of the mainstream of the system, the independent documentary producers are in a constant battle and struggle to survive. Much has been talked and written about concerning their dilemma, but there is no single research dealing with this survival issue -- examining the producer's decision-making process and his/her relationship with the society. Besides, one of the research motives came from the researcher's personal experiences (Appendix A) and interests.

II. Research Problems and Questions

Politics, censorship and commercial pressure are all that independent producers want to get away from. (Wiese, 1984). Ideally, they are supposed to be free from the institutional constraints and to be able to do what they want to do. However, practically, there are infinite numbers of pressures on the independents when they are on the road to maintain their artistic and professional integrity and to survive (Rosenthal, 1971).

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The system will start to cook the film maker. Is his work subject to network pressures? Can distribution outlets be found outside the usual and rather constricted channels? Does the director have to meet an air date? Is his shooting time limited? Is he really in total control or are sponsors continually breathing down his neck with lack of finance, and is he finally forced to agree with George Stoney that the name of the game is money?... These factors and others impinge on the evolution and development of the film. Slowly, that beautifully straight and simple original idea gets pulled into a curve, an arch, or even an unrecognizable squiggle, till the words, "If only I could have done it the way I wanted," become the saddest a film maker can utter. In reality, it is doubtful whether there ever was any straight creative line.

Based on this, there are a few questions the researcher would like to ask: What are the resources society can provide to contribute to the independent documentaries and to the producer's survival, i.e. production funds and distribution outlets? What are the problems the independents face under the above concerns? In order to counteract reality and to fulfill dreams, what and how are decisions made by the independent documentary producers? What is the role they must play in society? What kind of relationship exists between the independent documentary producers and the society that affects and determines the survival of the independents?

III. Significance of Research

There are three significant meanings in this research. First, many studies have been written about feature film makers, while few about documentary film makers or

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independent producers. Among the studies of independent documentary producers, interviews and articles are the majority. There is very little compilatory research toward this group. However, the value of independent documentary producers who act as the alternative media in society should not be neglected and their survival issues deserve more concerns.

Second, this survival issue has been addressed quite a bit both in the academic and the business world, either from artistic perspectives or from marketing ones. Nevertheless, there is no single case study examining the decision-making process of the independent documentary producers or trying to examine the prospects for their survival.

Third, how to make a living doing documentaries is always a question to the independents. To those who just got out of the academic world and wish to be independent documentary producers, this case study should be able to provide some useful information.

IV. Research Plan

This is a case study research report. The researcher will first describe and analyze the situation of independent documentary producers including means of support and problems they have in society. This part of the study results from related articles in magazines, newspapers,

journals, and periodicals. Some interviews made by others about this subject are also considered. An hypothetical model will be introduced based on previous research. Intensive interviews with four independent documentary producers will follow after the literature review. The interviewees were recruited and selected according to the research questions and purpose.

V. LIMITATIONS

There are three limitations in this research. First, because of the limited data focused on the research questions, the literature review will be in the form of articles and reports. The rest of the materials were obtained through interviews. Second, this study will examine the producer's decision-making process, focusing on two stages of the production process: funding and distribution. (According to several articles, funding and distribution are the two most crucial factors to survival questions.) Third, because of time and financial constraints, the interviews are conducted only in the Detroit area.

CHAPTER TWO LITERATURE REVIEW

I. Introduction

This chapter will first examine the situations concerning the resources and problems that independent documentary producers have in society on their roads to make documentaries and to survive. A hypothetical model will be presented to describe the relationship between the independents and the society that would relate to the survival answer. The reviewed results and hypothesis will be addressed and tested in the interview questions.

In the first part of "situation analysis," the researcher will focus on two production stages - funding and distribution - and will describe the producer's situation in regard to the following questions. Ideally and practically, what are the resources that society provides to the independent documentary producers in funding and distribution activities? What are the problems the independents face when using those resources? Do they get enough of what they need? What should be attributed to the problems? How do the producers perceive and solve their problems? The methods of how to raise funds and to get

distribution outlets have been addressed a lot in this field. Therefore, this part of the study will focus on the situation/problems of the independents in the fund raising and distribution process. It is hoped that this study will provide insight to the producer's problems in terms of survival.

A hypothetical model will be introduced based on the above analysis in the second part. It will describe what kind of the interactive and mutually beneficial relationship would exist between the independents and their societies and how it could be attributed to survival answers. The models will be developed based on the concepts of system theories, related studies and the researcher's observations.

II. Situation Analysis

The situation of independent documentary producers in society will be analyzed for both the funding and distribution stages.

A. Funding stage

1. Resources

Most independents have to spend nearly as much time raising funds as they do on the actual production of their works (Mooney, 1981). Other than the self-financing, there are two types and three funding resources for the

independently produced documentaries: Federal and State (public sectors), foundations, and corporations (private sectors) (DRI, 1981).

2. Problems

All funders need to be given some reasons or excuses to give their money away (DRI, 1981). They have their own biases about what they want to support and what they expect to receive in return (Powell, 1986). Seemingly, they tend to expect something visible and profitable and that is not always the value of documentaries that the independents always hold dear. The father of British documentaries John Grierson once criticized, "The people who sponsor its ultimate shape and qualities do not care a damn for the purpose it once professed and the ends which gave it its larger life... They are stifling a great public asset and serving this country ill." (Grierson, 1952) Generally speaking, except for some special interest groups, most of funders favor funding high-prestige, non-controversial programs that foster their image and seldom support potentially controversial projects (Powell, 1986). Since documentaries, particularly those deal with social issues, have been treated as "potentially controversial projects", the independent documentary producers have continually complained about the unfair, discriminating treatments from

fundere (both of public and private funding sectors). The following are the problems.

(a) The Independents vs. The Federal/State Funding Agencies

The National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and The National Endowment for Humanities (NEH) are the two largest and self-sufficient Federal funding agencies. Among the 36 grants and \$835,000 program funds that the NEA gave to support film and video production in 1990, there were 13 grants worth \$348,000 that went to documentary projects. The average for each project was about \$25,000 that could only support part of the production costs. Through the fiscal year 1988 to 1990, most of the grant recipients were located in New York. (Table A)

Table A: NEA Grants Recipient Allocations, 1988-1990

Locations	1988	1989	1990
New York	4	11	9
California	1	1	3
Massachusetts	1	1	1
Others	3	0	0

* Source: NEA Annual Report, 1988-1990.

Currently, the NEA is under attack by conservatives from political groups and communities (Wallis, 1990). Since 1989,

it has required all grant recipients to sign a no-obscenity statement that they "will not use grant funds to promote, disseminate or produce materials that are 'obscene' under the well-settled legal definition employed by the Supreme Court." (Robinson, 1990) If the grantees violate this prohibition, NEA can seek the return of grant funds. It is set to "block grants for projects likely to offend the public." (Frohnmayr, 1990).

Some documentaries received financial support from the National Endowment for Humanities. However, according to the NEH annual report of 1990, twenty three documentaries were funded under the "Humanities Projects in Media" program (Table B). The researcher divided the funded documentaries into four categories based on these descriptions: Historical events, arts/culture, personal portrait and social issues, and found that the documentaries dealing with the arts/cultural and historical events were most favored, while social issue documentaries were seldom funded.

Hence, the federal and state governments appear to give money for their own interests. Although various states have quite different goals, procedures, level of accessibility and politics of organizations, the track record is quite requested in some state organizations, that is, there are very few chances for new comers there. (DRI, 1981) Besides, in comparison with organizations, the independents as

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individuals have a hard time gaining access. For example, the NEH only accepts applications from non-profit institutions or groups. (NEH, 1991)

Table B: NEH Fundings on Documentaries , 1990.

Categories	Number of Projects	Amount of Funds
Historical Events	8	\$1,235,451
Arts/Culture	10	\$1,340,812
Personal Portrait	4	\$827,082
Social Issues	1	\$450,805
Total Documentary Projects	23	\$3,854,150
Total Projects	57	\$10,269,000

Source: NEH Annual Report, 1990.

(b) The Independents vs. The Private Foundations

Totally, there are about 25,000 foundations in the United States including several types of foundations such as national private foundations, regional or special interest foundations and corporate fund foundations. A few foundations are set up for supporting special interest projects including politically controversial documentaries. They are willing to see their money back someone and something quite worthy. However, there are still few foundations supporting filmmakers or television producers.

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The independents who produce controversial programs often view foundations "as an unlikely source of funds." (Mooney, 1981) Some independents have sought and found funding for unusual programs because of the good timing; Every foundation's mission is to spend their money away by the end of the year. As Jackie Kitzelman of The Western States Arts Foundation once said, "By Law, all foundations and corporation funds have to give away a certain amount of money every year as tax deductions. They may have thirteen rotten proposals and they have to give that money away. They might as well give it to you." (Mooney, 1981).

(c) The Independents vs. The Corporations

For private corporations, public relations is a big reason for them to be active in funding activities. Through funding worthy documentary films they can build up good images and relations with the community. Besides, if someone in the headquarters of the corporations has a passion toward the filmmaking/the filmmaker's ideas or who is related to the fund raiser (even though it may seldom happen), the producer would have a very good opportunity to get financial support. Otherwise, there are quite a few things that frustrate the independent documentary producer, especially the small ones, in searching for financial support through

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corporations. First, for the sake of the business, national corporations tend to give money to national projects and to major institutions. They also tend to support organizations and projects in communities where they have major plants or offices. Second, because the political orientation of most documentaries and documentary producers is liberal, while the political orientation of most corporate executives is conservative, the documentaries dealing with social issues are treated as a 'potential danger' and have more difficulty in getting funds (DRI, 1981). Third, since image building is the main purpose for corporations involved in underwriting and funding matters, they prefer to have their names associated with non-controversial, high-quality programs (Powell, 1986). There are a few things that corporations want to know before they give their money away. Will this film make profits? Will it bring about the rate of return? Will it have a market or audience? Will the film have the social, emotional or spiritual value? What is the reputation of the producer as well as his/her track record, reliability and capability? (Wiese, 1983)

In terms of TV commercial networks as the private corporation type of funders, they only fund their own documentary programs or purchase the finished works. This policy makes it hard for independent producers to get access. Actually, the commercial networks have virtually

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abandoned the documentary because of its small audience, and its potential in causing criticism and lawsuits (Weiss, 1983).

(d) The Independents vs. Public Television

PBS is supposed to be the best place for the independent documentary producers in this country. However, they have been struggling to gain a formal position within the system. Under the Congress's concerns about the value of the independent producers' contribution to public television, the Public Telecommunications Financing Act of 1978 was born. It required CPB to allocate "a substantial amount" of the federal money to the independent producers and especially the "small independent producers." (Global Village, 1980; Mooney, 1981) Nevertheless, since there have been shortages of funds from the Federal government, the independents have to turn to outside funders, both public and private, for more sufficient financial supports.

In 1989, CPB and NCIPBP (The National Coalition of Independent Public Broadcasting Producers) incorporated ITVS (The Independent Television Service). ITVS was created under the amendment of the Public Broadcasting Act and is set for funding independent public television productions. It began with a congressionally mandated first-year fund of \$6 million from CPB to develop and produce programs without

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direct oversight by other public television entities. However, producers have charged CPB for renegeing on their agreements. According to the NCIPBP, "CPB has failed to support ITVS on several counts, including proposing to use nearly one-sixth of the ITVS fund to support overhead costs," the Coalition said, "CPB was ordered to cover with resources other than the \$6 million earmarked for program production." (Lambert, 1990)

PBS is supposed to have the mandate to assist the independent producers in reaching a wide audience. However, the independent producers have complained that they were treated unfairly in seeking for access to the PBS's national programming (Table C). They could not get funds or enough funds to compensate their expenditure on production. (Levitch, 1977) There are some critical opinions: First, the independents who have close relationships with large foundations or the major PBS stations, such as WGBH and WNET, can get access to PBS more easily than can the isolated independent producers (Levitch, 1977). Second, there are not enough funds from CPB. Since CPB only funds one-third or one-half, the independents have to find other sources for covering the cost. Third, it is not easy to get funds from the PBS local stations. Because of the shortage of funds, they would prefer to obtain funds that keep their own in-house staffs working, and they would also find it

Table C: PBS Distributed Hours, by Producers

Producers	Programming Proportions
PTV Organizations (Children's Television Workshop, etc.)	35%
Major PBS Stations	31%
Other PBS Stations	10%
Independent Producers	8%
Foreign Producers	7%
International Coproductions	5%
Consortia	3%
All Others	1%

Source: Corporation for Public Broadcasting, Public Television Programming Content By Category (1984), unpublished. (adapted from "Broadcast/Cable Programming Strategies and Practices", 1989)

easier and cheaper to channel already produced independent works into showcases rather than fund the production. Fourth, the independent's works are not favored by PBS in terms of economics. Compared to independent's works, national programs such as "NOVA" or BBC imports are cheaper and easier to promote and to schedule. Fifth, the PBS's programming philosophy leans toward national programming in order to get large audiences. This is contradictory to the nature of the independent documentary that tends to target specific audiences. Sixth, the increasing commercialization of PBS had resulted in decreasing the controversial

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programming (Levitch,1977; Zimmermann,1982).

PBS has been criticized for failing in fulfilling its mandates of reflecting the rich diversity of American social, cultural and political climates. This is because of its inadequacy in funding and airing more diverse, oppositional, and controversial opinions as the independent documentary producers have been doing. Like Professor Aufderheide once said, "Seemingly, PBS's mandate makes it a perfect place for controversial programs, but its intention on searching for wider audiences and potential subscribers makes itself notorious to independent documentary producers." PBS was born differently from the commercial systems to keep the "ecological balance" in the broadcasting environment. However, it is like the "vanishing species" because of its commercialization (Brown,1985). Moreover, because of the "dominant values of Capitalism," there has existed the contradiction between theory and practice in PBS; It seems to keep away from controversy and prefers the "soft politically inoffensive documentaries". (Zimmermann, 1982) Its creed of "objectivity," "neutrality," or "balance" toward making documentaries is resented by the independent documentary producers as well.

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B. Distribution Stage

Distribution is designed to guarantee films the opportunity to be seen by a great number of people and/or to make some money while doing it. The goal of distributing the independently produced works is to have them distributed as creatively and individually as possible. The independents can release their works by a major studio which can bring them a nice big advance and a huge advertising budget, or have their works handled by a smaller distributor that would involve less or no upfront money and much more narrow distribution, or distribute the film themselves (Gerstman, 1989). The decision is based on the producer's priority toward his/her distribution plan. For example, some may choose a big distributor in order to make as much as profits as possible through elaborate distribution work, no matter whether or not they might lose a certain degree of creative integrity. Others may decide to distribute by themselves to control over the whole process. Generally speaking, making profits, having a good exposure, and being able to fund the next film are some major concerns of most independents in distribution activities (AIVF, 1989). "There are three things they (filmmakers) can get out of distribution- fame, fortune, and a good conscience (i.e., making sure the work reaches its intended audience)." (Zimmerman, 1898)

The following are some accessible distribution outlets for the independently produced documentaries, videos and films, and the description of problems that independents face when distributing their works.

1. Distribution outlets

There are many possible distribution outlets in the market as follows.

(a) Theatrical distribution

The theatrical market is dominated by feature films. The major studio distributors (Hollywood per se) control nearly 90% of the total theatrical market (Wiese, 1984). They distribute in-house produced movies which are usually on a contractual base with an established producer, affiliated with the studios or acquired from the mini-majors as well as established "independent" producers. Most of the independents will most likely go to the smaller micro-studios or distributors which specialize in handling lower budget, more idiosyncratic arts and films, if they are to secure a theatrical release (Rosen, 1989). However, there are not many short films shown theatrically and very few feature length documentaries are booked by theaters. Michael Wiese talked about his experience on theatrically distributing his short film: *Hardware Wars*,

Suppose a theater booked your 10 minute film to play before *The Empire Strikes Back*. It runs for 4 weeks in a 2000 seat theater in Hollywood. There are lines around the block. All of the shows for the entire week are sold out...What weekly rental would you receive?... The answer is \$50...The \$50 is split 50/50 with your distributor. That leaves \$25 for you and your investors. If all goes well, and the theater pays the distributor on time, you will get your \$25 share three to six months later... It will cost you \$2000 or more to make a 35mm blow-up (if you shot in 16mm) and \$150 for each release print. After a few months of showings the print will be badly scratched.

Why did this happen? Wiese said it is because of the money and economics.

Theater managers like to turn over the audience as many times per day as possible. A short film adds time to the program...Another reason that theatrical shorts are nearly extinct is that distributors simply cannot earn enough money when the rental is so low and expenses are so high. They pay for prints, shipping, advertising, accounting. And they get \$25 per week rental in return for their efforts.

There are roughly 18,000 to 20,000 theaters in the United States, but only 100 theaters that show short independent films on a regular basis. They are mostly smaller art and repertory theaters. In 1981, to alleviate this situation, the National Endowment for the Arts had sponsored the Short Film Showcase, which was a competition for 16mm shorts. Nine new shorts were chosen from over 300 entries. The selected films were released free to the dozens of participating theaters. However, because of government cutbacks, NEA had not received sufficient funding to continue the Short Film Showcase in 1984. Wiese said, "The only reason a filmmaker might do this at all is exposure.

His or her film will be seen and enjoyed on a large screen. Now that's exciting. Any income must be regarded as gravy. You can't count on much." (Wiese, 1986)

Some independent documentarians will resort to self-distribution if they fail to secure a commercial distribution deal. Self-distribution is referred to as "four-walling" which means that they rent the "four-walls" of the theater. It is a very expensive and risky way to release a movie (Rosen, 1989). Wises's feature length documentary *Dolphin* was release theatrically in this way. When you 'four-wall', you pay all the costs, theater rental, advertising, etc.", he said,

When you take this great risk you get all the ticket money. The theater keeps the money from the concession stand which can be as much as 30% of the gross ticket sales... To 'four-wall' you must be very certain your film will have an audience because it is a very expensive venture with high risk.

Some theaters were built to exhibit the independent's work, but all of them face an uncertain future. This phenomenon results from the escalating rent, the high cost of shipping frequently changing films, and the fierce competition for press coverage. Besides, the theaters' limited time and resources, consumer's inadequate education, and the fact that independent works often arrive with little attendant publicity are the causes of their "handicaps." (Treadway, 1991) Here is an example. Last year, the American Film Institute launched a program, the AFI USA

Independent Showcase, with Laemmle Theaters to give independent films a limited release. It was subsidized by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. Every selected film was launched with advertising, a press screening, and a flyer at no cost to the filmmakers. Expenses to AFI and the theater were covered by the first thousand tickets sold. After this point, the filmmaker could receive a sliding scale percentage of the box office.¹ This screening of independent work has been sporadic in the past, because independents often can not afford the promotion needed to open their films. As the owner of Laemmle said, "Filmmakers raise all the money to make their film and spend every penny to finish it. Normally, money to open the film would come from distributors, but independents (without a distributor) get stuck." (Osborn, 1991) Most distributors won't take the risk of promoting a film that doesn't have a guaranteed audience, such as documentaries. AFI hoped this Showcase would demonstrate to distributors and studios that independent films can draw an audience, but the theater warned that if the screening didn't draw an audience, it will bail out sooner.

¹ Note: Each film opens on a Friday night and is screened 25 times during the week. At \$6.50 per ticket in a house that holds 220 seats, potential revenue is a substantial \$35,740.

(b) Non-theatrical distribution

Because of social and economic factors, non-theatrical exhibition, cable, broadcast television and home video markets may be more appropriate for showing independent documentaries (Rosen, 1989). This section will discuss the non-theatrical market first.

Non-theatrical markets include educational institutions such as libraries, schools, colleges and universities, corporations, and grass roots communities. These groups demand films or videos for education and/or entertainment. Other potential users are individuals such as teachers and home users who find titles from libraries or schools (Block, 1989).

Most educational distributors prefer 20-to-30 minute versions of films or videos. Different markets have different demands in terms of program length. If the filmmakers want to relate his/her work to the markets, shorter or longer versions might be considered. This makes the filmmakers upset all the time since every creator treats his/her work as perfect in its final shape.

There is a model for the documentary producer to expand the non-theatrical market of his/her work; if the producer is doing a 70-minute or longer documentary, it is appropriate to do a 50-to-58-minute version in video for U.S. commercial or public television distribution, a 20-to-

30-minute version in 16mm for school distribution, and a feature length film (16mm or 35mm) version for distribution in Europe and the world markets (Block, 1989).

(c) Domestic broadcast distribution:

As described above (in "funding stage"), the three TV commercial networks do not fund and seldom purchase the independent documentaries, PBS thus became the major distribution channel for the independent works. There are several ways of getting your show on PBS for a national airing. The first and the easiest one is to sell the program to an existing PBS series that features independent work such as "P.O.V." and "The American Experience." PBS will pay the producer a reasonable fee and cover all publicity and marketing costs. However, the acquisition fee is very little and these series are very competitive and able to acquire only a limited number of programs. Another divisions like "News and Public Affairs" and "Children's and Cultural Programming" are possible ways of national programming of PBS. Nevertheless, PBS is constantly lack of funds for acquiring provocative and original programming. Producers who have received federal funds from CPB have to provide their program free of charge to PBS. PBS then has the exclusive right to air the shows four times during a three-year period. Another way if getting the programs aired by

PBS is to negotiate a deal with a "presenting" station which will present the programs to PBS and handle the paperwork and contracts. If the programs can attract large audiences or prestige, the presenting station may also be willing to pay an acquisition fee. But they may ask for fees or require the producer to contract exclusively with their editing/production facilities. On the other hand, this may prove beneficial to the producer in the long run for developing a closer relationship with the station. Regional networks of public television stations may distribute the independent's programs and may be willing to pay something for it and can also sell the producer inexpensive satellite time and offer the program as a 'soft feed' which means the stations can use it if they desire (Chester, 1989). Chester described,

The biggest obstacle independents face is arranging 'same night and time' carriage... Stations don't automatically accept everything PBS schedules, particularly when a program is from an independent. Some stations are worried about possibly controversial content; other programmers fear that the independent film won't be able to hold a large enough audience."

In order to simplify the promotion work, get attention from the national press and publicize the program, the producer has to try hard to arrange the maximum carriage of the shows for every station on the same day and at the same time. Based on this, a cooperative agreement with the stations for 'same night' carriage was executed in the

autumn of 1989 by PBS. However, there may be some exceptions.

Every PBS station has its own priorities, so it is best for the independents to do as much of the promotion work as possible by themselves.

(d) Cable distribution:

Cable networks are emerging as an alternative to public television that has shrinking production funds for independent producers and few national showcases for such work (Yates, 1991). About the relationship of the independents and cable networks, Larry Jaffee has a clear description:

Over the past few years at least half a dozen satellite-delivered national cable networks have become more receptive to funding and developing independent projects, as they have shifted toward a preference for original programming over off-network series and reruns in order to differentiate themselves from their commercial broadcast counterparts. In response, more and more independents are giving up a degree of creative control and final cut in order to work with these networks. In exchange, the producers get larger budgets and audiences, as well as the opportunity to carry out projects that might otherwise languish unfunded. Furthermore, at a time of fiscal crisis for the arts, cable networks are providing independents, especially documentarians, with a welcome funding and distribution alternative to public television and the media arts center circuit (1991).

HBO, the Discovery Channel, The Learning Channel and Bravo are the four accessible examples of cable distribution. Since 1978, HBO has made and shown 140

documentaries. Most of them were presented as part of the "undercover America series." Many producers who have experiences with HBO treat it as "a different world" in comparison with Hollywood and the big three television networks because of the freedom that HBO gives; Discovery Production is a subsidiary of the Discovery Channel that has more than 50 million homes with basic service. Discovery does not produce any in-house shows and only programs documentaries; The Learning Channel has contributed to the existence of independent documentaries for a long time. Its long running acquisition series "The Independents" has brought the total number of independent works showcased to over 300 programs; Bravo, which reaches more than five million cable subscribers, begins funding and distributing independent films this year. Most of them are documentaries. It will also program a weekly showcase of US independent works that do not have theatrical distribution (Jaffee, 1991).

Although HBO has a documentary development department that will sometimes fund projects with producers and promotes them to a large audience, for cable networks, it is much easier to retain an audience with a series than with a single show. One-time shows are difficult to promote because they do not build followings (Wells, 1989). Some networks purchase shorts as "fillers" (or "interstitials"), but

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usually they produce the "interstitials" in-house instead of buying shorts that are at odds with their regular programming. Besides, most cable programmers have indicated a preference for dealing with distributors rather than filmmakers. Because of an emotional attachment to a project, filmmakers are often thought to be somewhat difficult to deal with, while distributors are considered more pragmatic. Many buyers mention that filmmakers often do not know enough about the marketplace, and may have wildly unrealistic expectations as to license fees (Wells, 1989). More and more documentaries were completed and/or purchased by the cable networks dealing directly with the independents. It seems to be a brighter future to independents, although the track record of the documentarians is a prerequisite (AIVF, 1989).

(e) Home video market:

Home video markets can offer new life for documentaries that have worn-out their non-theatrical shelf life by offering sales directly to the consumer (Stehlick, 1989).

There are three ways of distribution:

(1) Video rental store:

The documentary falls into the category of "special interest" at the video rental store. Of all the home video tapes purchased and rented in the U.S., "special interest" make up about 15% of the pie. The majority of special

interest titles are made to appeal to the largest number of consumers/audience and are therefore on mainstream subjects like exercise, golf, fishing, travel, sports, and "how to." Social issue documentaries, video arts and experimental videos and so on are only half of one percent of the total pie.

(2) Direct marketing: Direct mail and catalogue: marketing. Direct marketing is the second major channel of distribution for special interest tapes which has made an increasing percentage of special interest sales. More video distributors begin to use consumer mailing lists to target the special interest groups and try to sell videotapes to them which relate to those interests. Currently, direct mail sales account for about 15% of the entire home video market (Franco, 1990).

Direct mail is a fairly simple distribution mechanism. Distributors create or purchase lists of video buyers, or buy products that relate to the videos they are selling, and mail it to them directly. However, it is extremely expensive because hundreds of thousands of potential customers must be reached in order to generate enough sales to cover costs. Instead, most distributors choose to promote their tapes more specifically to a target audience. The problem is that the costs of developing so many separate subject-specific mailing lists is prohibitive for most small companies, not to

mention the independents themselves (Franco, 1990). The other method is catalogue distribution. Distributors put together specialized catalogues selling tapes to customers of a certain type. Theoretically, catalogue distribution would seem to be a sure fire way to do low-risk, large-scale distribution of special interest videos. However, for independent and alternative titles such as documentaries, the obstacles are great. The first problem is competition. There are currently thousands of special interest titles on the market. Simply having a low-cost special interest video is no guarantee that any cataloguer will choose that title for placement in the catalogue, or even if chosen, these kind of tapes do not fall into an easily identifiable subject category, that means they do not have a recognizable name attached. As a result, independent titles have suffered the same key problem they face in all channels of home video distribution--lack of publicity.

Catalogues do not promote tapes--the distributors merely present them to the consumer for sale. A tape that consumers already know about is much more likely to be purchased than a tape which the customer has no familiarity with. Programs have won the consumer trust, or have been visible through a public television broadcast or reviews in newspapers or magazines, such as *the National Geographic*, have more chance to be seen. For examples, the Video Project (the

distributor) distribute an award-winning inspirational documentary titled *Women- For America, For the World* on women and piece by the catalogue. The video was featured prominently, receiving a full quarter page and the catalogue went to 500,000 individuals. However, it resulted in less than 50 sales. Maysles Films had the similar story; they placed their five home video titles including the masterpiece *Salesman* in the catalogue, and sold about 60 copies over all five titles (Franco, 1991).

(3) Direct response: (advertising and television sales)

Placing advertisements of selling tapes in magazines is another method to reach the consumer. However, it seems that it is not a feasible way for the independent documentary producers to aim toward; Most of them paid a lot of money for a glossy advertisement and got next to no results. The problem was lack of recognizability of the title and the filmmaker. Furthermore, even if readers have interests, they would probably not go to the trouble of writing or calling the distributor's office, since most independent works are not available at most local video stores. Any interest that would be generated goes nowhere. As one of the producer said, "Unless you're Disney and you're everywhere, ads don't work." For example, Cambridge Documentary Films tried to sell its documentary *Choosing Children*, about lesbian parenting, to individuals through advertising. They

took out a series of advertisements in the magazines targeting their potential audience. However, they sold only five copies. A prestigious documentary group like Maysles Films had the similar story; they ran an expensive display ad for their documentaries for four weeks and received only twenty five orders that exactly covered the cost of the ads (Franco, 1991).

Selling video tapes through a televised 800 number has been extremely lucrative for certain types of videos. But there is no "alternative tape" such that documentaries can generate vast interests through marketing on commercial televisions. Nevertheless, Public television is a possible way for the independent documentary producers to reach the consumers who have interests in purchasing high quality special interest tapes. Bill Moyers' 1998 program, *A Gathering of Men*, a program about poet Robert Bly dealing with men and emotions, was a good example of using Public television as selling tool. He sold 5,000 units via an 800 number in the weeks during its first broadcast. For certain shows that are not successful through other forms of distribution, this would be a feasible method. *The Struggle for Poland*, a nine part series about the history of Poland in the twentieth century and focusing on the struggle of the Polish people to claim a national identity, was first turned down for home video distribution by most distributors as

being too narrow in focus. However, WNET advertised it for sale during the nine weeks the series aired in prime time. It was packaged for consumers to purchase and over 3,000 were sold and resulted in about \$340,000 in revenues.

Not all programs have had successful sales through on-air offers. Most successful are those that "appeal to viewers special interests, or that connect with the interests of a motivated ethnic or demographic group, or that hit a deep emotional chord in a group of viewers,... or fill a psychological or informational need." (Franco, 1990) In terms of the sales of independent documentaries, according to PBS's report, "general documentaries make average sales of between 500 and 3,000 units. Programs that are part of a series generally do much better than one-time-only programs. Independent documentaries, many of which are one-time-only, usually fall into the lower end of the scale, selling fewer than 500 copies." A spokesman at PBS once talked about the sales of the documentaries in *the American Experience* in an interview,

Clearly, these numbers are on the low end of response compared to other, more popular public television programming, like "Nova" or "This Old House", or quality special interest programming like the Bill Moyers specials. No matter how important and well-made these films are, they may not be the kind of material that large numbers of consumers- even those who watch public television-want to own. (The Independent, 1990)

Besides, the independents who expect to sell their work through an on-air tag on PBS will not automatically get the

chance to do so and may not generate meaningful revenue from it. This phenomenon results from the PBS guidelines toward the station's preferences and priorities of programming and others. There are three criteria regarding the PBS guidelines of on-air tag: First, PBS makes its decisions as to what programs will be allowed to offer video sales on a case-by-case basis. Second, the on-air offer must be made by a non-profit entity (while many independents are not non-profit, they have to offer their works through the third group which will share the revenue after all). Third, PBS will require 20 percent of net revenues from on-air offers.

(f) Foreign distribution

Since the domestic market is highly competitive and the independent documentarians are in the inferior position of the industry, going to foreign markets is a much more feasible way in terms of distribution. Some countries will buy more programs rather than produce themselves because of the restricted budget. The producer might earn more money if there exists a possibility of co-production or a pre-sale agreement with the foreign markets. But this arrangement is very rare in the field of documentaries. Besides, most countries prefer programs that have universal appeal subjects such as communication of human spirits and avoid the social issue documentaries because the subject is

unlikely to have the same relevance to an audience in another countries (Balfour, 1989).

(g) Festivals

There are about 145 annual film and video festivals operating in the United States, and roughly 225 worldwide. Festivals can bring about some benefits to producers. First, festivals can provide recognition to unknown films and tapes through prestige, juried competitions and prize. Second, festivals can provide recognition to unknown film and video makers. Third, festivals can facilitate the entry of films into the marketplace through exposure to distributors and exhibitors. Fourth, festivals can provide pre-opening publicity for films with scheduled theatrical openings (Lidel, 1989). Going to the festival to get attention may be a good idea, but at first, the producer should be able to afford the traveling cost, print cost and show in the spot to meet people and hustle in it (Mollie).

2. Problems in Distribution

Most distributors treat a film as a commodity that should have unique characteristics (in terms of marketing concepts) in order to compete with other similar subject films. However, ultimately, the filmmaker is interested solely in self-expression and gives little thought to how and where a

given film will sell. For many independent producers, "market research" is a term of "anathema: the idea of listening to the marketplace goes against the grain." (AIVF, 1989) The relationship between the independents and distributors is not naturally a smooth one.

It is complicated and prone to misinterpretation. On one hand you have distributors whose experience and expertise in business leads them to believe that they know how to chart the unknown territory between post-production and getting the film seen. On the other hand the producer, whose films may have been the emotional center of their life for a year or more, regarding the distributor as the source of all their confusion about what has happened to the film since it left their hands. (Gerstman, 1989)

Conflicts thus emerge inside the producer: How can I reach the audience? Should I distribute by myself or through the distributors?

In order to realize the dilemma that producers face, it is necessary to examine first the philosophy of distributors concerning the distribution deal. Nancy Gerstman has a clear description.

There are no rules about what kind of work gets distributed- sometimes it just has to do with the taste of the person who does acquisitions for the distribution company. The distributor who is a little wary of taking risks will look for a film that they think will get good word-of-mouth, good reviews, and will be provocative and interesting enough to inspire feature stories in magazines and newspapers. They will look for a film that exhibitors will like enough to compete for and put up large guarantees, and that might still get decent television and home video deals. The film should have something special enough about it (a "hook") so that it can be marketed to a large but specific audience, or can capture people's imaginations enough to make it one of the two or three American

independent films that everyone must see... For the distributor that likes to take calculated risks and has a mandate to distribute 'difficult' films, the prerequisites are about the same." (Gerstman, AIVF, 1989)

Distributors look at the value of producers' works from the marketing viewpoint, while there are some conflicts in between. David Rosen had his comments.

Distributors will look for lower budgeted movies or films with 'stars attached' and be less willing to take risks on first-time, more off-beat movies that do not seem to meet a prescribed formula of successful performance. This is an operating contradiction within the independent distribution scene: more "original" films are what critics champion and audiences come out for, but are not predictable so distributors are more cautious about backing them. (Rosen, 1989)

In terms of documentaries, distributors treat the documentary as "troublesome product," because they know "the filmmaker does not have a string of films coming along to back up the box office failure of the first one" and a successful release of a ninety minute documentary is almost unheard of. Sometimes, for achieving more audience (market needs), the distributor will hold the editorial control and ask for the final cut (AIVF, 1989). In this case, producers may turn to small independent distributors whose commitments are fostering the documentary. However, a new problem emerge; lack of capitalization, staying power, and influence with the exhibitors, e.g, they can not afford major advertising campaigns and can not guarantee the product flow as the Hollywood distributors do (AIVF, 1989). The same

phenomenon happens with self-distribution.

There are many reasons for producers to self-distribute their works. As Chenzira said,

Some have found difficulty collecting royalty payments and ended up using their distributor. Others have felt that the distributor didn't promote their work but simply buried it in a catalog. However, the most common reason for self-distribution is that no one else will do it...Commercial distributors are in the business of making money and do not usually have your commitment to the subject of the film. Many times they view the works of independents as having too marginal an audience. Some don't believe there is an audience at all. Most commercial distributors are limited in their ability to think creatively about marketing and distribution of independent films." (Chenzira, 1989)

Except the perception gap in between that hesitates the independents to go the distributor, the exclusive right and the high price tag of tapes is the case. For example, independent documentarians Barabara Trent and David Kasper once shopped around their documentary *Destination Nicaragua* to the usual suspects among social issue media distributors. But they finally brought it back and distributed it by themselves. The reason was because distributors asked for exclusive rights and could only project a handful of sales per year. For reaching audience as quickly and widely as possible, they became their own agents and established nonexclusive contracts with ten distributors. Besides, they criticized the high price for video charged by some documentary distributors (\$300 or more for a tape) as "another form of censorship." To be able to use their tapes

to be used for political organizing, they were firmly committed to keep the price affordable and to cooperate with organizing groups. The result was quite good; 800 copies were sold in the first 18 months and it was broadcasted on 180 college and university stations and 20 public televisions (Tajima, 1987). As Renee Tajima concluded, "The flexibility of the non-exclusive standard and the conditions of nonprofit distribution make con-current self-distribution possible, sometimes even necessary."

Although self-distribution is a labor intensive work that requires a tremendous amount of commitment, time, and some money up front, (Chenzira,1989) many independents still insist on doing it by themselves as a part of their documentary commitment. As Renee Tajima said, most of distributors are "representing so many artists, it would be impossible for the distributors to devote equal attention to their attention to their many titles. Through self-distribution, a producer can give special attention to the tape, and clear a larger take of its earnings."

(Tajima,1987)

On the other hand, there are some different thoughts about self-distribution. Since it is very difficult to produce and distribute simultaneously (Chenzira,1989), Rosen commented,

Filmmakers, like authors, painters and composers, should not have to sell their own work. They should spend their time creating what the world can enjoy seeing...Due to the significant expenses associated with theatrical distribution and exhibition, self-distribution is far more difficult to successfully implement." (Rosen, 1989)

There is no certain way for distribution, self-distribution or distributor distribution, This depends on what the producer's current priority is. Ayoka Chenzira had been self-distributing for a long period, but she decided to hand it out to a non-profit distributor because her new priority is creativity. It has been a tough decision for producers to have someone else deal with their works and to have no idea about what it is going to be.

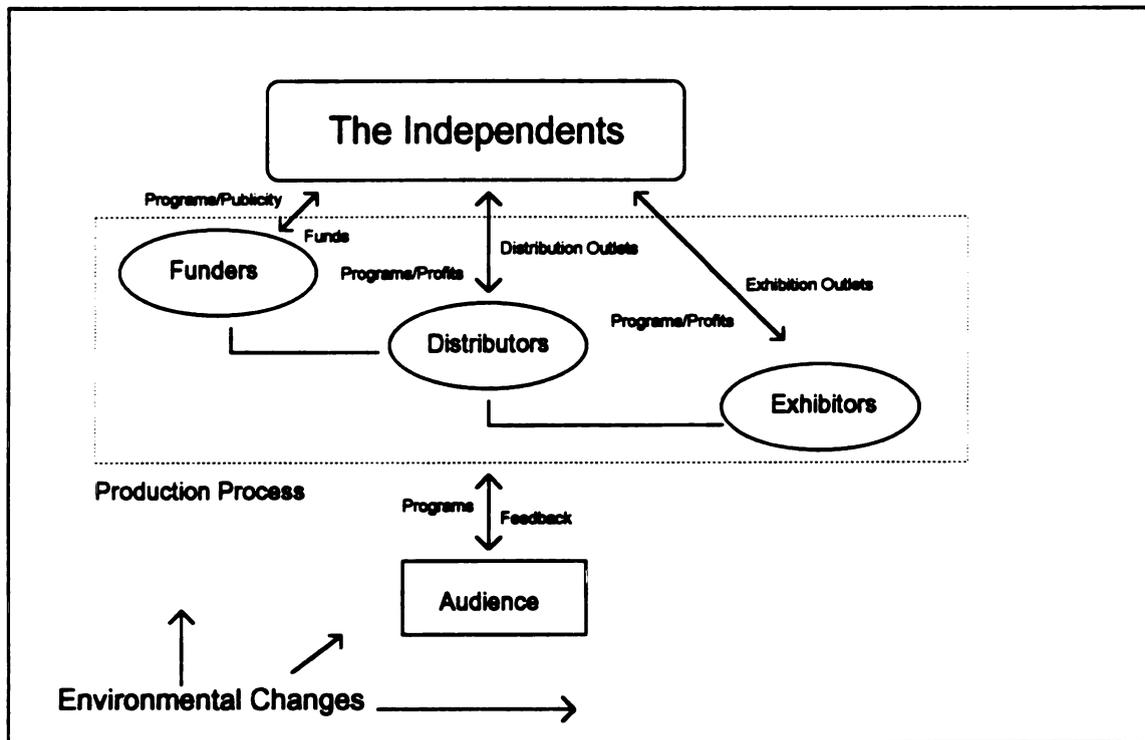
II. The Hypothetical Model

Based on the situation of independent documentary producers in the society described above, the researcher outlines a model pointing out the relationship between the independents and society (organizations) to examine the prospect of their survival (Figure 1).

Although the independent documentary producers are outside the mainstream of the media environment, in order to fulfill their goals and to survive-make a living doing documentaries, inevitably, they interact with the funders and distributors who are in the system and who compete with each other and mainstream producers. From the system theory view, if we treat the whole society as a system, ultimately,

the independents are in the "system." There are two hypothesis in this model:

Figure 1: The Relationship b/w The Independent Documentary Producers and The Society (Organizations)
Mutually Beneficial Relationship



A. The Relationship: Mutually Beneficial Relationship

As described above, every funder has different goals in funding activities. All of them request some reasons for giving their money away. For distributors, this is the same case; they would like to see if the independents' work will do good for them and bring some benefits, either finance or prestage. On the other side, in order to bring their ideas into reality and also to fulfill the survival needs, the independents demand support from the organizations (funders and distributors) as well. Therefore, ideally, there exists a "mutually beneficial relationship" between the independents and the organizations; they demand and supply each other on different levels. For instance, some funders and distributors might have the same goal as the independents in documentary making; PBS has set its mandates of encouraging the independently produced documentaries. It has a certain amount of money or funding and distributing documentaries. Thus, the relationship is: PBS supplies production funds and broadcasting channels to the independents which they demand, and the independents supply the quality work which PBS demands in return. However, the mutually beneficial relationship may happen even when the independents and the organizations have different goals. For example, corporations as funders or underwriters demand publicity through supporting a worthwhile work and may

disregard the value of documentaries that the independents hold dear. The independents may get what they want in terms of funding and distributing demands, if their works fit with the demand of the organizations, such as non-controversial, high quality programs.

Besides, ideally, the relationship between the independents and organizations is dynamic and "two-way" interactive. The organizations provide support to the independents based on what they need. Consequently, the independents can not produce programs without concerning the funders or distributors' demands.

B. The Environment-The Survival

In documentary history, the environment always contributed to the existence of documentaries and the survival of the independents. As Lewis Jacobs analyzed the reason for the success of Robert Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), which is called the first documentary in the history, "The 1920s were an age of betrayed idealism, disillusionment, and cynical materialism-but also a period of high creativity in the arts...The impact of this creative vitality made it easier to recognize the unique vision of *Nanook*." (Jacob, 1979) Any change in the environment could stimulate a new relationship between the independent documentarians and their society, let's say the "mutually

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beneficial relationship". During World War II, the American government had urgent demands for documentaries. They greatly supported the documentaries like *Why we fight* to have them served as "a potent propaganda instrument of national policy." Also, by looking at the 50s when televisions had just been invented, there were much room for documentaries; "the documentary suddenly became a staple item in the television screen." (Jacob, 1979) The reason is that "The 1950s were prosperous but uncertain years for Americans; the economic climate was one of increasing gains, with employment rising to an all-time high. 'Eisenhower prosperity' created a living standard far beyond anything America had ever known. But at the same time, the nation faced the depressing effects of the Korean War, the Cold War, and McCarthyism. An atmosphere of conservatism set in and dissent become hazardous." (Jacob, 1979) Furthermore, there were some demands in society for the American documentarians and they clearly reflected such an atmosphere through their films. At that time, the commercial networks heavily threw themselves into the documentary activities (e.g. CBS's *See It Now*), and business, non-profit organization, government information services, and others emerged to sponsor the filmmaking, and thus a large number of documentaries were made.

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The "mutually beneficial relationship" is an ideal statement. When it does exist in between, the independent documentary producers will survive easily since there is a demand in society. On the other hand, when the society (organizations) no longer see the needs for the independent documentaries and overlook the existence of the independents, the independent documentary producers would be on the skids to survive. Consequentially, the perception of the organizations and the independents would vary with the change of environment. As described above, the organizations would shift to whatever would benefit them all the time. However, in order to overcome the dilemma that came from the environmental change toward conservative politics and the worsening economic recession, the independents would have to modify their working structure, production process, or personal beliefs and so on--to survive.

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CHAPTER THREE METHODOLOGY

I. Introduction

This research is conducted using the case study method. The following chapter will describe what data were collected and how they were analyzed. There were two types of materials collected from two resources: the primary materials from personal intensive interviews, and the secondary materials from several literatures.

II. Data Collection

A. Primary Materials

The intensive interviews were conducted with four independent documentary producers in the Detroit area. They provided their opinions and feelings about this research topic. There were two steps of conducting the intensive interviews. First, the sample of interviewees based on the research purpose and questions and the characteristics of being truly independent and documentarians. Second, through the recommendation of the Detroit Producer Association, the potential interviewees were found. A letter explaining the research topic and purpose was sent by fax to every possible

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interviewee and followed up by telephone calls to confirm the appropriate interviewee. Personal interviews were then conducted.

B. Secondary Materials

The second materials is a review of literatures gathered from several resources: books, journals and newspaper reports.

III. DATA ANALYSIS

Information was gathered through elaborative readings and described in the "literature review" chapter. Based on that, interview questionnaires were designed. Along with the interview results, the researcher will compare the empirical data with previous research to examine the phenomenon and to test the hypothetical model.

IV. Reliability and Validity

According to the definition, the intensive interview is typically done with a small and non-random sample. (Wimmer, 1991) The reliability and validity concern in this research should be judged only on this measure: Whether or not the chosen samples fit with the sample criteria. The interviewees the researcher chose are truly independent documentary producers (which is the characteristic set previously), who could cooperate actively in providing

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information. This research is intended to illustrate a variety of experience in the independent documentary business rather than serve as an objective analysis of the field. Since the interviews were only conducted in the Detroit area among four producers including one female, the researcher would not try to generate the result to other producers.

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CHAPTER FOUR RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

I. Introduction

This chapter is the compilation of interview results and discussion. The work was done mainly in personal interviews followed by a few telephone interviews. Every interview lasted at least one hour and was tape recorded with the approval of the interviewees. All of the four independents have been making documentaries by their own efforts. From the researcher's point of view, in terms of their financial conditions, two of them have already succeeded, one is "on the middle ground" to achieve, the other one is "on the skids" struggling with his survival.

II. Results

A. Profile

1. Mr. Gary Glaser and Glaser Productions

Mr. Glaser is an independent documentary filmmaker who has deep concerns about social issues. Before he became an independent producer/writer/director (1986), he worked for KTLA Channel 5 in Los Angeles for numerous television shows. He is along with his Glaser Productions right now. He has

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created many documentaries concerning people with disabilities, street gangs, homeless people and graffiti writers. His most acclaimed documentary to date, *Justiceville*, which is about the homeless community, has won many awards since 1988 while it was first aired on the Discovery Channel. *Bombing L.A.* is Glaser's most recent documentary which has an inside look at the graffiti writer in Los Angeles. It has won two awards through festivals also. Currently, Glaser produces some segments for the PBS series "The 90's" which is a magazine show of contemporary ideas and trends. Glaser is one of the board of directors of the International Documentary Association.

B. Mr. George Colburn and National Video Communications, Inc.

Mr. Colburn owns three companies: "National Video Communications, Inc." which deals with television production, "Contemporary Learning System" which publishes and sells books, and "International Video Connection" which deals with fund raising and promoting things for educational videos. He received a Ph.D. in history from Michigan State University and was a media educational expert and consultant to producers of major series of PBS. Colburn is a senior independent documentary producer/executive producer who has had a working relationship with PBS since 1977. Among his numerous documentary works, there are two programs which

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were mentioned often in the interview: *What's of Tomorrow* co-produced with KQET, San Francisco, is the pilot of six documentary series on people with disabilities. *Dangerous Years: President Eisenhower and The Cold War* is a two television documentary series that Colburn is currently working on. The first part of *Dangerous Years* is going to be aired on the Discovery Channel in May.

C. Ms. Sue Marx and Sue Marx Film, Inc.

Ms. Marx is the president of Sue Marx Films, Inc., Urban Communications Group, and Woodbridge Video Productions which produce and distribute documentary and corporate videos. She received an Academy Award for her documentary film *Young at Heart*, in 1988. She once worked as a free-lance photojournalist, and produced and wrote a award-winning documentary series *Profiles in Black* for the NBC affiliate in Detroit for nine years. Since founding her company in 1979, Marx has produced and directed over fifty promotional, political, and educational films and videos and has also won numerous national and international awards such as Emmy's and Cine Golden Eagles, etc.. She was named one of the top ten newsmakers of the year in 1989 and is listed as one of the fifty most powerful women in Michigan.

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D. Mark Kochis, Ben Moon and Moon Kochis Productions

Mr. Kochis is the vice president/owner/operator of Moon Kochis Productions. He is a producer, director, cameraman, editor, and sales and marketing director in this four full-time staff based company. *Tarahumara* made in 1989 is a documentary about the Mexico Indian children's hospital and the hospital founder Father Verplancken. It was self-funded and designed for raising funds for the children's hospital in Mexico. Kochis has won many awards and is a board member of the Detroit Producers Association. Since 1982, his company has earned a distinguished reputation for producing high quality documentaries, employee training and information programs, and television commercials.

Mr. Ben Moon is the co-owner of Moon Kochis Production who once worked for CBS as a freelance cameraman. The researcher interviewed him once on telephone.

B. General Description

Although the four independents came from different backgrounds and have different career in documentary video and filmmaking, they have the same commitment as an independent documentary producer. Gary Glaser left his steady job on a television station and put all his own (little) money on the projects. The reason is "I want to make my own film". He said,

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I couldn't draw any satisfaction from the systematic lowering of the American IQ with bad television, so I wanted to create my own company to specialize in filming issue-related documentaries. I feel that it's even more important in capturing reality because even now TV news is into recreation. (The Jewish News)

It's not easy to make a living as an artist and an independent, but Mark Kochis resigned his secure job in a large industrial corporation long time ago, and decided that he would rather work independently than work for the networks. Because "I know what I am doing is much more important than the money I was making", he said, "I was spending so much of my time doing something that I didn't want to do. Then I start to take art more serious." In spite of the fact that the independent documentary filmmaking never turned out a lot of money into the producer's account (most of time the money never back), George Colburn still insists on doing this business, "Because I like it, I never expect to that (making big money)," he said, "I would never work for PBS stations. I am independent that's my personality which is not looking for security. My life is my own." Sue Marx treats her documentary business as a "hobby slash career" and does not expect much income from documentary making either. Impressively, they all share the same love for documentaries.

Different from other producers working inside of Hollywood or Networks, as independents, they are not just producing their programs, most of the time they have to

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fight the reality to survive. "Independent producers have a very difficult life in this country", Colburn said with his experience, "We have to invest hundreds of hours and thousands of dollars on airplane tickets and hotel bills and so on to chase money." As a newly fledgling independent documentary producer, Glaser thought himself at risk:

The dollars for documentary are decreasing. I've received great support for some of my films, but for others it comes either out of my pocket or from in-kind contributions. With this kind of work, I'm always seeking contributions of goods and services and funding sources. (The Jewish News)

Because of the fact of reality, Kochis set his current priority on making his company survive and growth and choose to do more industrial communication types of works, after he finished his self-financed "pet-project" documentary with his partner Moon. He said,

My creative integrity is lost a couple of points because I am not doing the job that I want to do, I am doing the job that I contracted to do...The conflict that somebody like myself was forced into is that I am working for the people that I don't want to work with or for. I am doing a lot of jobs that I don't want to be around, but the reality of it is keeping the hat on my head and keeping the food in my mouth. I am doing what 99% of the world does which is doing something they don't want to do. I am no exception to the rule.

Successful as Marx is, even she has a hard time getting grants to produce her own projects. She said, "You have to be practical in this industry, you can't just be floating on the crowd all the time."

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There is no disagreement that each of them thinks that society treats them indifferently and leaves little room for them to survive. "This country made a commitment a long time ago--the electronic media was gonna be for entertainment and not for education and information per se."

Colburn addressed, We never set up a system to give the American public through electronic media really quality programming. We don't have a system where the documentary filmmaker is the important part of the system. CPB and PBS are not there to support independent producers and generate ten thousand hours of documentaries programs per year. There is no commitment to that kind of program. We are never gonna have that kind of commitment."

About how the system perceives the independents, Glaser had much to say,

The system works in a strange way; it's very hard to make money. It seems like the system is intentionally built to exclude the people like myself because it's so hard and so expensive to make a program. Once you get it on the air, you get so little money that you are gonna to do it once or twice, because it's not practical.

PBS is the most notorious villain they all referred to quite often. Marx said,

When you look at the possibility of our public stations, they are gonna die. The whole public television services are undergoing some tough times right now. Our arts counsel and arts agencies that have always helped independent producers are getting their budget slashed so severely, they can't be helpful. When you have a very conservative atmosphere in the country such as we have now, you worry that everybody who is an independent documentary producer is a left wing radical anyway. They are worried about funding things that might be off-color or promoting very liberal and radical courses. Most of the documentary producers are reformers. They are very non-conservative people. They are always sort of looking for what's wrong and never

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applauding anything what's right particular. So the arts organizations and endowments are afraid of funding them continually and there are so few of the private foundations that would take a risk to fund independent documentary production.

However, "Unfortunately in this country, PBS is the best place for independent documentary filmmakers to get their work on," said Colburn, who has had a working relationship with PBS since 1977, said, "But PBS and CPB is a bankrupt system. It is not set up to let the independent producers make a living (supplying documentaries); it is set up with special interests in mind, and it is set up to follow money into TV stations and so on...The system stints." Also, the commercialization of PBS was mentioned a bit. With high expectations of PBS but disappointment instead, Glaser uttered,

I expect that kind of thing from the (commercial) networks because they are kind of advertising driven and I fully understand that is the way the commercial television is...but PBS shouldn't be subject to the same kind of revenue driven things; (it) shouldn't be driven so much by the number of games, (it) shouldn't be driven by the number of viewers and shouldn't be so driven by the corporate control. It is supposed to be the public television where you see the things that you won't see anywhere else, where you see the things are the community related, where you see the things that may be on the fringe and where you see the independent work that we enjoy is supposed to be on PBS, but it's getting less and less and less. PBS is looking more and more like the networks.

These four independents have the same commitment of independent documentaries, the same inferior position in society, the same inadequate treatment from the system, and the same struggle to survive. Still, they have their

particular beliefs and philosophy on the answer to "how to make a living doing documentaries."

B. Funding Dilemma and Decisions

1. Gary Glaser Case

Since there was only two thousand dollars from a small foundation, Glaser faced a severe dilemma in finding sufficient money to make this half-hour documentary *Justiceville*. He sold his car and anything he could lose to get the equipment to shoot and to edit. It took him three years to finish and left him with a \$35,000 bill which he is still paying. He said,

I completely bottomed out during the making of *Justiceville*, It took me three years to make, and my financial situation paralleled that of someone who was on his way to being homeless. (The Jewish News)

He re-addressed his financial dilemma in the interview,

I shot a little more and I was waiting to get the money to finish it. That's why it took so long to make. There's no reason for a half hour film to take three years to make.

Glaser mentioned one contradictory phenomenon when he went to PBS asking for financial support. On the one hand, PBS wanted to see if the filmmaker could cover things broadly and nationally, on the other hand, they are not be able to provide any support to the filmmaker before shooting. It means that the producer has to spend his money first if he didn't get sufficient funds elsewhere. For

Glaser, because of his poor financial situation, he could not even go outside L.A. for shooting. Clearly, he failed to get funds from PBS. Glaser described:

There is just no room for anybody else. That is only so much in terms of foundation money, so even someone has success as she (Sue Marx) has, you still have to wait six month or a year to get the foundation money. PBS particularly like some people Ken Burn (The Civil War) alike. They like his work. His work is not going to offend anybody. The corporations line-up behind somebody like Ken Burn because they know he is gonna do a very high quality job as he does do. Young and old, everybody can enjoy his stuff. (My audience is more specialized) That is one of reasons why PBS hardly breeds because they know the viewers will turn in--all sources of viewer--the rating will be high and the corporations like General Motors whatever else know that he is not gonna say anything bad about GM or whatever, so that's how that happens.

Glaser once went to Paramount Studio asking for financial support, but there existed a perception gap in between:

It's very frustrating to go to the Paramount Studio. All I want is to help my documentary, and they want to talk about the story (a filmmaker and *Justiceville*) and make it a "movie of the week.

Although the homeless problem was the hot issue in Los Angeles at that time he made it, Glaser only brought it to the attention of the public and won a few significant awards, but no significant financial support nor income. He is still in debt. Facing such funding problems, Glaser realized,

You have to ride the craft of popularity. Your film has to be out there and ready when people are talking about the issue. If I came out with the homeless film now, I don't think the interest would be as high because people don't think about the homeless as much as they used to at least in California. Now people are worried about the environment and education. You have to see into the future - You have to have some ideas what the next issue is going to be (big issue) and have your film ready. When they are ready to talk about on the talk shows or whatever else, you have tapes or films that you can go on and show and talk about it. That's always a good promotion for your film. (Otherwise), You come out with a film that even though a problem has happened, people are not interested now, they will go for something else.

2. George Colburn Case

Colburn has had a working relationship with PBS for fifteen years, however, he does not seem to have gained advantages from this. In terms of funding, "Some people just normally are funded." He said,

First of all, the process takes so long, and you can have the worlds greatest proposal and won't get funded. You can read their proposals and the proposals that stink and get funded because they like the producer or the producer has work before or someone like Bill Moyers who they know him. He can write something on the back of this fax and get five million for it. I can't.

Besides, Colburn thought there are some bureaucratic factors involved in the funding procedure determining who gets funded by PBS. He said,

I think it's typical bureaucracy or anything. If I know somebody, somebody would listen to what I have to say. I don't live in Washington, I don't know the people in PBS bureaucracy, therefore they don't listen to me. If I was based in Washington D.C. for the last ten years, I bet you I would make a lot of PBS programs. They

(PBS) have a certain amount of development money, but we are not well connected in Washington, therefore we didn't get any money.

The subject is another matter that concerns PBS. Colburn talked about his story:

Last time I went to PBS with an idea for a six part series on people disabilities. KQET, San Francisco was our partner, we had done over a year of research and we had been primarily funded. We presented the idea to PBS, and they said why should we do anything about this, it's not gonna make people happy.

Currently, Colburn has finished his first part of two documentary series called *Dangerous Years: President Eisenhower and The Cold War*, and is planning the second part. Here is his experience on funding this program through PBS:

I want to raise twenty five thousand dollars to make it into a fifty eight minute program (PBS version) for PBS. PBS said, 'Yeah, we will take it.' (I was so amazed) But they said, 'George, we are not gonna give you any money. We are gonna charge you. You are gonna have to pay for all the technical changes which is about seven thousand dollars and for a couple thousand dollars for publicity. All will cost you about twelve thousand dollars.' So I didn't. I got to make a living. Last week they called me and said, they are ready to give it a prime time spot in the Fall, and asked me if that was ok. I said 'No, I haven't got any money to pay you, you want to buy it?' They said 'No.' (They gave me one week to raise money.)

Colburn then went to a public television station in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania (near the place Eisenhower lived) and tried to have it as the presenting station. The station was pleased about this program, and was thinking about

putting some publicity on it. But when Colburn asked for funds, they just could not help. The reality was,

PBS does not have enough money to go around. We do not have a system in this country that in any way rewards independent producers. This is a very market oriented capitalistic country and you are supposed to be out there scratching around and so on.

However, Colburn had very delightful working experience with the Discovery Channel. He addressed,

I am much happier in a way working with the Discovery. The money they gave us which is twenty percent of budget. We sent the treatment in, we sent the script in we sent the rough editing, we sent the final program in, and they sent the four page critics of rough editing and that was it, no hassle. PBS would have hundreds of hours of meetings for an hour television. They would come out saying goodness this, goodness that. It's much easier to work with the Discovery Channel.

Since it is not easy to get sufficient funds, Colburn has to work his way to survive and succeed.

An independent producer has to raise a lot of money; he has to live from month to month. So what I am doing today is I came into the world of documentary television for high education. I continue every year to produce books and study guides for educational programs to go with television, because if I don't do that I couldn't live.

3. Sue Marx Case

Unlike Glaser and Colburn, Marx never put in her own money nor invest money on documentary filmmaking. She always wrote grants and had the grant pay for upkeep of the office and staff. She recalled the problems she faced when funding

her Academic Award winning documentary *Young at Heart*.

It's too hard. The money is difficult to raise. I can not tell you how hundreds of companies turned me down for money. It's awful. We would try to raise eighty or ninety thousand dollars for half hour program. We raised sixty five thousand dollars and that's all we can raise. My co-producer and I, we never got pay until long after the film won awards and we sold rights to BBC and Public stations.

For private corporations, it is not easy for them to give their money toward filmmaking, Marx said,

They (corporations) don't know what it is gonna be like until it is done. Particularly, if it touched on social and political issues. So it becomes very touchy and very sensitive. You have to be a very clever producer to write a grant in this country and to get funded.

One of Marx's tremendous documentaries called *Magician*, which was released this year, caused some funding dilemma. Marx said,

I raised sixty five thousand dollars that is half of the budget from one corporation. I couldn't raise any more money. We shot the film but we couldn't afford to cut the film. We didn't know what to do. We were sad and sad. I tried countless places in town and Michigan to find the money. Our plan is to do thirty or fifty minutes of film originally.

Marx finally got the financial support from National Geographic Television. But they requested Marx to cut the film under twenty minutes for the airing sake. Marx recalled the tough decision she had to made at that time:

We ended it up with a seventeen minutes film which sort of killed us all. That was not the film that we wanted to make, that was not the film we visioned making, but

our version which is long and are gonna cost us another twenty thousand dollars.

The National Geographic Television allowed Marx to do another version but restricted it to only one airing in Michigan on broadcast. She could not sell any broadcast rights in Europe because they tied all the rights to the *Magician*--this particular festival. All she would be able to retain the rights to would be to show it or sell it on home videos. Marx said since there is no way she can make twenty thousand dollars back under the restrictive rights, she decided not to do their own version. She said,

We were sad. We didn't know where to find enough money to finish the film so we figured out taking their sixty five thousand dollars and finish the film which we did, but we did it their way. It's not as bad, it's just not the way we would have done it...It's a horrible compromise.

Because of more and more difficulties with fund raising activities, Marx opted to not continue writing grants for the rest of her life. Her priority right now is to create business (which she has done) and create profits.

I am not just interested any longer in making documentaries. I have done as many as I intend to do. I am done enough (fifty or so). To me, it's about making money...I have turned down so many jobs in video, because I am too quality driven that I wouldn't touch video, I only gonna do film. But I am not turning them down now, I am turning down the small job, but I am not turning down the meaningful budget and meaningful contracts now. I try to put my signature on them and I try to keep most of projects in the documentary format, but if the client has certain specifications and.. hey, he is the client, he is paying the bill, and I am making money.

4. Mark Kochis Case

Among the interviewees, Kochis is the only one who totally self-financed his documentary called *Tarahumara*. He has his philosophy in funding documentaries:

Creativity is something that should be generated from the heart and it should be something that should not be ended at the expense of somebody else...If you are truly artistic, you are also truly able to find a way to do your project--not the expense of somebody else personally. It's just rare opportunity to have me think about the documentary grant money....I have a real hard time depending on where the funds come from. I have really hard time with somebody else who gets a four hundred thousand dollars because they want to do a "pet-project." That are only artistically important to that one person...When you think about where the money came from, somebody has to make an offer to you that the way you want to spend it, and now if you are really interested in creativities and worry of the world and make the world a better place, have you really made the world a better place by your own creative integrity by expending somebody else?

The total estimated cost of *Tarahumara* was about \$125,000. Moon Kochis, Inc. provided most of the labors and equipment, the others came from the donation of companies they had worked with. "Nobody turned us down." Kochis's partner Moon said, "We called this is a labor of love." Kochis recalled the timing of making *Tarahumara*, and said,

Because we were financially able to do it. We did well with the other projects, so we decided to do something that we really wanted to do. We had the connections and we had the desire to do this project. These all the personal commitment. It is more important at that time because financially we can leave somebody behind and they can handle everything. The connection was there, the desire was there, so we did it... not only we got a lot of money to do it, but also we got thousands of

other companies to supply their equipment and talents with facilities for free. At that time, I felt secure enough to do this job."

Kochis cares so much about the connection of the funding resource and the content of documentary. He said,

When I was there to produce this film (*Tarahumara*), I was not even helping the American, but nobody can tell me to spend my money in helping the American, I can help anybody I want because that is my money....I am drawing the line about why a documentary should be made or should not be made. If it should be made in the expense of the American public, I will be very critical for what it is going to be producing. But if you are putting down your own funds or the funds from your family, and your friends, you can do anything you want."

Based on the self-funding concept, even though Kochis and Moon have been talking a lot about doing another documentary about the Indian tribe in Mexico, they have no time to develop it. Kochis said,

I would love to do some wonderful documentaries, but that is not my priority at this point of my life...Making a living and survive become my primary goals. When I get more secure about what I am and the people are more secure in my talents, that type of work will come to me, if I go out to say that type of the work that I want.

B. Distribution Dilemma and Decisions

1. Gary Glaser Case

Almost every independent documentary producer expects to get nation-wide audience to try to broadly impact society. Seemingly, PBS is the best place for them to show their works. However, Glaser had a bad experience:

I attempted to get *Justiceville* on the air nationally, and I attempted to deal with PBS through Washington D.C. with national programming. I was told two things: One, they are not interested in half-hour (they really need an hour). Two, they thought that was too local.

In order to get it (*Justiceville*) on PBS and to have wide exposure, Glaser lost a certain degree of integrity. He had experts talk about the problem nationally, had a celebrity narrate the film, and had music to go with the film. "It bothered me." He said, "Why can't the work stay alone?" He talked about his decisions at that time:

(About the experts)

I tried to say there are homeless in every community through the expert. I tried to get them to speak about the problem nationally. So *Justiceville* is an example that happened locally but I used the expert to speak nationally. Because I had heard that's a L.A. thing and nobody cares about the L.A. homeless...In order to have an audience as wide as possible, I had to have that (experts) because that is too much to see nothing but just the homeless people. People just don't believe what homeless people say. The experts in *Justiceville* said the same thing like Ted (the organizer of the *Justiceville*) and other people said, but they have the ties on and they say behind the desk. The look of homeless people scares a lot of people. I had to take my stuff and water it down.

(About the style)

In many ways I feel my stuff is full of all kinds of built, whistle and craft that is really unnecessary, but I think it needs to be there, or else people won't come to see it. Nowadays, you need a certain amount of that, otherwise people won't watch."

(About the celebrity)

That's one of the things I had to do: go to get the celebrity, have the celebrity narrate it. But deep inside me I was resenting that I have to go to get some body to narrate my things. However, that is the game you have to play in documentaries. Nowadays, if you

don't have the celebrity; you don't have Robert Redford or Merrill Streip, you won't get it alive. That's how PBS remains interested in. That's good for them because people will turn in to hear Robert Redford of whatever...It's a game you have to play. If you have the celebrity attached to your project, more people would see it probably, more stations would accept it, and more newspapers would write about it, because they write from the celebrity angle.

Glaser tried self-distribution before he went to distributor. "It didn't work." He said,

Schools want to preview the stuff. Because they want to show it in the classroom, they are very careful about the content. They request four previews before they buy it. You have to be in the real business that sets up and sends out the cassette copies for them to look at first. Then they send it back and then they buy a fresh copy. There is so much paper work related to one sale. I couldn't keep up with the paper work...I was just not equipped to spend the money that it takes to sell one.

Besides, most buyers don't like to deal with the independents for purchase. Glaser explained,

Teachers are more inclined to buy from academic institutions than from filmmakers, because they don't know where they (filmmakers) are gonna be, but they know this company is gonna be there.

Justiceville is distributed by the "University of California Extension Media Center" that distributes all documentaries and has a very good reputation among independent documentary producers. The educational markets including libraries, universities, etc. are their targets. The distributor get 75% of the sale of *Justiceville* and the others goes to the producer. Glaser appreciates the relationship between him and his distributor, however, when

referring to his situation, he said,

I get the quarterly check from the distributors. Before I get my check, half of it goes to the editing bill. By the time the money gets back to me, it is very small money. Even though I get checks every three months, it's never been over ninety dollars, ever. You can't exactly live on that.

The exclusive contract with the distributor does not bother Glaser because...

That's a deal you have to sign. The reason is this: They want to make sure you (the buyer) don't spend two hundred dollars on the film, and at that night you go to the "Blockbuster" and it's in there for a buck. That is why a lot of independent stuff is not in the home video, because it's a violation of contract. That (the distributor) is the only place you can get it.

Glaser did not think the non-exclusive contract with several distributors was a good deal to him, because, "They don't really do any promotion. All they do is put it in the catalogues."

The high price of videotapes that the distributor charges the consumer for purchasing (\$350) and renting (\$50) has bothered Glaser all the time. He gave his tape away very often to some small groups that could not afford to buy or rent the tape and wished to show it for fund raising purposes. However, this put Glaser in a dilemma:

Because I made it to try to do something about the issue and not to make money to begin with, this really puts me at odds. That is another thing when you are independent and you are often at odds with your own ability to make a living, because you want people to buy it, but on the other hand, you want to have some

impacts in the community. Some communities can not afford it.

Justiceville was first aired on the Discovery channel. Glaser recalled his experience with cable television, and said:

I was surprised at first when the Discovery channel picked up *Justicevills*. That was the big premier. They did a lot of promotion. I thought that meant they are going to continue to air films and videos like *Justiceville*. But they really haven't. They gone into doing nature films rather than the big life. That's what they called in three letters: fur, fin and feathers--just films about animals."

Glaser thought cable television should create room for independent documetaries dealing with social issues:

They (cable) tend to duplicate a lot of what the PBS has. They should be involved in something more significant like social issues not just historical revision kind of things. I don't mean to put anyone's work down, it just doesn't seem to be any way on a diet- any way on the TV diet- they aren't willing to show truly independent work. That is something that bothers me and everybody doesn't get involved in doing independent works.

Glaser addressed the problem of the insufficient revenue coming from cable television:

When they do show it, when they pay the license fee-- the amount they pay you for showing it--is not enough to cover any of the cost of making it. So you are guaranteed to lose money. What I consider is the built-in format of censorship. Because if you are not gonna make any money on your program, less people are gonna get involved in this kind of program if they know they are not going to make any money or they know they are not gonna make money but don't lose money. That ultimately takes a lot of people right out of the field

because who want to make a movie that you are guaranteed to lose money and you have to fight to get it seen.

Justiceville was aired on WTVS, Ch.56 recently, Glaser talked about his experience when contacting the PBS:

What Ch.56 pays me was not even enough to pay for my airfare to get here. Detroit is the seventh largest market in the United State for television. I thought I would make some money from it. They pay 10 dollars per minute for independent work. *Justiceville* is roughly half hour. So it's \$300 dollars. As I understand, the program is a few years old now but I don't think that makes a difference to them even if the program is brand new and it is only airing locally, you won't get much more than that. That's what I mean about how the system works in a strange way, it's very hard to make money. It seems like the system is intentionally built to exclude the people like myself because it's so hard and so expensive to make a program and once you get it on the air you get so little money that you are gonna do it once or twice because it's not practical.

Airing on PBS is not so easy, Glaser said,

Even if you are willing to pay the cost in making a program, PBS want you to line up with corporations some sorts in order to cover the cost of the project. Unless you get corporations that want to lick up to your project that won't get on the air. That means that the only programs that gets on the air are the ones that corporations say yes to. That means the corporations are in control of what gets on the air. So you won't see anything that is negative against the corporation. Censorship is not in a bleeding way. No one ever said "we are censoring you." No one ever said "you can do this, you can't do that." But, because of the way the PBS works, if you don't have a corporation to line up to support you, you just can't get through the labyrinth what it takes to get in there. It's not out right. It's much more subtle than that."

Some independent documentaries can reach broader audiences through the satellites to the PBS stations. There

are four regional satellite services for PBS: Central Educational Network, Rocky Mountain Network, Southern Educational Network and Eastern Educational Network. Producers can send their programs to the networks which will send them up to the satellite and let all the local stations know what programs are coming. This is on the preview base, and nothing is aired until the stations pick it up. Every program aired on the satellite has a chance to be aired on more local stations but no guarantee that it will be broadcasted nationally. It depends on how many local stations pick it up. Glaser had the story on it:

The very week when I went to Ch. 56, I found out that the chairman of one of the satellite networks was obviously interested in the program. He said he would take it to the satellite and see what other stations might want it. But, they rejected the program because they said it's too old. The guy who is the chairman of the network bought and submitted the program, so I thought it would be a sure thing because he is behind the program, but I got a letter that said they didn't even put it on the satellite to see if other stations would like it. I can't figure it out what is wrong. I know it (*Justiceville*) would never be the whole national thing, but I am quite sure there are at least five or ten stations that would say yes to this program--maybe smaller stations or smaller communities. It's very labor intensive for me to contact every little station. It's much easier if I send one tape to the satellite.

Glaser put his works together titled, *Rewind: A Video Retrospective by Gary Glaser* and showed it on the gallery and the coffee house. Although he does not have to pay for showing that and he enjoys the fact that people come

together to see his works, he has this conflict in mind:

I have some real concerns that I didn't get paid for that. That thing costs me money. I can't continue to sustain that kind of losses in order to just get a breath for a few minutes.

2. George Colburn Case

For the distribution needs, sometimes, the independents have to be able to raise enough money to afford the cost of giving it away to PBS stations since there are very few PBS stations willing to pay for the airing of independent producers' works. As Colburn said,

'Is it gonna cost us any money?' That is the first question they (local PBS stations) asked before they even saw. But that's typical because they don't have any money. Nobody give them money to buy programming...They would rather put on a free program they get over the satellite and do little local programs dealing with local issues. It's the nature of the beast...If I said it is gonna cost you (station) five hundred dollars because it costs us thousands of dollars to make it, would you pay five hundred dollars for that? They would probably say no. How is the independent producer gonna make any money? So I gave it away. It had been on WNET, New York; Ch. 9 in Seattle... all they do is pay the postage to send it back to me. So, I got *What's of Tomorrow* funded by small corporations and foundations and I gave it away to PBS stations because I just want it to be seen.

Colburn thought access to the PBS is controlled by the politics and atmosphere of the system, He described,

PBS is very very sensitive to the Congress and to the conservative development and to their own bureaucratic maintenance, they carry with them. They can say we are not gonna air it, we don't give you the rest of the money and they can make changes.

Take *What's of Tomorrow* for example, it was refused by the PBS national programming even though it has no political controversy, Colburn said,

It's controversial with people with disabilities. They are extraordinarily criticized. *What's of Tomorrow* was designed not to be controversial, but you raise issues like that young girl who is supposed to be a ninth or tenth grader but she can't read. Also, it raised the question at the end: For 21 year old Elizabeth, What's gonna happen to her life? Where's she going? They (PBS) were very upset.

In order to make the documentary distribution more accessible to the viewers and to make a living, Colburn put his career on taking major television series into courses. For example, he is doing a five or six hundred page book to go with a television series called *Childhood* that will enter into the television course.

3. Sue Marx Case

Marx once sold the program directly to a distributor who did a very lousy job on distribution. She thought about getting it back, but at that time, she did not have any money to pay for the promotion fee and so on. Nowadays, Marx has her own company dealing with distribution and promotion tasks. She is quite satisfied. However, she thought almost all the independent documentary producers have a hard time reaching the broad audience. She said,

Every documentary filmmaker wants to have a large audience for their shows. We do everything we can to get our shows out and seen and promoted. But it's very difficult for documentaries to be seen. It's rare for documentaries to be shown in theaters. *Roger and me*, *Truth and Dare* and *The Hearts of Darkness* are a few examples of outstanding and popular documentary films.

Marx thought it is luck of the independents that brings their documentary works on public and cable television.

4. Mark Kochis Case

Kochis also distributes his "pet-project"- *Tarahumara* by his company (self-distribution).

The premier presentation of *Tarahumara* was in March, 1991. It was at a children hospital's annual donation dinner party in Detroit. Thousands of people were there and it was shown on a big screen. Generally, the grass roots groups related to children's hospitals are their major distribution outlets. Through "word of mouth", they got many orders and donations from groups and individuals. (It cost \$10 for owning the tape.) By the telephone interview, Moon said, many people get information from their friends and contact them directly for purchase. Moon Kochis Productions supervises all the copying and shipping tasks. All the money from customers goes to the children's hospital in Mexico. They are planning to translate it into Spanish, so that it can be sent to Mexico for distribution. A Catholic cable network in Washington D.C. once contacted with them for

showing this program, "We send it to everyone who wants it," said Moon. Since Moon Kochis Productions has quite sufficient finances to handle the self-distribution work, there is not much to be addressed about their problems.

III. Discussions

A. How to survive? - Making a living doing documentaries.

Comparing the four independent documentary producers by looking at their ways of making a living and doing documentaries, the researcher has the following findings.

George Colburn and Sue Marx, both own three companies, and are successful types of documentary producers. They are satisfied with their current status and do not simply rely on making documentaries. As Colburn said,

I couldn't make a living as an independent producer...I have always been in communication (as an educator) and so far I am able to make a living--consulting, doing the educational things and making some documentaries. I have invested a lot of money in my companies and in my products in order to make sure to see the light of the day. It turns out a lot of programs, a lot of books and study guides. That's very satisfying.

Marx has spent much of her time working for the clients, including the state government and corporations, but she is pleased to do so. "It's about making money," she said,

Being an independent producer, this is a business. You are doing it on your own, you come up with your ideas, you go find the funding for them, you figure out the marketing strategy, Who is gonna see it? How is it gonna be shown? How many people? You are gonna answer all these questions. You've got to cover your own insurance, your own health cost, your own taxes, and

your own everything: travel and overhead...nobody is paying your bill for you.

Like Sue Marx, Mark Kochis treats the documentary making as a hobby. He said, "the documentary business is an unique industry, that is, most people do it for their loves." His real career is in the industrial television production. Although he has been saying that working for clients is not what he wants to do in terms of creative integrity, for making a living, it is indeed his priority for the short term. He believes that...

During the first ten years, you will do a lot of things you don't want to do, but if you can stick it out that long, somewhere around ten years, you then will be able to make decisions in the direction that you want to go and the direction with the thing you want to do, and maybe some people will get it sooner, some people get it latter. I think the first ten years, you just build up your talent and all your connections, and I honestly believe in it.

For Gary Glaser, life is another panorama. Since he devoted his life as an independent documentarian, he has been focusing only on making documentaries, especially on social issues. To him, the documentary is his career, his life more than a hobby. However, he has been threatened by reality and has struggled to survive. He said,

I think a lot of that is my fault. I am spoiled in a way. What percentage of the population do a job they really like? Maybe I should just like somebody else doing something else and don't even do this stuff. People are trying to find me a job here doing the corporate and industrial video. I would do that but I am just worried that I would be selling my soul or something. I don't know if I could look myself in the mirror knowing that I am doing the stuff that I really don't like and I don't want to do it and it's not

really appropriate and all I do is serving the needs of corporations. Those are the kind of things I grope with everyday. I have to come to some sort of revolution with it. I don't know what am I gonna do, where am I gonna live, everything is really up in the air.

So, how could they survive?

Glaser had no answer but said, "You really have to be passionate about your work, otherwise you would have quit long ago. That sense is almost like in nature. The weaker animals get weeded out of the system. It's almost the natural thing of selection."

Kochis had the same thought as Glaser had in some ways,

You can not just like this business, you have to love this business. That's the bottom line--that you must love what you are doing. Because you could easily sell out and work for somebody and do something that you totally don't want to do...If you have a mission and you want to do it, and you will survive. I think anybody that is really dedicated will survive. I think people that are internally creative, people that have to be creative or they won't be happy will survive.

However, Kochis thought the independents will survive in the little niche of the industry and would never set the world on fire. Also, he believes that in order to survive, "we have to compromise all the way of life."

For Colburn, the hint to survive is "to pick the right subject and to have energy for fund raising." Marx suggested from the same ground. She said,

There has be a match between the subject you are interested in and the foundation you are looking for money from. Who is gonna fund it, who would be interested in taking a look at that subject? And you've got to figure out who would benefit from this subject? And then target your proposal to show them why, if they sponsor your proposal, it would be good for them.

B. Model

In the film and video industry, producers, including mainstream producers (Hollywood and Networks per se) and independents, fiction and non-fiction, are competing with each other for funds and distribution outlets. There are more demanders (producers) than suppliers (funders and owners of distribution outlets). According to the interview result, the independent documentary producers are in the most inferior position in society. Most of the time, they (outsiders) can not even compete fairly with the mainstream producers (insiders). They have to modify or compromise all the time in order to get accesses into the system. For instance, Glaser changed the original format of his program for getting into the PBS; Marx cut the film length under the funding and distribution dilemma; Colburn brought the major television series into courses for "making a living"; Kochis sacrificed his interests in the short term for the financial security. They adjusted because the system does not change a bit for their goodness. As Colburn said, "I don't see the system changing, I see the independent producers are scratching around trying to make program now and then, and hope once in their lifetime they will get one series, if they are extraordinarily lucky."

By looking at the environment today, the conservative atmosphere pervades in both the political and community

level and the economic climate is getting worse because of the recession. There is less and less room for the independent documentary producers to stand. For example, Senators urge the Congress to restrict the Federal money to support arts and public television, especially those potentially radical projects (ABC news, 1992). Among the video and film industry, for its nature, the documentary would be under the most severe attack.

The researcher mentioned a hypothetical model including two hypothesis in the previous chapter. First, ideally, there exists a dynamic interaction/ mutually beneficial relationship between the independents and the society (organizations). Second, any environmental change would cause changes of the relationship and thus effect the survival of the independents. However, the interview results indicate something different. As described above, in order to make a living and to make documentaries, the four producers have to adjust themselves to react to reality, but, the organizations (society) never change a bit for them. That means that there is no dynamic interaction but "one-way" compromise in the relationship. Besides, the contemporary climate of society (politics and economics) and the nature of the media industry (commercializations) make the term "mutually beneficial relationship" vague. Based on what the independents said in the interview, the documentary

is a term that most of the funders and distributors are scared about, in terms of ideology and benefits. Less and less organizations would "demand" the documentaries from the independents since they usually bring no visible benefits (rate of returns) but "potential dangers" (e.g. NEA has been under attack for funding *Tongues Untied*-a documentary about two Black gays). On the other hand, the second hypothesis is verified; Under the climate of the contemporary environment, the independents are scratching around to survive. For instance, PBS's shrinking funds makes it few room for the independent documenataries and because of the prosperity of the cable and home video business, some independents find themselves a market in that.

CHAPTER FIVE CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

I. Conclusion

The objective of this research is to explore the answer to the survival question of the American independent documentary producers. There are many things that are due to the answer of this question, e.g, the talents and trainings in the artistic field and the business sense and marketing skills in the marketing field. However, all factors resulted from one word--the commitment.

The independents in the interviews of this study indicated that the commitment is the prerequisite for all the independents to stay persistently in this business. They mentioned, once some one has the commitment, he/she won't be forced out this business easily even though they have faced tremendous problems or survival dilemma. For instance, like other artists, the independents are the breed who are usually full of idea but lack of business sense or sometime resent the connection of his/her work and the commerce. Nevertheless, they would decide to compromise in certain degree after a long period of struggle, because of their strong commitments toward documentary filmmaking; they would do any thing (including what they resent) to have their work

done and show it to the public. They would try to learn what the reality really is, (e.g. the nature of commercialization of the media system), what opportunities exist in society, (e.g. the potential market of documentaries) and know when to fight and how to win (e.g. marketing strategy).

Independent producers Marx and Colburn are examples. Their successes are due to their sophisticated experiences and knowledge toward this business. They know how to write great proposals to get funds and know how to use marketing skills to show their documentaries to the most broadest audience.

When asking the survival question at the first time, the researcher was told that anyone will survive if he/she "never, never, never...(for thirty times) give up!" no matter how bad the situation is.¹ This is the commitment. No matter how bad it would be, once the independent producer is committed to make documentaries, he/she will survive.

¹. This is from an informal interview with an independent documentary producer in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

II. Recommendations

A. The survival

The documentary is something that usually challenge the established value of society and has no visible value (profits) from the marketing viewpoint. Therefore, the independent documentary producer is on the skid to survive in this commercialized industry. However, when the nature of media and society lean toward hegemonic, the role of independent documentary as an alternative voice should be more important and valuable. Documentaries about the Vietnam War in the 60s are the example. If there were no such documentaries, the actually of war could not be known by the public and the myth of the American foreign policy would continue more seriously.

There have been many debates of whether or not the documentary can really do good to the society. The researcher think, it might be inevitable that the government should keep its eyes on the media content for the social security sake, and the public media like PBS can set its own mandates to prohibit certain kinds of programs to be shown to the general public for maintaining the public's right. However, if all these activities fall into the conspiracy of serving the politics, that would be a huge lost of society.

As far as the PBS's concern in terms of the program contents, the researcher also agree that not every

documentary is appropriate to be broadcasted to the general public. However, there should exist an open and systematically choosing process toward funding and programming. Besides, the researcher think the community should play a more important role than the government does to encourage the existance of independent documentaries by providing the financial support and the distribution outlets; more private and non-profit organizations should be set up for supporting the independent documentary programs. The International Public Television Screening Conference (INPUT) is an example. It selects nearly one hundred innovative videos and films every year and provides the independents the chance to show their works and discuss with the audience.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

RESEARCH MOTIVATIONS - TAIWAN EXPERIENCE

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Although this is a study about the survival issue of American independent documentary producers, my motivation toward this research is based on my 'Taiwan experience'.

Moon Children is a documentary about how the Albino people struggled with social discrimination for their survivals and human dignities. It was produced by Full Shot Film/Video Studio, Taiwan (where I worked for two years) and was originally fund by Taiwan's Public Television Station. Because of the over-length problem, the Public Television Station requested for the producer to do some final cuts. After a long period of negotiation, the producer/director finally withdrew it by refusing to revise the content and had the company afford the two year production expense. Under the current climate of Taiwan's television systems², *Moon Children* has received public recognition yet. However, it has received many awards domestically and internationally, and has been treated as a new milestone in Taiwan's documentaries.

As an associate producer of that program, I experienced

how the producer/director made decisions contributing to a fantastic program but a broken relationship with his clients, how the decisions shaped a good model for making independent documentary programs but led to a constant struggle for financial difficulties, how the firm and conservative value around the environment dragged the producer away from a worthwhile program, and how the commercialized nature of systems placed the producer in a dilemma of maintaining the artistic integrity. Since then, I had been hitting by this question: How can we survive? Fit or die?

Maybe it's not an 'either-or' question. For the documentary conscience and the bright prospect of the society, the independent documentary producer should hold an endless guerrilla war with the system to keep breaking down 'taboos'. Taiwan's society had become more and more capitalized. The independent documentary producers are in the same battle as American's. I expect to find some 'American experience' as prototypes for Taiwan's independent documentarians in balancing their professional integrity and their survival needs - funds and distribution outlets.

² There are only three commercial stations in Taiwan owned respectively by the major political party, the government, and the military. The Public Television Station broadcasts under the commercial channels and will have its own channel two years from now.

APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

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INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

Beginning:

There are a few issues I would like to address in my thesis:

1. How does an independent documentary producer balance his/her professional and creative integrity and the funding and distribution needs? What and how does the producer make decisions under this concern?
2. What is the relationship between the independents and their societies?

Furthermore, if possible, I would like to know: **How and can the independent documentary producer survive?**

I. The Independents (General descriptions of producers)

1. Would you tell me a little about your background?
(education, working experience)
2. What documentaries have you made? How many of them?

Why did you do those programs? Did they all come from your own interests or what?
(motives of documentary filmmaking)
3. Among them (documentaries), what are the ones dealing with social issues?

What are they all about?

Where did the ideas come from? your interests? or other's?

(motives of documentary filmmaking)

II. The Relationship

A. Working structure

(examine how the social contexts affect the working structure of the independents)

1. Would you tell me about your company?

What brought your company together? (motives)

How was it (your company) formed? (history, process)

How many people are in this company?

2. Except for documentaries, what else does your company do?

Why do you do those jobs? Are they all your interests or what?

B. The role of the independents

1. As an independent, what do you perceive yourself in the society?

How does the society perceive you are?

(examine the perception between the independents and the society)

III. Decision-making

A. Funding

1. Where do your financial resources come from to produce documentaries?

(mention the programs that producer has done)

2. Would you tell me what problems you usually face when funding this kind of documentary? why did they happen?

3. In your experience, are there any successful or unsuccessful examples in funding activities that you can tell me?

(examine what factors make them successful or fail)

4. What aspects do you think funders are always concerned with when looking at your projects?

Is the controversy in the program concept their biggest concerns?

B. Distribution

1. Where do you distribute your documentaries? (mention the program the producer has done)
(What's your major market?)
2. Do you distribute your works by yourself or by other distributors? Why? (Whom do you go to?- the distributor)
(How do you do it?)
3. Would you tell me what problems you usually face when distributing the documentary? and why did they happen?
4. In your experience, is there any successful or unsuccessful example in the distribution activities that you can tell me?
5. What aspects do you think distributors are always concerned with?

Is the controversy in the program their biggest concerns?

6. What is your objectives in distribution activities?
(Do you plan to raise funds for producing your next film? or simply for broad exposure? or what?)

C. The philosophy of decision-making

1. Have the funders/distributors ever asked for the editorial control? What's it about? Why did they do so? What was the end result?
2. Have you ever faced a problem about balancing creative integrity and the funding and distributing needs? How did you solve it?
3. Do you agree that the producer should "compromise" sometimes when conflicts happen between the dream and the reality?

IV. The Survival

1. Have you ever thought about "How to survive?" (by surviving, I am speaking of the ability of the producer to get enough funds and distribution outlets to accomplish his goal.)

Is there an answer?

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