US

Independent Film

Audience&Landscape

Study

KerithPutnam

Harvard

ShorensteinCenter


HARVARD Kennedy School
SHORENSTEIN CENTER
on Media, Politics and Public Policy



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Introduction

In an era where digital platforms prioritize sensationalism over substance, the future of independent media hangs in the balance. While the mainstream market is saturated with fleeting trends and popular content, independent film—offering profound storytelling and diverse perspectives—is increasingly marginalized. Yet this sector plays a crucial role in advancing culture, tackling untold stories, and reflecting a broader spectrum of voices.

Our research aims to illuminate the current and potential audience for independent film in the US. By analyzing broad viewership trends and distribution options, we seek to inform policy making, inspire innovative distribution strategies, and attract investment to ensure the sector's sustainability. This report is a call to action to recognize and support the unique value of independent film for its artistic worth and its impact on society.

We hope this study will spark dialogue, guide new initiatives, and foster a more vibrant future for independent media.

Keri Putnam

Walter Shorenstein Fellow

Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, Harvard Kennedy School.

Research made possible with the generous support from RandomGood Foundation.

Executive Summary

The goal of our audience study and distribution landscape research is to unearth opportunities to grow the audience for US independent films to generate more cultural and social impact as well as revenue. These may be business ideas, nonprofit efforts, or even regulatory or public policy initiatives.

Our methodology is described in detail in the Appendix, with details in individual sections where applicable. Our Appendix also includes our source data and the full reports from our vendors and collaborators.

In our polarized society, filled with misinformation and distraction, it is critically important to maintain a place for high-quality longform media that offers diverse perspectives and narrative depth.

Independent films illuminate untold stories, spark discourse, and broaden our perspectives. This sector operates outside of the Hollywood system of work commissioned by major studios, networks and streamers a is a vital source of innovation in the $192B US film industry. Distinctive personal films–like *The Farewell*, *Lady Bird*, or *Moonlight*–open our hearts and launch culture-defining talent. Documentaries–like *Navalny*, *Searching for Sugarman*, *Biggest Little Farm*, or *The Social Dilemma*–deepen our understanding and challenge the status quo. Bold and innovative approaches to storytelling- in films like *Lost in Translation*, *Memento*, *Tangerine*, or *I Saw the TV Glow*–advances the art form of cinema. Independent film is essential to to our culture and society.

But independent film in the US is at risk.

The streaming channels that dominate global viewership are no longer buying many smaller or risk taking projects. Instead, they offer mostly sequels, action, fantasy, true crime, genre, influencers, and celebrity content. Niche platforms featuring independent documentaries or scripted films lack scale and resources to break through to wide audiences or pay creators. Theatrical attendance is down dramatically in a trend that started with the pandemic and now sees viewers maximizing at-home streaming options, and broadcast and cable viewership is shrinking. And on mass market free streaming and creator platforms like Tubi or YouTube, independent film struggles to compete with an algorithm-optimized firehose of content.

This is a global issue, but the United States lacks the regulation and public funding investments that help many countries protect media in the public interest in today's commercial media landscape.

New commercial and nonprofit solutions, alongside policy reform and public investment, are needed to build a sustainable future for the sector. In conversations over the last year with more than 200 professionals in independent film and adjacent fields, including producers, distributors, exhibitors, executives, entrepreneurs, academics, and nonprofit leaders, we learned of several promising new ideas to revive and sustain independent media. The momentum for change is exciting, and it has gained considerable energy since this time last year.

Yet our research also showed that few in the field have data—or resources for market research—on the current and potential *audience* for this media sector. Data is not publicly available to small independent film businesses or independent creators, which puts this sector at a disadvantage compared to the large, tech-enabled businesses dominating the US media.

Certainly, the intrinsic value of independent media is not related to the scale of its audience or even to its financial success. But a clearer picture of the audience will drive both the social impact and sustainability of the independent film field.

We hope this overview of the distribution landscape and our broad snapshot of the estimated addressable market will inspire further research, raise questions, spark conversation, and catalyze better data-gathering and sharing across the sector.



Vendors and Collaborators

Theatrical Exhibition
The Numbers; Bruce Nash and Sebastian Gomez
Art House Convergence; Alicia Kozma, Kate Markham, and Lela Meadow-Conner

Film Festivals
Film Festival Alliance; Barbara Twist and Gray Rodriguez

At Home Viewing
Parrot Analytics; Brandon Katz, Lucas Mascarenhas, and Julia Alexander
Nielsen; Jonathan Wells and Mark Davis

General US Audience Surveys
ESHAP& PCH Insights*;* Evan Shapiro, Jesse DeRocco, and Smriti Sharma
Covid States Project Survey; Matthew Baum, PhD, Marvin Kalb Professor of Global Communications and Professor of Public Policy at Harvard Kennedy School

Fan Communities
Letterboxd; Matt Buchanan, Gemma Gracewood, and David Larkin

Research Team: Harvard research assistants: Bryant Valenzuela and Beatriz Rivero Anglada; Research and Design: Lucy Putnam; Data Analysis: Avani Gupta.

Thanks to: Sara Archambault, Director of the Documentary Film in the Public Interest Initiative at the Shorenstein Center; Nancy Gibbs and the entire team at the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, the research teams at PBS Audience Insights, Comscore, and MPA, Carrie Lozano and Lindsay Hodsgon, Raney Aronson, Giulia Caruso, John Nein, Christie Marchese, Elizabeth Frank, Nikkole Denson, Ian Bricke, Jason Tyrell, and Courtney Sanchez who provided insights for this report.

Advisors: Sara Archambault, Dori Begley, Karin Chien, Jon Reiss, Phillip Contrino,Amy Hobby, Dan Truong, Brian Newman, Abby Sun, Susan Margolin, Laura Lewis, Barbara Twist, Ted Hope, Arianna Bocco, Michael Franklin, Erick Opeka

Research made possible with the generous support from RandomGood Foundation.

Key Findings

A far larger audience is interested in independent film in the US than current viewership. This gap between potential and actual audiences offers an exciting opportunity to reinvigorate the sector.



Total Addressable Market vs Current Market Estimate

Our study includes what we believe is the first-ever national survey to assess US interest in independent film. We also collected actual and estimated viewership data across all distribution platforms using a representative dataset of titles from 2017-2023.

Our full report breaks down the data and research learnings by distribution platform and examines the difference between scripted and documentary films on each platform.

Potential US Audience

From our national survey of 14,421 US adults, conducted in winter 2024 by Evan Shapiro and Publisher's Clearing House Insights.

27% of survey respondents said they would be willing to pay for a channel dedicated to independent film and documentary, equating to a potential subscriber base of 77M.

This closely correlates with another survey finding:

Nearly one-fifth of American adults describe themselves as 'definite fans' of independent film (52M) and independent documentary (57M).

We recognize that people may respond to surveys with aspirational ideas of the media they want to read or watch. Our full report methodology describes our conservative decision to discount these results to account for survey bias.

Based on research from Parrot Analytics showing affinity for independent scripted films among independent documentary fans, we estimate a 30% overlap between the documentary and scripted film audiences.

We derive a total market of 76.3M from this survey result.

Current US Audience

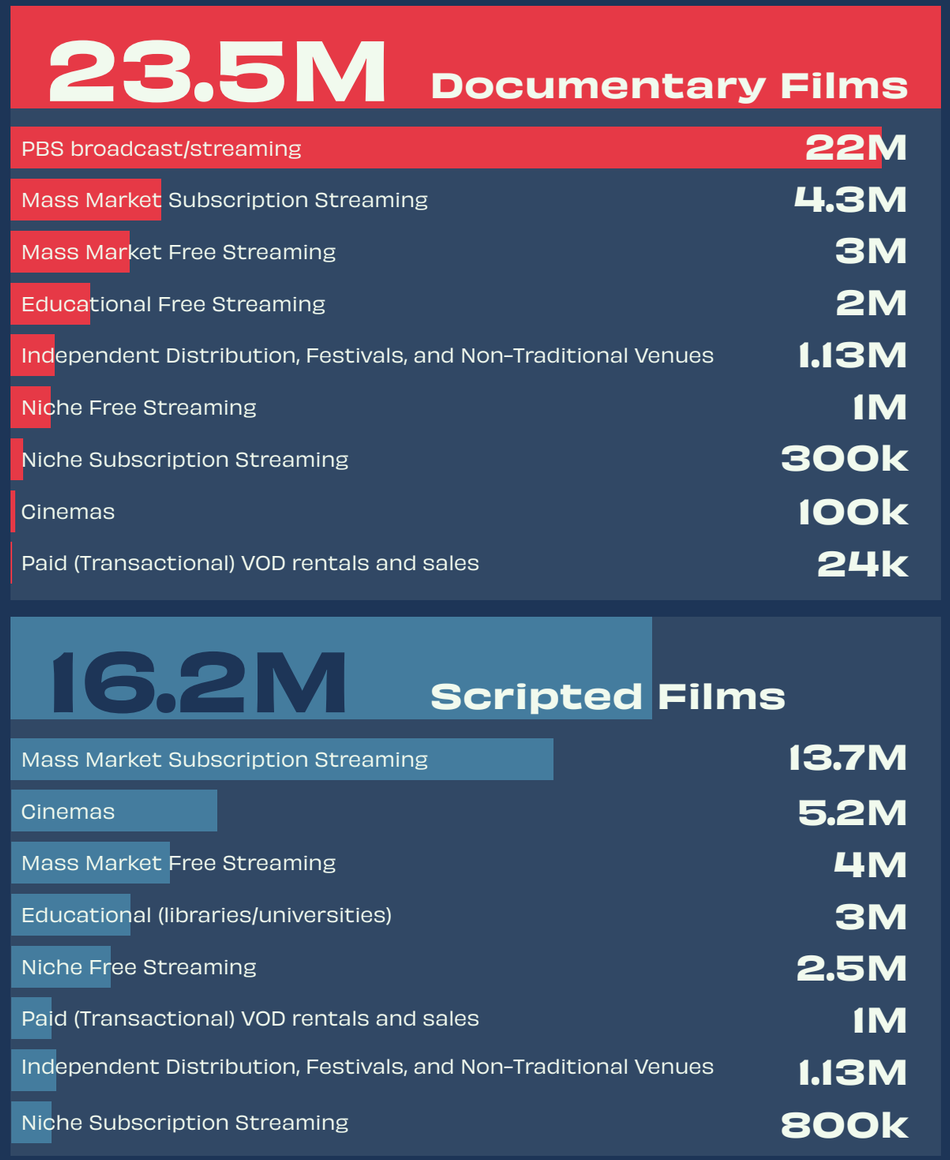
Data was collected by Nielsen, Parrot Analytics, The Numbers, and our own research team. We include research-based estimates where data is not available. Data from 2022 and 2023:

An estimated 36.7M people watched independent films in theaters or on small screens.

- Independent documentary reached 23.5M people
- Independent scripted film reached 16.2M people.

Viewership across all release platforms ranked by audience size

The figures below are estimates based on our data and research. Our full methodology is available in the Total Addressable Market section of the full report



Where are people watching?

Insights from Key Findings

Independent scripted films are more broadly popular than independent documentary films in theaters and on streaming platforms, driven by break-out hits in the scripted category.

Parrot Analytics found that independent documentaries (excluding commissioned fare in categories like true crime or celebrity docs) had half the 'audience demand' of independent scripted films on the dominant subscription streamers.

The higher viewership of independent documentary films is driven by their significant audience on free PBS linear and digital channels. Scripted US independent films are not programmed on public media.

Across all platforms, viewership of independent film is driven by 'hits.' Median per-title viewership is far below average per-title viewership for both documentaries and features.

Insights by Platform

Theatrical is 22% of the independent scripted film audience and less than 1% of the independent documentary audience. Per-film theatrical viewership has fallen by 90% in the last 20 years across both categories.

Mass Market Subscription Streaming: Our data shows the drop in the acquisition of independent films by mass-market subscription streamers after 2021. Both volume and viewership of independent films have decreased by nearly 50% on these platforms since their high in 2020.

Mass Market Free Streaming on platforms including YouTube, Pluto, Roku, Freevee, and the rising category leader Tubi, is growing in market share. Independent film reaches a significant audience *in the aggregate* on these platforms. Data is lacking, but the number of titles and total audience is likely even bigger than we conservatively estimate. Per-title viewing is low due to the lack of marketing to bring attention to small titles.

Niche Subscription Streaming is crowded with many wonderful but competing small offerings. Few, if any, have amassed a subscriber base large enough to enable significant investments in acquisition, production, or marketing.

Niche Free Streaming includes sites like Doc+ and Cineverse, which have many titles and generally low viewership/earnings per film. Other than what we learned in interviews, it was very hard to find any data about the audience for indies in this sector.



Paid Video on Demand (Rent or Buy) has collapsed for most independent scripted and documentary titles (as well as for studio films). Fewer people want to pay a fee to see a movie in its first window at home, preferring to wait for subscription or free streaming.

Public Media: The documentary audience on public media represents viewership of the strands *Independent Lens* and *POV* across all PBS broadcast and streaming platforms. Total public media viewership of independent docs on local stations and other digital public media platforms is larger, but insufficient data prevents a solid national estimate.

Free Educational Streaming, available through libraries, colleges, and universities, is dominated in the US by the platform Kanopy. The top-viewed titles on Kanopy are consistently independent scripted and documentary films, and our data revealed that the platform is the fastest-growing destination with the most US independent film titles.

Independent Distribution: Films without traditional distribution often opt for what we call independent distribution, which includes impact, community, and brand-backed distribution. We found great innovation in this sector, with new platforms and technology tools to target and serve specific audiences. We estimate that 1500 US feature films invest in independent distribution each year.

Festivals: Our survey with the Film Festival Alliance revealed a post-pandemic reduction in the number of screenings and ticket sales at large festivals but an increase in smaller festivals. The aggregate festival fanbase of members and social followers in the US is 20M, three times greater than the number of attendees.

Art House Theaters: 21M people say they attend independent or art house cinemas in our general audience national survey. Our survey with the Art House Convergence revealed that ticket buyers account for only 27% of the total member and social follower numbers.

Social Media and Fan Communities: More study is certainly required for reliable numbers in this sector, but we very roughly estimate a 20M social fan base for independent films across all social platforms, led by YouTube, Instagram, and Letterboxd.

Annual Viewership Estimates Drawn from Data from 2022 and 2023

	All			Documentary			Scripted		
	Films	Total Attendance / Views	Unique Audience	Films	Total Attendance / Views	Unique Audience	Films	Total Attendance / Views	Unique Audience
Theatrical	129	31.5M	5.25M	32	422.87K	70.5K	97	31.05M	5.2M
Paid Video On Demand	208	3.39M	1.3M	47	64K	24K	161	3.32M	1M
Major Subscription Streaming	67	47.9M	18M	32	11.4M	4.3M	35	36.5M	13.7M
Major Free Streaming (excluding PBS calculated below)	1500 Estimated	15M	6M			2M			4M
Niche Subscription Streaming Subscribers			1.1M			300K			800K
Niche Free Streaming		4M	1.5M			0.5M			1M
PBS across all broadcast and streaming, owned and branded channels	50 Estimated		22M			22M			
Educational Free Streaming			5M			2M			3M
Independent, Community, Impact and Brand Distribution	1500 Estimated		2.25M			1.13M			1.13M
Unique Audience Size ROUGH Estimate	62.3M			32.3M			30.1M		
Unique Audience Size Accounting for Overlap	36.7M			23.5M			16.2M		
Theatrical Proportion	9.19%			0.22%			20.80%		

Methodology Note: The chart above illustrates how we conservatively calculate the 'unique' audience across platforms: We assume a high degree of overlap among viewership categories. In other words, fans of independent films in cinemas also watch them in various ways at home. The exception is the PBS documentary audience, which we believe overlaps less with the commercial platform audiences.

Independent Scripted Film

The independent scripted film fan base skews younger and is more diverse than the general film audience.

Age Representation	Independent scripted film skews slightly to **18-34** with strong representation of **34-55**.
Race and Region	Highly diverse in terms of race and region.
Gender, Education and Income	No gender skew. No education or income skew.

Documentaries

Documentary watchers skew slightly older and are more educated and wealthier than the general population.

Age and Gender	Documentary film fans skew slightly older **(25-54)** with a slight **female skew.**
Education	Roughly **60%** of documentary watchers had college or graduate education.
Income	63% earned more than **$100K per year.**
Race and Region	Highly diverse in terms of race and region.

Who is the Audience?

Our survey showed great diversity among audiences expressing interest in independent film. Scripted films skewed younger and more diverse than documentary films, which were slightly older, more educated, and wealthy.

Our viewership and demand data tells a slightly different story.

Insights from Key Findings

The survey data shows greater interest among younger audiences and audiences of all races than what is captured by Nielsen viewership data, which skews older and more White than the survey shows.

Parrot Analytics 'demand' data, focused on social media and online behavior, captures more interest from the young audience and aligns more closely with the survey results.

Parrot Analytics data shows that demand among younger audiences for independent films increased from 2018 to 2022. According to our research on this market with Parrot, young audiences showed a particular interest in political documentaries in this period.

One major exception to the diversity of the audience by all measures is among Hispanic viewers, whose total viewing percentage never matches their 19% share of the US population in any year. There is a clear opportunity to increase viewership among Hispanic audiences, and independent film can and should be leading the way in telling a wide range of stories that appeal to this demographic.

Income and education skew slightly higher in actual viewership than in the survey. But actual viewership is broad across income levels in line with the US household income distribution in which 20% of households earn over $150K per year benchmark

More study is needed on the young audience and audiences of color in particular to determine why the expressed interest is so much higher than viewership in these two categories.

Documentary

Age

ESHAP

18–24	21%
25–34	31%
35–44	27%
45–54	27%
55+	13%

Nielsen

2–24	9%
25–54	51%
55+	40%

Parrot

15–24	48%
25–31	27%
32–41	14%
42	20%

Gender

	Male	Female
Nielsen	44%	55%
Parrot	39%	61%

Race

ESHAP

White	27%
Black	21%
Hispanic	26%
Other	13%

Nielsen

White	59%
Black	12%
Hispanic	9%
Asian	5%
Other	15%

Income

ESHAP

$75k–150k	27%
$150k+	25%

Nielsen

< $40k	16%
$40k–75k	28%
$75k–150k	34%
$150k+	22%

Harvard Documentray Survey

$100k+	60%
College	50%

Dr. Matt Baum Harvard Documentary Survey

Scripted Film

Age

ESHAP

18–24	26%
25–34	28%
35–44	22%
45–54	22%
55+	10%

Nielsen

2–24	9%
25–54	50%
55+	41%

Parrot

15–24	20%
25–31	27%
32–41	27%
42	27%

Gender

	Male	Female
Nielsen	42%	58%
Parrot	48%	52%

Race

ESHAP

	Female
White	23%
Black	20%
Hispanic	24%
Other	10%

Nielsen

White	
Black	16%
Hispanic	14%
Asian	5%
Other	16%

49%

Income

ESHAP

$75k–150k	25%
$150k+	24%

Nielsen

< $40k	20%
$40k–75k	26%
$75k–150k	34%
$150k+	19%

Region

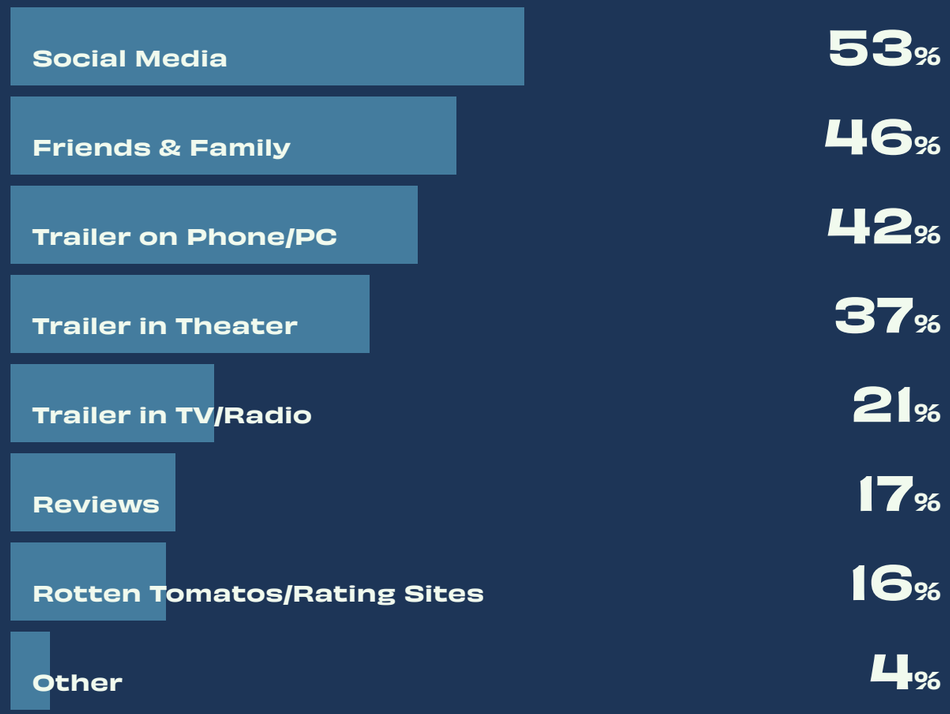
West	20%
Midwest	18%
Northeast	20%
Southwest	17%

ESHAP National Survey

Source: *Nielsen Actual Viewership Data 2022, Parrot Analytics Demographic Data, ESHAPNational Survey*

Our survey respondents' top reason for watching independent films was that they provide unusual and unexpected stories they can't find elsewhere.

Our respondents ranked the factors that influence their movie-watching decisions



Why are they watching?

Our survey finds that Audiences trust their personal networks more than reviews or marketing to help them decide what to see.

Only 17% of respondents cited movie reviews as a driver of viewership.

However, our broader research reveals the importance of other factors:

The algorithm

An anonymous source told us that 90% of Netflix viewers never leave the home page to decide what to watch. Certainly, platform algorithms are a significant factor in viewership decisions not reflected in our survey. Smaller independent films are recommended less frequently than other content by the dominant platform algorithms.

Social Media Marketing

A24 movies, brought to market with highly engaging social marketing, far outpace other independent films in terms of audience demand (Parrot)

The field would benefit from a dedicated marketing study exploring drivers of theatrical attendance and at-home viewing of independent film and documentary.



Overview of US independent film in the 21st century

The volume of independent film titles made in the US exploded between 2005 and 2017 as the revenue from at-home distribution encouraged investors and filmmakers to make more movies. This was more than the market could sustain.

At the peak of this trend in 2017, there were 700 independent film titles released commercially (and thousands more made independently and not tracked by commercial data platforms).

There were 200 theatrically released independent and art house titles in 2017, up from 50 in 2005.

Median and average per-film revenue and attendance declined by 90% across the period.

Average per-film earnings and attendance is far higher than median values because a handful of 'hits' lift the average. *Across the entire film business, the success of a few films carries the lower performing titles on the slates of studios and production companies.*

As subscription streaming began to rise in 2017, the number of theatrically released independent titles plummeted. Independent films started going directly to streaming.

In 2020, 30M people watched our dataset of independent scripted and documentary films on subscription streaming platforms. This was the peak year for audience reach for independent films on dominant subscription streaming platforms.

From 2017-2020, the major streaming companies built their libraries by acquiring a wide array of independent titles from festivals, often as award contenders with limited theatrical releases or awards campaigns.

Of course, the 2020 peak audience was found during the year that audiences were home during the pandemic binge-watching streaming television.

In 2021 the dominant streamers began to pull back on acquisitions of smaller, diverse, political, or challenging independent film titles in favor of investing in more expensive and popular mass-market fare.

Viewership of independent films on the major platforms decreased by nearly 50% in two years from 30M in 2020 to 18M in 2022.

That trend looks to be continuing as acquisitions on major platforms are trending down as free platform viewership rises.

Algorithms and home pages of the dominant sites rarely feature smaller films.

Nielsen and Parrot Analytics could not find data for many of our true independent titles.

A handful of breakout hits drives most viewership on streaming, as in theaters.

The accessibility of films at home and the streaming business's all-rights global deals broke the slower windowed distribution structure of traditional independent film releases.

Historically, independent films were monetized and reached more audiences over multiple windows over time.

A single global 'release' diminished the slow-release, cumulative build of a niche audience over time.

There is little long-tail' viewership on streaming platforms as the crush of new content crowds out the visibility of older and more niche fare.

Sources

Surveys: *The first-ever national survey to assess interest in US independent film conducted with Evan Shapiro and Publisher's Clearing House Insights, as well as surveys of the US Art House and Festival communities.*

Actual viewership data collected independently and in collaboration with Nielsen, Parrot Analytics, and The Numbers.

Estimated viewership data drawn from over 200 interviews with field professionals and desk research on viewership trends.

Challenges and Opportunities

The data in this report can be sobering, but also includes bright spots and opportunities—starting with the size of the audience that is interested in independent scripted and documentary film.

The energy in the field to find new pathways to audiences is palpable and promising.

Challenges

Lack of Data: Data asymmetry between mainstream and independent media is a serious problem. We knew it would be hard to get data because both big companies and smaller private ones do not share data publicly, but there were more gaps than we expected to find.

EXAMPLE

Total Number of Films: Independent film is not a category tagged or identified on any commercial platform. Commercial data companies track roughly 700 independent film titles annually, but many more are released on digital platforms. We conservatively estimate US 1500 titles annually, but some interviewees suggested our estimate was low and the total could be twice that number. More study is needed on volume and viewership of these untracked titles, but this category includes art-house festival films, public interest documentaries, and a high volume of low-budget films made to break out in the commercial market, via free streaming and PVOD. All are independent films, but market solutions and economics may be different.

Dominant Platform Pricing and Practices: YouTube, Amazon, Apple, and popular free streaming sites like Tubi and Roku provide revenue shares to independent films based on views. Several independent distributors told us that platforms with access to the most viewers are using their market leverage to retain more of the revenue by adding fees for preferred placement and limiting revenue-sharing rates despite viewership growth.

Fragmented Audiences: In the last three years, we have lost half the viewers for independent films on mainstream subscription streaming. Some may have moved to more commercial viewing choices, but the data shows that many scattered to other platforms to find the independent content they want. Films appearing on multiple streaming sites non exclusively are less likely to receive marketing support.

Discoverability: It's hard for audiences to find quality independent films due to the fragmentation of the streaming market, lack of marketing budgets, algorithms and landing pages that prioritize mass-appeal content, and the dominant streamers and networks largely abandoning this work in the last several years.

Festivals and Art House Theaters are the sector's core fans, but they currently lack the resources and capacity to employ data-driven marketing that could enable them to expand their attendance and leverage their audiences to promote films when released through their networks.

As the number of films increased significantly in the last 20 years, per-film viewing declined, raising the difficult question of whether the volume of films seeking audiences and financial returns is just too great for the market demand.



Opportunities

The data shows signs that audiences are seeking alternatives to mainstream fare:

While 94% of viewership happens on mass-market subscription streaming platforms, the 'other' category has grown 7% this year alone.

The rapid growth of free streaming is promising for independent film since these free platforms prioritize the engagement of viewers with niche interests.

Art House theater goers attend cinema more than twice as often per year as general moviegoers. In 2024, AMC theaters data shows that independent films captured a box office share of 31%—larger than in prior years.

Movies remain popular: We encountered a general perception that films–and in particular smaller films–are not relevant to a new generation. Our research shows that this is not true. In our national survey, 67% of people say they watch movies frequently. 37% (or 100M people) say they watch movies 'every day or several times a week.' People 18-24 report the highest percentage of movie watching of any age group at 74% (7% above the average).

Diversifying the Audience: People of color and young people express greater interest in independent film in our survey than is shown by the actual viewership gaps. Closing this gap will benefit both audiences and the field.

Public Media: The significant aggregated audience for indie docs on PBS and other public media platforms shows that when audiences know where to go, they will support this work. The lack of scripted US independent films on PBS today is a significant missed opportunity.

Independent Distribution: Several recent break-out successes have emerged in this sector. This illustrates the potential for films to circumvent the traditional acquisition-based distribution structures and reach audiences on their own terms. Our report includes links to case studies and a list of new tools and platforms being used in this sector to identify and reach target audiences outside the mainstream commercial platforms. The success in this sector bears close examination by exhibitors, distributors, festivals, and niche platforms who might scale these tactics beyond individual films to their venues or slates.

Recommendations

See our opportunities and recommendations section at the end of this report. We hope the data inspires a wide range of ideas. The independent film industry faces significant challenges but also has ample opportunities for growth and resilience. Overall, we believe the field needs collective action rather than individual efforts to make change. With collaboration, innovation, and investments in data and systems alongside individual films, the independent film field can forge a more robust future.

Methodology



Collaborators and Vendors

We looked at viewership and fan bases throughout the life-cycle of independent film releases: festivals, cinemas, at-home viewing, educational, and independent distribution, and online film communities. We focus only on the US market because independent cinema has little government or public support in the US and the commercial market here is no longer sustaining this sector. By contrast, many international films receive government or public media support and/or benefit from streaming regulations that preserve space for independent work.

Our research includes both documentary film and scripted film because they face similar sustainability challenges. However, we also break out the data separately for these two genres.

We conducted our own research and also worked with several collaborators and vendors.

FFA FILM FESTIVAL ALLIANCE

Nielsen

Letterboxd

PARROT ANALYTICS

PCH Publishers Clearing House

ARTHOUSE CONVERGENCE

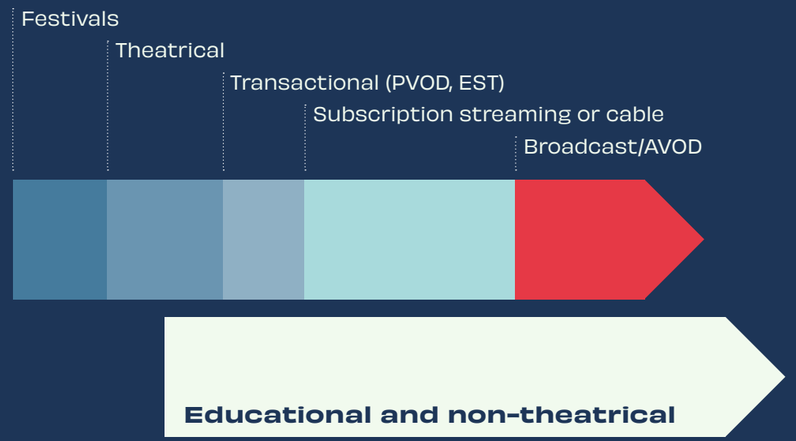
The Numbers

ESHAP
Evan Shapiro
Jesse DeRocco

Definition of Independent Film

We define an "independent film" as a film that is produced and financed independently, with the film's creators retaining full control of creative and production decisions. In other words, an independent film is not commissioned, developed, or majority financed in advance of production by a distributor, studio, streamer, or network. Many independent films are distributed by commercial distributors and exhibited on commercial platforms.

Distribution Windows for Independent Film



AVOD: Advertising-based video on demand
PVOD: Premium video on demand
EST: Electronic sell-through

Note: *The chart shows the standard film distribution windows. Many independent films distribute across all windows and also experiment with re-ordering these windows for increased impact. For example, the educational and non-theatrical window has grown in importance, particularly for documentaries that pursue impact campaigns, and is often launched before at-home viewing and continued through the life cycle of a film. Some films sell all rights to a global streamer, which replaces all traditional windows of release, although that opportunity is increasingly rare today.*

Surveys, Viewership Data, and Research-Based Estimates

Our study includes data from several sources, including national surveys and actual audience attendance or viewership data from theatrical, paid VOD, subscription streaming, and PBS. For categories where no data was available, or the data was spotty or conflicting, we used research-based estimates from our 200 field interviews and desk research.

National Surveys

We conducted a National Survey of over 14,000 US adults selected to represent national demographics. The survey was conducted in February and March of 2024 by Evan Shapiro and Jess DeRocco of ESHAPtogether with the research team at Publisher's Clearing House Insights.

Core Independent Film Dataset

We created a dataset of 329 US films released from 2017 to 2022, to represent a cross-section of US independent film and documentary coming out of top film festivals. We used this data set to track theatrical attendance and at-home viewership by title.

We created a data set because we could find no "independent film and documentary" category as we define it on film or television databases or ratings sites. Some databases allow a filter for all non-studio films, but there are many independent films made outside the studio system that are beyond the scope of our inquiry, including international films, anime, concert films, faith based films, and low-budget genre titles. It is possible to sort databases for documentaries, but the category includes commissioned work like true crime, comedy or concert films, or celebrity documentaries that generally do not apply to our study.

Full Specialty Market Analysis

We collaborated with Parrot Analytics and The Numbers to identify a broader range of US independent titles by filtering their databases to isolate work from distributors specifically focusing on independent and arthouse films. We used this data set to analyze viewership of independent films on paid VOD and in theaters, and to determine the full market size for theaters and mass market subscription streaming, and Paid VOD.

Links to the datasets from Nielsen and Parrot Analytics are found in our appendix.

Field Research

We conducted over 200 interviews with industry experts and performed additional desk research on film viewership trends. We drew our estimates of free streaming, niche streaming, PBS, educational, independent distribution from research since there was little available data. Our Interview List and a Google Drive with links to our reading sources are in our Appendix.

Detailed, Section-Specific Methodology

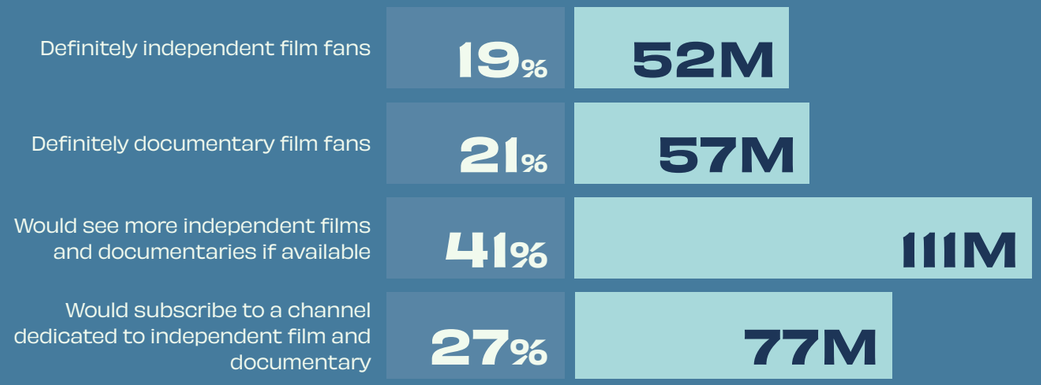
Methodology for specific parts of the report, including Total Addressable Market calculations, are within the applicable section. Deeper detail on methodology for various sections is also in the Appendix.

National Survey

We believe our national survey of 14,421 American adults is a first-ever look at potential market size for the independent scripted and documentary film in the United States.

The survey finds a large, diverse audience that expresses interest in independent film and documentary

LINK TO FULL NATIONAL SURVEY RESULTS



Methodology

We collaborated with Evan Shapiro (ESHAP) and Publishers Clearing House Consumer Insights, who regularly work together on media-related surveys and have access to a large, demographically tagged, and validated database of national online survey respondents. The survey, conducted in the first quarter of 2024, asked a cross-section of Americans ages 18+ about their movie-watching habits, with particular focus on independent film and documentary film. Survey responses are weighted to align with national demographics. The numerical value of response percentages is calculated based on a US adult population estimate of 272M.

Separately, we added questions about documentary film viewership to an existing national US survey called "The COVID States Project (CSP)," conducted by one of the principal investigators, Matthew Baum, PhD, Marvin Kalb Professor of Global Communications at Harvard Kennedy School. The CSP Survey, administered between November 2 and December 5, 2023, had 28,494 participants, representing a cross-section of the US population. The questions and methodology for this survey can be found in our appendix.

Overview

The potential market for independent film and documentary in the US identified in the survey is significant.

The independent film fan base skews younger, especially for scripted independent films, and is more diverse than the general film audience.

Quality independent documentary and scripted film is often hard for audiences to find due to fragmentation of the streaming market, lack of marketing budgets, algorithms and landing pages that prioritize mass-appeal content, and the dominant streamers and networks abandoning this work in the last several years. While we recognize that people may respond to surveys with aspirational ideas of the media they want to read or watch, we are confident that our survey results show a viable market in the US significantly wider than those currently watching independent films.

"One quarter of Americans still go to movie theaters, but the vast majority of movie watching happens on streaming, with some still taking place on traditional TV and even DVD."

– Evan Shapiro–ESHAP/Publisher's Clearing House Insights Report

Audience Scale and Demographics		
Regularly	67%	182M
Every Day or Several Times a Week	37%	100M
People 18–24	74%	↑ 7%
White people	86%	↑ 19%



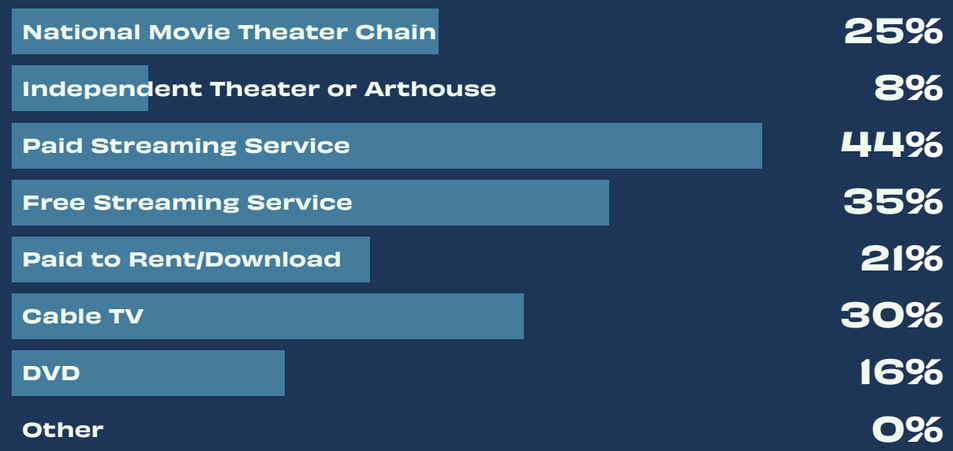
Report Summary and Analysis

Note: The survey asks about movie watching generally, whether at home or in cinemas

General Movie Audience

> **"The audience in general, but particularly a younger audience, no longer goes to the movies. They go to a movie. It is now a programmatically driven decision, not an overall behavioral decision. It's programmatic. What is it about a particular movie that is significant and compelling and urgently relatable enough for me that I'm going to go to see it? In which case, they will absolutely go to the movies, absolutely, but they will not do it as a matter of course."**
>
> **– Tom Rothman**, *Chairperson Sony Pictures Entertainment; quoted in Deadline*

The young audience skew is consistent with the MPA 2021 Theme Report (p. 53), although that report does not show as strong a White skew as our survey and does show a slightly male skew that our survey did not. Discrepancies are likely a reflection of the specific films in the theater during the 3-month period queried by our survey, although there is opportunity to grow audiences of color–in particular Black audiences and Hispanic audiences–with investment in marketing and distributing movies that offer more diverse characters and stories.



Where Do They Watch?

Our finding that 25% of the US adult population attended a movie in the theater from November 2023 to January 2024 is lower than other estimates, likely because the specific 3-month period of time queried in our survey had fewer big studio releases than other years—and times of year—due to the supply of films affected by the Writers Guild of America (WGA) and the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) strikes and pandemic restart. We captured a trough in movie attendance.

The most recent published full-year MPA estimate (2021) shows 47% of Americans attending movies in theaters; an S&P Global insights report estimated 54% between 2018 and 2022. The Art House Convergence 2020 Audience Report shows 30% of moviegoers opted to see movies in cinemas, and the rest online. We asked the National Association of Theatre Owners (NATO), ComScore, and The Numbers to verify our theater attendance finding–all of those organizations are tracking a significant rebound in 2024 based on the success of several summer films. Researcher Matt Ball dug deeply into the reduction in movie attendance and found its cause was not a factor of the percentage of Americans who go to the movies each year, which is still consistently above 75%, but instead a drop in the frequency of their visits–particularly for younger audiences under 24.

Because respondents had the opportunity to select multiple ways they watch movies, it is not possible to determine the overlap among categories in this question on the survey. For example, we cannot know if the 8% who selected independent or art house theaters are a subset of the larger 25% moviegoing group, or if they are additional cinema-goers.

At-home viewing predictably shows subscription streaming as the most popular way to watch movies, but it's also notable that the share for free streaming services (Tubi, Roku, YouTubeTV) has increased since the beginning of 2024 (see our *free streaming* section below), while VOD has struggled especially for documentaries (see our *VOD section* below).



Do you consider yourself a fan of specialty/independent movies?



Source: *Pch Insights | Chart: Eshap | N=14,421*

Independent film fans skew younger and are highly diverse in terms of race and region.

People 18–24 and 25–34 report the highest percentage of "definite" fanship, 7% and 9% above the average of 19%.

Independent film fans are more racially diverse than general cinemagoers who skew White. There is no significant racial or regional skew among independent film fans.

Independent Theater or Art House Cinema Attendees

For our purposes, the 8%–21.7 M people–who report attending art house / independent theaters is an important number. This is the core audience for specialized film, a smaller group that attends venues that specialize in independent or art house content, even if they also show some studio films. This would include the Art House Convergence Theaters (see our report below) plus smaller chains like Landmark and Alamo Drafthouse (the latter recently acquired by Sony so no longer 'independent').

This may skew higher than unique annual attendees at purely independent art house theaters because some respondents may have included mainstream cinemas from smaller chains in their definition of 'independent' theaters. Phil Contrino, Head of Research at NATO and an advisor to this project, told us that NATO defines "independent" theater as any theater that is not part of a publicly traded company (by this definition, 36% of US theaters are 'independent'). This includes several commercial chains that play mostly studio movies, and is a larger universe than true independent, art house theaters.

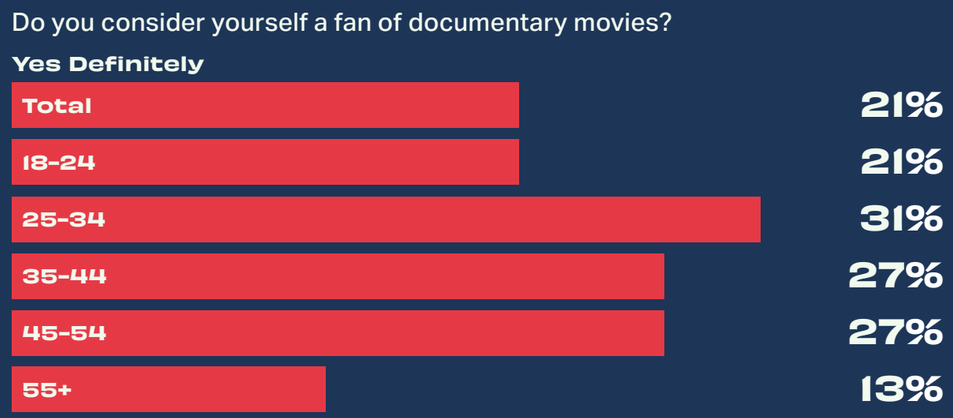
Independent Scripted and Documentary Film Audience

The survey asked respondents whether they are fans of specialty / independent movies and documentary films, defining the category as films made outside the studio system and including a list of successful independent and documentary films as examples to help describe the category. *Moonlight*, *The Holdovers*, and *Little Miss Sunshine* were among the scripted film examples, while *Blackfish*, *I Am Not Your Negro*, and *Three Identical Strangers* were among the documentary examples.

> **"Nearly 1 in 5 American adults–19% or 52M people–say they are "definitely" independent film fans."**
>
> **– Eshap/PCH Report**

An additional 27% –73M people– define themselves as "somewhat" independent film fans. We have focused on the 'definite fans' when considering the attainable market in this report, but there is potential in the larger group too.

> **"More than 1 in 5, or 57M people, consider themselves "definitely" documentary film fans. These doc-lovers skew a little older, but once again they come from all corners of America"**
>
> **– ESHAP/PCH Report**



Source: *Pch Insights | Chart: Eshap | N=14,421*

53% reported watching a documentary in the last three months.

82% of those who watched documentaries, saw them on a streaming platform.

20% reported watching on PBS, consistent with our research finding on PBS documentary viewership.

4% reported seeing a documentary in a theater, consistent with the dismal actual box office results for documentaries found in our viewership study.

An additional 22% or 60M people define themselves as "somewhat" documentary film fans.

Documentary Film ranks highest for people ages 25-34 (31%) while older audiences (55+) yielded only 13%, well below the average. White and Hispanic audiences were 6% and 5% above the average respectively. There was no regional skew among documentary fans.

Documentary Film Results from Harvard Kennedy School Survey Questions:

In late fall 2023, we asked several documentary-specific questions through the COVID States Project (CDP) national survey conducted by one of its principal investigators, Professor Matthew Baum, PhD. Dr. Baum's survey also shows very strong documentary interest. However, this survey did not specify titles so the definition of documentary is likely interpreted more broadly by these respondents to include celebrity, true crime, and other categories popular on streaming but generally outside our remit.

Dr. Baum's survey looked at education, income, and political affiliation in addition to gender, regional, or racial skew among documentary viewers.

There were no notable gender or racial skews.

Documentary watchers tended to be more educated and wealthier than the general population: roughly 60% of documentary watchers had college or graduate education and 63% earned more than $100K per year.

Documentary viewers did not have a political affiliation skew.

The documentary audience is strong in the United States, but this survey's questions did not specify an interest in 'independent' documentary.

In both surveys, nearly half of all respondents watched one or more documentaries in the last three months.

Drivers of Independent Film Viewership

> **"By far the number one reason indie and documentary film fans say they love these films is because they provide unusual and unexpected stories they cannot see elsewhere. Overwhelmingly, indie and doc film audiences learn about and seek out these movies in online communities and platforms."**
>
> **Evan Shapiro,** *ESHAP/PCH Report p 23*

The PCH survey asked how respondents decided which films to see. The top choice was social media at 53%, closely followed by friends and family at 42%. But, taken together, trailers are the biggest driver of viewership (our survey had separate questions for trailers watched online, in theaters, or on television). Reviews and press rating sites ranked lowest on the list of decision drivers.

Potential Market

The data suggests that if independent scripted and documentary films were more available, or easier to find, more people would see them. The 100M+ market that expresses interest in independent film and documentary also reports difficulty in finding the work. This is consistent with research that reveals audience frustration in finding what they want to watch.

In addition, this finding–together with the Parrot Analytics data about how 'demand' for films is driven by social media–suggests that exhibitors and distributors should leverage social media and video assets that will generate word of mouth and engagement more than press junkets or traditional ads.

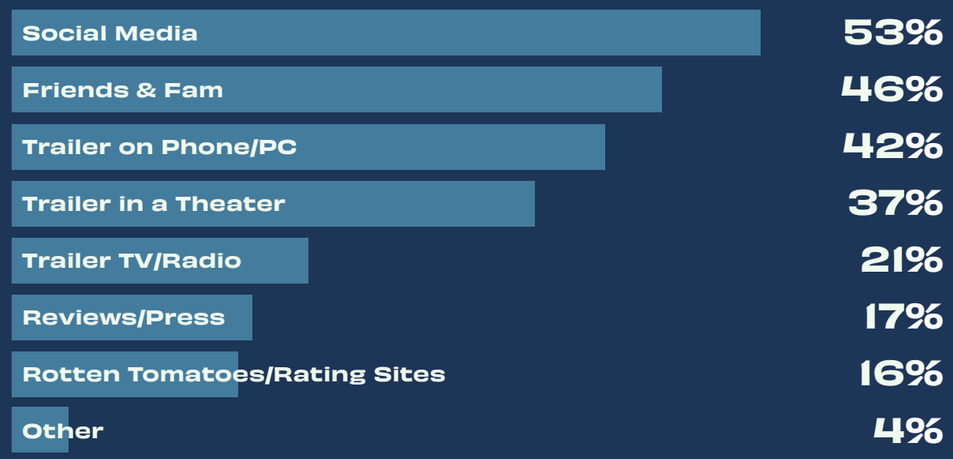
We were surprised to learn that a higher percentage of people said they would be interested in a dedicated channel for independent documentary and scripted film than in a general channel that "included" independent film or documentary. [This finding is inconsistent with current subscribers to the handful of niche channels that currently focus on independent films or documentaries].

The young skew of interest in this sector throughout the survey is consistent and encouraging. Studies, including a Harris Poll conducted in 2024, show that young audiences are more interested in original content over franchises. Further, our interviews with independent exhibitors around the country suggest a significant increase in young audiences watching classic independent and art house movies at art house theaters.



"More than 4 in 10 Americans say they would see more independent and documentary film if they were available. That's more than say they are fans of indie film, roughly 111 million people. 18% of Americans say they would be more likely to subscribe to a streaming service if it had independent films and documentaries. That's approximately 49 million people. 27% of respondents said they would subscribe to a service dedicated to indie and documentary"

– Evan Shapiro



Source: *Pch Insights | Chart: Eshap | N=14,421*

US Theatrical Market

FULL DATA SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND METHODOLOGY

SPREADSHEET OF THEATRICAL PERFORMANCE OF FILMS

"...for a hundred years through many, many different distribution models, through the advent and eventual extinguishing of the studio system, through the invention and mass adoption of television and then other forms of home entertainment, through the introduction of the VHS, and then HBO and then the 300 channel cable universe. Through it all, movies endure, and what's true even in this streaming moment is that successful movies become more valuable."

– Tom Rothman, Chairman of Sony Pictures Entertainment in Deadline

Methodology

We looked at independent film theatrical performance and trends from two angles:

Sector level insights from a dataset of 7,386 independent films made between 1995 and 2023. To create our specific independent film list for this part of the study, we tracked releases from 142 independent film distributors with the help of *The Numbers,* a platform offering data analysis and insights into film financial, theater, and at-home video metrics. This list includes studio specialty and all art house titles. A summary of the titles and results from The Numbers dataset can be found in the Appendix.

Specific theatrical performance of our core dataset of 329 independent scripted and documentary films released between 2017 and 2022, analyzed through The Numbers and Box Office Mojo data. *Our full data summary of our findings and methodology along with a spreadsheet of theatrical title-specific performance of films in our core dataset.*



General Theatrical Market Snapshot

Cinema attendance, trending down for nearly two decades, dropped significantly in 2020 and has not yet recovered to pre-pandemic levels.

There are many reasons for the decline in attendance, including increased adoption of streaming, collapsed theatrical windows, a narrower genre range of major studio films, a reduced number of releases due to consolidation and strikes, and increased competition for audience attention from television, gaming and creator content.

Our national survey found that only 25% of American adults reported seeing a movie in a theater from November 2023-February 2024, but this was a period in which few blockbuster titles were available in theaters so is lower than the annual rate. We captured a significant trough in movie attendance. The annual attendance rate is higher as a percentage of the population.

Motion Picture Association research executive Julia Jenks told us that 2023 data suggests a recovery close to pre-pandemic level attendance of 68% of people visiting a cinema (pre-pandemic was 75%). Comscore research exec Nancy Reyes provided some data showing that 2024 looks even stronger. But analysis from researcher Matt Ball in a summer 2024 deep-dive piece about movie going in the US revealed that ticket sales are down–despite the rebound overall percent of Americans attending a cinema remaining relatively high– because of a significant drop in the *frequency of attendance*, especially among young audiences.

Despite the long trend of downturn in moviegoing, films like "Inside Out 2," "Barbie," "The Super Mario Brothers Movie," "Avatar: The Way of Water," "Oppenheimer," and "Twisters" brought large pre-pandemic size crowds. Independent films like "Everything Everywhere All at Once," "Sound of Freedom","Longlegs," and "Thelma" (relative to its size) broke out with audiences in the theaters.

Moviegoing heated up in the summer of 2024 after a challenging winter and spring. Distributors and exhibitors are optimistic about a return of audiences to theaters in 2025 as the impact of pandemic and strike-related stoppages recedes. It remains to be seen whether or when the US box office revenue might approach the pre-pandemic $11.3 billion level.

After a period of experimenting with direct-to-streaming releases, most studios and streamers–Netflix excepted–agree with analysts that a theatrical release enhances the visibility and value of films on home entertainment platforms. Indeed, Sony Pictures invested in Alamo Drafthouse based on the belief in the differentiated theatrical experience for niche audiences like fans of its anime subsidiary Crunchyroll.

1995–2023

Speciality and Independent Film Theatrical Market

The Numbers identified 7,386 independent films from 1995 through 2023 by selecting films released by 142 distributors that specialize in this sector of the business.

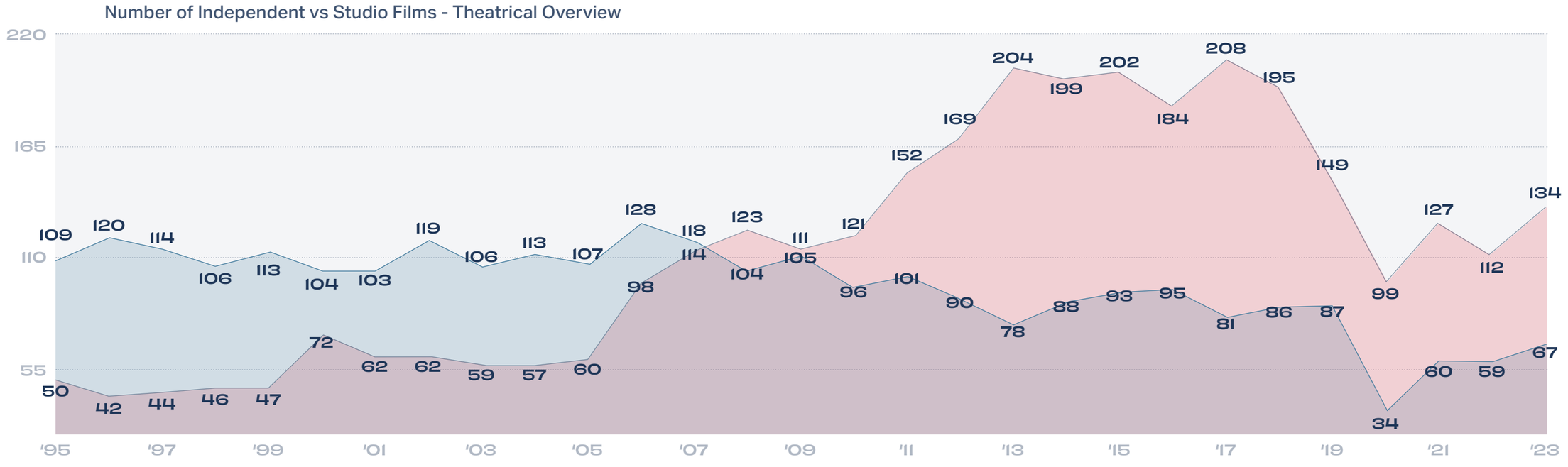
We analyzed the 45%–3,304 film titles–among this list that were released theatrically. These include studio specialty division and all art-house titles. The remaining 55%–4082 titles–were not theatrically released.

Independent, Art House, and Speciality studio films released in theaters increased from 1995 through 2018 (with a sharp increase between 2005 and 2018) when they reached a high of 208. The number of annual releases began a precipitous decline in 2018-2019 before the pandemic to a low of 99 films per year.

The number of 2023 releases recovered from the pre-pandemic trough but at 134 films per year, it was down 34% from peak volume pre-pandemic.

The volume of independent theatrical releases spiked as new streaming video businesses driven by acquisitions of independent titles launched and grew. Lower barriers to entry for production combined with the upside of more television buyers led to a boom in investment in the sector.

By 2018, the dominant platforms (led by Netflix) controlled the vast majority of streaming time. They shifted their focus on in-house production and exclusive premieres vs post-theatrical rights. We believe this contributed to the sharp pre-pandemic decline in theatrical releases for independent film. The other factor in the decline in theatrical releases in this period was the drop in per-film earnings. The theatrical market was oversaturated with independent films. There were more films than audiences.



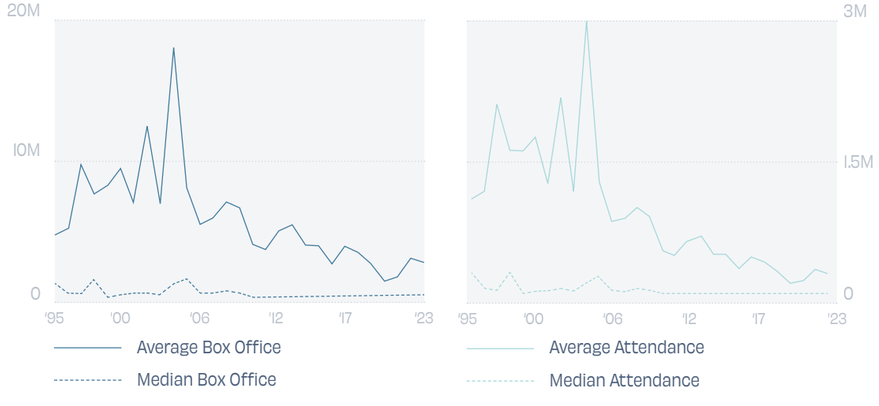
Film Earnings and Attendance 1995–2023

To see the trends in total attendance for all art house, speciality, and independent films before and after the pandemic and the rise in streaming, we looked at the data for 2018 and 2023.

	2023	2018
Total Attendance	31,053,185	70,388,085
Documentary	422,867	7,017,759
Scripted Film	31,053,185	63,305,718
Unique Attendees Estimate	5,245,973	7,609,523
Documentary	70,477	758,677
Scripted Film	5,175,530	6,843,861

We divide total attendance by the average attendance rate each year. (We make this rough calculation based on 50% of the audience attending at MPA rates at 3.5x per year in 2023, 5x per year in 2018, and 50% of the audience attending at the art-house audience rates of 8.5x per year in 2023 and 13.5x per year in 2018. We average the two attendance rates in each year.)

We divide total attendance by the average attendance rate each year. (We make this rough calculation based on 50% of the audience attending at MPA rates at 3.5x per year in 2023, 5x per year in 2018, and 50% of the audience attending at the art-house audience rates of 8.5x per year in 2023 and 13.5x per year in 2018. We average the two attendance rates in each year.)



Average and median per-film earnings and attendance both plummeted as the volume of independent films released in theaters grew sharply from 2005-2017 from 50 titles per year to 208 titles a year.

The steep rise in the number of releases from 2005-2018 exceeded theatrical audience demand. Researcher Matt Ball confirmed in his June 2024 research on moviegoing in the US that the decline in per-film revenue in this period was borne by the independent sector. He writes, "In 2019, 900 films were released in theaters, up from 350 at the start of the millennium. Essentially all of this growth [in volume of releases] came outside the six majors (including their indie labels)... Yes, these "tail" films released to fewer screens than those of the majors… but it's notable that the majors' share of total ticket sales grew from the low 70s to the mid-80s despite their declining share of total releases." The aggregate attendance may have been up, but it was spread across more films making individual film economics more challenging.

As the number of releases dropped starting in 2018, per-film earnings and attendance improved slightly for scripted films. It did not recover for documentary film. **Still, average and median attendance have dropped over 90% since their peak in 2004** when only 57 independent titles were in the theatrical market.

- Average attendance peaked in 2004 and fell by 92.02% from 2004 through 2023;
- Median attendance peaked in 1995 and dropped by 94.48% from 1995 to 2023.

Scripted and Documentary Results



Q1 2024 Growth of Specialty Distributor Box Office in the U.S.

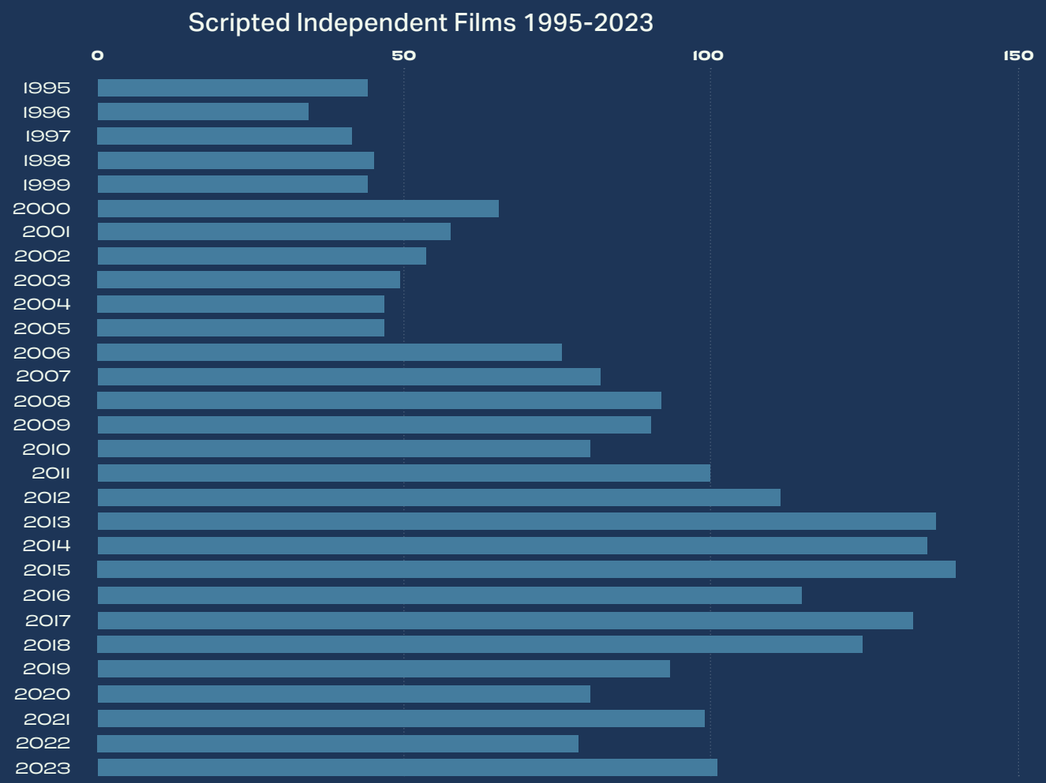
	Distibutor Segment	Majors/Mid-Majors (Disney, Universal, Sony, Paramount, Warner Bros. Lionsgate, MGM	Specialty Distributors Owned by majors (Searchlight, FOcus, Crunchroll, Sony Pictures Classics, Roadside)	Specialty Distributors (A24, Neon, Bleeker Street, Angel Studio)	Alternative Content Distributors (Fathom, Trafalgar, Iconic)	Independents
AMC	Change in $M from Q1 2023	-$45.3M	+$0.6M	+$19.3M	+$4.4M	+$9.3M
	U.S. Market Share	26.9%	29.3%	31.1%	24.5%	26.7%
	% AMC Adm Rev.	81.0%	3.3%	6.7%	2.9%	6.2%
	$M AMC Admissions Reveue	$314.7	$12.7	$26.0	$11.4	$23.0
U.S. Box Office	Change in $M from Q1 2023	-$198.8M	-$0.6M	+$62.0M	+$17.1M	+$29.7
	% Industry Box Office	81.6% Down from 89.2% from Q1 2023	3.0%	5.8% Up from 1.8% from Q1 2023	3.3%	6.3%
	$M Industry Box Office	$1,169.3	$43.3	$83.4	$46.6M	$89.6M

Source: *AMC Theaters | Updated: April 24, 2024*

Independent film is capturing a higher percentage of the theatrical market in 2023 than it captured pre-pandemic. By 2023 median per- film attendance for independent film *increased* by 14.40%, returning to 2019 attendance levels, although still far below the historic high. This is partially due to a decrease in volume and variety of studio titles in this period. AMC Cinemas data from CY2023 supports that the market share increased to 31% share for independent film in Q1 2024 from the 27.5% reported in 2023. Saturated with tired studio sequels and superheroes, audiences hunger for new voices and stories.

A new study shows that audience demand for the top-grossing movies has receded in favor of interest in a wider range of titles. This is good news for the vitality of the cinemas.

> **"I truly believe — and I realize that it may sound self-serving given the chair I sit in — that we might be coming into the very beginning stages of a golden age of movies that are filmmaker driven, with original visions and original voices being the thing that defines the biggest movies of our era... "We have seen data that shows that true habitual moviegoers — the people who go to movies 12 times a year — they actually rate specialty films as a category among the very highest of the movies on the scale of things that they like. These are people who then also go to all the other movies as well," Kujawski says. "So there's something about the fact that the most white-hot core of theatrical moviegoers actually are largely the cinephiles who are primarily driven by movies that are completely unique."**
>
> **– Peter Kujawski,** *Focus Features; Variety, April 2024*



Scripted films' Detail

Revenue and attendance recovered to 2019 levels, still down from historic highs. Documentary films revenue and attendance have continued to decline.

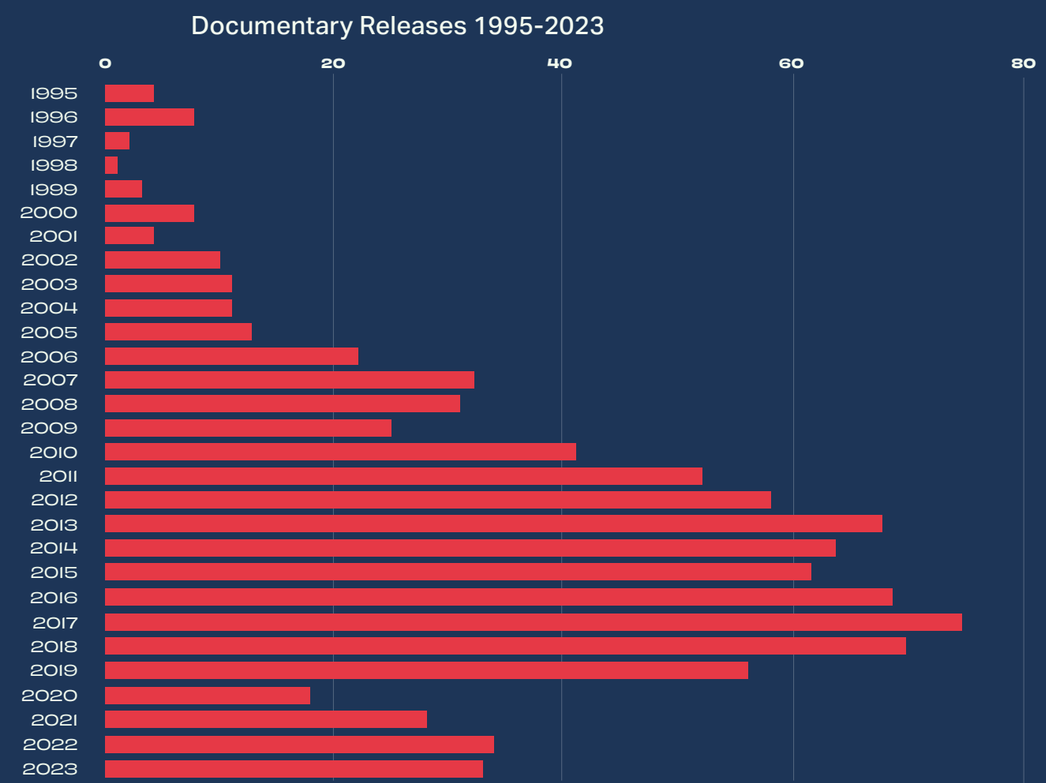
Median box office for scripted titles is only 4% of average box office. The median is more reflective of the low earnings of most films. The rare hits increase the average.

↓ 90.07% Median box office drop since its peak in 2005.

↓ 84.92% Average box office drop since its peak in 2004.

↑ 190.22% Median box office from 2019 to 2023
as fewer films resulted in better per-film earnings.

Source: *The Numbers*



Documentary Films Detail

Median box office is 12% of average box office for documentaries. The documentary median is higher relative to averages than scripted film due to fewer big-hit scripted outliers.

↓ 98% Median box office drop since its peak in 1998.

↓ 89.9% Average box office drop since its peak in 2009.

↓ 40.14% The decline accelerated from 2019 and 2023
median box office revenue decreased by 40.14% illustrating the extent of documentary films' struggle in theaters.

Source: *The Numbers*

81.29% of **scripted films** in our dataset received theatrical releases

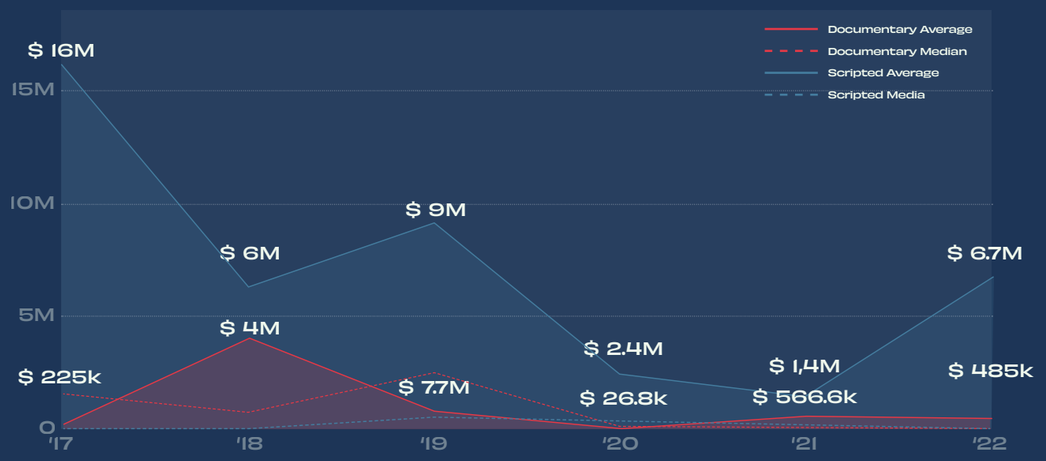
52.3% of **documentary** titles in the data set received theatrical releases.

Releases ranging from 1 theater (ACORN and the firestorm) to 3,143 theaters (Get Out).

Source: *Core DATASET, Background data calculations*

Average and Median Box Office by Category (Documentary & Scripted)

Theatrical Overview



Source: *Core DATASET, Background data calculations*

Detail performance of our CORE DATASET of US independent film titles

We created and studied a specific dataset of 329 US independent scripted and documentary films that played in 4 U.S independent film festivals (*Sundance, SXSW, Tribeca,* and *DOCNYC*) from 2017-2022. Throughout our research, we use this core dataset as a representative proxy for the larger set of films financed outside the studio system in this period. Our core dataset excludes studio specialty division and streaming platform productions, although films acquired by these entities are included. Methodology on this data set is in our appendix.

(Because we began this work in 2023, data for that year was not available at the time we started, so we capped our study period to end in 2022).

Our analysis of box office and attendance excludes the year 2020 because it is anomalous.

As with the broader dataset from The Numbers, and consistent with the hit-driven film business more generally, per-film box office earnings and attendance medians are far lower than averages for our core data set of US independent films..

Average scripted per title earning 8x the median. Scripted film shows a relatively strong median at just under $1M per film. The average is lifted by hits in our data set like "Get Out" and "Everything Everywhere All at Once."

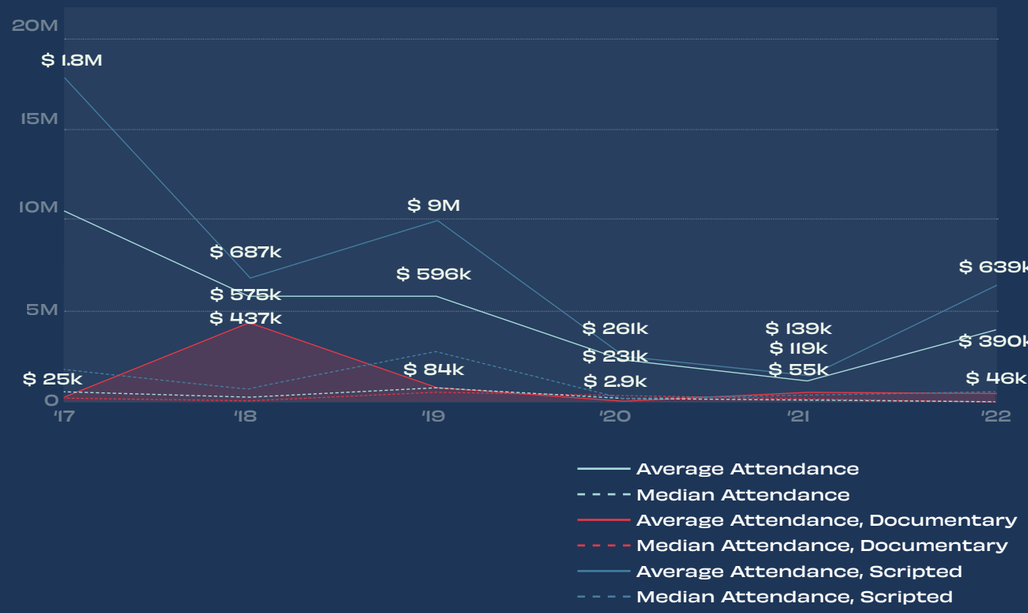
Earnings for documentaries are about 10% those of scripted films. Average documentary per title earning is 14x the median of $91,883.00.

There was a documentary "bubble" in 2018. 2018 releases "Free Solo," "Three Identical Strangers" and "Won't You Be My Neighbor," each earned more than $10M. The spike in documentary theatrical viewing in this period is indicative of potential future theatrical interest in the genre. There is clearly an audience excited to see distinctive independent documentaries in the cinemas, even when streaming is available.

2019 had the highest median box office in this 6-year period for both scripted and documentary films. This was also the peak year of streaming acquisitions. We believe that investments from streamers provided marketing resources that helped drive these box office results.

Median and Average Theatrical Attendance

Theatrical Overview



Specific Attendance Findings

Scripted	Pre-pandemic		2022
Average per-film attendance	742,738	↓ 47.42%	390,521
Median per-film attendance	59,744	↓ 68.70%	18,701

Documentary	Pre-pandemic	Pre-pandemic	2022
Average per-film attendance	182,277	↓ 74.72%	46,087

	Highest pre-pandemic median of 2017	Lowest pre-pandemic median of 2017	2022
Median per-film attendance	↓ 92%	↓ 43%	<5,000

Earnings are now at 32.79% of the pre-pandemic levels

- Scripted per-titles grosses are 26.74% of their average pre-covid median box office.
- Documentary per-title grosses are 20.08% of their average pre-covid median.

Average and Median Theatrical attendance for independent films in our core dataset also dropped significantly from 2017 to 2022 (Median by -70.46% and average by -63.04% in average theatrical attendance measures during the same period). Attendance correlates with box office returns, but is not the same because ticket prices may change annually.

The median values confirm that documentary films in particular are not connecting at the box office as tracked by the major data platforms.

Our core data set of 329 US independent titles across this period did not recover from the pandemic as well as the overall set of *all* specialized films tracked by The Numbers in the same period that included a wider range of independent titles than our US-indie set.

The Numbers set includes studio speciality releases (Fox Searchlight, Focus, etc), international films, and some faith-based titles that performed better than the films on our data set. Fewer independent films made outside the dominant studio and streaming system, like the ones on our core dataset, were acquired from festivals in this period. Therefore, most lacked the resources for marketing that come with a major acquisition.

There are many theatrical opportunities outside of conventionally tracked distribution.

See our section on Independent, Community, and Impact Distribution for more information on non-traditional distribution.



Art House Convergence, Independent Nonprofit Theaters

LINK TO FULL AHC SURVEY REPORT HERE

We collaborated with the Art House Convergence (AHC), the coalition of independent exhibitors that represents an estimated 358 Art House theaters in North America, on a Landscape Survey of their member venues across the country about audience size, engagement, and demographics. Our Landscape Survey was conducted in Q1 2024. This is the first known survey querying Art House theaters about their annual ticket sales to help analyze the size of the national art house audience. To assess pre- and post-pandemic data, our AHC attendance survey asked about calendar years 2019 and 2022.

The Art House Convergence study yielded a statistically relevant 30% response rate from its 358 art house exhibitors, in line with prior member surveys conducted by this group. We extrapolated from this response rate to attendance for the full universe of AHC member venues.

The survey was conducted by Dr. Alicia Kozma, Director of Indiana University Cinema and Vice-President of the AHC Board of Directors with support from Kate Markham, Managing Director of the Art House Convergence.

> **"...independent art house exhibitors are more than movie theaters. Indeed, they are vital arts and culture organizations whose community contributions and overall impact on quality of life continue to outweigh their increased invisibility to, and decreasing support from, the film industry at large."**
>
> **– Dr. Alicia Kozma,** *AHC report*

In July, 2024 the Art House Convergence published its own Audience Study, which gathered feedback directly from a survey of art house patrons. This study paints an exciting portrait of the vitality and growing attendance, including from younger audiences, at art house theaters across the country. We have included some of its findings to supplement our own data in the analysis below.

> **"What we learned of course is what we already knew to be true: art house moviegoing audiences are still attending their local cinemas, new and younger patrons are discovering these independent exhibitors, and the creativity and variety of programming is what keeps them coming back."**
>
> **– Indiewire,** *Kate Markham, Art House Convergence's Managing Director, Commenting on the July 2024 Audience Study*

Ticket Sales

We asked individual member theaters to report total ticket sales in the years 2019 and 2022.

Ticket Sales

CY19 Average	51,158
CY22 Average	38,609
Reporting Year Over Year Change	–25%

Source: **Chart from AHC Report, P. 3*

Average AHC venue ticket sales fell 25% from 2019 to 2022. This is a much smaller drop than the full North American ticket sales loss of 42.6% in the same period.

The strength of AHC venues' engaged of audiences is illustrated in the lower decline in sales among these theaters than national theater chains, especially since our data shows that the distinct number of films offered fell by 22% (from 217 in 2019 to 169 in 2022). This speaks to the innovation of the AHC venues in offering repertory titles and other special events to their constituents to make up for a reduced supply of new films.

In 2023, the North American box office as a whole was still down 32% from 2019 levels. Surprisingly, the July 2024 AHC Audience Study found a *4% increase* in attendance compared to 2019 based on their survey of patrons. It's possible this was due to the core fans of cinema who attend Art House Theaters coming back more strongly than the general population, the hits *Barbie* and *Oppenheimer* played by many art house theaters and the post-oscar run of *Everything Everywhere All at Once,* or to a mix of theaters featuring special repertory or other event programs participating in the more recent survey. In any event, this is an exciting signal about the vitality of the core art house audience. Nonetheless, we have calculated our audience estimates on our own survey data that specifically asked for ticket sales data from theater managers, whereas the other survey queried attendees directly about their habits.

13,822,022 total tickets were sold by Art House Venues in 2022.

To estimate the number of *unique* audience members, we divide total sales by typical attendance rates. **For our attendance rate calculation, we used the reported frequency rate of attendance of 8.35 times per year from the July 2024 AHC Audience Survey (P. 23)** Notably, The Motion Picture Association estimates an average national cinema attendance rate of just under 3x per year in their 2021 Theme report (p. 53). Although they have not issued a report since 2021, Julia Jenks, Vice President of Research at the MPA, told us in an email that "MPA analysis shows the 2022 and 2023 figures are 3.1 and 3.4 respectively" The Art House Convergence theater audience are more frequent, passionate moviegoers.

2022 Unique Art House Attendees

Across All Venues	1,655,332
Per venue Average	4634

Note: *calculated at 8.35/year attendance rate per patron*

Fan Community

To assess the scale of the engaged fan community for the US Art House Theaters, we asked venues to report their number of members, email list subscribers, and social media followers.

Fan Community

Members (average per venue)	1514
Email List Subscribers (average per venue)	14,944
Social Followers (average per venue)	16,027

Source: *AHC Report*

We assume a high degree of overlap among members, email subscribers, and social followers. We therefore took the highest single source of reach (social media followers) and rounded up only slightly to yield ***an estimate of 17,000 per theater total audience fanbase reach.*** This conservative estimate assumes all but 13% of the email, member and social followers overlap. We projected this per-venue number across all AHC venues:

Fanbase Reach

	Per Venue	Total Across All Venues
Fanbase (number of people)	17,000	6,086,00
Unique Attendees (number of people)	4634	1,655,332

Source: *AHC Report*

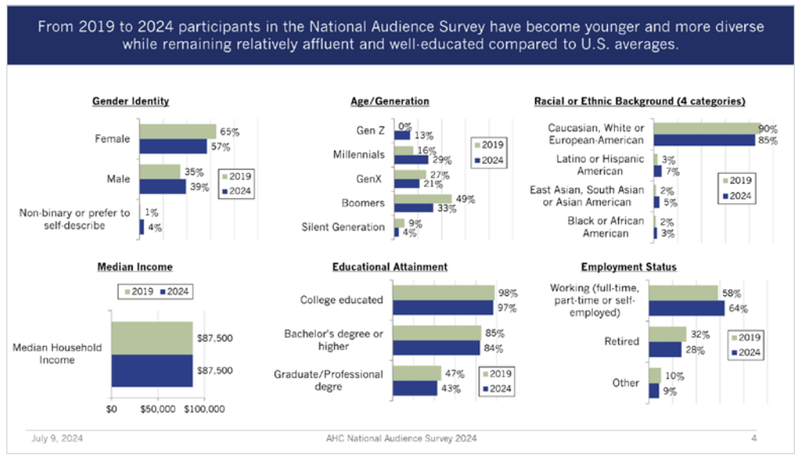
Ticket buyers represent only 27% of the engaged Art House Convergence fan base.

The nearly 70% gap between those buying tickets and members and subscribers to email and social channels represents a real opportunity to increase attendance among engaged members, subscribers, and followers with better communication and marketing strategies.

Demographics

We were disappointed to find that few theaters shared demographic data about their attendees. Our survey asked about the gender, sex, age, education, HHI, employment, race, ethnicity, and ability of audiences. It's not clear if the low number of responses was a function of overstretched staff or lack of data about the patrons on the part of the responding venues.

However, the more recent Audience Survey conducted by the Art House Convergence in Spring 2024 and released in July 2024, queried patrons directly and did gather some valuable demographic information about the 2024 AHC audience (see p. 4 of the AHC Audience Study).

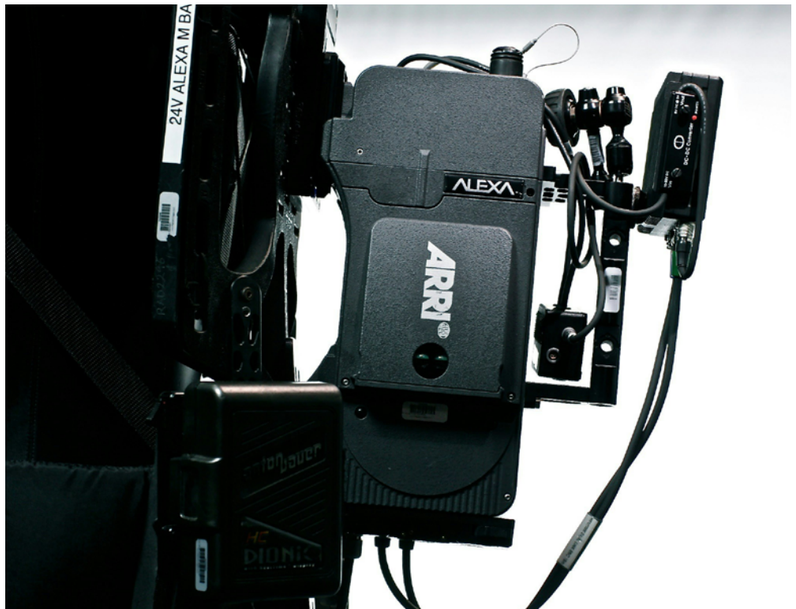


Source: **AHC National Audience Survey 2024 P.4*

The Art House Convergence 2024 Audience Study, which queried 2023 data, paints a picture of the core fanbase for these nonprofit art house venues as predominantly (85%) white and older (average age of 50) with a female skew. They are more highly educated (97% college educated) than the US population as a whole. However, the age of attendees has come down since the most recent study published in 2019, and there are signs of vitality in attracting a younger audience in the lower average age of new attendees. In 2019, 58% of audiences were Boomer and Silent Gen. Gen X and below increased from 43% to 63% since 2019. Diverse audiences doubled from 7% in 2019 to 15% in 2024.

This is supported by reports from Art House Theaters around the country–including the Music Box in Chicago, the Metrograph in New York, and many others we spoke to–who are noting a spike in young and more diverse attendance since the pandemic, especially for repertory titles. *More data will be required to validate this anecdotal reporting*.

The lack of demographic information returned by our survey recipients–the theaters themselves–is a valuable finding. Certainly they may rely on the Audience Survey conducted by the Art House Convergence for general demographic information, but it's clear that most are either not collecting demographic data themselves, or they do not prioritize this data enough to share it for our survey. In either case, there is a great opportunity for independent art house theaters to effectively understand and communicate with their audiences in targeted ways if they had more data and data-driven marketing capabilities. It's not clear from our survey whether the member theaters agree this is a priority.



Data was not mentioned as a top concern by respondents in an open-ended question on the survey, although 'audience recruitment' ranked 5th out of 5 responses and may relate to data.

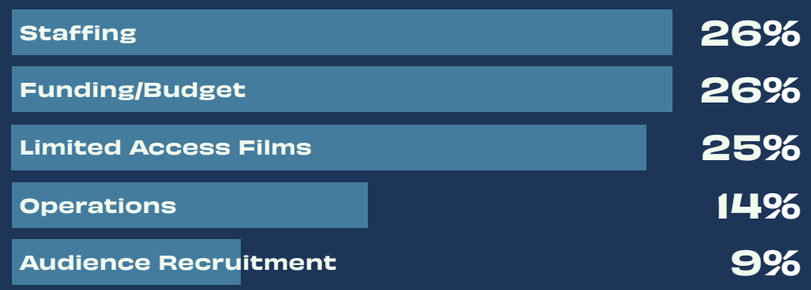
We asked Dr. Kozma to comment on the lack of audience demographic data and she suggested several reasons why this might be the case:

Over Reliance on the National Audience Survey: "AHC used to conduct a national audience survey via a third party annually. I believe art houses became dependent on this data rather than collecting their own (this survey goes out to patrons directly). AHC is bringing back the National Audience Survey this year, so we will have new data sets to use."

Lack of staffing capacity/staff knowledge: "Art houses are traditionally either just staffed enough or understaffed, and resultantly staff capacity for data collection is usually narrow casted to member/donor programs, again with a revenue focus rather than a demographic focus".

Lack of understanding around the necessity of data: "There seems to be a misunderstanding around 1) why collecting data in general is important and 2) what an organization does with that data once they have it."

As an industry, we know that audiences returning to theaters post-pandemic was our biggest hurdle over the last several years. Except for this, what has been the biggest challenge your organization has had to face in the last three years?



Source: *AHC Report*

Conclusion

US Art House Theaters are stressed for resources, not only for marketing and data but across all areas of operations. They are also experiencing a problem in 2022 attracting audiences, perhaps due to the reduced number of films.

But it's also clear from both our Landscape Study the from AHC's 2024 Audience Study that these theaters are a vital and vibrant network reaching independent film audiences in communities across the country with innovative and engaging curatorial work. AHC Audience Survey respondents noted how their Art House Theater contributed to their lives:



Source: **AHC National Audience Survey 2024 P.39*

There is great potential to build a strong base of cinema support for independent film by investing in these extraordinary nonprofit community cinemas, to help them build capacity for data collection, digital marketing, and broadening the diversity of their audiences.

US At-Home Viewing

SUBSCRIPTION STREAMING

Nielsen Viewership Data

LINK TO THE NIELSEN VIEWERSHIP DATA REPORT

Methodology

We worked with Nielsen to gather data on viewership of US independent scripted and documentary films on television in the US from 2017 through 2023.

Nielsen used our core dataset of 329 independent film titles released from 2017-2022. [This core dataset for our study is also used for our Parrot Analytics and theatrical box office analysis.] We use this dataset of roughly 50 titles per year as a representative proxy to understand viewership of independent film in this period, because there is no data source to find all independent film titles released annually. Our dataset methodology is linked in our Appendix.

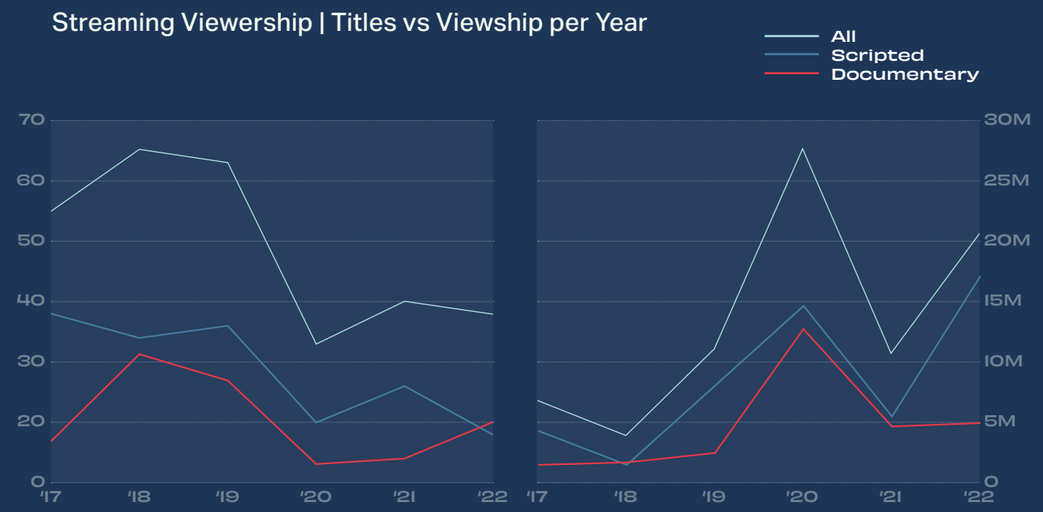
Nielsen reports on broadcast, cable and streaming audiences. Our study focuses on streaming, because most new independent film and documentary titles in our study period were released on streaming platforms. We do include some cable and broadcast viewership when captured by viewers accessing those networks (HBO, Showtime, Starz, PBS) through streaming platforms including Amazon or Apple.

Nielsen did not report any ratings information for 129 of our titles, or 40% of individual films on our core dataset. Until 2022 when the dominant streaming platforms became more open to enabling Nielsen to report their audience data, there was very little public information about streaming viewership–especially of smaller titles–for Nielsen to work with. The Nielsen Methodology in our appendix explains their process for streaming ratings.

Our research worksheet with some details of our analysis of the Nielsen titles, including a separate tab listing those that were not found by Nielsen is also linked in our Appendix.

The large Nielsen dataset provided to our project contains more information than we could process within the scope of our research. We hope this data can be further analyzed by the Shorenstein Center research team in the future. Nielsen's contracts prohibit sharing their raw data publicly, so their original spreadsheets are not in our Appendix.

Overview of Viewership



Source: *Links to detail of yearly total, average, and median viewership as well as YoY change tables are in our appendix*

Total Viewership

	2017	2020	2022
Scripted	5M	15.7M	18M
Documentary	2M	13.7M	5.6M

Total Viewership reached a peak of 29.3M in 2020 before dipping sharply in 2021. Scripted films recovered viewership in 2021 but documentary films did not.

Source: *Nielsen Report*

The chart on the left shows the number of 'found' titles per year based on their release dates from 2017-2022. Nielsen was able to find data for 200 films (61%) among our 329-film dataset. The number of 'found' titles trended down overall beginning in 2019-2020. This is a statistically relevant sample size, but we believe the lack of ratings information from Nielsen illustrates the challenge in finding data on smaller streaming titles, as well as the decrease in acquired independent titles at the major streamers in the later years of our study period as these companies increased in-house production and reduced smaller film acquisitions.

Viewership, the chart on the right, is a standard measure in media research indicating the number of views of a particular film or series. This is not the same as unique viewers, because it may include individuals who watched a single film multiple times. But it is the main measure used to measure the audience size for a program or category on television. We normalized the total combined viewership across all found titles in our dataset by averaging the annual number of titles to eliminate the fluctuation based on the varying number of titles per year.

Viewership was likely at its peak in 2020 due to the pandemic increase in streaming platform viewership generally. The tally of views also includes viewership of prior year titles on our dataset since Nielsen calculates cumulative views per title. In addition, in 2020 the documentary *The Social Dilemma* reached a significantly larger audience than other documentaries in our dataset, driving up the annual viewership for the category.

The rising viewership trend from 2017 through 2020 coincides with the period of heavy investment by the streamers in independent film acquisitions as they built their content libraries. The plunge in 2021 is harder to definitively explain, but likely represents the relative commercial weakness of independent titles that year (there were no breakout theatrical hits in either scripted or documentary film on our 2021 dataset, and few among the total releases that year beyond our dataset.) It may also be that the pandemic production stoppage affected the supply of titles in 2021. In addition, 2021 was also the peak of series and original film productions by the dominant streamers, likely making smaller titles harder for audiences to discover there.

The failure of independent documentaries to rebound in viewership mirrors the trend in theatrical viewership and was also confirmed in Parrot Analytics study. With the glut of sensational true crime and celebrity documentary and nonfiction content, the political, character-driven, social issue, or cultural films that dominate the independent documentary dataset are not finding their audiences.

We believe the peak viewership in 2020 is the best indication of attainable market-size for independent film and documentary when titles are available and easy for audiences to find. As this category of work became less important to the major streamers amid the range and volume of other programming, their viewership diminished.

The audience of 30M that watched these films in 2020 is still out there.

Average and Median per-Title Viewership

A few high-profile titles drive viewership in both scripted and documentary film.

The chart below tracks average and median *per-title* viewership across our study period. Scripted averages are generally higher than documentary averages, but scripted and documentary medians are more closely correlated. In fact, documentary medians slightly exceed scripted medians in the final two years of our study period.

We plotted the average annually based on the average and median per-title tied to their year of release, and generated a look at the trends in average and median per-title viewership. The 25th and 75th percentiles, also known as the first and third quartiles, indicate the values below which 25% and 75% of the data fall, respectively, providing insights into the spread and skewness of the distribution.

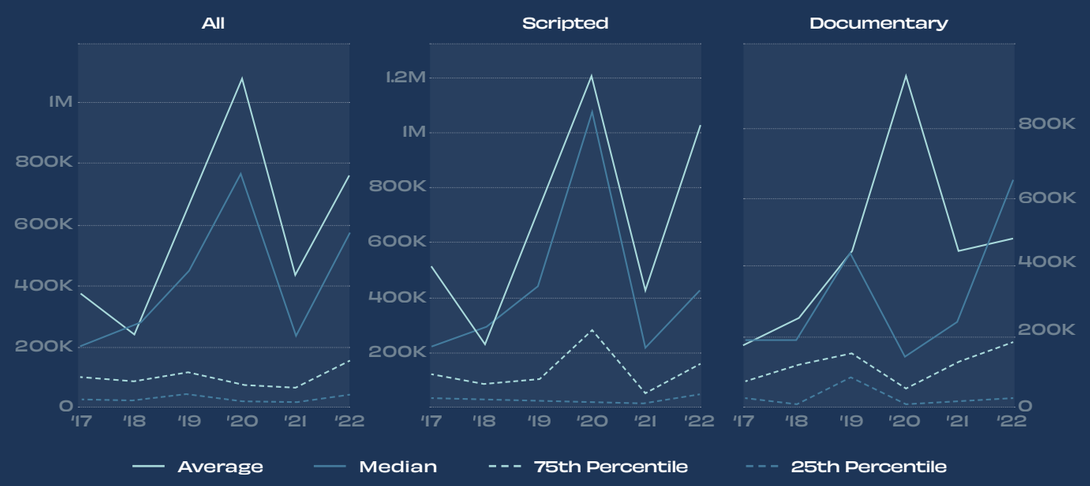
In most years, the average viewership exceeds the 75th percentile, while the median and 25th percentile values are closely aligned. This pattern indicates that the distributions are heavily skewed by a few high-viewership titles. For instance, in 2020, 70% of scripted films had total viewership below 1 million. However, titles like Palm Springs and Worth achieved viewerships exceeding 4 million, raising the average to 1.19 million.

Select per-Title Results by Year

Nielsen does not permit publication of its full data sets. Our appendix contains our analysis of their data, including the top- and lowest-rated 5 titles each year. The viewersrhip numbers shows stark difference between peaks of 8-9 million viewers for the top 2 titles, and a valley of only 100s of viewers for the lowest-performing titles. This illustrates the extreme volatility of the independent film sector–and the larger reality that the film business is successful because of a minority of breakout hits covering costs across financier and studio slates.

We learned through this project that full streaming ratings for smaller independent film titles are very difficult to source with confidence–not just for this study, but for anyone outside of the giant studios and streamers who hold the actual data and do not share it publicly. Since 2022, the streamers have allowed more third-party measurement and the data is improved and will continue to improve as the demands of advertiser-driven streaming require more audience reporting.

Selected Films Per-Title Viewership from 2017-2022



Source: *Average and median year over year per-title changes can be found here.*

The cumulative viewership per title for the selected films over the 6-year study period.

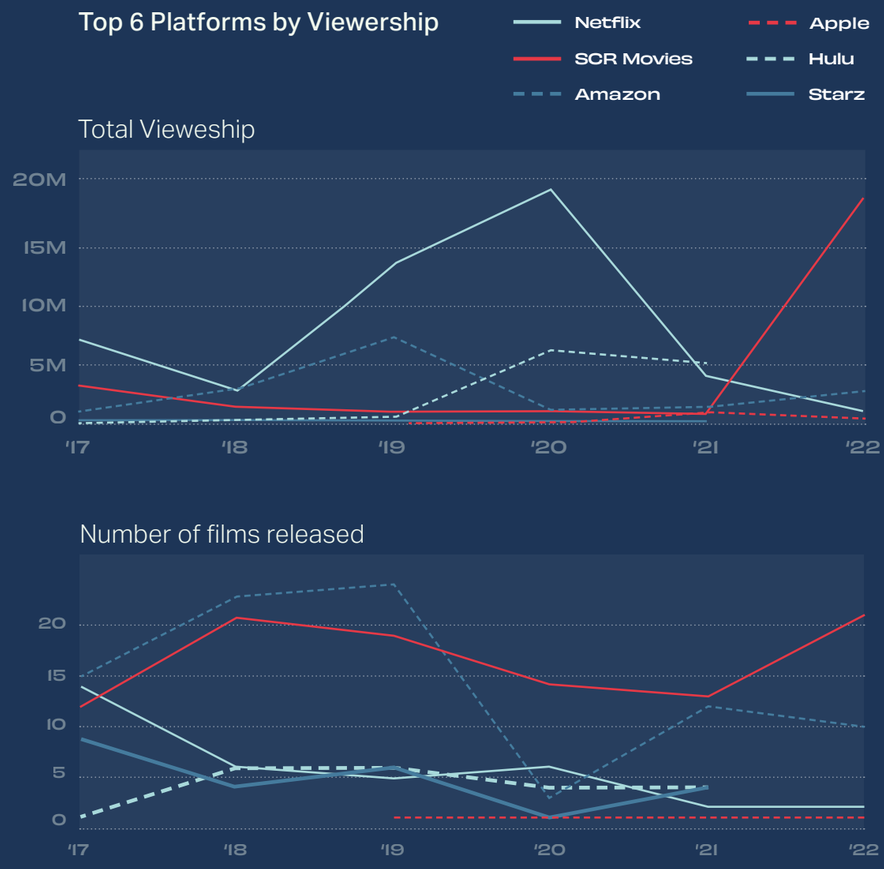
	Average	Median
All	383k	50k
Scripted	430k	50k
Documentary	316k	50k

Source: *Nielsen Report*



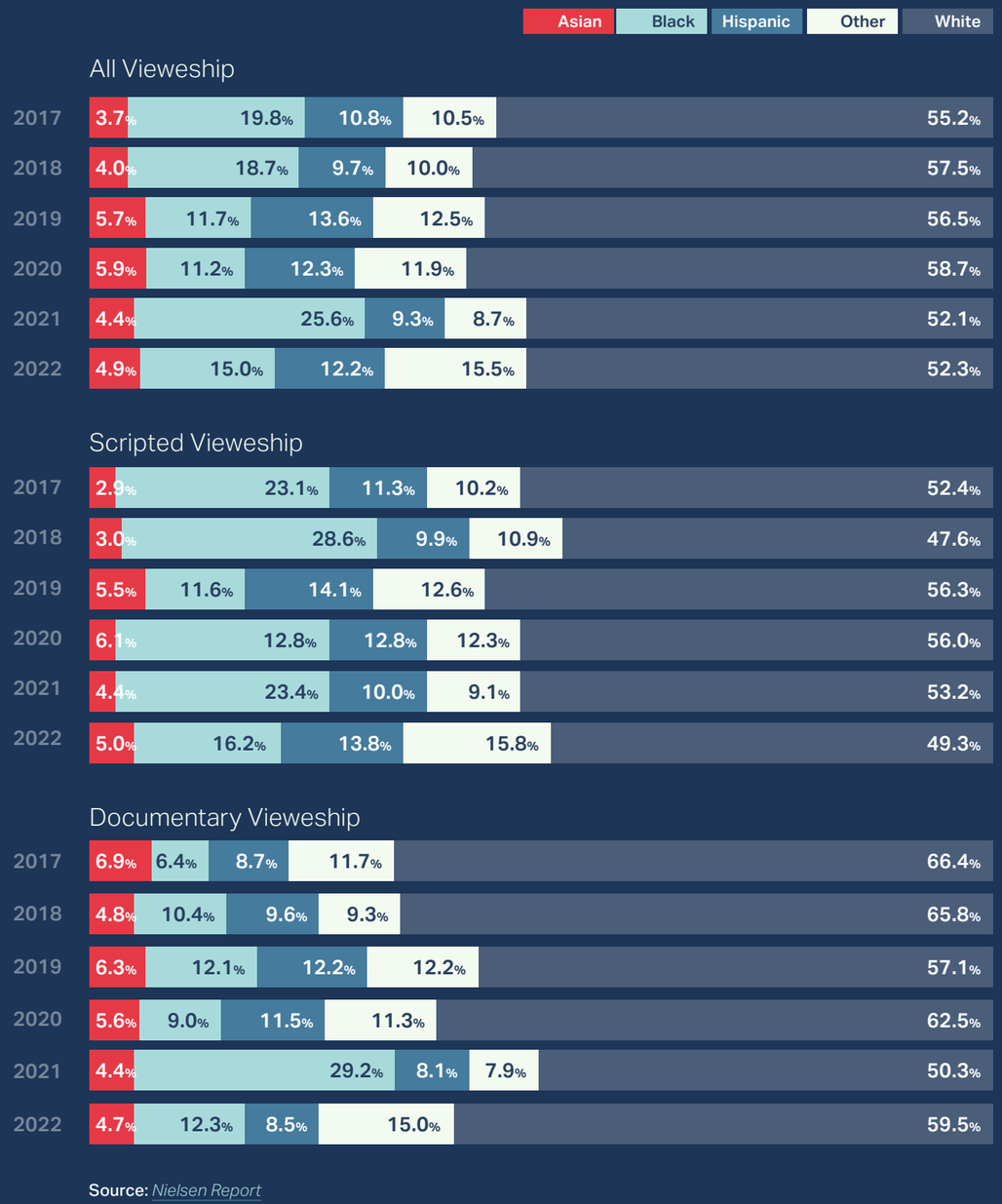
Where are People Watching?

We were curious whether we would see any trends if we plotted a graph of where people are finding independent films among the top platforms. Indeed, this look starkly reveals the drop in viewership on Netflix after 2020, along with a decline on all the other major platforms. This coincides with a rise in "SCR Movies," which is Nielsen's designation for a title that is not exclusive to a single company. It also accompanies the rise of the "other streaming" category when viewers began to migrate to free streaming services and niche platforms, which is confirmed in our Parrot Analytics study of this period.



Note: *No movies were listed as Hulu Exclusive in 2022.*

Ethnicity Demographic Breakdown of Viewership by Year



Source: *Nielsen Report*

Demographics

Race / Ethnicity

Independent film audiences are highly diverse, representing almost all race and ethnic groups at levels relatively consistent with the US population distribution according to the 2023 census data.

Overall, documentaries are more White-skewing than scripted independent titles, except Asian viewership is higher for documentaries than for scripted titles.

The exception is among Hispanic viewers, whose total viewing percentage never matches their 19% share of the US population in any year. There is a clear opportunity to increase viewership among Hispanic audiences, and independent film can and should be leading the way in telling a wide range of stories that appeal to this demographic.

Age

Most viewers fall in the 25-54 age range, but there is a high percentage of 55+ viewers also watching independent films. Viewers younger than 24 are the lowest percentage, and decreased over the study period from a high of 16% to a low of just over 9%. The actual viewership demographics shown here differ from those on our national survey, which show highest interest in scripted independent films among respondents 18-24. We do not know where (or whether) they are watching this work now. Aggregating and building this young audience is clearly critical for the future of the sector.

Gender

The independent film audiences skew slightly female, but are close to gender-balanced in most years.

Household Income

We expected to find a skew to higher-income viewers based on the data from our national survey, but instead found an income distribution among viewers that roughly mirrors the US household income distribution as a whole in which 20% of households earn over $150K per year.

Future Research

The full Nielsen dataset is ripe for further detailed insights, including hours viewed, exploring top programs for younger viewers or for viewers in particular income, race/ethnicity or other demographic breaks. Future researchers from The Shorenstein Center will have access to this rich Nielsen dataset.

SUBSCRIPTION STREAMING

Parrot Analytics "Demand" Data

PARROT'S FULL REPORT

PARROT'S FULL SPREADSHEET SHOWING DEMAND FOR EACH TITLE

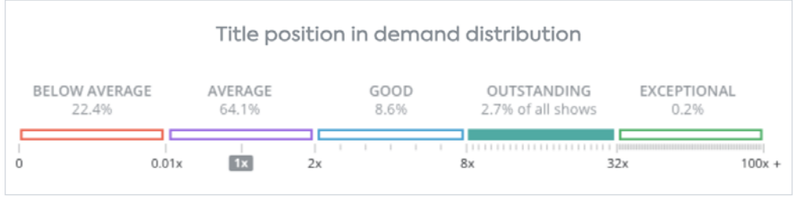
We collaborated with Parrot Analytics to assess the market 'demand' for our core dataset of 329 independent scripted and documentary films released from 2017-2022 on subscription streaming services in the U.S.

Parrot's demand metric, built from off-platform measurements, corresponds to the share of subscriber activity that comes from a particular title and therefore also correlates closely with streaming revenue and subscriber growth, as well as with viewership or ratings in most cases. "Demand" includes per-title off-platform viewership, online search, and social media mentions.

Any demand ranking from 2x to 8x is considered a 'good' ranking from Parrot, in the top 8.6% of titles. Rankings from 1x to 2x are considered average and is where the majority of available titles fall (including library titles). The top films and series on subscription streaming are found in the outstanding and exceptional range above 8x average demand.

Parrot uses its database of 725,000 titles to conduct its research. Parrot was able to assess demand for 230 titles (70%) in our overall dataset, but had no data on the remaining 99 films, suggesting low levels of online engagement with those films. Parrot studied the period from 2018-2023 because its 2017 database did not contain enough information about our titles.

Parrot's full spreadsheet showing demand for each title, along with the list of films that were not found from our dataset, are found in our Appendix.



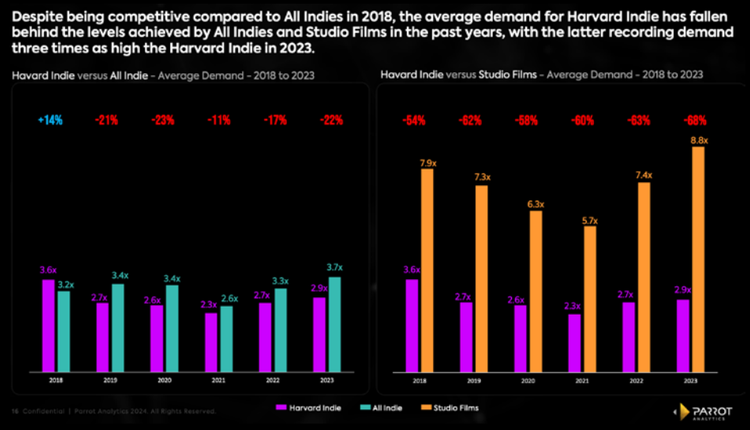
Source: *Parrot's analytics website*

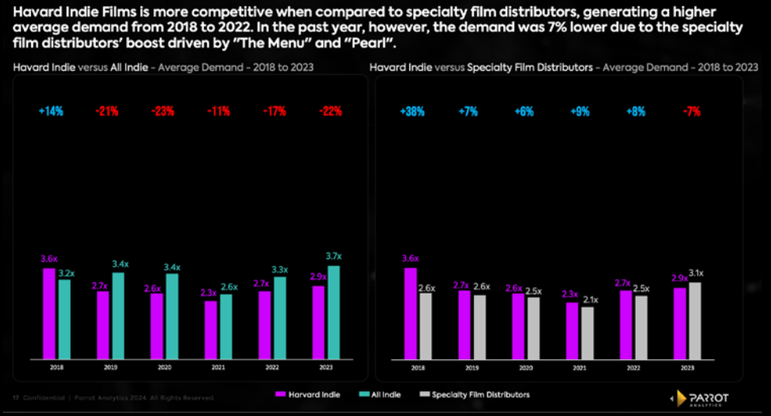
Parrot General At-Home Film Viewing Market Analysis

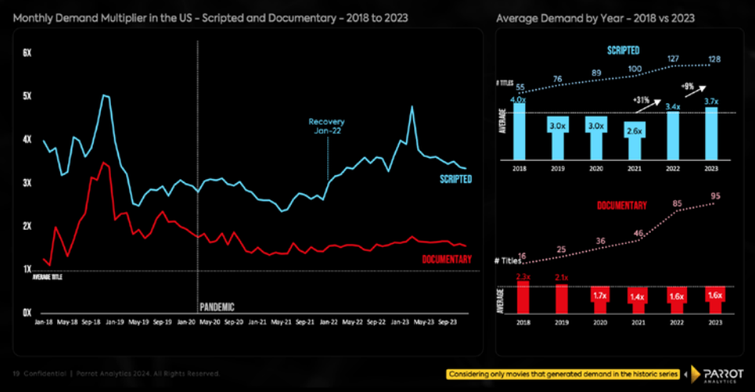
In a 2024 study, Parrot reported that overall consumer demand on at-home streaming channels is "shifting to shows versus movies." It's not clear from the data why demand for movies is declining, but we suspect it's due to fewer new, high-awareness wide-release theatrical release films overall, further reduced due to the pandemic and strikes, and the smaller cultural footprint of SVOD exclusive films. Further, TV offers more hours of engagement and bingeable units and series typically receive more promotion by the streamers. (Of course television production was also affected by strikes and pandemic, but with the sharp spike in series production through 2022, there was more new series work in the pipeline.)

Another factor in the declining demand for film may be the nature of the streaming movie slates from 2018-2023, dominated by Netflix. Parrot issued a report finding that Netflix's pre-2024 movie strategy of producing a large number of studio-style commercial titles saturated the service with original movies but did not yield many breakout high-demand titles. Parrot's report notes, "Netflix ranked last behind Universal, Sony, Fox, Paramount, Warner Bros. and Disney in terms of the percentage of films that maintained significant public interest for more than five months, per The Wall Street Journal." In spring, 2024 new Netflix film head Dan Lin amended that strategy eliminating some higher-cost movies in favor of a 'wider array' of genres.

Across all platforms, Parrot found that demand "appears to have flocked to licensed movies (which in Q1 accounted for 75% of Netflix's on-platform movie demand), and all the top streaming movies since Jan 2023 are licensed". This includes some original streaming films licensed from third-party studios as well as theatrical releases in their first streaming window. Indeed, Netflix made a deal to license theatrically released titles from Sony and Universal Animation (after their initial play on Peacock), suggesting again that the awareness and marketing value derived from theatrical releases increases their value in the at-home market. Netflix's licensed catalog is now more demanded than its original work, again suggesting the difficulty of building buzz and attention on original streaming content in such a saturated market.







Source: *Parrot Analytics*

Comparison of our Independent Film Dataset to All Studio and Speciality Movies

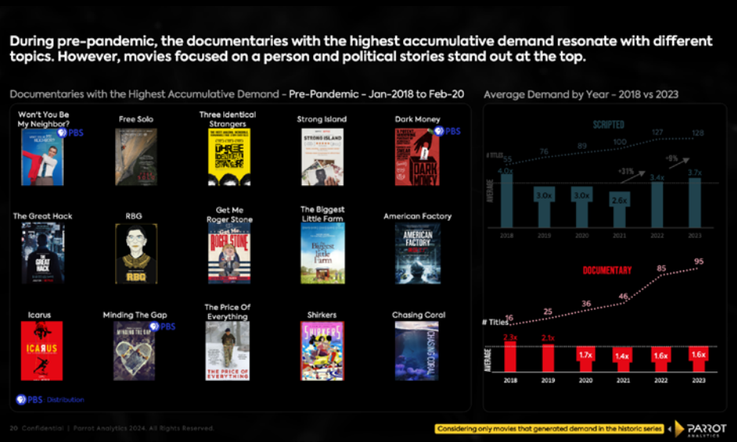
Our core dataset of independent titles, called "Harvard Indie" by Parrot, excludes films that were fully financed by a streamer or major studio-backed distributor. For the methodology on our core data set, please see the appendix.

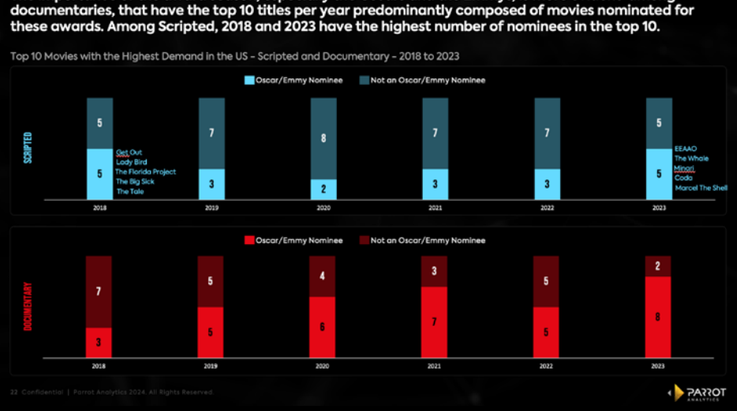
We asked Parrot to compare the demand for our dataset to demand for studio films, a wider array of independent films available in the time-period, and to speciality film distributors releases.

Parrot methodology note: *To define Studio Films, we filtered by production company, selecting Disney, Warner Bros., Sony, Universal, Fox, Paramount and Netflix. To define the wider set of Indie Film, the Parrot team filtered by production company, selecting 27 most closely associated with independent film. To define Specialty Film Distributors, we filtered by distribution company, selecting A24, Neon, Sony Pictures Classics, Focus Features, Fox Searchlight/Searchlight, Miramax, Annapurna, and IFC Films.* The titles considered for the All Indie and the Specialty Film Distributor are linked here.

Our core dataset yields an average annual demand of between 32-45% of demand for studio titles across the time period. In every year except 2018, our core dataset yielded less demand than "all indies," defined by Parrot as films from production companies most associated with independent film. For 2018, horror movies like "Get Out" and "Hereditary," as well as coming-of-age stories like "Lady Bird" and "The Florida Project," led among scripted titles with "Won't You Be My Neighbor?" as the highest average annual demand documentary.

The comparison to specialty distributors below is more positive for our data set, which outperforms films in this category every year but 2023. The 2023 comparison is likely less favorable because most of our dataset titles were released before 2023, although "Everything Everywhere All at Once" and "The Whale" both peaked in demand in 2023. Some of the most commercially successful titles in our set were acquired by these companies so the datasets overlap to some extent.





Source: *Parrot Analytics*

Analysis of Our Core Independent Film Dataset

The chart below looks specifically at demand for films in our core dataset of independent titles from 2018-2023 ('Harvard Indie'). Scripted titles from our dataset had roughly twice the demand of documentary films. The average demand for scripted titles was in the 3x-4x range ('good'), whereas the documentary title average was in the 1x-2x range ('average').

Both documentary and scripted films' demand peaked in 2018 before beginning a decline through early 2022. However, scripted films have recovered with year-over-year growth for the last two years, while documentary films failed to recover after the pandemic.

This trend mirrors the theatrical box office results for the two genres in the same period. The growth of indie scripted in 2022 & 2023 is attributable to the outsize demand for the 2022 title "Everything Everywhere All at Once," a spike in demand for 2018 title "Hereditary," and strong demand for 2022 titles "The Whale," "Emily the Criminal," and "Bodies Bodies Bodies."

Despite the recovery of scripted films since 2021 driven by hits (largely from A24), the general decrease in demand after 2018 is likely attributable to the lack of marketing resources for independent titles as major platforms focused on their series and original movies, and acquired fewer smaller indies. Smaller independent films acquired in prior years but still available on the dominant subscription platforms in this period became more difficult to discover due to algorithms that prioritize potential mass-market and in-house produced content. This is one of the primary value-propositions of the growing Ad-Supported (FAST channels), to surface non-exclusive content that gets buried on the major SVODs (more on free streaming is found in its own section of our report). This is also an opportunity for niche streaming channels to capture share, as evidenced from the growth of Kanopy in this period.

The top 10 scripted titles in our dataset were mostly films that generated buzz during awards season. It's also notable how many of the breakout scripted titles were by and about people of from historically underrepresented communities, from "Get Out" to "CODA" to "Everything Everywhere All at Once," indicating the value of expanding the range and diversity of stories being told.

On the documentary side, our dataset excludes commissioned true crime and celebrity titles, focusing instead on independently made documentaries in an array of genres. The greatest demand for documentary films in our dataset were those that focused on a person or a political topic.

Importance of Awards

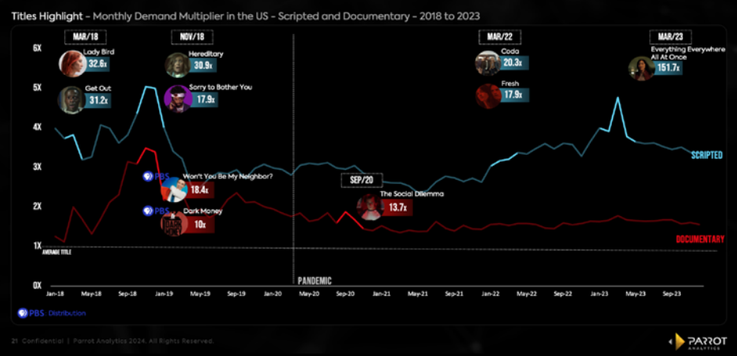
An investment in an awards campaign may be worthwhile based on the clear demand spike for films that win Academy Awards, and to a lesser extent Emmy Awards. Of course the expense of an Awards campaign weighted against the longshot likelihood of a nomination or win for most titles is extremely low. But it is clear from the data that films that received an Oscar or Emmy nomination garner increased demand from audiences.

Demographics

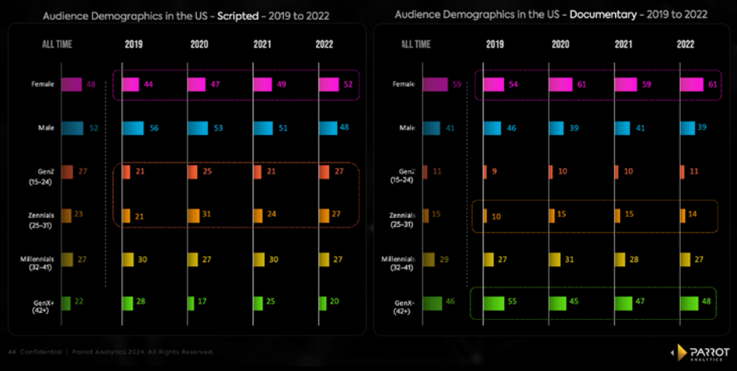
Scripted Indies have no appreciable age or gender skew. Documentaries skew older (GenX dominates at 46%) and female at 59%. It's encouraging that the young audience increased for both scripted and documentary films from 2018-2022. There is also an interesting sign of Zennial interest in the political docs, although at 15% of modest demand ratings overall, it's a relatively small sample and more study of the youth market will be necessary to assess whether this is a sign of a broader trend. Still, viewership by a young audience of documentaries about famous female figures, reproductive rights, and political corruption is encouraging.



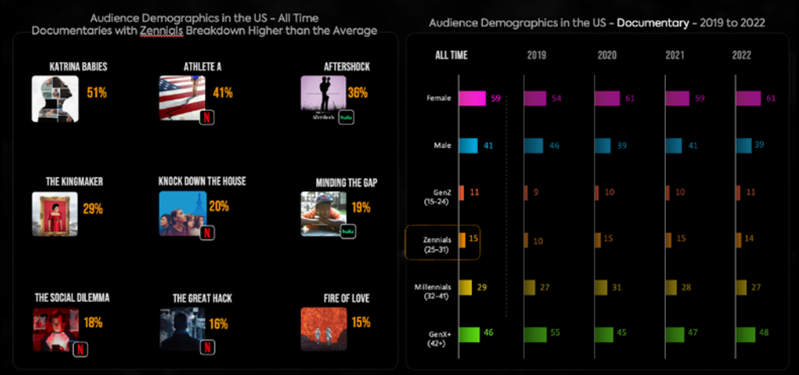
Among the standout titles throughout the historical series, productions that sparked discussions during award seasons are noteworthy for driving up the average demand, especially for Scripted movies.



Considering the historical series, both genres increase their breakdown among females. While Scripted films became younger, Documentaries became less old, growing among Zennials.



The majority of documentaries with a higher Zennials breakdown than the average are digital originals, from Netflix or Hulu. In general, these titles tell stories about social issues, from politics to sexual abuse.



Source: *Parrot Analytics*

Top Distributors

A24 led all distributors among our data set by a wide margin for driving demand in pre-release, during release, and after release. A24s brand-building and social media marketing in particular set it apart from other distributors in terms of off-platform viewing and social engagement. The value of an umbrella brand in the independent film space, like Miramax in the 1990s, is clear. With an umbrella brand that audiences recognize, there is a short-hand and momentum to individual title marketing because dedicated fans know to expect risk-taking and original work. As obvious as this may seem, few film companies or niche streaming platforms today invest in brand-building vs individual title marketing. We believe there is an opportunity in the market for a consolidated, branded online streaming destination for independent and specialized films.

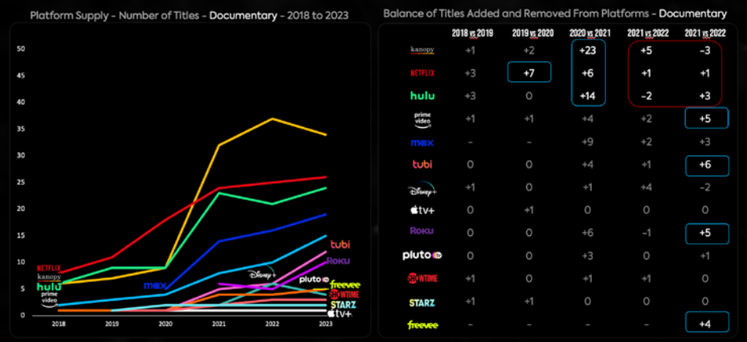
Platforms for Independent Film

In 2018, Kanopy and Netflix had the highest number of films from our data set. In 2023, Kanopy, Hulu and Netflix had the highest volume. However, the presence of our core dataset on Netflix and Hulu reflects the long tail of their pre-pandemic independent doc acquisition strategy. Smaller and more political independent films are no longer being acquired by these platforms at scale. Kanopy, a service that is free to users through the public and school libraries, mostly acquires titles in later windows but has been growing its audience while building its library of high-quality independent film and documentary. *For more on Kanopy and Free Streaming, see sidebar on Educational Distribution*

Free ad-based network Tubi also grew its share and demand significantly from 2018-2023, as did free services Roku, Pluto and Crackle. This shift is certainly due in part to consumer price sensitivity on multiple subscriptions, supported by the high churn rates among subscribers to most subscription services. But this period also saw the dominant subscription platforms reduce their acquisitions of new independent films, while the free viewing platforms, primarily offering older titles as part of their library content strategy, grew their share of independent film titles. To confirm this, we looked at new titles by platform by year from our data set, and noticed the slowing of acquisition by both Netflix and Hulu (Netflix's "new" titles in 2023 were primarily older titles from our data set's earlier years rather than new acquisitions) and an increase by Tubi and Freevee. *For more on the growth of free streaming, please refer to section 2c of this report.*

Transactional video platforms (Paid Video on Demand/PVOD or Transactional Video on Demand/TVOD)–including Apple, Amazon, and GooglePlay among others–have more of our data set titles than subscription platforms by a wide

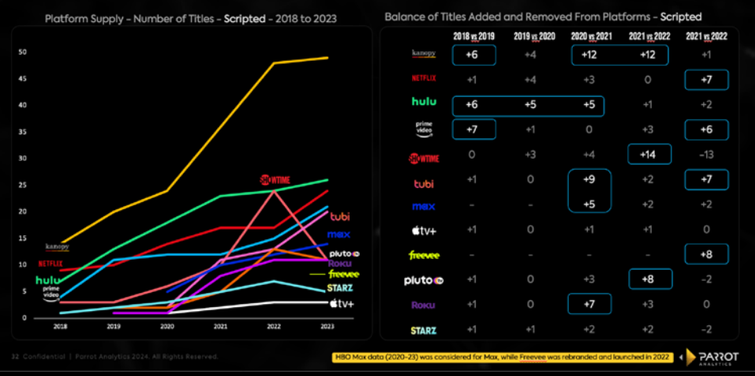
Kanopy, Netflix and Hulu experienced significant growth in their documentary supply during the pandemic. However, starting in 2022, the increase in their portfolios slowed down. Over the past 3 years, the documentary supply on the platforms hasn't shown significant variations. Besides Prime Video, AVOD platforms had the highest increase in 2023.



The availability increases when analyzing only TVOD (rent or buy) platform tiers, with the main services having around 80% of the scripted and 60% of the documentary indie selected films in their catalogs.

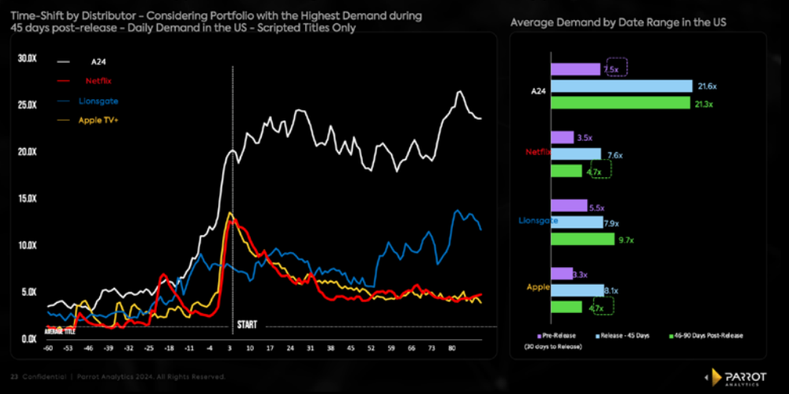


Considering the top 3 platforms with the highest supply among scripted films, Kanopy had significant increases during the pandemic, while Netflix stand out in 2023 by licensing older movies. Hulu decreased its additions in the last two years compared to the beginning of the track. Regarding other highlights, AVOD platforms starts to increase its supply in 2021.

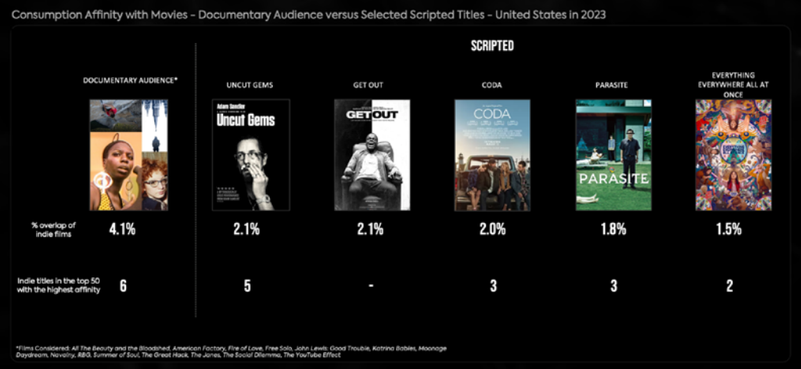


Source: *Parrot Analytics*

Considering the Scripted titles analyzed, A24 movies not only generated the highest pre-release demand but also had the highest increase during their release period. Among the main distributors, the streaming platforms Netflix and Apple TV+ had the highest decrease after the 45-day post-release.



The documentary audience has twice the overlap with other independent films than the selected scripted titles, indicating a higher tendency for this audience to seek out other indie titles.



Source: *Parrot Analytics*

margin. This is to be expected because placement on these platforms does not require an acquisition by the platform. Instead, pay-per-stream transactional video is open to all films as long as they come through a platform-approved distributor or aggregator. *For a look at actual independent film VOD revenue, see the VOD section of our report also in section 2c.*

Affinity between documentary and scripted film audiences

Here we see that the documentary audience has twice the consumption affinity with independent scripted films compared to other scripted films. But the independent film audience has no particular affinity for documentaries. Parrot also mapped the titles on our data set with the most affinity to one another, which is found in their full deck in our appendix.

Overall, Parrot's full deck has valuable additional data on the demand of titles on our dataset based on genre, ethnicity of director, and other factors. It also includes more detail on several findings and a section on social sentiment with a few title-specific case studies.

Read the full report from Parrot Analytics along with the excel sheet breakdown of individual title demand rankings, both linked in our appendix.



SUBSCRIPTION STREAMING

Other At-Home Viewing

Introduction

This section looks at streaming of independent films outside the major subscription platforms, which are covered by Nielsen and Parrot analytics above.

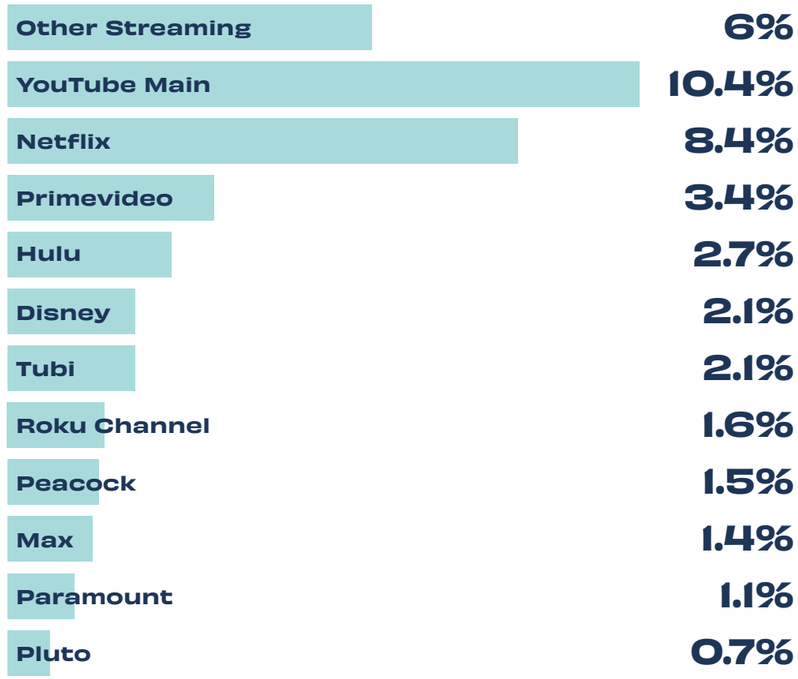
Fast-growing in share, streaming currently accounts for 41.4% of all television viewing as audiences continue to shift away from broadcast and cable.

Streaming films are available for per-title sale or rental, through niche platform subscriptions or channels accessible at their own destinations and/or available on a large platform like Amazon, and on free ad-based streaming platforms.

The three business models for streaming films:

PVOD or TVOD	Paid/Transactional Video on Demand
SVOD	Subscription Video on Demand
AVOD and FAST Channels	Free, Ad-Supported Television

Note: *Each of these categories includes both mass-market and niche offerings*



Source: *Nielsen Gauge, August 2024*

Google's YouTube, with a 9.7% market share, leads all streaming platforms. This count includes its free platform, its subscription product YouTube Premium, and its fast-growing multi channel app YouTubeTV, which replicates the old cable systems by offering live cable and broadcast channels alongside trending creator content and some originals.

Netflix is in second place among streamers with 7.6% share, which includes its primary subscription product and its newer ad-based offering.

Ad-based streaming outside of YouTube (Tubi, Roku, Pluto) captured 4.4 % share in total, more than Max, Peacock and Paramount+ combined, and growing month-over-month.

6% of the total streaming business is categorized by Nielsen as "other." This includes platforms for mass audiences and niche communities. Some research counts over 2500 streaming platforms competing for this 6% market share. There are platforms for wellness, anime, learning content, British television, international crime series, and content targeting specific demographic groups–among many other niches. **Within the "other" category, our report will focus *only* on channels that feature independent scripted and/or documentary film.**

Paid Video on Demand—Sale or Rental

Methodology

We looked at independent scripted and documentary film results on Paid Video on Demand (PVOD) from 2005-2023. This analysis is based on the data set from The Numbers of all independent films from 1995-2023. This is the same dataset used in part of our theatrical analysis. You can find our full methodology for this PVOD section here in our appendix.

Studio vs Independent Film VOD

There were 97.11M TVOD users in the U.S. in 2023.

A comparison between independent film and studio PVOD revenue from 2005-2022 reveals a peak in 2015 for indies and 2016 for studio films as digital video offerings expanded and penetrated the market. Since then, total PVOD revenue in both categories has declined sharply as subscription streaming replaced PVOD for many at-home consumers. Studio PVOD revenue has slightly recovered since the pandemic, but independent film revenue has not. Both are still well below their peaks.

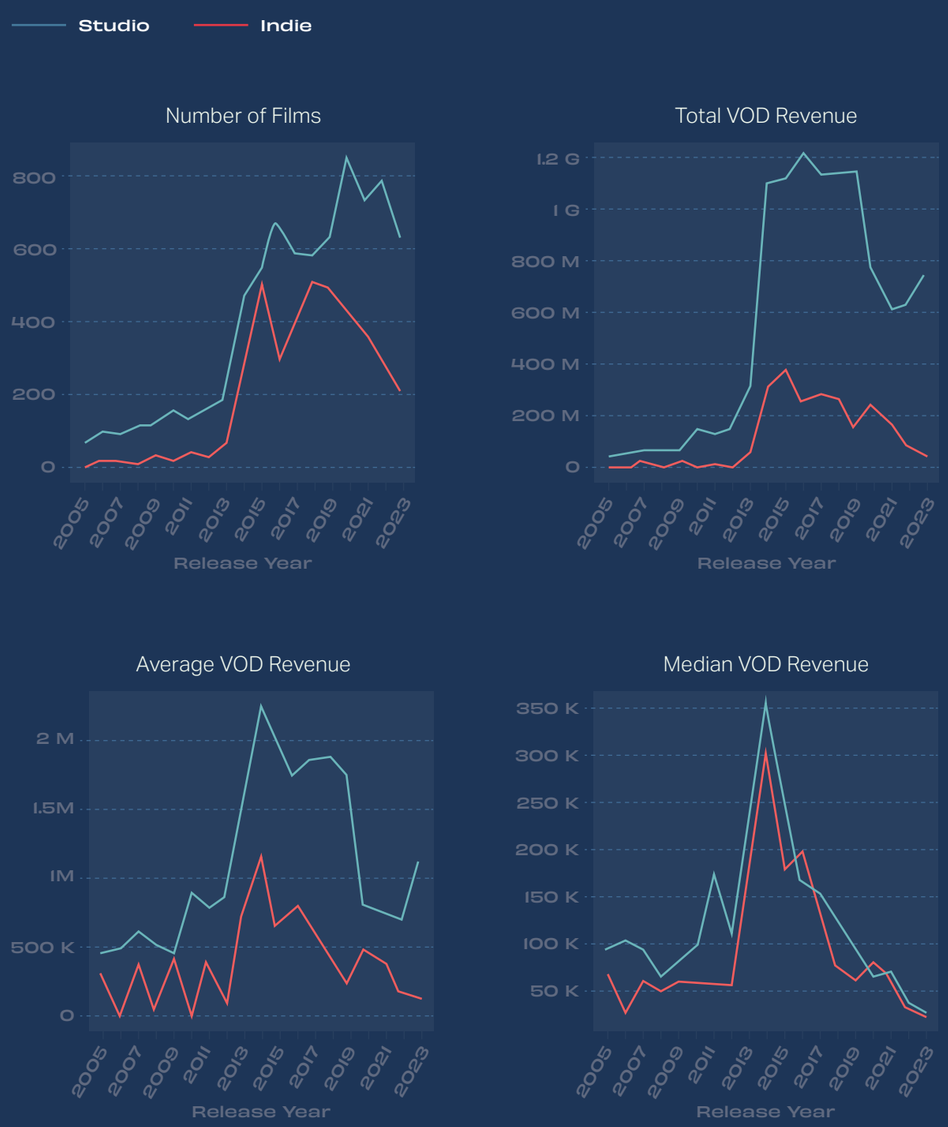
In the 2015 independent film peak year, approximately 500 independent and 500 studio titles were released on PVOD. In other years, there were more studio films than independent titles but the two categories were fairly close in number. However, after 2018, the number of independent films dropped sharply (from 500 to 200), while studio film volume increased through 2020 before dropping (from over 800 to 600). The drop in the number of independent films available through PVOD correlates with a similar drop in independent theatrical releases after a 2108 peak. This reduction in theatrical and PVOD titles is due to the rise of subscription streaming acquisitions in the independent film market after 2018.

Average and Median Per-Title Revenue

Not only are there fewer films available, but those that are available make less money per-title in later years of the study period. Overall, studio film *average* per-title revenue was more than double the independent average in most years.

We were surprised to find the *median* per-title revenue nearly the same between studio and independent film categories, peaking at $300-$350K per title in 2014 and declining to below $25K for in 2022—a drop of 91%.

VoD Revenue between Studio & Indie Films | 2005 - 2023



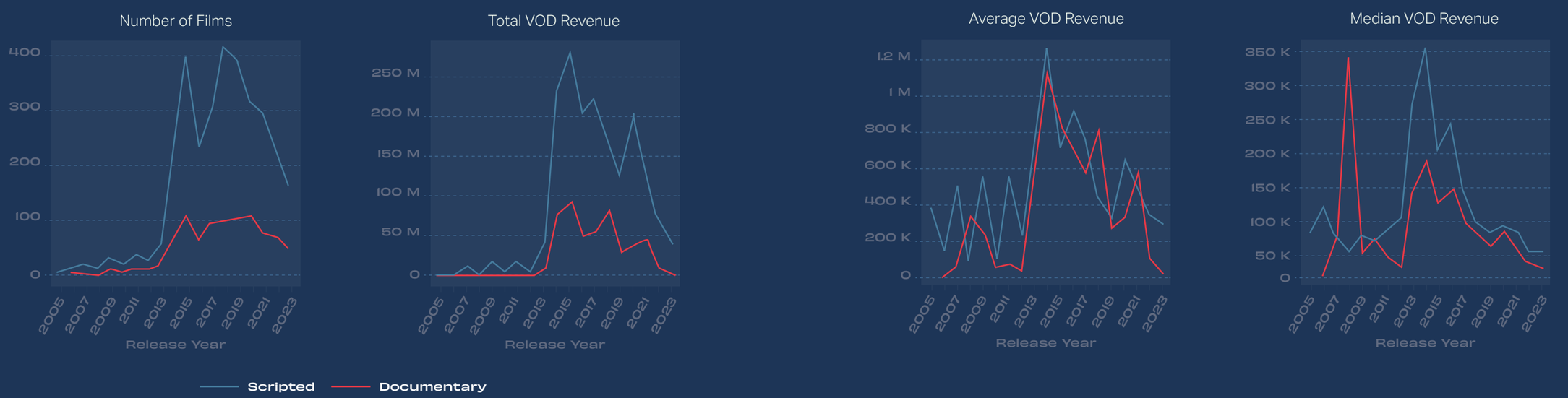
Source: *The Numbers*



Independent Scripted vs Documentary Film PVOD 2005-2023

Scripted films garner more viewers than documentary films in theaters and on subscription platforms, but in PVOD the two categories are relatively equal. (Total revenue between the two categories diverges significantly, but this is a function of there being more scripted than documentary titles.) There is close correlation in average per-film revenues between the two categories across the study period until 2022, including a sharp rise in 2012 followed by a shared decline since then. Median per-film revenue between documentary and scripted film diverges more from 2005-2016, but is closely correlated from 2017 to 2021. After 2021, documentary averages sunk lower than scripted averages.

VOD Revenue between Indie Scripted & Documentary Films | 2005-2023



Source: *The Numbers*

Scripted and Documentary Film High Level Metrics | 2017-2023



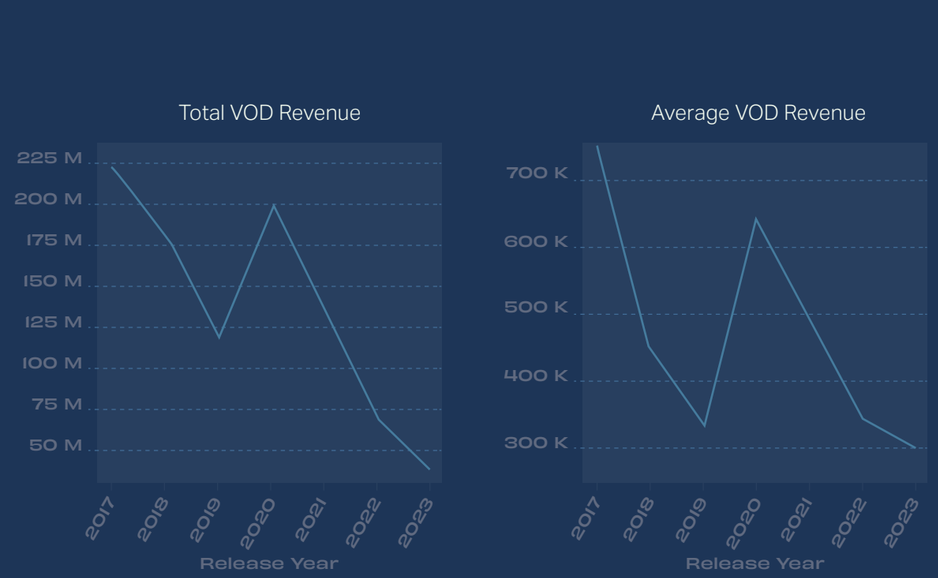
Source: *The Numbers*

Closer look at 2017-2023

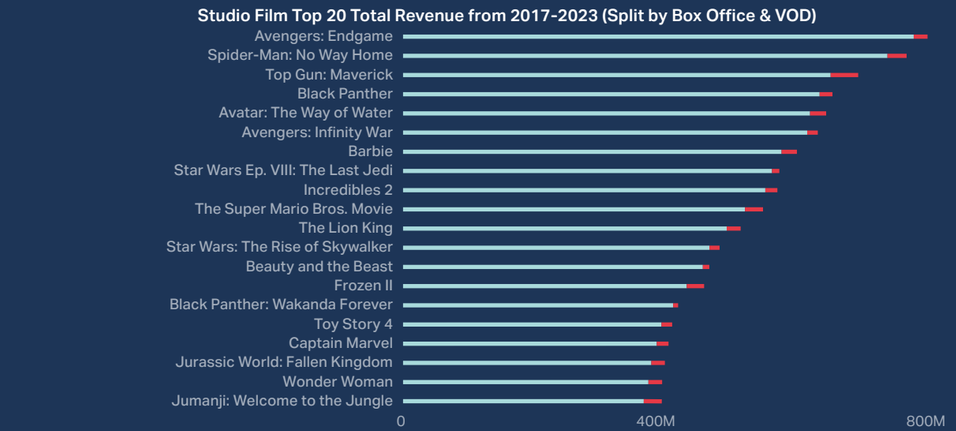
As with our theatrical analysis, we isolate the years 2017-2023 to consider pre- and post-pandemic results and reveal more detail about the current market for paid film rentals or sales.

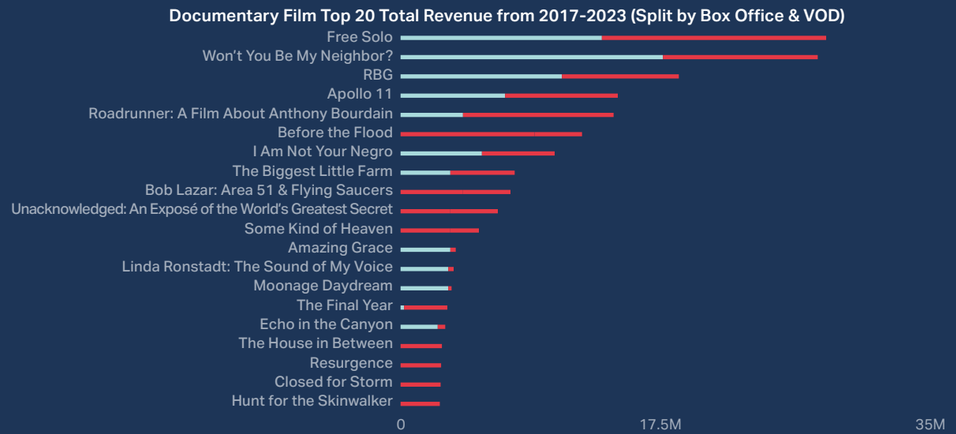
The total number of films available on PVOD declined steeply over this period. Scripted films peaked at a high of 400 titles available in 2018 and dropped to only 161 titles available in 2023. Documentary films peaked in 2020 with 108 titles, with 47 titles in 2023.

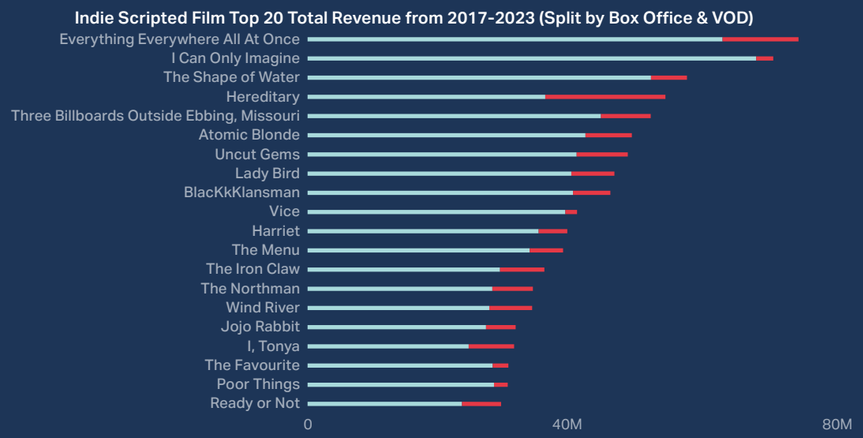
As of 2023, the average scripted film earned 289K from PVOD, while the average documentary film earned 19K.











Source: *The Numbers*

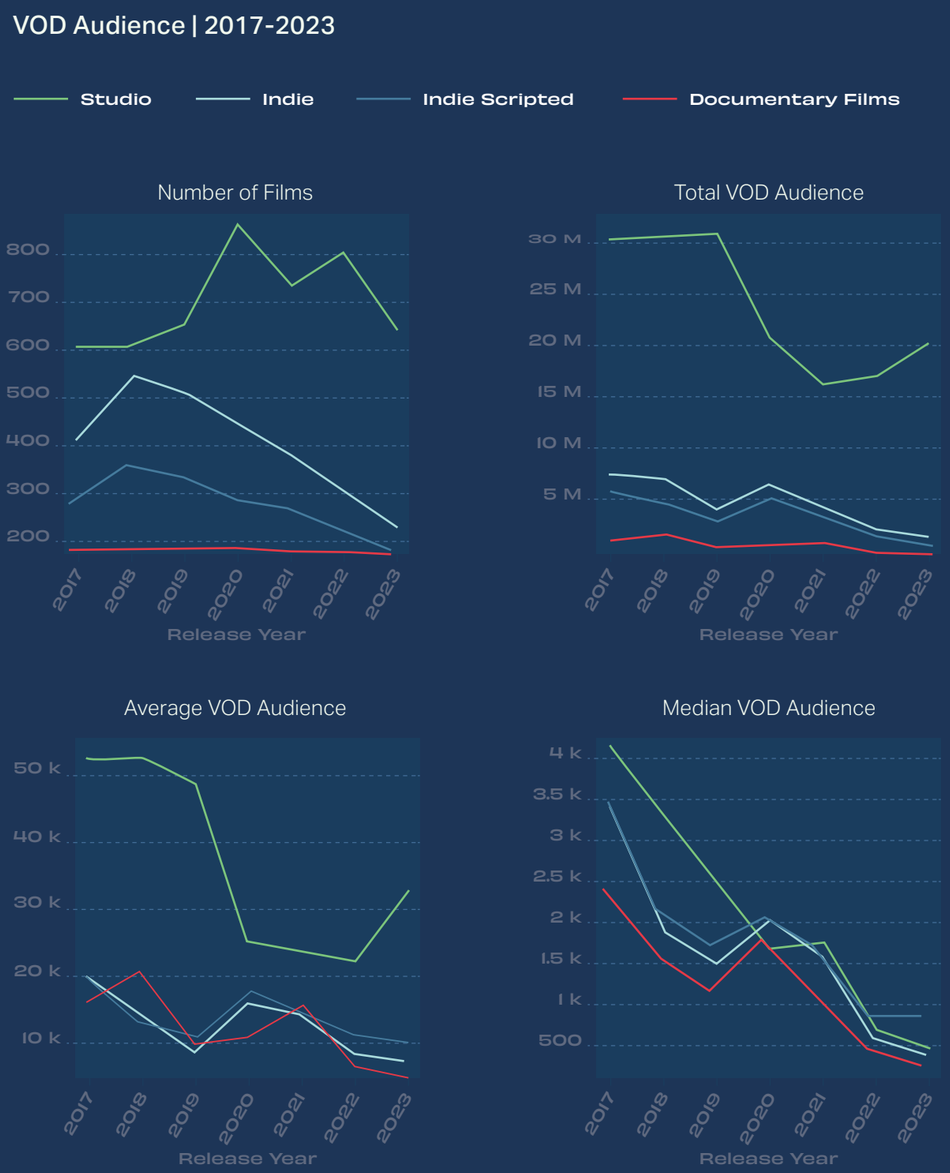
Total Revenue Split by Box Office & VOD, 2017-2023

We were interested in the percentage of revenue that came from PVOD vs theatrical release. Note that the scale of the graphs below is different for studio, scripted, and documentary films.

On the studio side, PVOD is a smaller portion of the big-hit titles than we would have expected.

The top scripted films are primarily releases from studio-backed speciality distributors, including smaller studio Lionsgate with two titles on the list (the faith-based title "I Can Only Imagine" at #2 and "Wind River"). Independent distributor A24 has 4 titles among the top 20, including top-earning "Everything Everywhere All at Once"), while smaller distributors NEON ("I Tonya") and Annapurna ("Vice") were also represented.

Considering that absolute earnings are lower for documentaries, it's notable that VOD is a higher proportion of the earnings when compared to theatrical. This may simply reflect the weak theatrical box office for documentaries, but could also be seen as a bright spot for documentary VOD marketing. For example, "Some Kind of Heaven," released by Magnolia Pictures in 54 theaters, earned $45K in theaters and nearly 7M on VOD. "Free Solo," the biggest hit among documentaries in this period, distributed by Nat Geo (Disney), earned nearly the same $17.5M from its theatrical and VOD runs.



***Note:** *Each graph uses data that removes titles with 0 audience for that metric. For example, in comparing Box Office Audience Between Studio & Indie Films, only titles with an audience greater than 0 are included.*

Source: *The Numbers*

PVOD Audience Size for Independent Film, 2017-2023

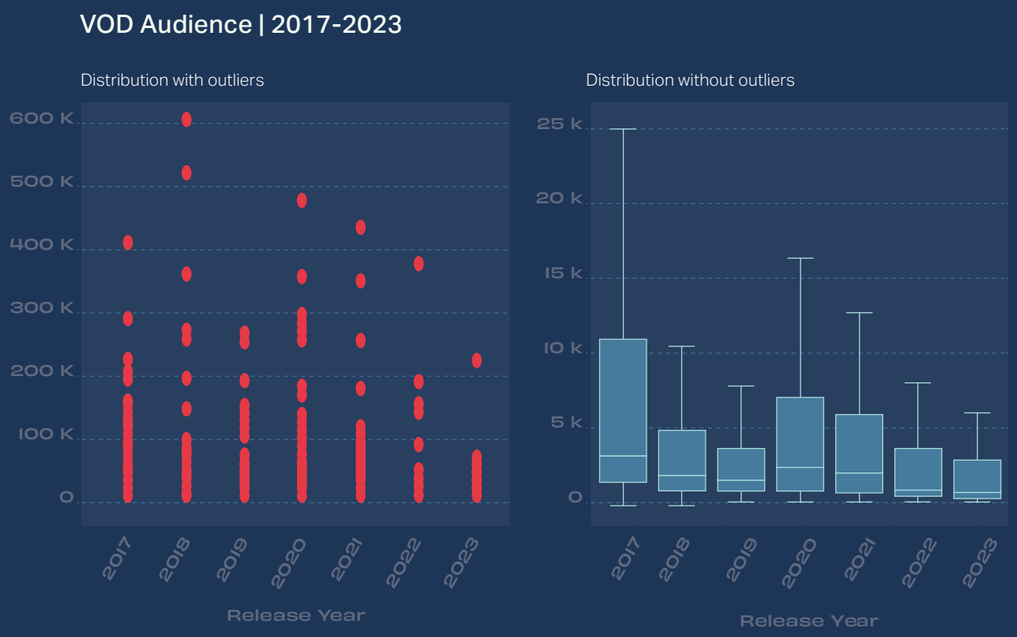
To project the audience size, we divided the gross revenue by the average transaction price ($13.99), and then divided the result by our estimated average PVOD rental frequency per customer (4x per year, matching the average theatrical rate). This yields a *unique* number of households who rented or bought films. We roughly project that one third of the rentals or sales were households with average 2.5 people, with the remainder individual viewers. These estimates allow us to yield a broad sense of the unique viewers of independent film and documentary via PVOD in the period.

Independent Film Revenue and Audience Size

		VOD Revenue			VOD Audience		
Release Year	Number Films	Total (,000)	Average per Title	Median per Title	Total	Average per Title	Median per Title
2017	393	$1,028,713	$2,617,590	$149,169	7,417,200	18,873	3,360
2018	514	$886,874.1	$1,725,436	$84,270	6,970,929	13,562	2,032
2019	491	$501,016.8	$1,020,401	$66,844	4,054,386	8,257	1,625
2020	423	$345,870	$817,660	$79,125	6,304,396	14,904	2,083
2021	366	$349,992	$956,264	$66,988	4,722,680	12,903	1,714
2022	295	$385,192.2	$1,305,736	$36,969	2,197,788	7,450	838
2023	208	$359,071.9	$1,726,307	$36,236	1,269,489	6,103	636

The number of films released on PVOD decreased nearly 300% over this period, as did total revenue. But fewer releases did not drive more viewership to the available titles.

The 2023 *median* per-film audience is strikingly low for the whole set at only 640 viewers per film, an 80% drop since 2017. The 2023 *average* is only marginally better at 6100 per film, a 96% drop since 2017.



Note: A box plot represents a dataset's distribution, highlighting the median (50th percentile), quartiles (25th and 75th percentiles), and potential outliers. The box depicts the interquartile range (IQR), with the lower and upper edges representing the first and third quartiles, while the "whiskers" extend to the smallest and largest values within 1.5 times the IQR from the quartiles, and individual points outside this range are considered outliers.

Distribution of PVOD Revenue, 2017-2023

The charts illustrate the dynamics of the hit-driven film business, where a smaller number of titles earn most of the money. A look at revenue distribution with and without 'outliers' (defined as the top and bottom quartiles of earnings) requires graphs with significantly different scales. The top 25% of titles, represented by the black dots on the left-hand chart below, earn between $25K and $600K across the period while the median is less than $2500 at its peak, and sinks to less than $1000 in the most recent years, due to the volume low-earning titles clustering at the bottom of the distribution in both cases.

Removing outliers, we see that–outside the top 25% of hits–independent films perform on par or better than studio films. However, the median performance of both categories is so weak, it's hard to see this result as positive for independent films.

The PVOD market cratered in the past 3 years for both studio and independent film titles.

Customers are not paying to rent or buy most of the hundreds of films available on the top mass-market PVOD transactional platforms (Apple, Amazon, etc.). Instead, it's likely people are waiting for films to be available on subscription or free streaming.

In the best cases, PVOD clearly offers independent filmmakers a chance to earn money and reach new audiences; but success requires title awareness and marketing resources. It is very difficult for individual films to break out without successfully marketed theatrical releases or other highly promotable elements.

Few independent films have access to marketing and promotion funds to enable them to promote their PVOD releases on crowded mass market platforms. Several niche PVOD options targeting the specific independent film market, including films for sale on VIMEO, newly available VOD offering via Festival platform Eventive, an offering from Letterboxd expected this fall, a new platform called JOLT that uses data to connect audiences to particular films through social marketing, and one launched earlier this year from the independent film social cinema platform Kinema, might offer insights on whether the core audience for independent films is willing to pay a per-title fee.

Dedicated Independent or Art House Film Platforms

Platform	Description	Estimated Subscriber Count
The Criterion Channel	The best of art house cinema	350,000, US-only
Mubi	Global art house cinema	200,000 US (more globally)
IFC Films Unlimited	US independent film (AMC)	175,000
Ovid	Art house, US Indie, and Doc Film from a collective of independent filmmakers and distributors	1600-1800 in 2021
OTV	Nonprofit, intersectional lens on curation Mostly short film, fiction and nonfiction	20,000
IndieFlix	Independent film, doc & shorts With an impact focus	20,000
GuideDoc	International and US Docs Company based in Spain	No Estimate
Magnolia Selects	Films from this distributor`	100,000
Moviesphere	Formerly Tribeca Shortlist	30,000
Kino Film Collection	Films from this distributor	100,000
Kino	Eventized online screenings of Independent films and film content	No Estimate
SlamdanceChannel	Curated by the Festival Team	20,000
PBS Documentaries	An Amazon Channel offering (also streams free at PBS App)	300,000
ScreenPix	Movies, mostly classic but some contemporary from MGM+ With a low $2.99 price	15,000
Film Movement +	Mostly international film	15,000
Galerie	A curated art house collection and community, now with same owners as Criterion	10,000
Metrograph at Home	Art House film from popular NY Theater turned distributor	20,000
MeansTV	Creator Owned, Anti-Capitalist Film streamer	No estimate
Fandor	Longtime Indie Film site has struggled for sustainability	10,000
Argo	Creator driven Web3 platform Shorts and features; subscribe to a creator or to the channel.	No estimate
CORE MARKET		**1,360,000 estimate**

Niche Subscription Streaming

There is little public data available on the subscriber bases for niche streaming services dedicated to independent film and documentary in the US. Most are privately held and do not report their subscribers. One exception is OVID, managed by a collective of independent distributors committed to data transparency. Another is AMC+ networks, a publicly traded company which reports 11.5M subscribers across all their streaming channels, including independent-film focused IFC, SundanceNow, and horror-film streamer Shudder as well as the flagship general interest AMC+, the British content platform Acorn, and Black content platform ALLBLK.

Subscribers to niche streaming services for independent film are a critical part of the independent and art house audience in the US. They are the most passionate fans, willing to pay a monthly fee for a dedicated subscription to access this work.

Below is a select list of independent film and documentary niche streamers and our *estimate* of their audience size based on our research. Most of the brands below are available as apps on the dominant platforms and stand-alone sites. The full array of niche subscription streaming sites is huge and fast-changing, and those that feature independent film and documentary are not tracked in any centralized place. For example, in our research we have learned of at least 4 additional platforms being launched now to target the independent film and documentary market, but they have not been announced or launched.

We have based our estimates on interviews with distributors and platform executives across the field. A few have been anonymously confirmed. Others are educated guesses. None would speak on the record.

We encourage niche streaming entities to be transparent on their subscriber counts and demographic data so the entire art house and independent field can understand its audience better. We hope some will step forward and either confirm or correct our estimates.

We roughly estimate the current independent, documentary, and art house niche *subscription streaming* market to be 3M in the US.

This estimate includes the specific- indie film sites (estimated 1.3M total), as well as a very rough guess of the indie movie fans on the broader movie or content platforms like MHz, and indie horror-specific fans on Shudder or Screambox.

We assumed that subscribers were unique with relatively small overlap between the niche channels due to the increasing price sensitivity for most customers. Film lovers subscribing to niche streamers likely also subscribe to one or more dominant streaming platforms, so this audience may overlap with the independent film audience on Netflix, for example.

Platforms with some Indie Film Included

Cineverse	General interest platform For movies streaming across all genres including doc an indie movies	1.4M
PBS Passport	Membership paid streaming from PBS, featuring US documentary film but no scripted film.	
Screambox	Cinedigm owned horror streamer	200,000
Shudder	Horror (AMC Networks group)	1M subscribers
MHZ Choice /Topic	International series but offers US movies from TOPIC Media (merged)	100K subscribers
Kweli TV	Black global film and series (also has free and rental options)	no estimate
Stingray Qello	Concerts + music documentaries	no estimate
Revry	LGBTQ+ film and series	no estimate
SundanceNow	Mostly crime series now but key brand in US indies	250,000

Creator-Centered Subscriptions

Patreon for Video	Subscribe to creator channels, so far not widely used for feature film	no estimate
Substack for Video	Currently for videos by substack bloggers rather than film	no estimate

Conclusion

Competition among multiple small services fragments the market.No current independent film or documentary platform has captured a significant subscriber base, certainly not one large enough to allow for robust acquisitions, productions, or marketing costs. While it's possible that one of the current niche subscription streaming platforms will establish market dominance, we suspect that more collaboration or consolidation of various small platforms is likely necessary to aggregate a paying fan base at scale.

It would be hugely beneficial to filmmakers, audiences, and small independent distributors and exhibitors to grow the independent film niche streaming subscriber base.

More niche subscriber fees can help replace the lost acquisition revenue from the dominant global subscription streamers reduction of spending in this sector. The remaining revenue streams (theatrical, PVOD, free streaming, PBS/broadcast, educational, and non-traditional community or impact distribution–all covered in this report) currently fail to cover the cost of making even a small independent scripted or documentary film.

A significant aggregated fan base can be engaged to market titles in theatrical release before they come to the platform, create fan engagement, and more.

Audiences too would benefit from an independent film subscription platform that brings together the core fanbase with the highest quality independent film. Multiple offerings of various quality exacerbate rather than solve the problem of finding what you want to watch.

Our national survey found there is a sizable audience willing to pay a subscription price for a high-quality, dedicated independent film alternative to the mass market platforms.

An opportunity to build the niche subscription streaming audience is also suggested in recent studies that show the demand for smaller channels has increased since the mass-market streamers have narrowed their new investments to mass-market fare and focused more heavily on library content.

We believe this is the time for the field to come together and build a new destination dedicated to the best of American indie film, that will also fuel the makers of the future with an engaged audience and fair payments that enable creators to make new work.



Free Streaming

Free, ad-supported television or ad-supported video on demand (FAST or AVOD) accounts for 14.1% of all streaming viewership in 2024, driven by YouTube with 9.7% of the total market, higher than Netflix. The top free streaming channels account for 4.4%–led by Fox's Tubi (43% YoY growth) and The Roku Channel (36% YoY growth) and Pluto. These channels recently surged in popularity, as subscription streaming prices and churn are rising while the user experience and ease of free platforms improves.

> **Consumers say FAST channels provide excellent value, and they rank FAST platforms such as Pluto and Tubi more highly than paid services like Max, Netflix, Prime Video, Hulu, and others**
>
> **– Nielsen Gauge (reported by PBS Audience Insights)**

These ad-supported channels primarily feature library content in both film and series, but include some new and original film and series to complement their library offerings. They offer new independent films a space on the platform as part of their effort to cater to a wide array of niche audiences with high volume of content.

There is no complete list available of independent US titles delivered to these platforms.

Our collaborators Parrot and Nielsen do not currently track specific independent film per title demand or viewership on most FAST or AVOD channels. Further, there is no reliable list of the number of independent titles coming through aggregators and digital distributors on an annual basis. In addition, the viewership data provided to rights holders by the platforms is spotty and inconsistent. We learned from digital distributors in our research that data transparency falls in a big range, with Google (YouTube) at the low of data transparency and TUBI at the high end.

Based on our research and conversations with several distributors who release films across all digital platforms, we estimate 1500 independent titles accessing these platforms annually, but the actual title may be considerably higher.

Select list of free streaming platforms

As with the VOD channels, independent film is delivered to these platforms by all-rights distributors or aggregators. Free streamers do not generally pay to acquire independent film titles, although they make select acquisitions. Instead, they offer a portion of revenue to rights-holders. The calculation for this revenue share is based on CPM (the rate charged to advertisers) for a particular program, which varies based on the advertiser demand for a category or specific title, and also based on audience viewership once a title launches. CPM will go up if the title trends upward in viewership.

Digital distributors or aggregators typically charge a delivery fee per platform (around $1000-$2000 each) and take a 15-30% share of the rights-holders revenue. They work with filmmakers directly and with smaller theatrical distribution companies seeking to outsource this part of the distribution.

It's very difficult for individual titles to break through on VOD or FAST channels without the benefit of marketing or title-awareness to draw attention among so many options. Platforms promote highlighted titles from time to time, but success on free streaming requires rights-holders to create title awareness and marketing. Many independent filmmakers, all-rights distributors, and aggregators do not have the resources to mount marketing campaigns tied to their digital releases.

According to Nick Savva, a leading specialized film digital distributor at a company called Giant, films are typically delivered to as many as 60 platforms that play independent scripted and documentary film, including the big ad-supported platforms. While there are some real success stories out of digital distribution, a distributor told us anonymously that most are not making enough to meaningfully offset production costs: a modestly successful title might expect under $50K over the life of their distribution. Yet Alan D'Escragnolle of FilmHub highlighted the recent success of the independent thriller "Betray" on Tubi as an indication of the potential in this marketplace.

Mass Market Platforms

YouTube + YouTube TV, Tubi, The Roku Channel, Pluto, Crackle. Freevee (Amazon), Plex, Redbox, and via smart TVS like LG, Vixio, Xumo, and Samsung, ... *and more*.

Independent or Art-House / Film Lover Film-Focused Free Streaming

Tribeca, FilmRise, Doc+, PBS Apps, The World Channel (docs, public media), Waterbear, Mansa (Black content for global audiences, deal with Array), Dust (sci-fi focus from production company and distributor Gunpowder and Sky) Cineverse (from digital distributor Cinedigm), TMC cable channel with ads is a hybrid linear/streamer included in this space with a significant movie-lover fanbase for classic films, *and more*.

The 10K per firm audience across 1500 films yields our rough estimate of 15M people watching independent films on mass market free streaming. Again, there are indications that this number may be too conservative. More data and study is needed.

Several distributors anonymously shared per-film free streaming revenue information, which together with typical per-ad viewer rates (CPM), allows us to estimate **at least 10,000 viewers per film**, higher than we expected. Film rights holders earn relatively low revenue shares for those views, and the revenue splits have not improved with the growth of subscribers on the mass market free streaming platforms.

This market is like Spotify for music, reaching a lot of viewers for low-cost per viewer and low fees to creators. The market is good for distributors that have a lot of titles, but each titles makes less and less money. Many distributors and distribution consultants mentioned in our interviews that as the platforms get more powerful they are turning the screws and keep more of the revenue in return for paid promotion and other offerings. Erick Opeka at Cinedigm believes that the major subscription streamers, now in the ad-based business too, will likely begin licensing titles to bolster their free streaming libraries. This will be another opportunity for more sales and viewers, but with the same low-revenue model that characterizes massive digital platforms.

> **"The independent distribution market has become much more challenged in the last 15 years. Market share is so consolidated with just a few players controlling the market and setting prices and terms. Amazon has 3/4 of the paid video on demand market, and 50% of the market for enthusiast (aka niche) channels, where most independently produced content will find a home. New release promotional placement used to be based on editorial decisions, but today with little exception requires a paid advertising spend. These spends have minimum floors that only larger and mass market titles can afford"**
>
> **– Erick Opeka,** *Cineverse*

Spotlight | Youtube

In 2023, Youtube amassed more views than any other streaming service including Netflix and Disney+, and, as of this year, Youtube TV (the Television streaming arm of the platform) has become a top three provider of "traditional subscription TV services in the U.S".

YouTube offers its free, ad-supported online platform where any creator–including a film distributor or producer, or a filmmaker–can post content and share in the revenue of any views they generate. With some exceptions, longform independent film and documentary has not had break-out success on YouTube. (Although PBS documentaries are very successful there (see our sidebar on Frontline on YouTube in our PBS report).

YouTube TV replicates the feeling of cable tv with multiple live tv channels and offerings including sports, designed to play on the television rather than a computer or mobile device. The channels on YouTube TV include many studio brands including Disney and Max, as well as some niche brands like the AMC channels IfC and SundanceTV, TCM, and some add-on options in the documentary space. There is little for contemporary independent film that stands out on this list, however.

We can find no data on independent film viewership on YouTube, beyond what can be sourced by searching the online platform, which does not include YouTube TV audiences. Individual distributors and aggregators will have some data based on revenue about their films' performance on the platform, but there is no sector-wide view for independent film.

Open Culture recently published a list of thousands of art house, independent and documentary titles available for free streaming on YouTube, but our study's scope did not allow for a review of viewership of the US independent films among them.

We searched the top ten subscribed U.S. indie or documentary channels on the YouTube platform (not including foreign indie channels). These include six studio channels, two exhibitors, and two filmmakers; the top subscribed channels in each category being *FRONTLINE PBS | Official* (see your sidebar on Frontline in the PBS section of this report), *Rotten Tomatoes Indie*, and animator/filmmaker *Vivziepop*, respectively. In terms of total viewer counts, the top ten viewed channels included six studio channels, two exhibitors, and two filmmakers–the same as those most subscribed but in differing order; *Rotten Tomatoes Indie* replacing *Vivziepop* for the No. 1 slot.

Rotten Tomatoes Indie is the most viewed independent channel in the dataset, the most viewed content included a love scene from *The Teacher,* a lion mauling scene from *Roar,* and a violent dog pack scene from *White God*–the most popular content exemplifying a mix of gore and love scenes. From a subscription standpoint, *Vivziepop's,* the most subscribed to channel in the dataset, most popular content included an animation adaptation of a music video, a pilot episode of an animation series entitled *Hazbin Hotel,* and Season 1, Episode 1 of the series *Helluva Boss.*

For the majority of the independent film scene on Youtube, short-form content through the form of short independently-produced films, and scenes from independent films are far more "popular" than long-form, feature-length content.

We see potential in the 3M fanbase on the platform, but limited opportunities for feature-length independent film to break out on YouTube online.

Anecdotal evidence shows that individual independent filmmakers like Joel Haver with topics of wide interest, aggressive social promotion, or existing social followings can succeed with select titles but shorts are far more popular even in these cases. Without marketing resources or a deep engagement strategy, breaking out is difficult for a feature film.

More study of this platform's potential and tactics for the independent film field are certainly needed.

Spotlight | Tubi

TUBI has seen a fast rise in viewership to 80M users as of June, 2024, compared to the 64.7M at the end of 2023. Its new CEO Anjali Sud was the former CEO of Vimeo and is a technology and product expert who also understands the creator and independent film space.

Tubi's structure is not fundamentally different from any of the FAST channels; they offer on-demand vod from a large library, as well as 250 programmed, linear channels including live tv, sports, game shows, and more. However, linear FAST Channels viewership on Tubi is only 5% of their revenue, with the on-demand titles driving their success. The other ad-supported platforms are predominantly FAST channels with linear feeds. Following Tubi's growth success, the goal for all now is to build a bigger library and offer more on demand.

Tubi has gone from 30,000-40,000 titles to 300,000 titles. But its audience has not grown enough to keep the average revenue per title flat with this huge increase. Individual filmmakers make very little on the platform, although they may be reaching thousands of viewers. Payments to rights-holders are typically 1/3 of the revenue. A distributor is paid out of that share, and with low earnings per title, most earn in the hundreds or low thousands of dollars.

One notable bright spot on Tubi is the strength of its niche audiences, including a sizable Black audience watching independent films. In June 2024, the NY Times reported that Tubi's Black audience accounted for 46% of its viewership. Other analysts, including Entertainment Strategy Guy reporting in The Ankler, noted the figures were not quite as good but confirmed that Tubi's diverse audiences and niche fan bases are essential to its success.

Tubi's user experience is particularly strong. This, combined with relatively high data transparency, the largest library of any ad-supported channel, clear interest in satisfying niche audiences, and innovation in engaging audiences and creators makes Tubi stand out for us as a place that might be conducive to growing free, ad-supported independent film viewing.

Tubi offers several verticals in the category already, including Art House Film, Indie Film, Documentary, and Award-Winning films with well known library titles and high-quality, select newer titles. Tubi's interface and experience lets you easily navigate and engage with the content. Click on a specific title, as we did with independent film "Lady Bird" and you are fed a screen of titles you might also enjoy, have the option to share your pick on social media, and can up- or down-vote the title. Recently, Tubi announced an initiative with Issa Rae called Stubios for its community to select and fund creator-driven projects by aspiring filmmakers, and another with The Blacklist to discover and greenlight new work.

Tubi recently launched in the UK, and in a recent interview with The Ankler, Tubi's EVP David Salmon described the platform's niche audience strategy, "Salmon reasons that his U.K. rivals — from BBC iPlayer to Netflix — are "extremely focused on a median viewer" because of their commissioning and acquisition models. "They want the maximum number of people on a single piece of content," he explains, "and it means they lead with blockbusters or high recency." In contrast, the Tubi model is about operating at the periphery of esoteric fandoms. "The weird, the wonderful, the brilliant, the broad — we're trying to be a house for all of those things."

Indiewire noted the potential for free streaming to "democratize cinema" featuring both Tubi and Kanopy, both highlighted in this report from our research. We agree!

We spoke to Courtney Sanchez, Tubi's Chief Strategy Officer, about the potential of independent film and documentary on the platform. She noted that individual films need to market themselves on Tubi, but will receive platform support if they begin to trend upward within an individual niche. It is difficult for individual films to build awareness and engagement on the platform with the limited marketing resources of most independent creators and distributors.

Still, Tubi is leaning toward a personal, creator-driven and audience-centric identity that lends itself to building community and excitement for niche content alongside mass-market fare. Independent filmmakers and distributors should keep a close eye on Tubi.

Free Niche Streamers

Among free niche streaming services, there are few standouts.

FilmRise is the biggest independent film site, with an estimated 15-18M monthly users across its many channels and verticals.

Cineverse has a large independent film library with a wide range of titles. There are several independent free streaming brands that offer channels on the dominant services or on their own platforms. Their viewership is 1.4M.

Doc+ is in 90 million homes via smart tvs, and sees strong growth on their platform there. We estimate their actual monthly views are an impressive 2.2M.

Tribeca–we have no estimate for viewership on this free streaming channel.

These niche free channels, like their subscription counterparts, are available on a wide array of commercial platforms including SmartTVs, AppleTV, Amazon, Roku and more.

FilmRise and Cineverse have a wide array of content other than independent films, including kids, anime, classics, series, music and comedy, and more. Documentaries are less prominent on those platforms. We estimate fewer than 1/5 of the views on these platforms are for current US independent films.

There are also many smaller free documentary channels on YouTube of varying quality with short and long-form content, but we have not been able to calculate that market size or how applicable it is to our inquiry about high-quality US independent documentaries.



Documentary Social Impact Platforms

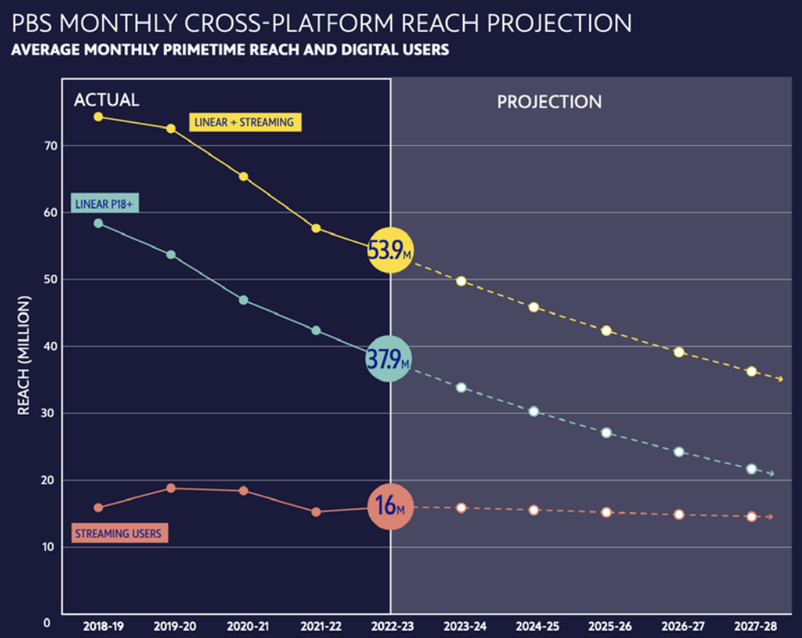
We learned of several new free streamers focused on documentaries tied to social issues and impact campaigns. These platforms seek to engage active communities of members by integrating social action and purpose with filmed content, in particular documentaries. These are nonprofit ventures for the most part, although some are purpose-based for-profit companies.

Waterbear

A platform targeting audiences focused on environmental activism and sustainability with short-form and some longform documentary films integrated with social action campaigns. This platform began in Europe and has recently expanded with new investment in the US. They have a fairly large curious audience of some scale already. In our research and interviews we learned from the Watebear team that they have 3M in the community including viewers on FAST on Samsung and LG in Europe. Their Membership base is 800K viewers globally, and 29% or 230K are US-based but we did not get data on minutes viewed or return visits. They acknowledge their focus is social action more than content consumption. Their measures of success do not include minutes watched of films, for example. The CEO told me, "We did not set up this business to solve the documentary distribution problem. We set it up to solve a consumer program. Our community wants to do more in terms of climate/impact and other crises! We don't feel there is a product on the market that is delivering that solution for aspiring change-makers. Getting started on their climate or impact journey."

Three other companies emerging in this sector are still raising money and building, but all plan to launch in the coming year

Educational and NonTheatrical Distribution is covered in another section of this report, but it's notable that Kanopy, Hoopla, and the other educational platforms are free streaming to users through libraries and feature many independent films and documentaries.



Source: *PBS Audience Insights*

PBS linear reach is shrinking year-over-year

PBS reached 58% of US television households in 2023, a 13% drop from 67% in 2022.

2024 monthly linear views have dropped by another 2M to date this year.

Digital viewership is growing but not replacing the loss of linear viewers

44% of PBS viewers watch on digital channels, 11% year-over-year growth.

Digital viewers are watching far fewer minutes of PBS than broadcast audiences.

Demographics

91% of PBS viewers are over 50, and 71% are over 65

Black and Hispanic household viewership is below the national average on both broadcast and streaming platforms

PBS's streaming audience is younger than its broadcast audience.

PBS and Other Public Media

Public media is of particular importance to US documentary film, especially with the consolidation and mass-market focus of the dominant commercial channels. Documentaries reach millions of Americans each year on PBS member stations and various public media digital platforms. Our study of the audience for US independent film would not be complete without a look at those watching documentary film via public media.

In the past, independent scripted films and series were supported and presented by PBS—notably through "American Playhouse" in the 1980s and 1990s—but PBS does not show American scripted work today.

The funding for public media in the US, as well as the political debates and pressures around its mandate and certain of its content choices, create signficant challenges for national and local public media. Lack of funds prevent robust investments in digital infrastructure, data-based or brand marketing to expand its audience, and rights for content. At the same time, the stakes for a thriving public media system in the US are high. Research shows a correlation between public media investment and healthy democracies.

General PBS Audience

PBS' 2023 audience insights report reveals that its broadcast audience is aging and shrinking and its younger cohort of digital viewers is not growing fast enough to replace them, signaling a significant challenge for public media in the streaming age.



PBS Digital Strategy

> **"No matter how viewers want to watch PBS, the network has found a way to make itself available."**
>
> **– Paula Kerger,** *PBS CEO*

PBS CEO Paula Kerger and her team, along with PBS member stations across the country, are focused on expanding digital engagement for PBS national and local programming.

PBS' digital offerings for its linear programs include PBS.org (13.9M monthly viewers), a PBS OTT App (1.4M monthly viewers), a PBS mobile app (725K monthly viewers), and PBS Passport for paying station members. Packages of PBS content in themed strands—including PBS Documentaries as a stand-alone app on Amazon— are available on Amazon, Apple, Roku, YouTube and elsewhere. PBS has free Ad-Supported Streaming TV (FAST) channels on Xumo, Samsung, and LocalNow (the latter offering free streams of PBS stations), and streams on Hulu Live TV and DirectTV.

PBS Digital Studios produces original short form content for YouTube and social media channels. The Digital Studios brand has about 300K followers across Instagram (38K), TikTok (55K), Facebook (220K) and YouTube (8K). Its subchannels—themed to offer nature, science, arts, cultural, and educational programs that fit PBS' mandate, but not connected with PBS program brands—have millions of followers across the same social platforms. PBS Digital Studios reports an average of 50M viewers per month across 16 active channels. 82% of the audience is less than 45 years old."

A local station streaming effort called LSI (Local Streaming Initiative), organized by the Cascade Public Media under the leadership of Kevin Colligan, features an app and content management system that will allow local stations to build a program calendar from across the PBS system offerings that fits their local market. The apps will be available in fall 2024 on commercial platforms including Roku, FireTV, AppleTV, GoogleTV and smart TVs LG and Samsung and directly on the web. To date, 10 stations have signed up to participate. This sort of economy of scale in product building is essential to allow most local PBS stations to compete in the digital sphere and for them to customize for their own local audiences. However, questions remain as to whether the digital rights given to PBS by creators and producers extend into station-led/managed platforms. Further, the ability to attract viewers will depend on marketing efforts and traditionally budgets for marketing in public media are stretched thin. There is also some risk that multiple station brands and destinations for the stations and for PBS digital will increase customer confusion , inhibiting the scale of viewership that could allow for more program sponsorship, donations, and investment to pay creators for their work.

On a national or local level, the decision to offer PBS on multiple major commercial platforms where most people watch media is wise for maintaining the reach and relevance of the network. Going where audiences are is likely essential. And re-imagining PBS content in short-form video for a younger audience has been successful. But the fragmentation of the PBS digital brand can also be confusing for consumers. [A recent attempt to watch a show on PBS.org via a member station led to a pop—up prompt to sign up for PBS Passport, for example.] Further, questions remain about whether PBS' distinct public service mission is served in the long-term by placing its future audience in the hands of the tech-enabled media giants like YouTube, TikTok, Amazon, Apple, and Meta, who don't generally share data or allow others to build a direct relationship with the audience.

We commend the experimentation and effort throughout the public media system, especially considering its limited resources and lack of centralized decision-making. Still, we can't help wondering what might be possible if PBS, its flagship programs, and its local station digital feeds could create a single, essential online home that did not flow through the mass-market platforms.

Feature Length Documentaries on PBS

A documentary, Ken Burns' *The U.S. and The Holocaust*, was the highest rated program of the 2023 season on PBS, reaching 16.5 million people across linear and PBS's owned digital platforms and among the highest ratings for Asian, Black, and Multicultural adults on PBS in the past five years.

Commissioned Documentary Strands

In addition to stand-alone event documentaries, PBS offers several flagship commissioned documentary programming strands. *Frontline, NOVA, American Masters, American Experience,* and *Nature*. These are all commissioned strands, although they often work with independent documentary filmmakers.

Independent Documentary Strands

Independent documentaries on PBS are programmed on national and local program strands that invest in production in return for acquiring select rights. The national independent film strands for US documentaries are Independent Lens, POV

Other Public Media Documentaries

Independent documentaries are offered on public media outside of PBS through WORLD channel, a platform distributed through American Public Television and made in partnership with WNET and WGBH. Its flagship documentary strands America ReFramed and Local USA, (which includes short and feature films). In addition to its own streaming destination, WORLD channel programming is often available through local public television stations.

Independent Lens is programmed by Independent Television Service (ITVS), a stand-alone public media organization established in 1988 via federal legislation to provide support to independently produced media,with a dedicated allocation within CPB's budget outside of PBS. ITVS's focus is on underserved audiences, underrepresented perspectives and seeding innovation in public broadcasting. The history of ITVS funding provides a critical lesson in successful field-wide advocacy for resources, and Shorenstein Fellow Bernardo Ruiz is conducting an oral history project to share the story.

CPB also provides funding to the National Multicultural Alliance, which brings together five longstanding independent media organizations dedicated to presenting diverse perspectives. In addition to robust feature film funding and support for artists, members of the National Multicultural Alliance produce strands of digital short documentaries through series including Voces, a YouTube and social media channel produced by Latino Public Broadcasting, and Afro-Pop from Black Public Media. Many of these films premiere nationally on WORLD Channel distributed by American Public Television).

Hundreds (if not thousands, as there is no clear count) of independent documentaries compete for space on the national strands each year. Those not selected may access the public media system through local channels. PBS leaves space throughout the week, including Thursday evenings, for stations to program. Some choose to include independent documentaries relevant to their communities in those slots. If programmed on a local channel, films may even secure space on national PBS.org. Selena Lauterer, a former PBS station marketing executive, is now an advisor to independent films on how to access the system explained that she often works with national producer and program syndicator American Public Television and NETA (National Educational Telecommunications Association) as well as with PBS and PBS Plus directly to advocate for independent documentaries.

65 Independent Documentary features play on national public media each year

Films per Year	
20	Independent Lens
15	POV
17	WORLD channel: America Reframed
13	WORLD channel Local USA
65	Total

In addition to those that air on national public media annually, we estimate that **60-70 new Independent documentaries in production each year are partially funded through ITVS and the National Multicultural Media Alliance**. When completed, these funded films generally play on PBS or other public media broadcast and digital channels and, in some cases, on commercial platforms as well.



Select documentary ratings on PBS Broadcast

	Rating	Series	Total
#1	2.3	US and the Holocaust	2.8M
#6	1.0	Nature	1.6M
#8	1.03	NOVA	1.3M
#17	.67	American Experience	824K
#18	.48	Frontline	590K
#20	.42	American Masters	525K
#24	.24	Independent Lens	300K
#25	.17	POV	213K

Rating = Share of 125M broadcast households | ratings on PBS Broadcast
Source: *PBS Broadcast*

	Show	Views
#3	NOVA	10.5M
#9	Frontline	6.3M
#10	Nature	6.2M
#14	"The U.S. and the Holocaust"	4.2M*
#19	American Experience	3.4M
	Independent Lens	1M
	POV	453k

Source: *Streaming Rankings*

PBS Documentary Broadcast Ratings

A broadcast rating point represents a percent of the homes watching broadcast television, which PBS Audience Insights and Nielsen estimate at 125 million households.

PBS Documentary Streaming Viewership

*Ken Burns's "The US and the Holocaust," #1 in broadcast ratings, competed in the top 20 with the *full series of films* included in the program strands in other the top-ranked slots. *Across all programs, Strands with more episodes in their online catalog garner higher streaming ratings because viewers have more options to watch.*

***Streaming views of Independent Lens and POV are not publicly reported, since they do not make the top 20 PBS streaming list. Amy Sample and Bill Merkel at PBS Audience Insights generously provided us with the streaming data on those strands for 2023.*

Outside of PBS, other public media, including WORLD Channel, program independent US feature documentaries. Their audience is younger and more diverse than the PBS national audience (24% are under age 50). We spoke with Liz Cheng, General Manager for Television at GBH whose portfolio includes WORLD channel, who provided insights into their demographics and reach for its independent doc series *America ReFramed* and Local, USA.

	Local, USA	YouTube	Streaming
Projected TV Reach	290.1K viewers	643.7K views	458.4K total streams
America ReFramed	2.8M viewers	126.4K views	163.2K total streams

Sources: *TV Reach–Nielsen, YouTube–YouTube Analytics, Streaming–PBS-provided WORLD Producer Report Dashboard*

PBS programs also stream on commercial sites, including Amazon and YouTube among others. However, there is no aggregated reporting of views on these third-party streaming platforms. A look at the audience and followers on YouTube for PBS documentaries offers some perspective on the potential audience there.

Independent Lens publishes its long-form documentaries on the PBS YT channel Between Jan-June 2024, **it had 2.6M views on its library of long-form content on YouTube**. These are not discrete viewers, so this number needs to be reduced to assess the unique audience size. However, this is an impressive figure for independent, feature-length documentaries on YouTube.

Independent Lens documentary Spotlight: The Longest Goodbye premiered on PBS broadcast and streaming on May 6th 2024. Its success in reaching a young audience on YouTube was partly fueled by a collaboration with PBS Digital Studios to generate short-form content.

Space: The Longest Goodbye was a standout streaming success for the Independent Lens season with 1.1M streams in 30 days across YouTube and the PBS App.

74% of the audience on YouTube were under 45 years old.

Independent Lens collaborated directly with PBS YouTube creators, whose channels had the second and fourth highest number of subscribers within the PBS YouTube ecosystem, Be Smart and Space Time: Our Universe Explained to produce ancillary content driving to the long form documentary. The resulting series, Uncharted Expeditions, included three episodes and three supporting vertical videos. The combined ancillary content had 3.65 million views in 30 days.

The digital marketing campaign had over 21 million impressions over 14 days.

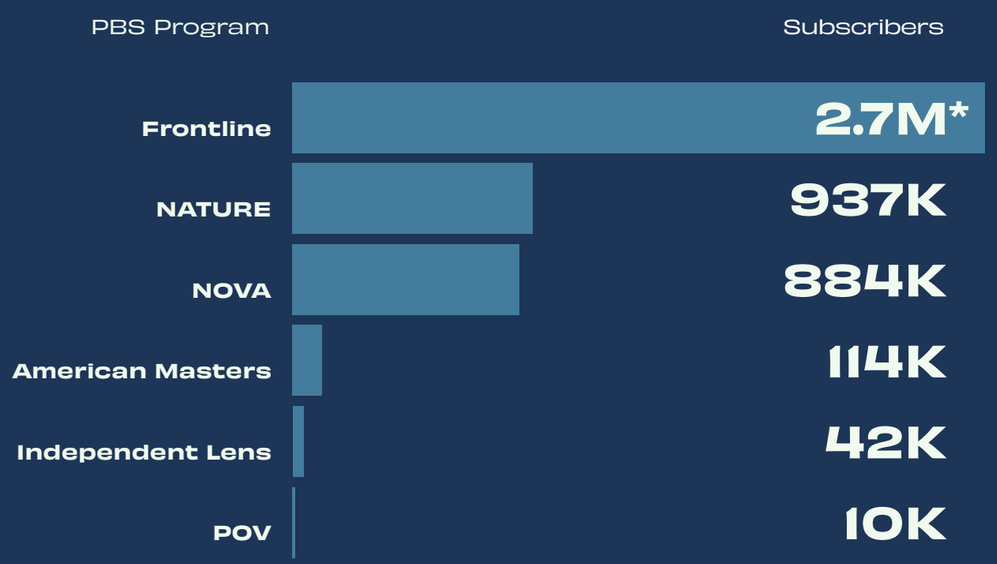
Documentary on PBS Passport (for PBS Members)

Commission strands *NOVA* and *Nature* are the only documentaries on the top 20 programs on PBS Passport. This audience is older and more White than the PBS general audience. However, anecdotal information from documentary producers we interviewed anonymously suggests significant viewership of their work on Passport. PBS would not share data about this platform.

PBS Documentary on Amazon Prime Video Channels

The *PBS Documentary* offering on Amazon Channels is a bundle of its documentary programming, including all its major program strands. We were told in interviews that documentaries on Amazon are doing very well for PBS–earning revenue and reaching new audiences where they are already browsing. No figures are available for the actual audience reach or demographics, or the share of independent documentary views.

PBS Feature Length Documentary on YouTube



Audience Demographics for Independent Documentary on PBS

In line with the rest of PBS audience, **Independent Lens and POV skew older, with a media broadcast viewer age of 69** (remarkably this is nearly the youngest median age of any program on the chart). Frontline is one point younger at 68.

Independent Lens and POV score the highest of all program strands in reaching Black audiences, with almost double all others 17% Black viewership each. Still, actual Black viewership in numerical volume of these strands is relatively low (in the thousands).

Independent Lens and POV also have a higher percentage of lower income households and fewer viewers with college degrees than other PBS strands.

Source: *Nielsen NPOWER L+7*

Digital Audiences–There is no breakdown of digital audience demographics for independent documentaries in the PBS Audience Insights Report.

Estimate of Total PBS Independent Documentary Audience Broadcast + Streaming:

Bill Merkel at PBS Audience insights generously shared with us Nielsen data on audience reach (unique viewership) for Independent Lens and POV:

Total *unique* viewers of Independent Lens and POV (combined) on linear PBS channels was 14.5 M in the 2022-2023 season.

Note that this 'reach' measurement is different from ratings, which is a statement of average viewership in any minute of a program, not total unique viewers.

The chart below includes **both linear and streaming viewership from January to May, 2024** for Frontline, Independent Lens, and POV.

We then remove Frontline from this tally because it is a commissioned strand, not an independent one. Projecting the 5-month total to a full year (accounting for program strand timing), we estimate an annual unique viewership for **independent documentaries (POV and Independent Lens) on PBS linear and streaming channels of roughly 20 M in the 2024 season.**

We estimate 2M additional unique viewers on third-party streaming channels. Projecting beyond the PBS-owned digital streaming channels is more difficult, but our estimate is based on the viewership numbers visible on YouTube and (3) 'demand ratings' of 4.2 for Independent Lens and 2.2 for POV published by Parrot Analytics. We project 4M annual views of independent PBS docs (including library titles) via third-party channels, including YouTube and PBS Documentaries on Amazon Prime Video Channels. Considering repeat views by single individuals, estimated at a 2x per year average, we land at our 2M unique viewer estimate.

We estimate a total of 22M unique viewers for PBS feature length independent documentaries across public media broadcasts and digital channels as well as third-party digital channels.

Including commissioned strands and special documentary presentations, the full annual documentary audience watching PBS documentaries is in the range of 75 M unique annual viewers.

PBS has successfully cultivated a wide audience following for high-quality documentaries but at fewer than 50 titles per year released through its national strands, the benefits of a valued and known destination do not reach most independent documentaries. If our public media system can make the transition to the digital age, and invest enough to retain digital rights–rather than just broadcast licenses–across all its documentary strands, it is well positioned to grow its brand as the leading home for independent documentary in the American media landscape.

Estimate of total public media viewership

In addition to PBS viewership, WORLD channel reaches at least 3M viewers through its *America Reframed* and *Local, USA* strands. Below is the 2023 viewership by platform generously provided by Lis Cheng and her team at WORLD Channel.

We cannot responsibly estimate the total number of public media viewers for independent documentaries (PBS + Local Channels + WORLD) because the data is duplicated. For example, WORLD programs stream on PBS broadcast and digital channels through local stations.

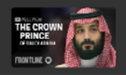
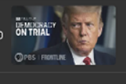
PBS Documentary Strand Unique Viewers/Frequency/Minutes Jan 2024 thru May 2024

Schedule Name	Units	AA Reach %	AA Reach Proj(000)	AA Average Frequency	AA Average Minutes
FRON Linear (8, 600)	8	2.29	7,228	1.72	46.29
INLE Linear (10, 870)	10	2.53	7,991	1.81	38.59
POV Linear (2, 180)	2	0.58	1,842	1.10	16.12
FRON SCR (8204, 568926)	8,204	1.27	3,999	3.66	94.44
INLE SCR (10810, 822640)	10,810	0.57	1,799	1.91	35.44
POV SCR (1709, 111991)	1,709	0.06	200	1.25	16.93
FRON Linear (8, 600) + FRON SCR (8204, 568926)	8,212	3.47	10,936	2.47	65.13
INLE Linear (10, 870) + INLE SCR (10810, 822640)	10,820	3.06	9,643	1.86	38.58
POV Linear (2, 180) + POV SCR (1709, 111991)	1,711	0.64	2,009	1.13	16.46
FRON Linear (8, 600) + INLE Linear (10, 870) + POV Linear (2, 180) + FRON SCR (8204, 568926) + INLE SCR (10810, 822640) + POV SCR (1709, 111991)	20,743	5.57	17,574	2.69	63.58
POV Linear (2, 180) + INLE Linear (10, 870) + INLE SCR (10810, 822640) + POV SCR (1709, 111991)	12,531	3.31	10,441	1.93	38.80

Source: *Credit PBS audience insights.*

DIGITAL STRATEGY

Spotlight | Frontline

	Content		Average view duration	Views
1		Amazon Empire: The Rise and Reign of Jeff Bezos (full documentary) | FRONTLI... Feb 18, 2020	36:07 (31.9%)	39,192,620
2		The Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia (full documentary) | FRONTLINE Sep 28, 2019	38:59 (34.0%)	26,459,604
3		In the Age of AI (full documentary) | FRONTLINE Dec 2, 2019	40:06 (35.1%)	25,032,101
4		Age of Easy Money (full documentary) | FRONTLINE Mar 14, 2023	35:08 (31.0%)	17,431,792
5		From Jesus to Christ: The First Christians, Part One (full documentary) | FRONTLI... Dec 22, 2020	39:07 (35.7%)	14,878,831
6		How Doctors Tell Patients They're Dying | Being Mortal | FRONTLINE Feb 13, 2015	3:00 (54.7%)	14,813,058
7		Putin and the Presidents (full documentary) | FRONTLINE Jan 24, 2023	19:23 (36.7%)	14,025,588
8		Trump's Showdown (full documentary) | FRONTLINE Oct 19, 2021	40:27 (35.7%)	11,481,884
9		The Choice 2016 (full documentary) | FRONTLINE Sep 27, 2016	38:28 (33.5%)	11,216,640
10		Democracy on Trial (full documentary) | FRONTLINE Jan 30, 2024	46:47 (32.7%)	10,523,403

Frontline on YouTube

Channel Subscribers	2.8M
Average views for new docs	2.7 million, with some much higher
Completion rate	36%
Average view duration	38 minutes
Age	nearly half of all viewers under 44
Newsletter subscribers	600-700L
Gender	70% male

Link to Embedded Chart Below: *Frontline Top 10 Most Viewed on YouTube*

Among PBS' documentary strands, Frontline has particular success in reaching a digital audience.

In a departure from expectations on the heavily short-form oriented YouTube, Frontline's most viewed films are feature length. More serious subjects often do better on YouTube, indicating the core audience is interested in substantive investigative journalism. *Up to 80% of the traffic for many new films is specific to those films*, not from the current subscribers, so the general Frontline audience grows with each new video. "Documentary" is viewers' top search term, more than "film" or "Frontline," suggesting that people are hungry for the form on the platform.

However, Frontline feature films are not reaching large audiences under 24 on YouTube. *Frontline Editor and Chief and Executive Producer Raney Aronson heads the award-winning journalistic strand for WGBH.* In our conversations, Aronson noted that Frontline's largest 18-24 audience is on their website, perhaps because its stories and archive are used in classrooms and for research.

Aronson's epiphany on the power of streaming began on The Frontline website, where they began streaming programs as early as 1995. Her wake-up call around building a digital strategy was a film called "The Interrupters" by Steve James, which premiered on PBS and the Frontline website in 2012. She and her team felt it was a profoundly important film, but it fell flat in the broadcast ratings. However, it really took off on streaming with a wider, more diverse audience.

In 2016. Frontline premiered its first feature-length film on YouTube,"The Choice 2016." Many assumed then that YouTube was short, quick viewing only. But the documentary gathered a large audience. Four years ago, Frontline began publishing all its full-length films on YouTube in partnership with PBS. Sharing a new film every single week has helped build Frontline's audience considerably.

Frontline provides short-form content to supplement its feature-length documentaries on the platform and increase engagement. Because of their long term relationship with the platform and their considerable following, Aronson explained "We are a major recommended show on YouTube. They are entrusting us because they want authoritative news sources, and we work hard to provide a lot of new content for the platform." Aronson concedes that this preferential platforming could end at any time as commercial needs and mandates change; she gave the example of how Frontline started on Facebook with original content, then audiences decreased when news and journalism became controversial and were deprioritized on the platform.

> **"I really believe this is the best era for Frontline in terms of audience reach domestically and globally – that we are reaching more people via streaming than we ever have across all platforms. And with the digital growth, our broadcast ratings have held steady."**
>
> **– Raney Aronson**

Educational Distribution

Educational distribution provides licenses for libraries—including universities, colleges, secondary schools, and public libraries—to make films available free of charge to their constituents. Libraries pay a fee to the educational distributor, who has acquired the right to distribute a library of films for the nontheatrical and educational window, which typically sometime after the initial commercial distribution of a film.

This sector is an especially important part of distribution for classic films, international films, documentaries, and independent films that are taught as part of college or high school courses or deemed of value to the public in libraries. Educational distribution is part of the larger array of non-theatrical distribution rights–including airlines, hotels, and community or impact screenings.

There are a wide array of excellent distributors who specialize in this space. We want to highlight one that is making significant inroads in building market share of independent film viewing:

Kanopy

Kanopy reaches over 158 million library cardholders at 4,000 libraries, and more than 1,800 U.S. colleges and universities serving 15 million students. Kanopy's global business is evenly split between academic libraries and public libraries. Public libraries focus on free accessibility of streaming video across multiple popular categories. General library card holders are a great potential market, but as of today they tend to consume more series content and kids programming than independent film and documentary. For our purposes, the U.S. college and university library audience is of the most interest because the top-viewed feature-length films on Kanopy skew towards independent and classic cinema, presumably influenced by what is taught in college courses.

Kanopy's portfolio includes 85% of large American colleges and university libraries. The Kanopy app is available on iOS and Android and all major streaming devices, including Roku, Apple TV, Android TV, Amazon Fire TV and Samsung Smart TV.

Kanopy was acquired in July 2021 by a company called Overdrive, a digital reading platform for libraries and schools. Overdrive is a Benefit Corporation (B-Corp), which means it has a 'double bottom line' that balances purpose and profit, with particular priority on sustainability of all stakeholders, transparency, and mission. Overdrive is controlled by private equity firm KKR, whose typical investments target growth and returns rather than purpose. Kanopy as a division of Overdrive has been in a period of rapid growth, capturing significant market share in the U.S.

> **"I think broadly, the promise of streaming was this concept that you would have the entirety of film cinema at your fingertips and this ability to sort of binge without interruption," ... [Tyrell] believes. "And I think more and more, what people are seeing is that content is disappearing, prices are going up, and it's just become an unreliable, more expensive version of your cable package. I think that's where platforms like ours start to become really appealing."**
>
> **– Jason Tyrell,** *Kanopy General Manager; Interview in GoldDerby.com, January 28 2024*

In December 2023 Kanopy released its list of the top 30 most popular films on its platform for the year. All were smaller independent films and documentaries, including several international titles alongside US ones. Notably, at least one film on the list, "The YouTube Effect," produced by Hollywood veteran Gale Anne Hurd failed to secure traditional distribution from any major streamer after its successful premiere at the Tribeca Film Festival but clearly reached a significant audience through Kanopy.

We asked General Manager Jason Tyrell to provide us with a per-film average viewership for the top 10 films on Kanopy for this study, but he declined. He explained that some are viewed by entire classrooms and others by individual students so the calculation is challenging.

Kanopy provides 30,000 streaming video titles from over 800 suppliers to more than 8,000 public and academic libraries worldwide. They describe their offering as "quality, thoughtful entertainment" on their website and other materials. Many films on Kanopy—including work from NEON, Samuel Goldwyn Films, First Run Features, Kino Lorber, and IFC Films—are independent films unavailable elsewhere. In addition, Criterion Collection is especially popular with teachers and students.

We estimate 5M US viewers of independent film on educational free streaming based on Kanopy's numbers, our projection of its US vs international audience, and our estimate of its market share in the educational market. This is a rough estimate and certainly worth more study of this curious, young-skewing audience.

Kanopy provides each library with a full breakdown of its usage, including patrons, titles watched, hours watched, and top titles by category. Its live dashboard allows librarians to see plays and usage both by title and by card holder, so it's transparent for the entities who are footing the bill. Kanopy's content suppliers also have access to a similar view for their collections, so they see title performance by institution, which can be valuable in the hands of a savvy marketing team. This data is not always available to filmmakers because data sharing is decided by the distributor/rights holder.

When asked about filmmaker compensation in our interview, Kanopy's General Manager Jason Tyrell estimated an average of 50k per year per film per year revenue share, although it's not clear how this is the split between the rights holders, the film financiers, and the filmmaking teams. Over time, an ongoing $50K per year is a valuable revenue stream to meaningfully help offset production costs on a modestly priced film. Tyrell also mentioned that presence on Kanopy can also lead to more teaching of films in courses, more exposure, and to speaking engagements and live events for filmmakers.

In conversations with Tyrell, we learned that the company is actively working to grow its global reach with a range of new offerings including a Kanopy Kids program, tools for teachers to embed video into course materials, and investments in original programming in partnership with other distributors. One of the first is a documentary about Book Banning in partnership with Greenwich Films. Kanopy brought the film to Greenwich and invested 30% of the budget in return for nontheatrical and educational rights. Doing co-acquisition with distributors and putting MG down on individual titles will be valuable to filmmakers and rights-holders because Kanopy is giving academics and students free previews of these titles to help get them programmed in curriculum. Once a film is offered as part of a class, revenue is increased.

One of the most important changes in Kanopy's offerings is what Tyrell describes as 'flexible payment models' at different price points introduced during the pandemic. Payments to Kanopy come in three basic forms, (1) an outright purchase of titles or collections that are frequently used by students or library card holders; (2) a flat term license fee that allows all constituents of the school or library to watch content over a period of time, with price adjusted for how much content is included in the license; and (3) a pay-by-patron model, in which schools or libraries are charged based on what is watched by their constituents, and only pay the license based on usage. Kanopy describes its subscription tiers as follows:

Despite its promising reach, free streaming model, and quality curatorial approach, we did encounter in our research a current of concern among librarians and filmmakers about Kanopy's pricing models and dominant market share that is now being addressed by Kanopy.



In 2019 the New York Times reported that the New York Public Library, Brooklyn Public Library, and Queens Public Library all canceled Kanopy, despite their constituents' love of the product, because it became prohibitively expensive for the library.

"Because the libraries pay about $2 per movie "play" — watching at least 30 seconds of a film constitutes a play — a growing number of cardholders using the service for free increases costs for the library. And though Kanopy said it does have capped pricing options, the New York Public Library said the cap it was offered was too high." (NY Times article linked above)

At the time, the New York Public Library wrote on its website: "The Library made this decision after a careful and thorough examination of its streaming offerings and priorities… We believe the cost of Kanopy makes it unsustainable for the Library." Stanford Libraries scaled back Kanopy in the same period, claiming that the cost of the service had "escalated significantly in the past year and is no longer sustainable."

Kanopy has adapted to this criticism. As a B-Corp, they want to address the question of library sustainability. Their new approach in pricing cut the cost of academic titles 50% in response to Covid and created a 'free shelf' in the pandemic in the public libraries. Since then, they have kept this discount going. Libraries seem to be re-engaging with Kanopy.

At a 2023 library conference, librarians and Kanopy executives discussed how Kanopy's new pricing models have improved sustainability for their operations while preserving access for their constituents. As part of our research, we asked librarians to comment on how Kanopy works for them. Danielle Stanley, electronic resources manager at the Phoenix Public Library, where digital resources are a growing priority, shared her thoughts on Kanopy with us via email:

"When we first got Kanopy (seven years ago) we paid $2 every time a customer watched something on Kanopy (it didn't matter how long it was or how popular it was). I actually like the new ticket system because it gives our customers options and they know how many tickets each of their views will "cost" them. I love the addition of the PLUS packs too. It gives libraries a subscription option so they know exactly how much they are going to pay and the amount doesn't fluctuate no matter how many checkouts there are… It's really important for libraries to meet customers where they are (as budget allows) and streaming video is obviously becoming more popular. Kanopy has such a great variety in their content so there really is something for everyone."

In 2024 the Queens Public Library noted that since the pandemic they have increased their investment in digital content and is again offering Kanopy as well as Overdrive for eBooks, its "Libby App."

Hong Yao, director of digital services at the Queens Public Library "emphasized that most digital services offered to cardholders are free for patrons, but they are not free to the library. Cardholders must know that libraries have limited budgets and must be judicious in allocating taxpayer funds. She further explained that periodic budget cuts can impact the library's ability to offer free services at the levels cardholders would like. It is a careful balancing act that administrators must wrestle with often."

However, there is still concern from some libraries about Kanopy's market share and pricing power. In June 2024, we spoke with Charles Cobine at the University of Pennsylvania Libraries who subscribes to Kanopy but expressed concerns that the pricing was still unsustainable for universities and libraries, and that its high prices, library strength, and market dominance threatens to squeeze our smaller specialized educational distributors. Penn decided to limit the scope of its offerings to afford to continue working with Kanopy. Cobine added, "For us, it was Kanopy's demand-driven pricing in particular that was unsustainable."

Jason Tyrell responded that its "pricing is not outside the industry standard." He noted that their market share and popular platform has drawn other educational distributors to work through Kanopy, which works for many libraries who prefer the larger set of options within one platform.

The idea of taxpayer funded free-streaming through public libraries and universities, is an exciting expansion of 'public media.' Some question the sustainability of this model, including producer and film distribution platform Gathr founder Scott Glosserman, in a July 2024 Linked-In comment on a Kanopy post:

> **"Given the meager budgets most local libraries have, how are they going to be able to afford your fees? Won't they have to ask for more government funding, which will then have to become a town ballot initiative?"**

We believe that free streaming through libraries and schools has great promise as a 21st century complement to existing public media in the US, especially since PBS and its member stations do not include the scripted independent and specialized film that is so important to the Kanopy viewers. Kanopy operates as a for-profit business while serving a public good as a benefit corporation whose services are paid for by nonprofit higher education and government through the library system. This model can offer great value to a diverse, young audience for independent film and documentary if it remains affordable to ensure wide, free access while paying fair fees to the filmmakers and rights holders for their work.

Independent Distribution

Independent Distribution is our umbrella term for a release led by the filmmaking team, usually with the help of consultants and/or distributors who offer their services for a fee and/or revenue share rather than acquiring rights. It may involve impact or community-focused engagement of particular constituencies based on the topic or target audiences, or may be general audience distribution following more typical patterns.

The contraction in the acquisition market, along with new opportunities afforded by technology to identify and engage directly with fans, has led to an increase in independent distribution. This work is often called self-distribution or hybrid distribution, but we prefer the term 'independent distribution' because we feel it embodies the spirit of indepedence from the conventional system that characterizes the field at its best. This approach has been a tactic in the independent film field for decades. Independent releases are highly customized, and can leverage all exhibition platforms, from festivals to traditional theatrical and at-home viewing to more bespoke special screenings online or in person. This sector is particularly vibrant and innovative today, especially for films pursuing social impact or community engagement outcomes alongside commercial releases.

This approach also offers the long-term benefit of filmmakers retaining rights to their work.

Industry observer and producer Brian Newman's invaluable newsletter lays out the opportunity of independent distribution and offers information on distributors that offer service deals. Newman, and others, emphasize that independent distribution has been part of US independent film since the 1960s. Filmmakers, especially documentary filmmakers, would ship their film prints to film collectives around the country for screenings. This led to the start of regional media centers and regional festivals. Filmmakers and consultants Jon Reiss and Peter Broderick—among others—have been urging independent filmmakers to take charge of their distribution for years. Their newsletters and websites offer advice, case studies, and educational resources for filmmakers interested in pursuing these strategies. Veteran producer and executive Ted Hope's blog is a vital source for advice and inspiration. Sundance Institute has been experimenting with creative, independent distribution for over a decade through fellowships, case studies, workshops and more. Scholar and producer Aymar Jean Christian and artist/entrepreneur Elijah McKinnon, writing on Color Congress' Medium platform, laid out the benefits of thinking outside the traditional distribution system in a recent article. And Distribution Advocates is producing a podcast and calling for more education in film schools about including marketing and distribution expenses as a critical component of production budgets.

> **Since the start of its roadshow tour last year, "Hundreds of Beavers," a black-and- white comedy, has grossed more than $320,000, a considerable haul given that the movie has never played on more than 17 screens in any single weekend. It has been fueled entirely by organic word-of-mouth without the aid of a distributor's marketing team.**
>
> **– From "Indie Filmmakers Getting Their Movies in Theaters (The Wrap).**

We could find no data source to determine how many US independent films each year are pursuing independent distribution. However, we can estimate this number by considering the total number of feature length independent films produced in the US each year, compared with those that receive a professional release. Approximately 2500 independent feature films are submitted to top festivals annually, but there is no clear way to count the many films that are made and do not go this route. Some experts feel the number is much higher if all commercial independent titles are included–low-budget horror, action, comedy, etc.].

Most films don't receive a deal to pay for their distribution. In recent years, our best guess is no more than 350 US independent films were released by a distributor who paid an acquisition price for theatrical or at-home rights in 2023. Some, but not all, of the remaining 2000+ independent filmmakers and investors who did not find traditional distribution release independently with varying degrees of time and financial investment. Most of these films don't reach significant audiences or earn revenue to cover costs. But a handful successfully break through to audiences, showing the potential of this market.

In 2024, the scripted film "Hundreds of Beavers" made headlines with its innovative, independent release and will reap further benefit based on their successful brand-building on paid video on demand and other at-home viewing platforms. Filmmaker Gary Hustwit announced a fall 2024 independent release of his documentary ENO in partnership with the Art House Convergence theaters, rather than accepting offers from conventional distributors. Hustwit's recognized voice and loyal fan base across his body of work makes this approach especially exciting. Jeanie Finlay's documentary film "Your Fat Friend" has reached a significant audience (and earnings) from its 2024 US release using specialized screening platforms like Kinema and Jolt to reach her core fanbase.

Filmmakers may also make 'service deals' with distribution companies including Roadside Attraction, NEON, and others in which the film team pays costs and assumes risk, but the distributor releases the films including (where applicable) providing accesses its lucrative 'pay one' streaming deal to allow the film to play on one of the dominant global streamers.

Many independent filmmakers work directly with theatrical exhibitors to release their films as part of an independent distribution strategy. This ranges from single art house theaters who regularly program independent releases that speak to their loyal fanbases to national exhibition chains, including AMC Theaters. Slamdance winner "Good Bad Things" secured 50 screens in AMC Theaters and a partnership with the Muscular Dystrophy Association for its independent release. Writer-director Shane Stanger recently noted that the team started with its impact strategy for the disability community and built from there. From 2022 to the present, AMC Independent has played 37 independently distributed titles, with 11 of them (30%) of them performing well enough to be extended for a second week. AMC SVP of Content Strategy Nikkole Denson, who leads AMC Independent, shared their criteria for selection and some recent performance highlights: "When we are considering films for direct distribution, we watch for quality, saleability, and whether the filmmaker has a marketing budget, plan, and the wherewithal to activate an audience to get off of the couch." Some of the most successful films in this program have reached more than 10,000 people in theaters and earned a share of the gross box office earnings.

To reach the at-home market, independent distribution is generally done in partnership with a service distributor or aggregator who places films on up to 50 US platforms that are open to all films. Service distributors take a fee for their work and generally provide more customized marketing and distribution consulting services. Aggregators generally split revenue with filmmakers but generally charge no up-front fee, and handle a wider volume of titles with limited customized per-film support. The platforms that most independently distributed films reach through their service distributors or aggregators are generally free streaming channels that do not pay acquisition fees to filmmakers (with some exceptions like the educational market or airlines). Instead they offer revenue shares based on views.

Many filmmakers also pursue specific fan-bases online or in semi-theatrical or community venues outside of traditional box office tracking, and there are many professional distributors, consultants, and tech-enabled platforms who help facilitate and market these efforts. Much of this work falls in the impact, community or brand distribution category described in more detail below.

There is no data on the performance of independent releases, but we have aggregated some case studies we collected during our research here. There are many more, largely from the documentary field, and our colleagues at The Shorenstein Center's *Documentary in the Public Interest* program will continue to build and maintain this references folder.

Impact and Community Distribution

> **Whatever we call it — impact, social action, engagement, etc.– many independent creatives are taking a rigorous look at how their films are influencing people and movements in these uncertain times.**
>
> **– Ellen Schneider,** *Active Voice*

'Impact distribution' focuses on creating social change through film. In the recent past, this was mostly a stand-alone effort pursued separately from commercial distribution. Today, most impact strategists we spoke to in our research are also distribution strategists and consider the film's broader distribution holistically. These releases typically are built around 'third places' outside of traditional theaters or home screens, but also include more traditional venues.

For independent documentaries in particular, this category of distribution can be very successful, with recent examples including "The Wisdom of Trauma," and "Coded Bias," breaking out in both earnings and audience reach by targeting special interest communities built around their films' topic or featured characters. In the case of *Coded Bia*s, their successful engagement and impact strategy yielded a Netflix acquisition. Doc Society, a UK and US based organization dedicated to supporting independent documentary filmmakers around the world and furthering the impact of their work, publishes an "Impact Field Guide" on their website that includes some case studies and other tools.

'Community distribution' describes work with particular populations, most often bringing films into communities through local partnerships and organizations. There is a lot of activity in this space including programs to screen films in targeted regions (e.g. the Southern Documentary Fund), schools, military bases, NGOs, in prisons, and at workplaces. ROCO Films, a longtime documentary sales agent and distributor, specializes in integrating community and educational screenings into their commercial release plans by retaining these rights. ROCO founder Annie Roney recently launched a nonprofit called IRLfilmclub that brings documentaries to theaters nationwide to facilitate community and conversation. Third World Newsreel makes a catalog of films by and about people of color and social justice issues available for the educational and community market, and offers pay-per-stream viewing through its site. Non-fiction filmmakers and the organizations that support them have a long and successful history of community distribution.

Outside the US there is exciting work happening in community distribution, including by Ambulante, an organization based in Mexico that has long been presenting documentary film screenings in communities across the country. More recently, Ambulante together with organizations in 12 Latin American countries released a Manifesto for Community Distribution and Exhibition that may inspire new ways of thinking here in the US. Ambulante is also part of the DISCO network of global documentary organizations, focused on community distribution in regions around the world. Members include Doc Society who work in the US and UK and whose Independence Manifesto beautifully expresses the urgency of this sector. In 2022, with backing from the Ford Foundation and other philanthropy, some US organizations specifically focused on communities of color came together to form Color Congress. We want to highlight the impact and reach of their work in communities around the country.

> **Color Congress, a national collective of documentary filmmakers of color and organizations that support and amplify their work in communities around the country, recently released a study of the reach and impact of nonfiction films made by people of color. Their constituent organizations have been producing documentaries in the US since the 1970s, and represent a vital part of the independent documentary ecosystem. Work supported and presented by these organizations includes a wide range of award-winning and commercial film, including for national public media and streaming. They also focus mindfully on engaging people in their communities directly in festivals, independent venues, and grassroot community screenings. Color Congress co-founders Sahar Driver and Sonya Childress spoke to us about the audience data in their report. Including public media organizations and channels, festivals, and online and in-person community screenings and engagement programs they estimate a significant and underreported audience reach for this sector. This community of documentary filmmakers of color is doing essential work to represent and engage people with media that speaks specificallty to their experiences and perspectives.** ***We believe we have captured the scope of this audience throughout this report (including in this section and the PBS and Festival sections).***



Brand-funded production and distribution

A growing number of filmmakers, consultants, and distributors have pursued brand or philanthropic partners to support independent film production and distribution. In some cases, these partnerships even offer audiences the chance to see the films for free because the quality and impact of the audience engagement is more important to the brand than its financial return.

Brand-backed films are receiving awards, reaching audiences, and making social impact. In 2022, a brand funded, social issue based film won the Oscar for best live action short: WeTransfer, with The Long Goodbye. The brand funded (Johnson and Johnson) feature documentary 5B, produced by Saville Productions and directed by Paul Haggis and Dan Krauss, won both Cannes and Cannes Lions. John Deere's Odd Hours, No Pay, Cool Hat played 350+ volunteer fire departments and 56% of them recruited volunteers as a result.

BrandStorytelling is an organization that brings together brand-backed media work and makers. Longtime Hollywood producer and manager Michael Sugar has expanded his filmmaker-centered business into this area, and launched the "way upfronts" for brands to be exposed to potential media projects at early stages. Producer and consultant Brian Newman helps brand clients navigate the film space, and often covers branded content in his newsletter (including a summer 2024 piece on the Elevate conference produced by BrandStorytelling). One of Newman's clients, REI, supports outdoor and adventure documentaries through its partnership with Mountain Film. This year the team is extending the offering through a national partnership with AMC Theaters.

Brand-funded distribution has incredible potential to increase the reach of independent film but providing marketing and audience engagement funding and support. Raising philanthropic or investor money for distribution is challenging, even when included in production budgets. The financial resources from aligned brands bring new investment to the independent film field. Brand-backed projects need not be promotional for the brands. In fact, the best of this work aligns filmmaker-led independent storytelling with the spirit of the brand without product placement or even heavy editorial management from the brand.

It's too early to fully assess the current audience reach of brand-backed films, but we believe this growing space will play a significant role in the future of the independent film sector in the US.

Tools and Technologies for Direct Audience Engagement

Kinema A platform that enables customized online or live screening by filmmakers as well as a newly launched transactional VOD option on the platform. Kinema shares certain data and payments in real time with rights holders (including several independent distributors now using the platform for some titles).

Arvester A platform in Europe that tracks how visible titles are on VOD.

Gathr Another example of a platform that powers impact and community engagement with automated booking and ticketing of live venues. Gathr is powering a new tool offered by sales company and distributor ROCO that offers speakers for events connected with film releases. Gathr also recently launched "Pay it Forward" ticketing that enables cause-marketers or event producers to designate seats to screening events. Like Kinema and Eventive, they are also launching VOD screenings on the platform.

Eventive Powers many festivals' ticketing and event platforms, is now expanding to work with distributors, art houses, and individual releases on VOD.

Jolt A new marketing tool and VOD platform that uses machine learning to identify and market to target audiences based on a film's specific content.

Seed and Spark Evolved from a crowdfunding and streaming platform to a distributor that brings films to audiences in workplaces.

Fathom Events And others in the event-theatrical category offer service deals for live in-cinema events for independent films.

One of the most exciting things happening in the field is the innovation emerging from the independent distribution sector. What's being built and used in this sector has the potential to positively influence conventional distribution and exhibition.

We want to highlight several new or evolving tech-enabled companies to help filmmakers identify and engage audiences, simplify bookings, and gain valuable data that is unavailable to filmmakers (and distributors) when releasing on most large commercial platforms. Many were set up for use by individual projects, but have become so useful that small distribution companies are working with them to find more audiences for their new and library titles.

Kino Studios Facilitates event-driven preview screenings for independent films.

Vimeo Not a new platform, but does have a direct-to-fan distribution function along with many robust tools for professional filmmakers that could be leveraged for independent distribution if its new CEO chooses to invest in this aspect of the business.

Ushero A marketing and tech company based in Europe to facilitate content discovery, audience engagement, ticketing and sales, and data insights.

Publikum A Danish company using "AI-backed anthropology" to identify audiences.

Gruvi Based in Europe, identifies and engages target audience segments for film releases. Most of these companies are clearly building capacity to aggregate their own repositories of data on audience segments that can be leveraged by future releases for more targeted marketing than is typically used in exhibition or independent film marketing.

For impact engagement measurements, ITVS has DocScale and Frontline is working with the MIT Media Lab Center for Constructive Communication to use machine learning to better understand how their work on YouTube connects with audiences, and in particular if they are reaching people across political and cultural divides

Existing Direct-to-Audience Creator Platforms

6% A new survey conducted by MIDia Research and Amuse found that only 6% of musicians are interested in signing with a major label.

Source: *MIDia Research and Amuse*

Many creative professionals in other fields are successfully using platforms like **Soundcloud, BandCamp, Substack, Patreon**. The film business has **Vimeo**, which offers a direct-to-consumer fan platform, but Vimeo has focused on b-to-b professional services in recent years and this part of its business is no longer its core work. The vitality of direct-to-fan platforms in other creative fields is currently missing in the independent film sector.

Substack has a vibrant independent film community with a long list of writers covering the space for industry, aspiring makers, and fans. Researcher Stephen Follows created a valuable list of film Substacks that suggests the breadth and scope of the work there. In addition, Substack is adding video capabilities, which may make it a more viable option for filmmakers with higher quality and piracy protection on its player.

Music, journalism, creator content, and fiction writing may be better suited to direct-to-fan online distribution than film because they are generally less expensive than film and therefore have lower costs to recoup. Further, these disciplines are usually built around fan bases for a particular artist or creator across multiple projects. Most films, by contrast, are distributed as individual projects with their own audiences and strategies rather than marketed based on a specific artists' output.

There are a few exceptions, filmmakers who have curated and engaged directly with a following for their body of work rather than title-by-title alone, including Jim Cummings and Gary Hustwit, Jeanie Finlay, and Harmony Korine, Joel Haver, and Ava Duvernay through her company Array. Not every filmmaker wants to become a 'brand' and spend time engaging her audience directly. But for those who do, there is great opportunity. Patreon has seen strong growth as creative people in all disciplines appeal directly to fans to fund their work. "Video" is the most popular category on Patreon, but we could find very few feature film focused accounts today. Independent filmmaker Joel Haver is building community there, and distribution advocate and producer Liz Manashil is also promoting and funding her upcoming independent horror film there. The independent film site No Film School created a guide to Patreon for filmmakers in 2020, but there were no successful examples of film accounts cited in their piece.

Of course the huge creator economy is entirely based on direct relationships between creators and fans on platforms led by **TikTok, Instagram** and **YouTube**. **Instagram** does not currently offer feature-length work, but serialized shorts that make a larger narrative are popular on all the platforms. **TikTok** has a hashtag for users to promote their first feature film, and has now enabled videos up to 30 minutes long. More expansion may be ahead.

YouTube, by far the biggest creator platform (and also the largest streaming platform overall in the US) features streaming video, is a home for many US independent feature-length films on its Movies and TV section, available for rent, sale, or free ad-supported streaming. We did not have the capacity to find and assess the scale and performance of films that are self-released on individual YouTube accounts.

Many field observers cite Joel Haver as an example of what is possible on the platform. From 2019 through 2024, Haver uploaded over 400 films to his YouTube channel, including 12 feature films. In early 2024, Haver made an announcement to his YouTube fans saying that he was planning to focus on feature films going forward, giving up his weekly short films on YouTube in favor of posting a monthly feature. He acknowledges in his post that he will make less money when he is not posting short content weekly, and indeed it is evident from the view counts that the short animation he posts receives millions of views while features receive around 150,000. He plans to offset this loss of YouTube revenue and views by using his Patreon account (3000 followers) to fund the movies.

The stunning amount of social content being uploaded daily to social platforms, reported by Mike Gioia on his substack as 700,000 hours a day, and the dominance of YouTube among online and now television viewers (via YouTubeTV) suggest that more experimentation on the platform is necessary. Certainly individual filmmakers committed to personally engaging and feeding a direct fan base with frequent content would be wise to invest time and energy. But we see from the example of Frontline how producers and studios can do this effectively to generate more viewership and revenue for their titles.

We recommend more study and experimentation on YouTube as a home for independent film distribution. *For more on YouTube, see our analysis of Frontline's success on the platform in our PBS chapter, and our Social Media and Fan Communities section.*

Reaching and Measuring Audiences

Despite the vitality and activity in the field, there is very little data about audience reach for independent distribution. Published case studies tend to celebrate only the successes. There is no reliable information on the aggregate number of films distributed in this manner, or the average or median results in terms of audience reach or revenue. Measures of impact are generally even harder to quantify.

Volume of Independent Releases

We roughly estimate that around 1500 U.S. feature films invest in independent distribution each year. Our estimate is based on interviews with 20 professionals working in this independent distribution sector. This number also aligns to US feature film submissions to festivals. It excludes a raft of ultra low-budget titles made for specific niche markets (horror, action, etc) and distributed to free streaming only because we don't have a full grasp of the size of this market. More study is needed to accurately assess the number of releases, but some estimate it is double our 1500 number.

Most films reach relatively small audiences measured in the hundreds rather than thousands through festivals and bespoke online screenings. Per-film audiences in live venues or online screenings range significantly, from only 100 people to over 100,000 or more. The high end of that range are rare exceptions and most films cluster closer at the lower end. We do not know of any independently released film that has reached more than 500,000 people in the US.

We learned from conversations with all-rights distributors, including Erick Opeka at Cineverse who was particularly insightful about the numbers, that there is a surprisingly large–and largely hidden–audience on free streaming for independently released titles. This category includes the FAST channels on smart tvs (Samsung, LG, Visio, etc.), YouTube, and the free streaming platforms like Roku, Tubi and Pluto. Based on per-title revenue and the platforms' average per-view rate (a penny or two per view) and the number of platforms, the scale of the audience is far larger than most people realize. But the share to the rights-holders is minimal, similar to Spotify for music and audio content.

We estimate a median of 1500 viewers per film in all categories of independent distribution other than free streaming and VOD. This includes festivals, theatrical, impact, community, and branded content backed releases).

We estimate a median of 10,000 views per film on free streaming per film. This brings our total market estimate for independent distribution up to 17,250,000 people across 1500 independently released films across all categories of release (including free streaming, VOD, and festivals). This is a median of 11,500 people per title.

Independent Distribution Summary and Recommendations

Our research reveals potential for filmmakers and their funders to earn enough money to cover production costs and connect with wide audiences by investing in their own marketing and distribution, but this level of success is relatively rare. As to the potential ROI in terms of revenue, reach, and impact for the average or median title… the picture is still blurry.

Defining a target audience, effective marketing, and managing the mechanics of distribution for each individual film release is time consuming, inefficient, and often financially draining for film teams–even with the support of consultants and service deals with distributors. This work can take filmmakers away from making a new film for a year or more. Even the highly successful "Hundreds of Beavers" filmmaking team told Filmmaker Magazine that they would not want to do the independent distribution route a second time because of the cost and time for them as filmmakers. Still, for filmmakers interested in social impact, or filmmakers whose stories speak to specific and underserved niche audiences, non-traditional independent distribution is an essential part of their work to make change through film. And for most independent films it is the only pathway to audiences in the US today.

We agree with the many advisors and producers who urge independent filmmakers to include the resources to cover independent distribution costs, including marketing and professional fees, in their production budgets. The conventional US acquisition market will buy only a small fraction of US independent films. Arguably this pathway–in success–is preferable because it allows makers to retain rights and build a direct relationship with their audience.

Recommendations

Funding for independent film in the US today must include marketing and distribution costs.

Tools and platforms developed for independent distribution that enable data gathering and reaching targeted fan communities can be leveraged by distributors and exhibitors, not just individual films.

We believe the future success of independent distribution depends on collaboration across the field to address the inefficiency of stand-alone campaigns for every independently distributed project.

Film Festivals



FULL FILM FESTIVAL ALLIANCE SURVEY REPORT

We collaborated with the Film Festival Alliance to collect data about attendance and audience for the film festival community in the U.S. from operating years 2019 and 2023. The goal of the survey was to understand the scale and demographics of the audience at film festivals around the country, and the impact of the pandemic on attendance.

The Film Festival Alliance (FFA) is a nonprofit network of member festivals and allied partners that connects, champions, and advocates for the film festival sector as a vital part of film exhibition.

Methodology

The survey, conducted by Film Festival Alliance Executive Director Barbara Twist and Director of Communications Gray Rodriguez, was open for six weeks in Spring 2024. It generated a total of 56 unique responses from festivals in the United States.

Respondents come from 23 U.S. states, representing all regions. Responding organizations include standalone film festivals, festivals hosted within a university or community parent organization, and festivals whose organizations also operate a bricks and mortar cinema. 66% were FFA Members and 34% were not FFA Members; the respondents represent a response rate of 19% among its U.S. member festivals. [Because the survey was distributed to FFA's full email list and promoted through the Art House Convergence, Festivals who are not current members also had the opportunity to respond.]

Respondents were queried about attendance and sales information for festivals held in 2019 and 2023, about audience demographics, and about their number of members, email subscribers, and social media followers. 2023 was chosen as the post-pandemic year as it was the first year where no major U.S. market festival (Sundance, SXSW, Tribeca) was exclusively virtual.

The majority, 77% of festivals represented in the survey, have annual operating budgets less than $500,000 ('Small'), 11% of festivals have budgets between $500K–$1,000,000 ('Medium'), and 11% of festivals have budgets $1,000,000 or above ('Large'). This size distribution aligns with the budget sizes of all FFA Member Festivals, +/- 5%.

Figure Title

Festival Size	CY19 Total Screenings	CY23 Total Screenings	Year over Year Change
Large	1548	1075	-30.6%
Medium	723	687	-5.0%
Small	1869	2276	21.8%

Large and Medium Festivals showed a reduction in the number of screenings, whereas small festivals reported an increase in screenings of 21.8%. The small festival increase is in part due to more small festivals reporting in 2023 compared to 2019.

By Festival Size	CY19 Passes Sold	CY23 Passes Sold	Year over Year Change
Large	101,735	53,140	-47.8%
Medium	5771	5050	-12.5%
Small	17,109	9887	-42.2%

By Festival Size	CY19 Tickets Sold	CY23 Tickets Sold	Year over Year Change
Large	156,601	84,316	-46.2%
Medium	47,069	39,214	-16.7%
Small	68,693	54,433	-20.8%

Source: *XXX*

> **"[Covid-19 relief funding] buoyed many organizations and helped guard against the significant losses seen in sponsorship sales and ticket sales. By 2023, COVID-19 relief funding was largely gone, and festivals were on their own with reduced revenue and reduced attendance."**
>
> **– Barbara Twist and Gray Rodriguez,** *FFA*

Key Findings

Total Screenings

Festivals were asked to report how many screenings they hosted in 2019 festivals and 2023 festivals. A "screening" was defined as a single instance of a film the festival showed to the festival attendees. For example, if the festival showed the same film 2 times, that counted as 2 screenings.

The notable 30.6% decrease in the number of screenings at large festivals is likely due to the financial pressures facing these bigger organizations post-pandemic, but may also be attributable to a reduced supply of U.S. films after the pandemic and the Hollywood strikes. Several festivals have reduced the number of unique films they present, including Sundance and San Francisco, in addition to the total number of screenings.

However, the Sundance Film Festival, for example, saw only a minor decrease in U.S. submissions between its 2019 and 2023 editions (1,767 in 2019 vs 1,662 in 2023). We believe the overall decrease in the number of screenings is related more to funding challenges than lack of submissions.

Ticket and Pass Sales

Ticket and pass sales at U.S. festivals of all sizes dropped sharply in 2023 compared to 2019, with an average 31% decrease calculated across all festival sizes. The decrease in sales at large and medium festivals is higher than their respective decrease in screenings held. Small festivals, which showed an increase in screenings, also showed a significant decrease in sales.

Reports of festival closures and downsizing across the U.S. have contributed to field wide concerns about the financial viability of the sector, however there have been at least 5 new festivals launched since 2019 according to the survey data. Barbara Twist, the Executive Director of the Film Festival Alliance and the co-author of this report, shared with us her insight on festival closures:

> "Nine festivals reported to us that they were ceasing operations since 2021, and there are several more we know of that have either closed or gone on hiatus in this period. We've also had a number of folks not renew their memberships due to putting funds elsewhere. However, there are also some positive changes including the restructuring of Full Frame Festival after a dormant two years, and the new Los Angeles Festival of Movies which sold out in its first year. *Generally speaking, it seems the shorter festivals are better off, and any festival that is on the longer side is shrinking or considering shrinking.*"

Reported Attendance

Total reported attendance declined by 38% from 2019 to 2023. **Median attendance maintained its pre-pandemic level because the reduction in total attendance was primarily weighted to a few large festivals.** Attendance is a larger number than ticket or pass sales, because it includes all paid and non-paid events including screenings, parties, workshops, and talkbacks. The difference between shrinking attendance estimates and a flat median is due to a reduction in program and attendance among big Festivals in 2023, a small percentage of total respondents.

Fewer than half of the survey respondents reported attendance. This low response rate from respondents suggests a data-collection challenge among festivals of all sizes.

Calendar Year	CY19 (COUNT: 18)	CY23 (COUNT: 20)
Reported Attendance	360,807	257,814
Median Attendance	4,358	4,082

Projection of 2023 National Film Festival Attendees and Fans

	National 2023 Attendance FFA Member Festivals	Unique 2023 Fan Base FFA Member Festivals
195 FFA Member Festivals	1,233,752	3,740,000
	Estimated Attendence	Estimated Fan Base
1000 US Festivals	6,627,487	20,000,000

Notes: *Median attendance data extrapolated from survey with weighting for festival size*
Fan Base assumes no overlap among different festivals, but is also a conservative projection since FilmFreeway lists more than 3000 U.S. film festivals and we projected only to 1000 in the FFA-recommended database.
Attendees represent just over 30% of total fan base

Fan Base Size

Respondents were asked to provide their total email subscriber count and total follower count across all social media platforms as of 2024. Social media platforms included any public social media platform, such as but not limited to Instagram, Facebook, Twitter/X, Letterboxd, and TikTok. Individuals may follow the organization on multiple platforms and may also be an email subscriber. As a result, these average counts likely reflect an overlap in audience members and should not be considered unique counts.

US Festivals reported an average of 14,797 email subscribers, and an average of 19,963 in social followers.

We assume that email subscribers and social followers have a near total overlap, and therefore conservatively estimate the average U.S. festival fan base at 20,000, the rounded-up count of the largest source of fans (social followers).

Extrapolation of Attendance/Fan Base across all 187 US-Based FFA Member Festivals:

We extrapolated our 2023 survey results to all 187 US based FFA members to estimate the national festival audience and fan base. FFA helped us weight the extrapolation by isolating the median attendance of large, medium and small festivals (based on budget size) and proportionally extrapolating the results to the total number of large, medium and small festivals among the full FFA US membership of 187.

In addition, since there are more festivals in the U.S. than those who pay for FFA membership, we include a rough extrapolation to our estimated minimum of 1000 U.S. film festivals. We extrapolated our weighted calculation of the 195 FFA members to the full set of 1000 festivals.

Note: the total number of film festivals in the U.S. is not thoroughly tracked by one organization or collected in one database, but the FFA recommends the FilmFestivalDatabase as the preferred source. The last count from the ***FilmFestivalDatabase listed 1023 film festivals in the U.S in 2020.*** *[By contrast, FilmFreeway lists 3,239 film festivals older than three years located in the U.S. However, these festivals are able to list themselves without being vetted for accuracy.] Certainly some festivals have closed since then, but FFA also knows of others that have started in the same period, so we chose to extrapolate our data to 1000 festivals most recently listed by FilmFestivalDatabase.*

Membership

The percentage of festivals with membership programs remained nearly flat from 2019 to 2023, but the number of members dropped significantly in this period. In 2019, 39% of respondents had membership programs with an average count of 1,693. In 2023, 40% of respondents had membership programs, with an average count of 1,261. Medium and Large festivals tended towards having a membership program, while 68% of small festivals reported not having a membership program.

Membership Programs correlate to higher sales and larger fan bases for festivals.

Festivals that offered a membership program in both 2019 and 2023 saw less decline (-11%) in ticket and pass sales than those that offered no membership program (-17%).

The presence of a membership program also correlates to a significantly higher number of email (674% increase) and social media (215% increase) followers for organizations with members compared to those without.

	Average Email Subscribers	Average Social Media Subscribers
Offer membership in CY19 and CY23	19,000	23,000
Does not offer membership in CY19 and CY23	2,456	7,287

The reason for the correlation between membership programs and increased ticket sales, email lists, and social followers is not clear. Festivals with membership programs are more accustomed to tracking and managing constituents with data-driven, active marketing and engagement. Membership reflects a sense of loyalty and belonging cultivated by the organization that extends to other areas of engagement. Of course it could also be true that larger and better-funded festivals are more likely to have membership programs, and also have larger marketing teams and followings. It's hard to validate whether the membership programs cause higher sales, but the data across festivals of all sizes suggests that they do.



Virtual festivals

The 55% of respondents that offered virtual screenings in 2023 were more successful at engaging patrons than those without virtual editions, with less decline in pass and ticket sales, email subscribers, and social media followers than festivals without virtual screenings.

	Change in Pass Sales from CY19 to CY23	Change in Ticket Sales from CY19 to CY23
Offer virtual screenings in CY23	-35%	-22%
Does not offer virtual screenings in CY23	-44%	-46%

	Median Email Subscribers	Median Social Media Subscribers
Offer virtual screenings in CY23	10,000	18,047
Does not offer virtual screenings in CY23	5,000	7,800

Festivals that offered virtual screenings had stronger pass and ticket sales and increased fan base size, results by offering increased accessibility opportunities for attendees along with a greater geographic reach. Arguably, the virtual experience challenges the core film festival promise of a shared cinematic experience for audiences and filmmakers. This result makes clear that festival audiences–like other movie watchers in the U.S.–prefer flexibility in how they watch, and the value of the festival brand and curation transcends whether the festival is attended in-person or online.



Demographics

Demographic data about the audience was reported by festivals at a rate significantly below response rates for other questions in the survey. Due to the low responses, demographic results are not statistically relevant and are therefore excluded from key findings. As with our Art House Convergence survey, the lack of demographic data is a finding in itself. Festivals do not know their attendees because they tend to lack data collection or proficiency; they therefore struggle to communicate strategically and grow or diversify their audience.

The FFA report notes: *"festivals used a mix of email surveys, in-person surveys, local census data, and anecdotal records to capture data. Festivals left comments noting leadership changes, an all-volunteer staff, internal policies related to demographic data, and different metrics for tracking demographic data as various reasons for the lack of data".*

Recommendations

The full Film Festival Alliance report offers an array of recommendations based on these findings. Highlights include:

- Implement a membership program.
- Keep virtual screenings in the mix.
- Convert the engaged audiences into attendees!
- Festivals need access to education on data collection best practices.
- Establish a common set of metrics for the independent film exhibition sector.
- Festivals should engage more in industry-wide (survey) data collection to enable field-wide insights.

> **With at least 1,000 festivals in the U.S., power lies in the ability to advocate together on issues facing the sector, such as limited funding, decline in sponsorship, audience development, anti-competitive business practices, low wages, and labor challenges.**
>
> **– Barbara Twist and Gray Rodriguez,** *Film Festival Alliance.*

Conclusion

Millions of Americans participate in the U.S. film festival ecosystem, an exciting indication of the potential fan base and audience for independent film and documentary in the U.S.. But, like the nonprofit independent theaters, as surveyed by the Art House Convergence, festivals fail to convert their interested fan base into attendees. Festivals of all sizes struggle with resources and staff training to enable them to know their audience and market effectively to them. Converting followers to ticket buyers is the first step.

In June 2024, Eventive, the top platform for festival ticketing that now includes many other products for art house film distributors, exhibitors, and festivals, shared a report on the state of festivals that confirmed many of the insights from the Film Festival Alliance survey–including the value of membership and virtual film festivals. Notably, in contrast to the FFA survey, the Eventive survey revealed that festivals overall have regained their pre-pandemic ticket sales and audiences and show signs of further growth. We hope conversations between the two surveys' authors and further research will help reconcile these apparently divergent findings.

Festival audiences can be effective, early, and engaged evangelists for individual films on platforms like Letterboxd, TikTok, or YouTube. Festivals, distributors, and filmmakers might provide them with tools, assets, and incentives to promote films they love at the time of their commercial release. Data from festival audiences can help distributors and filmmakers understand the strengths and opportunities to help effectively market their films. For films without a conventional distributor, virtual festival platforms might be adapted to allow filmmakers to continue sales after the Festival window on the platforms. The Parrot Analytics report in our appendix includes a small section (starting on p114) about the social media chatter around major US festival titles, illustrating that this positive network effect is not currently working to generate noise tied to Festivals premieres.

If festivals learn more about their audience, and successfully encourage them to opt in on sharing some data with filmmakers or distributors, these early fans can be embraced and incentivized in the marketing and promotion of their commercial releases.

Social Media & Fan Communities

The field would benefit from a full study of independent film fan online communities to gain insight into the potential market size of interested fans, identify specific influencers or communities to engage in marketing and promotion, and seek new ways to help filmmakers and distributors understand what is resonating with fans about their work or marketing.

We were not able to undertake this study as part of our research. Here we share some highlights we learned about these communities along the way. We hope others will dive deeper into this area in the future.

53% of adults in our national survey cite social media as the key driver of their entertainment decisions. Many specialized distributors–led by A24 who excels at this work, based on Parrot Analytics data on demand for titles by distributor–activate online fandoms. Tactics include traditional trailer placement on fan platforms and creative seeding of assets to enable people to share materials that inspire them, such as meme-able clips or customizable artwork. In addition, some hold advanced screenings for key fan influencers related to the film's topic or talent. The capacity and resources to pursue such efforts is out of reach for most individual filmmakers, and even for many small distributors or exhibitors, but activating a social media fanbase helps films (and film brands) break through the clutter of choices.

Our study with Parrot Analytics illustrates the power of social listening to help filmmakers and distributors understand what's resonating with audiences. The Parrot Report, starting at slide 54, features a section about social networks that includes several case studies as a way of understanding sentiment, audience affinity between different titles, and how remaining in the conversation decreases the typical falloff in interest after a title premieres online.

Communities on popular creator platforms offer filmmakers the opportunity to engage and distribute directly to fans. Yet few individual independent filmmakers are engaging with these platforms. Some, including Jim Cummings and Gary Hustwit among others, clearly relish working directly with fans. Some in the new generation of short content makers on YouTube and elsewhere will likely expand their practice into film distribution. Even seasoned filmmakers, including documentary filmmaker Alex Gibney who we spoke to about distribution, are expressing curiosity about bypassing gatekeepers to release films on their own channels.

Patreon is paying creators over $1B a year now, according to media journalist Simon Owens, writing on Substack about the relationship between legacy media and the creator economy. **YouTube** pays $20 billion in revenue share to its creators each year. **Substack** aggregates 3 million paid subscribers to its participating creators. (For a great list of independent film related substacks, check out producer Ted Hope's favorites here.).

It's not clear whether feature-length films can attract a sustainable audience on mass-market social media platforms, but on niche subscription platforms like Substack or Patreon there is more opportunity than is currently being leveraged.

> **"The Creator Economy is competing with the media for both attention and revenue. It's time to stop thinking of it as a separate industry."**
>
> – Simon Owens

Letterboxd, a film fan community not specific to independent film, is heavily weighted to high-quality cinema. The top curated lists recommended by influencers on the platform include many independent films and documentaries. As of January 2024, Letterboxd had 12M users worldwide, with 35% (4M) in the US. We believe that platform has grown considerably since then and is now closer to 5M users in the US.

In our conversation with David Larkin, Head of Business for Letterboxd, he shared that the Letterboxd business model is half customer subscriptions and half advertising from studios and brands. The company is planning to launch a VOD channel to add immediate viewing value for their members, including–according to Larkin–independent films that did not receive traditional distribution offers.

We asked Letterboxd CEO Matt Buchanan, and Editor and Chief Gemma Gracewood, in a separate interview, whether Letterboxd could identify the specific independent film fans within its larger community to enable distributors and filmmakers to size the market and offer target marketing and engagement. While they don't have a data analytics practice, they do have considerable data and have begun working more actively with distribution partners and filmmakers to market to their community of film lovers.

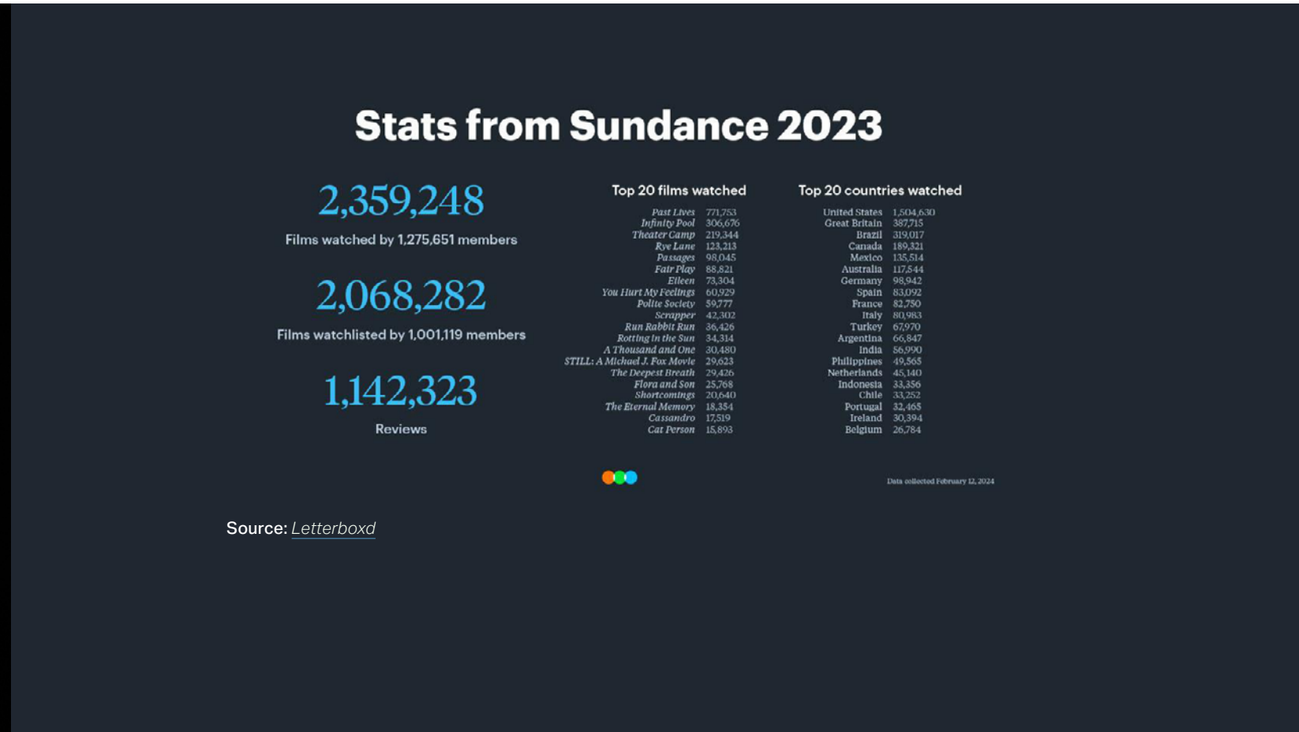
Gracewood and her team have created marketing and promotion opportunities featured in their newsletter and on the site. The June 2024 edition of their newsletter highlights a few examples (excerpts below):

…Focus Features has provided us with a bevy of exclusive alternative The Bikeriders backdrops featuring that oh-so-attractive cast, which any member (not just you good Patrons) can select from. It's rather fitting for a film inspired by a photo book. More details here.

… smaller films worth checking out, including Quebecian black comedy Humanist Vampire Seeking Consenting Suicidal Person, now in theaters, and I Used to Be Funny, starring Letterboxd fave Rachel Sennott (Bottoms, Shiva Baby), also now out.

Letterboxd's published data on the core independent fan on its platform is through the date-driven look at the Sundance Film Festival (2023 and 2024, published in March 2024). The 2024 data was published shortly after that year's edition of the festival, so the 2023 data is a more complete picture of the size of the 2 million interested fans on the platform, including those that watched and those that watchlisted films from around the world.





Source: *Letterboxd*

The 2024 data shows the most popular titles and the initial burst of watching and favoriting that comes on the heels of the festival. We believe this momentum could be better leveraged by distributors and filmmakers. The dissipated energy between the festival premieres and films dribbling into the market is an inefficiency that a targeted PVOD offering on Letterboxd–or elsewhere–that offered early window of festival film screenings might help address.

David Larkin founded a company called *GoWatchIt* in the 2010s that allowed people to be notified when festival films were released and find where to watch in theaters or online. (In the mid 2010s, Sundance integrated *GoWatchIt* with the Sundance Film Festival Online Catalog, but we did not successfully track how it was used to share with the field.). Today, *GoWatchIt* has become JustWatch, sold to new owners with Larkin serving as an advisor. For independent filmmakers and rights holders, the data on who is favoriting or intending to watch a film on JustWatch would also be highly valuable to converting interest to sales.

Below is a quick and highly subjective snapshot of some fan communities for independent film and documentary online. Across multiple platforms, we believe there are at least 5M discrete users participating in conversations and consuming content relating to independent film and documentary in the US.

YouTube: We looked at the independent film category on the online YouTube platform to assess engagement and awareness around independent film alongside the wide range of user generated creator content that is the majority of the platform's business. YouTube independent film channels, based on a search of the term, actively engage 3,226,500 people in the U.S. with clips, conversation, independent creators' work and more. The most popular indie site on the platform in terms of views (vs subscribers) is YouTube Rotten Tomatoes Indie.

There are four categories of independent film content on the Youtube platform:

- *Exhibitor (non-studio)*–channels that show clips of third-party Independent films or commentate on issues relating to the independent film industry.
- *Studio*–channels owned by independent film studios (Kino Lorber, Shout!, Frontline, etc), that release content relating to the studio's respective films and documentaries.
- *Filmmakers*–film and short-form content released by independent filmmakers through personal channels
- YouTube licensed content offered free with ads and available without ads to subscribers of YouTube Premium

Details of calculation of total fanbase on YouTube:

Total subscriber counts hit 36,102,303 across 593 youtube channels sourced in a search for "Independent Films" on the platform across all the above categories (not accounting for overlapping subscribers). These independent film channels garnered more than 10.4 billion total views across 125,135 total videos ranging in content from commentary pieces on the industry, trailers of upcoming independent films, independent shorts, and short clips of independent film scenes.

The total subscriber (2,050,117,626) and viewership numbers (1.11 Trillion) for the entire film market on Youtube sourced through searching for "Films, Movies, Pictures, Entertainment, Studios." **Independent film content on Youtube is 1.35% of total YouTube film channel viewership,** sourced by comparing independent channel subscribers to total market subscribers, and by comparing independent channel views to total market views and then averaging these two percentages, [0.9% (independent views / total market views) + 1.8% (independent subscribers / total market subscribers) / 2] .

Based on the US YouTube market of 239M users, we reach our total estimate of 3,226,500 people in the U.S. engaging actively with independent films on the platform.

This estimate is clearly a broad brush. Other search terms like art-house film might expand the market estimate, but a full study of YouTube fan bases was outside our script. YouTube Analytics offers a valuable trove of potential insight for future study–including other channels watched by those who consume independent film fans, the number of likes for particular content, etc. We hope others will take up this opportunity.

Joel Haver, Filmmaker on YouTube

Joel Haver, who releases films on YouTube, has cultivated a fan base with short-form work while also offering feature films. In early 2024, Haver made an announcement to his YouTube fans saying that he was planning to focus only on feature films going forward, giving up his weekly short films on YouTube in favor of posting a monthly feature. Since short films are far more popular, Haver plans to offset his loss of YouTube revenue and views by using his Patreon account (3000 followers) to fund the movies.



TikTok, with the youngest audience of the major platforms, includes the community FilmTok and specifically FilmTok Indie; A24's FilmTok channel offers behind-the-scenes clips and more and has 1.5M followers and 55M likes. They also have a smaller channel called FilmTok A24 filter. By comparison the studio specialty divisions, NEON, and others have far fewer followers and likes than A24.

Instagram has a group for Instagram IndieFilmmakers with over 800K followers. Most of the film distributors also have Instagram channels, and again A24 (3M followers) has more followers here than the other independent distributors combined with both a main channel and a 'memes' channel, as well as individual film channels.

Reddit has a wide array of threads dedicated to independent film and documentary, including Reddit Indiefilm, Reddit A24, and Reddit Criterion

We did not look at **X** or **Facebook** for this study, but of course they might be included in a dedicated research project.

We believe that activating online fan communities is essential for the vitality of the independent film sector. While more data and research is needed, there is no barrier to experimentation by filmmakers and distributors today.

We estimate an engaged core audience of 20M across all the social and fan communities in the US–including followers and members of Festivals, Art House theaters (covered in their own sections of this report).

20M for festivals & 6M for art house theaters: we assume nearly total overlap between these and also between social fans and followers counted above but have estimated some of these followers in our 'other' category above.

Rough Estimates of Independent Film Fanbase on Social Media

YouTube	US independent film and documentary fans	6M
Instagram	Indie film group + speciality distributor and filmmaker followers	4M
TikTok		3M
Reddit		500k
Letterboxd	Estimated total US users at 5M	5M
Other		2.5M
Total		**20M**

Total US Addressable Market

LINK TO OUR SOURCE DATA

to enable further research and independent interrogation of our projections

The potential market for independent film and documentary is **40M** people larger than current actual viewership.



Our estimate for US independent scripted and documentary film audience size incorporates actual viewership data, survey results, and estimated market size based on research in the following categories:

Actual Viewership: Theatrical, Paid VOD, subscription streaming, and PBS

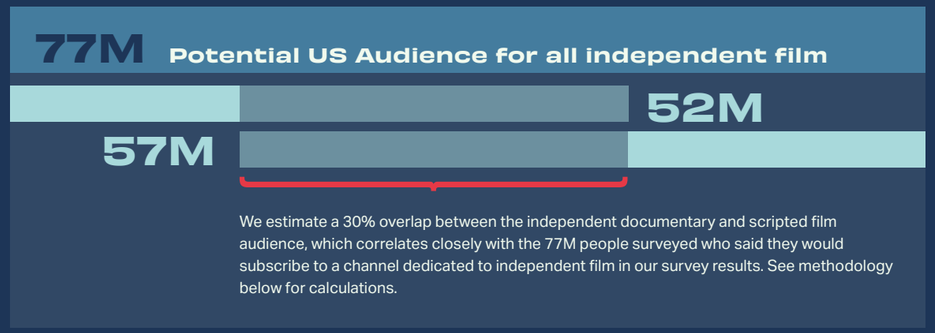
Estimated Viewership: Niche streaming, free streaming, educational distribution. Independent, impact, community and brand-backed distribution

Survey Results: National survey of 14,000 US adults, survey of Film Festival Alliance member festivals, survey of Art House Convergence member theaters, social media and fan communities

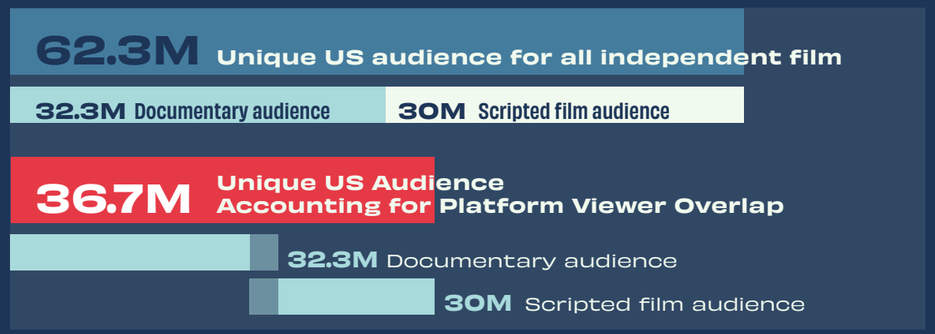
Our market size calculation is a broad-stroke figure. We encountered gaps in the available data that required best estimates. We hope this exploratory data analysis of trends of viewership across exhibition categories will provide a basis for more study by others interested in the health and sustainability of the independent film field.

National Survey Results

Potential US Audience



Actual Viewership Data and Viewership estimates



All data is from 2023 except Nielsen subscription streaming data, which is from 2022



Where They Watch

Per-Platform Breakdown of 2022-2023 Audience

Subscription streaming and public media (for documentaries) are the most popular way to watch independent films.

Theatrical: 9.57% of viewership for US independent films is theatrical, but almost all of this is for scripted films.

The theatrical proportion of scripted viewership is 22.02%

The theatrical portion of documentary viewership is .2%

Theatrical audiences are back at 2019 levels for scripted film, still far below historical peaks. Documentary film is not finding audiences in the theaters.

Art-house and festival audiences are a loyal and engaged fanbase that attend movies in theaters 2-3x per year more frequently than the average moviegoer.

Free Streaming: Free streaming is a fast-growing category capturing increased market share in the last 2 years. This category offers many US independent films, but public viewership data is lacking. Our estimate is for 17M views of independent film on free streaming, making it the second most popular place to watch scripted film (after streaming) and documentary film (after PBS).

Educational Streaming via Libraries and Schools: The free educational streaming platform Kanopy dominates the educational and library market and has become one of the most popular national platforms for independent film.

PBS (linear and digital) is the leading platform for independent documentary audiences.

Paid (Transactional) VOD rentals and sales are very low for all independent films

Niche Streaming Sites: Other than one or two platforms dedicated to horror films, we found no niche subscription or free streaming services for independent, documentary or art house films that exceed 300K subscribers/viewers. Most have far fewer.

Independent Distribution (direct-to-audience by filmmakers): Thousands of US independent films are made annually and most don't receive professional paid distribution. We estimate that at least half of these films choose to release independently through festivals, communities, non-traditional venues and non-exclusively across the at-home viewing market. The volume of films and aggregate audience in this sector is considerable but very challenging to measure. Per-film median viewership is very low. *Many of these films also appear on free streaming and paid VOD, which are open to all films for revenue-share vs acquisition and results are factored in the totals in those categories.*

Per-Platform Breakdown
2022-2023 Audience

	All			Documentary			Scripted		
	Films	Total Attendance / Views	Unique Audience	Films	Total Attendance / Views	Unique Audience	Films	Total Attendance / Views	Unique Audience
Theatrical	129	31.5M	5.25M	32	422.87K	70.5K	97	31.05M	5.2M
Paid Video On Demand	208	3.39M	1.3M	47	64K	24K	161	3.32M	1M
Major Subscription Streaming	67	47.9M	18M	32	11.4M	4.3M	35	36.5M	13.7M
Major Free Streaming (excluding PBS calculated below)	1500 Estimated	15M	6M			2M			4M
Niche Subscription Streaming Subscribers			1.1M			300K			800K
Niche Free Streaming		4M	1.5M			0.5M			1M
PBS across all broadcast and streaming, owned and branded channels	50 Estimated		22M			22M			
Educational Free Streaming			5M			2M			3M
Independent, Community, Impact and Brand Distribution	1500 Estimated		2.25M			1.13M			1.13M
Unique Audience Size ROUGH Estimate	62.3M			32.3M			30.1M		
Unique Audience Size Accounting for Overlap	36.7M			23.5M			16.2M		
Theatrical Proportion	9.19%			0.22%			20.80%		

Chart: Annual Viewership Estimates Drawn from Data from 2022 and 2023

Methodology Note: The chart above illustrates how we conservatively calculate the 'unique' audience across platforms: We assume a high degree of overlap among viewership categories. In other words, fans of independent films in cinemas also watch them in various ways at home. The exception is the PBS documentary audience, which we believe overlaps less with the commercial platform audiences.

We collected festival attendance data but we assume this audience overlaps with all other categories and have not been included in the totals above.

US Festivals

All	Documentary	Scripted
6.6M	3.3M	3.3M

Independent Scripted Film

The independent scripted film fan base skews younger and is more diverse than the general film audience.

Age Representation	Independent scripted film skews slightly to **18-34** with strong representation of **34-55**.
Race and Region	Highly diverse in terms of race and region.
Gender, Education and Income	No gender skew. No education or income skew.

Documentaries

Documentary watchers skew slightly older and are more educated and wealthier than the general population.

Age and Gender	Documentary film fans skew slightly older **(25-54)** with a slight **female skew.**
Education	Roughly **60%** of documentary watchers had college or graduate education.
Income	63% earned more than **$100K per year.**
Race and Region	Highly diverse in terms of race and region.

Source: *Our National Survey.*

Who Are They?

Our viewership and demand data tells a slightly different story.

Insights from Key Findings

The survey data shows greater interest among younger audiences and audiences of all races than what is captured by Nielsen viewership data, which skews older and more White than the survey shows.

Parrot Analytics 'demand' data, focused on social media and online behavior, captures more interest from the young audience and aligns more closely with the survey results.

Parrot Analytics data shows that demand among younger audiences for independent films increased from 2018 to 2022. According to our research on this market with Parrot, young audiences showed a particular interest in political documentaries in this period.

One major exception to the diversity of the audience by all measures is among Hispanic viewers, whose total viewing percentage never matches their 19% share of the US population in any year. There is a clear opportunity to increase viewership among Hispanic audiences, and independent film can and should be leading the way in telling a wide range of stories that appeal to this demographic.

Income and education skew slightly higher in actual viewership than in the survey. But actual viewership is broad across income levels in line with the US household income distribution in which 20% of households earn over $150K per year benchmark.

More study is needed on the young audience and audiences of color in particular to determine why the expressed interest is so much higher than viewership in these two categories.



Documentary

Age

ESHAP

18–24	21%
25–34	31%
35–44	27%
45–54	27%
55+	13%

Nielsen

2–24	9%
25–54	51%
55+	40%

Parrot

15–24	48%
25–31	27%
32–41	14%
42	20%

Gender

	Male	Female
Nielsen	44%	55%
Parrot	39%	61%

Race

ESHAP

White	27%
Black	21%
Hispanic	26%
Other	13%

Nielsen

White	59%
Black	12%
Hispanic	9%
Asian	5%
Other	15%

Income

ESHAP

$75k–150k	27%
$150k+	25%

Nielsen

< $40k	16%
$40k–75k	28%
$75k–150k	34%
$150k+	22%

Harvard Documentray Survey

$100k+	60%
College	50%

Dr. Matt Baum Harvard Documentary Survey

Scripted Film

Age

ESHAP

18–24	26%
25–34	28%
35–44	22%
45–54	22%
55+	10%

Nielsen

2–24	9%
25–54	50%
55+	41%

Parrot

15–24	20%
25–31	27%
32–41	27%
42	27%

Gender

	Male	Female
Nielsen	42%	58%
Parrot	48%	52%

Race

ESHAP

	Female
White	23%
Black	20%
Hispanic	24%
Other	10%

Nielsen

White	49%
Black	16%
Hispanic	14%
Asian	5%
Other	16%

Income

ESHAP

$75k–150k	25%
$150k+	24%

Nielsen

< $40k	20%
$40k–75k	26%
$75k–150k	34%
$150k+	19%

Region

West	20%
Midwest	18%
Northeast	20%
Southwest	17%

ESHAP National Survey

Source: *Nielsen Actual Viewership Data 2022*, *Parrot Analytics Demographic Data*, *ESHAPNational Survey*



Why are they watching?

Our survey respondents' top reason for watching independent films was that they provide unusual and unexpected stories they can't find elsewhere.

Our respondents ranked the factors that drive their movie-watching decisions

1st	**Most often mentioned was social media**
2nd	**Friends and family recommendations**
3rd	**Trailers watched online, in theaters, or on tv/ radio**

Reviews were only cited by **17%** of respondents as a factor in their movie choices

DETAILS ON OUR TAM METHODOLOGY ARE FOUND IN THE APPENDIX

We adopted a bottom-up approach to calculating the Total Addressable Market, building an understanding of the audience size by looking closely at each viewing category to estimate its unique audience size. We made this decision because we hope to get the best possible understanding of the current audience—by platform, and overall—to enable interventions in the market.

A TAM analysis designed to support a clear investment case would also approach the market from the top town as well. This would include deeper study of the factors that contribute to the gap between expressed interest and actual viewership estimates, and include anticipated churn, analysis of incumbent competition, and costs of market capture. That is an important but different project.

Methodology on TAM Calculations

Data Sources

Core Dataset Analysis

Analyzed theatrical and subscription streaming viewership of a representative sample of 329 US independent films (2017-2022), split between scripted films and documentaries.

Used median viewership data from this dataset to extrapolate to the full number of releases to estimate the total audience in theaters and mass market subscription streaming.

We sourced a comprehensive list of independent films across all platforms that enabled extrapolation from our dataset results in theaters and subscription streaming.

We did not use our dataset for other categories of viewership analysis.

Full Specialty Market Analysis

Collaborated with Parrot Analytics and The Numbers to identify a broader range of US independent titles from distributors focusing on independent and arthouse films.

We used this data set to determine the full market size for theaters and mass market subscription streaming, and for Paid VOD.

We collaborated with PBS Audience Insights to gather unique viewership for independent docs on PBS

Field Research

We conducted 200 interviews with industry experts and along with desk research on film viewership trends.

We drew our estimates of free streaming, niche streaming, educational, independent distribution from research since there was little available data.

4.2.2 Potential Market: Surveys and Fan Bases

Surveyed over 14,000 adult Americans, revealing a significant fan base for both independent scripted films and documentaries.

TAM Detail

ESHAP/PCH Survey

57M are "definite" documentary fans.*

52M are "definite" independent scripted film fans.*

111M would watch more independent films if available.

77M would subscribe to a channel dedicated to independent films.

Fan Communities

We roughly estimate 20M fans engaged in online independent film fan communities (more for individual hit films old and new).

Our surveys show a 20M national film festival fanbase (Film Festivalf Alliance) a 6M fanbase of independent nonprofit theaters (Art House Convergence).

*Estimated 30% overlap between documentary and scripted film fans.

We assume a nearly total overlap between all these fan communities and those who report 'definite' fan of independent film or documentary in our survey.

Actual Viewership

Data Sources: Utilized Nielsen, Parrot Analytics, and The Numbers for viewership data across various platforms.

Theatrical Attendance

Calculated attendance by dividing box office by average ticket price.

Combined pre- and post-pandemic attendance rates to estimate unique viewers.

Used average of attendance frequency rates published by MPA and Art House Convergence to determine unique attendees.

Paid Video on Demand (VOD)

Estimated total views by dividing VOD revenue by average rental price.

Accounted for household vs. individual viewers with a conservative 1.5 multiple.

Estimated frequency of viewership by individual or household at 4x per year.

Mass Market Subscription Streaming

Extrapolated viewership from our core dataset to full set of 67 independent films acquired on mass market subscription streamers.

Estimated 4x films a year in this category per viewer.

We conservatively assumed 1.5 people per view for these niche titles.

Free Streaming

Estimated viewership based on distributor reports and adjusted for frequency and unique viewers.

This category has the largest variance in research-based estimates. We could find no definitive number but there is certainly a large group of low-budget films that seek to reach a commercial market outside of festivals and other traditional independent film pathways.

We landed on 1500 but welcome the debate.

Niche Streaming

Estimated subscriber base size from research for platforms dedicated to independent and art house film and/or documentary.

PBS and Educational Distribution

Used actual viewership data and reports and estimates from leading distributors.

Independent Distribution

Estimated audience size based on median viewership per film across all festivals, impact and community screenings.

The audience for independently distributed films on Paid VOD and Free Streaming is captured in our estimates in those categories.



Total Unique Viewer Accounting

We want to highlight three estimates that significantly affect our final TAM figure, each based on our research but also requiring subjective decisions. The dearth of available data–a finding in itself–makes our total TAM a rough estimate:

The 30% overlap between the documentary and scripted audience (estimated based on Parrot Analytics data).

The 4x a year frequency of viewership of US independent film per household or individual on streaming platforms

To find unique viewers across viewing categories, we estimated 85% overlap among independent film viewers across platforms (for example, the subscription streaming audience for independent film also watched films in the theaters.) The exception is PBS documentary viewers, who we believe have less overlap with other categories.

DETAILED METHODOLOGY IN THE APPENDIX

Opportunities & Recommendations



There is certainly some hard news in this report for the independent film field. But there is also real opportunity to build a stronger and more resilient sector. The field must commit to expanded data gathering, and engage the addressable market by centering audience trends in strategic decision making, getting even more creative with marketing and fan engagement.

It's time to move beyond individual film economics to think collectively about the future of the entire field at this critical inflection point.

Here are 10 recommendations. We hope this list inspires many more.

1. Combat market fragmentation with a new, consolidated streaming destination

It's hard for audiences to find quality independent films. The lack of revenue from free streaming and VOD, together with little opportunity for subscription streaming acquisition for most independent films, leads to most films being posted in multiple places. While that strategy may optimize an individual film's revenue, it still rarely covers production costs. It also creates market fragmentation and audience confusion.

Both Nielsen and Parrot Analytics analyzed where people are finding independent films among the top platforms. The findings reveal the drop in viewership on Netflix after 2020, along with a decline on all the other major platforms. This coincides with a rise in "SCR Movies," which is Nielsen's designation for a title that is not exclusive to a single distribution platform. It also accompanies the rise of the "other streaming" category, when viewers began to migrate to free streaming services and niche platforms.

Our survey suggests that the loyal fanbase for independent and arthouse film would subscribe to a platform that aggregated independent film. An opportunity to aggregate the niche subscription or free streaming audience is also suggested in recent studies that show the demand for smaller channels has increased since the mass-market streamers have narrowed their new investments to mass-market fare and focused more heavily on older library content.

Our research certainly points to a hungry audience seeking an independent film niche platform alternative, but more study is needed to determine market saturation, price sensitivity, business models, and how niche platforms are used alongside mass-market platforms. This would include more analysis of the SVOD market saturation in the US. [Research shows an 84% penetration of SVOD services in US households but only 1% growth YoY driven by Disney and Netflix. Michael Nathanson reports the average number of streaming services at 4 per household. Further the high churn rate across all subscription services suggests that customer acquisition among major SVOD services is now a matter of competition rather than growth.

Nonetheless, we observe that the many niche platforms vying for market share today, with offerings of various quality, exacerbate rather than solve the problem of finding what you want to watch. Many wonderful, small streaming platforms feature art house and independent fare, but there is no clear streaming destination for contemporary independent film in the US. It's hard to see how any of the other niche players can achieve scale enough to pay filmmakers or afford the data marketing required to grow a library and expand a subscription or free streaming audience.

It would be highly beneficial to filmmakers, audiences, and small independent distributors and exhibitors to grow the high quality, independent film niche streaming market.

More niche subscriber fees and/or ad-supported views can help replace the lost acquisition revenue from the dominant global subscription streamers reduction of spending in this sector.

The remaining revenue streams (theatrical, PVOD, free streaming, PBS/broadcast, educational, and non-traditional community or impact distribution) currently fail to cover the cost of making even a small independent scripted or documentary film.

If a significant fan base could be built for a niche streaming platform, that base can be activated to see films in theatrical release before they come to the platform, create fan engagement for increased reach and publicity, and more.

Audiences would benefit from an independent film subscription platform that brings together the highest quality independent film in a curated, community experience.

This is the time for the field to come together and build a new destination for curious and adventurous audiences dedicated to American independent film.

This platform would complement theatrical releases, educational distribution, and public media exhibition. But to achieve this, a collective approach is required. To avoid high library acquisition costs and monolithic curatorial points of view, the many competing small services and independent distributors must experiment with radical collaboration. There have been attempts to collaborate on a platform, but to date these lack the level participation, marketing heft, and higher profile titles necessary for success. These were not a failed experiment, but one whose true idea was never able to be realized without an "all in" push behind it.

A scaled field-wide platform would serve audiences by improving the discoverability problem, bring revenue to small distributors, fuel the makers of the future with an aggregated engaged fanbase, which in turn enables marketing expenditure and fair payments that enable creators to make new work.

2. Invest in Theatrical Exhibition: Build data and marketing capacity at Festivals and Independent Cinemas

Theatrical releases have been proven to drive value and viewership on streaming because the titles are better recognized by audiences when they come to the home market. Building back the theatrical market for independent film will pay dividends throughout the value-chain.

Our research found that independent scripted film is capturing a greater share of the theatrical market than it did pre-pandemic (even with 34% fewer titles in the market than the peak in 2017), and total attendance returned to 2019 pre-pandemic levels in 2023. This is certainly due in part to the Hollywood strikes decreasing the output of films from major studios in this period. But recent studies, particularly among young audiences, indicate a craving for originality rather than corporate entertainment.

This intervention might look different for documentaries because the theatrical market for documentaries is deeply challenged. Theatrical documentaries may find opportunity in non-traditional venues, eventized screenings, and festivals. Sam Green's *32 Sounds* is an example of an independent documentary that became a theatrical event in its limited run due to the live element of the screenings. Perhaps the outdoor adventure documentary film series being released in AMC Cinemas in partnership with REI, or the Art House Convergence release of Gary Hustwit's *Eno* this fall may also break through.

Theaters across the country have screen capacity and are eager to find new ways of bringing in audiences. Companies and initiatives like The Fithian Group, The Popcorn List, Cultivate Cinema, and more are already actively working in this space. Producer Albert Berger, Producer and Theatrical Strategist Annalisa Shoemaker, and Film Festival Alliance ED Barbara Twist have convened a large group of producers, exhibitors, distributors and marketers meeting regularly to discuss how to innovate and enliven the theatrical space for independent films. These conversations conducted over the past year, have spawned several collaborations and new initiatives.

Our research suggests one place to focus the core art house and independent film audience is at venues or events dedicated to this work. Of course, many people watch independent and art house films at the big cinema chains, but fans report finding more engaging and connected experiences at community Art Houses, independent cinemas, and festivals.

Art house audiences go to the theater 2 to 3 times more frequently every year than general movie audiences. There are 1000 active film festivals in the US, some of which may even evolve into a new theatrical distribution mechanism, with revenue shared in new ways with filmmakers. From newer venues like Vidiots or Metrograph,

to the classic indie cinemas like the Roxie in San Francisco or the Music Box in Chicago, to festivals all over the country from Blackstar in Philadelphia to True/False in Missouri, to larger indie cinema chains like the Alamo DraftHouse (now owned by Sony studios) and the Paris Theater (now owned by Netflix), these indie spaces are innovating in how they engage their audiences with participatory programming, repertory titles, and special events featuring speakers and musicians.

But data collection by independent exhibitors and festivals is generally very weak. We were surprised and disappointed that neither our Film Festival Alliance nor our Art House Convergence members could accurately report on the demographics of their attendees and did not cite data or data marketing as a top concern. These organizations are often financially stretched, but an investment in knowing their audience would allow them to more effectively attract new attendees.

Festival and art house theaters' members and social media followers vastly outnumber their attendees. Film Festivals in the US have 20M social media followers and fans collectively. Art House Theaters have 6M national members and followers. Current ticket buyers represent only 27% of the engaged Art House Convergence fan base, and approximately the same ratio applies to 1000 festivals around the country.

The gap between interest and attendance represents a clear opportunity for targeted marketing and engagement of a core fanbase. Capacity building in data and marketing would pay dividends throughout the value chain of independent film releases. This core independent film fan community can be engaged to the benefit of filmmakers, exhibitors, and distributors with more robust investment in the data-marketing infrastructure for Festivals and Art House Theaters.

Tactical Idea: Bring the innovative tech-enabled platforms built for independent distribution to small exhibitors, platforms, and distributors:

New marketing and data products used to build target audiences and facilitate engagement for the hundreds of individual independent films pursuing impact or independent releases. These tools should be used by niche streamers, independent theaters, and festivals to increase and engage audiences at scale.

We have a list of platforms and tools in the independent distribution section of our report.

3. Invest in 21st Century Streaming Public Media and Include Scripted Films on PBS

PBS brings together more viewers of independent documentary than any other distribution platform through the strands *Independent Lens* and *POV,* and also offers highly successful commissioned strands including *Frontline, NOVA, American Master*s, and *American Experienc*e that incorporate independent documentary from time to time. But the public media system needs investment and digital innovation to survive and thrive in the streaming era.

PBS' broadcast audience is aging and declining faster than its digital audience is growing. Independent media funding entity ITVS does not have the resources to fully-fund most documentaries, requiring filmmakers and distributors to secure other revenue to offset production costs. These challenges, combined with political pressure on ITVS and public television generally, threaten the public sector for documentaries.

Additionally, we call on US public media to carry American independent *scripted* films as it did in the past with "American Playhouse." This is a notable omission in its programming that could be a huge benefit to diversifying and reaching a younger PBS audience, preserving a unique American artform, and generating additional investment for the scripted sector.

Related idea: PBS + Educational Distribution

The educational market is dominated by the quasi-public entity Kanopy, which is a B-corp whose revenue comes from subscriptions from libraries, colleges and universities. Kanopy is fast becoming the biggest single streaming home for independent film viewing in the US. Some librarians and field observers express concern that Kanopy is squeezing out smaller educational distributors with its growing market share. Still, our data shows the large and young audience watching independent films through Kanopy and how fast it has surpassed Netflix and the other dominant streamers as the place where more independent titles can be easily found.

Together, the educational and public media sectors (led by Kanopy and PBS) are compatible with one another as quasi-public, free pathways to viewers. Might they work collaboratively to offer films through public television (linear and digital), public libraries, and schools. This could be an economically and strategically advantageous addition to the conventional commercial market, and in particular an excellent potential complement for a successful niche subscription streamer. A collaboration like this might shape the digital future of public media.

4. Leverage Free, Mass Market Platforms: Build a field-wide vertical on a mass-market free streaming platform

Revenue from home entertainment that traditionally sustained the independent film sector has dried up in the digital era and must be replaced for the field to be sustainable.

The mass market subscription platforms will not be buying many independent films for exclusive premieres. The aggregated platforms like YouTubeTV, SmartTV, Roku, Apple, and Amazon will become the new 'cable tv' directly on the television with multiple channels, alongside creator content and gaming. Independent film must find a home on these platforms.Certainly embedding a destination niche subscription channel across these smart-tv platforms is one option. But we see another opportunity through free streaming, which is trending upward as subscription prices increase.

The free streaming currently requires independent filmmakers to do their own marketing on a revenue-share model, with most receiving very low viewership and payments for their work. This sector is the 'Spotify' of visual media, offering customers a huge volume of content for pennies-per-view, and taking fees off the top. Most creators and rights-holders are unable to fairly monetize their work. Individual films going it alone on these platforms is not working.

Free streaming channels–especially Tubi–show potential because they cater to niche audiences rather than seeking tentpole content that appeals to a mass market. They have independent film and documentary verticals but the quality is inconsistent. Independent distributors or producers could come together to launch a high-quality independent film vertical on a free streaming platform like Roku, Tubi or YouTube–or directly with a smartTV provider like Samsung or Visio. A partnership like this could command better revenue splits and create economies of scale for individual films by investing in the marketing of the vertical.

5. Expand and Engage Audiences of Color

The field needs more dedicated analysis of the ways the sector does (or does not) serve makers and audiences of color.

The independent film sector can and should lead the way in telling stories that reflect the full spectrum of our society and culture. Certainly independent film is far more diverse than the mainstream commercial sector, but data shows a significant disparity in the reach of films by directors of color compared to their white counterparts.

Color Congress reports a significant and under-leveraged documentary maker and fan community. Our theatrical data (p14) shows that 70% of the top 10 grossing films in our dataset were made by White directors, while 70% of the lowest grossing films in our dataset were made by POC directors. And our audience demographic data shows a gap among Hispanic viewers in particular and a lack of diversity among the current PBS audience.

There are many vital organizations working in this space–too many to mention them all here–but we especially love the manifesto from the collective Minorities in Film, which was reprinted with their permission on Jon Reiss's Substack after their presentation at CIFF. We also are inspired by the vitality and promise of dedicated streaming sites like OTV.

Expanding engagement with audiences of color and supporting diverse filmmakers will be crucial for the sector's vitality, impact, and growth. This is especially urgent with organizations like ITVS, CPB and other funding entities today facing political and legal pressure for prioritizing of diversity and inclusion in their work.

6. Thoughtfully enlist Brands and Philanthropy to Fund Production and Marketing

"Branded Content" often suggests a blurry line between creatively independent storytelling or journalism, and advertising. But some brands and philanthropic institutions are supporting independent storytelling without restricting the creative voice of film teams. The potential reach and revenue associated with a promotional campaign or financing from a deep-pocketed company or foundation could be transformational in the independent film space. See our report section in independent distribution for more detail on some current examples of this work.

One digital distributor told us that the smart tv platforms (LG, Samsung, Visio, Xumo) sometimes offer an inventory split instead of a revenue split on the ads sold. The opportunity to engage brands might itself provide an advantage for independent filmmakers–as many brands seek authentic content to speak to their values and audience.

It's easy to mistrust brands, and certainly 'independent' films can't be in the pocket of big corporations. But if goals align and editorial independence is preserved, companies offer significant financing and promotional support for new work.

7. Innovate on Sector-Wide Marketing

Experimentation and collaboration in marketing will pay dividends in building best practices and expanding the independent film fan base.

Funds like the marketing innovation fund, called FilmADE, launched by Amy Hobby and Karin Chien with the founding support of The Perspective Fund and others will empower independent distributors with resources for risk-taking and innovative marketing strategies.

There are ample opportunities to co-promote individual films, festivals, or special events through partnership or distribution integration with aligned media organizations. The list of possibilities is long, but some possibilities include *The Atlantic*, with an engaged audience of 1M curious subscribers for fiction and nonfiction storytelling, news organizations like *The New York Times* or *The Guardian* or Pro-Publica, or platforms like *Substack* or *Patreon* who support independent creators.

Financiers, distributors and exhibitors might collaborate on a sector-wide effort to rebrand 'independent film' with a compelling message, potentially involving celebrities and local artists to enhance appeal and excitement. We believe there is potential for a campaign tied to authentic and innovative stories made outside the 'system' to attract audiences tired of the impersonal and corporate flavor of mainstream media.

8. Deepen and Enrich Engagement with Younger Audiences and Fan Communities

Social media and user-generated content platforms like Letterboxd, TikTok, YouTube, Reddit and Instagram, among others, have active independent film fan communities in the millions (we estimate at least 20M people).

Distributors, filmmakers and producers need to become stronger content marketers, engaging creatively with social media fans and influencers to watch and promote new work when it is released. Parrot Analytics highlighted A24 titles consistent presence as the most in demand titles, successful in generating interest through social media with consistent efforts to engage and surprise fans around its brand and offerings.

This work takes significant time and resources. Investment in market research and learning and implementing forward-looking audience engagement best practices is critical for the future of the field, and will need to be shared across the field since few companies can afford this expense.

To strengthen the core audience, and find the next generation of independent film fans, filmmakers and distributors must allow fans to use their voices, participate more deeply with the content, and be rewarded for promoting their favorite work.

9. Conduct More Research and Share Data Across the Field

Our project is a broad survey, and just a start. We have shared our data sources where possible in the appendix of the report. There is a lot more valuable information to mine, beyond what we had capacity to investigate.

Some examples of work we did not have time or resources to complete include a survey of independent film fans on Letterboxd or TikTok, dedicated focus groups with young audiences about their viewing habits and interest in independent film, a site that aggregates case studies of independent release tactics, and deeper study of audiences and makers of color in the field.

We are grateful that the Documentary Film in the Public Interest initiative at the Shorenstein Center plans to continue this work, and know there are other entrepreneurs conducting research to inform their businesses. Armed with better data, interventions will be more successful. We hope individuals, companies, and institutions will continue to research the opportunities and challenges in the field. But it's critical for this data to be shared as widely as possible in a field that faces resource challenges.

To overcome the data asymmetries between independents and mass-market players, we need to share financial, audience, and performance data on individual projects for the benefit of all. A collective approach to data might include: a centralized, ethically run audience database that could be accessed by projects with similar genres or target audiences; a consolidated field-wide database that sorts films by topic or constituency and could be used by professors, teachers, and nonprofits to supplement their educational or social impact efforts; or another attempt (this has been tried before by Distribution Advocates and Sundance Institute's Transparency Project) to collect and disseminate shared data about financial returns on the various commercial platforms to develop clear best practices on release windowing and other strategies.

10. Build a Trade Organization to Facilitate Field-Wide Research, Innovation, Public Policy Advocacy

The independent film sector would benefit greatly from a centralized nonprofit entity that could conduct further research, fund and manage field-wide data-sharing or marketing innovations, and identify and build advocacy efforts.The sector needs stable funding and dedicated structural support to enable field-wide data sharing, innovations, and research. A trade organization dedicated to this work would be beneficial and could be funded in part by philanthropy and in part by the companies and financiers who will benefit from the information provided.

It's also time to build a lobby for independent film that would pursue antitrust, regulatory, and public policy interventions to address monopolistic practices and secure more favorable conditions for independent creators. We believe an independent film lobby is an essential component of securing the future of the sector. This might include antitrust work, regulation of streamers and studios to secure carve-outs for independent creators as in the EU and Canada, or public investment in cinema arts through public media or a national film board.

Independent film today is being strangled by the same technological and monopolistic challenges as music and journalism faced before it. While entrepreneurial ideas are important, independent film will never be sustainable without systemic collaboration and public policy interventions on the media business landscape.

The time for this effort is now, and there are several groups in the field actively working toward building such an effort.

Conclusion

The independent film industry has always been scrappy. It was born from the creativity, ingenuity, and entrepreneurial spirit of artists who believed enough in their film to will it into being. It is nurtured and fed by a passionate field of professionals in production, financing, distribution, marketing, and exhibition. This is not a field that waits for permission to make change. We can't continue hoping for the good old days to return, because they never really existed. It has always been a struggle to make independent films, but together we have a chance to radically reimagine, reform, and reshape our field for the future. The time is now.

Appendix

Core Data Set

Core Data Set Methodology

Interview List

Total Addressable Market Methodology

Total Addressable Market Calculations

National Audience Surveys: Detailed Results And Methodology

ESHAP Independent Film Study 2024

COVID States Survey: Questions and Methodology

Theatrical

Theatrical Box Office Data Summary

Core Data Set Film-Specific Performance

The Numbers 'all Indie' Dataset

Art House Convergence Report

Streaming

Nielsen Methodology

Nielsen Titles And Detailed Charts & Analysis

The State of Indie Films

Parrot Analytics Rankings & Excluded Titles

Parrot Analytics 'indie' & 'specialty ' Titles

Paid Video On Demand (Rental Or Sale)

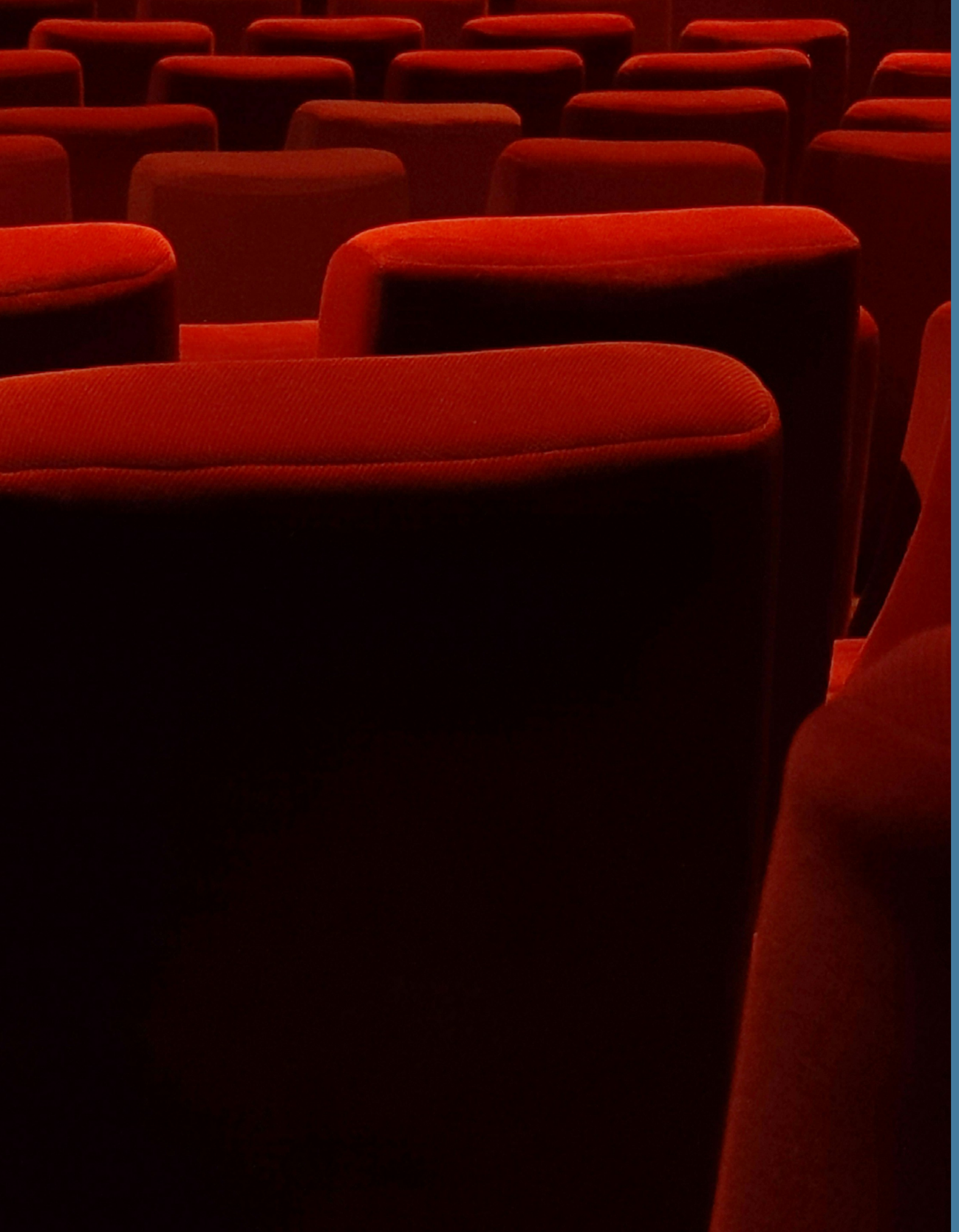
Paid Video on Demand - Analysis Methodology

The Numbers PVOD Dataset Detail Of Analysis

Film Festival Alliance Report

Reading List Google Drive

Decorative images from unsplash.com
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US Independent Film Audience & Landscape Study

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