

Maggie Bowman: Hello, everyone. Welcome to the IDA's first Getting Real Now panel, Re-Wiring Distribution Networks. We're going to get started here in just a few minutes. We're going to let the room populate. We'll get started in two or three minutes. Thank you.

Hello, everyone. Just for the newcomers, thank you for joining us. We're going to take just two more minutes before we get started on our conversation. Thank you for joining us.

Hello, everyone. Welcome. Thank you so much for joining us today for Re-Wiring Distribution Networks. I'm Maggie Bowman. I'm the director of programming for Getting Real at the International Documentary Association and thank you so much for being here.

I first want to let you know I'm joining you from Chicago, which is the unseated ancestral land of the Kickapoo, Peoria, Potawatomi, Miami, and Sioux people.

Just want to let you know we'll have-- the session format today is that we'll have a dialogue between Karin Chien and Gary Chou followed by a Q&A of 15 to 20 minutes. Many of you have probably done sessions in Zoom before. We ask that you can-- if you have a question, you can put it-- use the Q&A tool. Otherwise, feel free to use the chat, which will be moderated by my IDA colleague LeAnn Scrimmager. And there will be a point at which I know that Karin is going to invite you all to add some thoughts into the chat.

Before we get started, I just would like to thank our sponsors for today who have made this possible-- the LA Department of Cultural Affairs, LA County Arts and Culture, Hollywood Foreign Press Association, Participant Media, the Jonathan Logan Family Foundation, the NEA, and the Wyncote Foundation.

So today is very exciting. It's the kickoff of Getting Real 2020, which is quite different as it has been in past years because it's virtual. And what we're doing this year with these three sessions that we're having this month leading up to the conference we're calling Getting Real Now.

And the reason that we're having these this year is to start to engage all of you and provoke all of you to consider and reflect upon this year's conference themes, which are access, power, and possibility. And somewhat unlike past Getting Reals, which many of you may have attended, the themes aren't so much tracks this year as they're guiding frameworks for us to all be thinking about through all of the-- across all of the sessions.

Getting Real 2020, the full conference begins September 29. It's a five-day conference. It goes through October 3. And there will be-- registration will launch for that on September 2. So please sign up for our mailing list if you're not already on it.

Registration is free this year, and we have some really exciting programming lined up. So please spread the word. We are excited about the possibility, speaking of access, that so many people who might not have been able to travel physically to Los Angeles in the past will be able to join us and will have access to this convening this year.

So in terms of today's session, I was really moved and just provoked to think a lot about distribution questions when Karin Chien wrote a piece back in January, a blog post, on the failure of our current distribution system to bring a multiplicity of voices to global audiences. And LeAnn will post a link to that in case you hadn't seen that article.

What really stuck with me from that piece were two questions that she asked in the end of the

post. What if filmmakers organized and negotiated terms that helped protect the global filmmaking community? And I will admit that as a former union organizer myself, anytime I hear someone talking about a group organizing, it gets my attention.

And then secondly, how do audiences gain access to a multiplicity of points of view? And I think both of these are two very important parts of this conversation.

Karin's piece was followed up by a manifesto that Karin and Amy Hobby and their group, Distribution Advocates, penned. They mentioned that they found some inspiration to write a manifesto in Chi-Hui Yang's keynote address from Getting Real 2018. And then in a further conversation with Karin and Amy, Karin made the point that documentary filmmakers have come to a place where increasingly they own the means of production, but they don't-- when they don't own the means of distribution, they don't own their work.

So this has been a really formative conversation for the thinking about this conference since we talked about that. And as noted in the Distribution Advocate's manifesto, the recent demise of the Paramount consent decrees which were struck a final blow by the courts a few weeks ago is just yet another step in the consolidation of power and cultural distribution.

So as we talked about the kind of generative and imaginative thinking that we hope people will bring to Getting Real, we knew that it was also important that we bring in voices from outside of our industry who have a bit of distance and perspective to help us do the kind of critical thinking we need to do to think about the possibilities ahead. Gary Chou is a strategist from the tech industry that thinks a lot about networks and how success is a function of access to those networks, and Gary has been in dialogue with Karin and Amy and others and distribution advocates for a couple of years now.

So I'm first going to start by inviting Karin to give us a brief overview of the key factors of the distribution ecosystem for documentaries as it stands today, and then Gary will join her. And this is going to be a self-moderated conversation between Karin and Gary. Karin will join her, and they'll talk about how we might consider the possible future for such an ecosystem. I'll come back on at the end during the Q&A.

So I'm really excited for this conversation. Thanks so much, Karin and Gary, for joining us, and I will pass it over to you now, Karin.

Karin Chien: Thank you so much, Maggie, and I want to thank everybody at IDA, all the people behind the scenes. Thank you, Hope. Thank you, Simon. You know, I'm grateful that Gary and I have been invited to have a conversation which hopefully everyone listening can participate and will participate in as well.

But really, I think that with distribution, it's such a large topic. It often feels overwhelming. When I teach classes on it, sometimes, you know, people are just trying to grapple with how the structure works, how the system works. And it's really helpful sometimes to take a step outside and look at how does the structure of distribution work? Where is power concentrated? How does it flow? Where do we sit as creators and as audience members in it? And this is why I'm really excited to talk to Gary, you know, who works with networks and especially the way information flows.

You know, I just want to say one, Maggie, thank you for-- I love that you turned my questions

back on to me, so thank you for doing that. And two, I wanted to say-- I just want to say the way-- how I've come to this conversation, you know? And I think it is both as a filmmaker and as a distributor, but how did I come into those roles? It's as an audience member. You know, I became a film producer because I wanted to see more films about women and people of color.

And I realize now that it wasn't that those films didn't exist. They just weren't being released. I just didn't know or have a way to find them as an audience member.

And as a distributor, you know, I started a very micro-distribution company called dGenerate Films which works in partnership now with Icarus Films. And that was again as an audience member. I wanted to see-- as a Chinese American audience member, I wanted to see films about China that were unmediated by Western points of view, and I found that the only way I could do that was to distribute them. So I've been doing that since 2008, and now we have over 70 titles in our collection, most of them documentary.

So I think that, you know, first starting as an audience member, I've confronted the problems of distribution, the systems of it. And I hope that we can get to a little bit of the diagnostic of that but also spend quite a bit of time on ideas and possibilities, of which there are many because there are still many to be explored.

So I'd like to invite my friend Gary Chou into the conversation. And, you know, Gary has been someone that I've known since the beginning of my producing career who has supported Asian American artists. And I'll let Gary talk about his work with networks as well. Hi, Gary.

Gary Chou: Hey, how you doing? Thank you all for having me, and thanks to IDA, and thanks, Hope, for signing for us.

So I think it's hard to have a conversation like this without helping folks understand where my perspective is coming from, and so I want to just share a little bit of kind of my background. I've spent most of my 20-some-year career working in the tech industry, both on the startup side as well as on the investment side. And having the privilege of being able to kind of, like, work in those two different dimensions has helped me both understand kind of like the micro-level details of what it takes to actually build technology and build systems as well as kind of an understanding of how an investor might think about macro-level trends-- and so how broader dynamics might inform how things work.

And so a large part of my career also intersected with the rise of kind of these large-scale, ubiquitous, real-time information networks, which have taken, you know, a decade plus to fully install. And these are networks like Twitter, like Facebook, and, you know, to a weird degree, like Google, Amazon, and Apple. And so, you know, because of that, I spent a lot of my time thinking about how networks work and, you know, how you can get them to form and also kind of like how they're financed and how they're governed or, in many cases, not.

And I think like, you know, one of the biggest challenges that's probably relevant to this conversation is just that we have these online networks, right, these mechanisms by which people are connecting with each other and engaging with each other internationally, and control of these networks happens to fall to corporations and who may often have kind of a misalignment in terms of what their interests are as well as kind of the interests of the networks. In a lot of cases, also these corporations are monopolies, and that also leads to other problems

in the market.

So those are kind of the broad swaths of kind of what I think about. I think also at a smaller level, I've also kind of personally done a lot more work with smaller-scale networks, whether that's in the service of educating people on entrepreneurship or as well as thinking about how you connect people into peer support networks across a specific industry.

So these are dynamics that exist because the technology that we live in or that we have today, but they're separate and distinct from necessarily the money, the control systems. But they're obviously very greatly informed.

- Thanks, Gary. I mean, maybe we should just take that as a jumping-off point. You know, we have, in a way, access to more people and audiences than technically we've ever had before, yet it also feels like we have less access than ever before. And, you know, there is this trend towards consolidation, monopolies-- certainly monopolies on attention, right? There's this new term the attention economy.

Whereas, you know, in a way, that goes against the natural order of things where the multiplicity and plurality, you know, is something that is-- and diversity is a part of the natural way. So we now, creators and audience members, find ourselves in this space.

And I want to dissect that a little bit. Like, how did we get here? And is the trend towards more consolidation, in fact?

- Wow. We could spend a whole hour just on that sentence, especially because you managed to integrate a lot of different themes. I think, like, the first-- let me answer that in a number of layers. So I think, first of all, we tend to not really acknowledge network systems in our life because networks are kind of invisible, right? Like, we're connected because we've had a common experience, like, many, many years ago, and there were some opportunities that I may have received through you, but I might not exactly have attributed it to the network that we belong to. I attribute it to you, my relationship specifically with you.

And I think that a lot-- I think the fact that we can't see networks, the fact that they're invisible, it makes us somewhat, you know, ignorant of kind of the importance that they play in everything. And I think that one, I think, core thesis that I have is, as Maggie mentioned, is, you know, I think that success for any creator, whether you're a CEO of a venture-backed company or an artist is a function of whether or not you have access to the relevant networks that you need, and money, information, power, people kind of flow through that.

Now what's happened with a lot of these venture-backed companies, for instance, is that they've discovered that having access to certain types of data, like your social connections, is an incredibly powerful source of energy. And that has led to these data network effects-- for example, best represented through Facebook's social graph, right? So because Facebook has all this information about who your friends are and because they're all already there on Facebook, they have an incredible advantage in terms of anyone who would attempt to compete because it's very hard to build that asset up.

And so if you take, you know, a company like that-- and, you know, they're not the only-- they're not the only businesses that leverage this. And then you kind of multiply that network phenomena with globalization, right, with all these other-- with, you know, the fact that we all

carry computers in our pocket now, all of these different kind of global trends have led to not just increased competition for attention, as you mentioned. It's also led to a kind of a-- well, probably a really more interesting phenomenon around kind of how the labor force does or doesn't operate in the future as well.

It's created-- you know, it's also had-- these effects are not necessarily good or bad. They just kind of are. So it's allowed us to move away from, say, hierarchical categories in genre not just in film but pretty much in everything. You know, if you look at culture, like, nothing-- music that comes out today doesn't necessarily fall very neatly into one thing.

So what you're having is you have this previously ordered system which was routed by the previous incumbents, whoever they were, whether they were studios, music labels, whatever. And we now live in this new world where the new incumbents that have come up through the rise of these new systems, they're now these really weird animals, right?

You look at Apple-- or Amazon's a better case. Amazon was a bookstore, you know, 20 years ago. Then they became a retailer. Then they became a marketplace, right? Now-- then they became a provider of critical internet infrastructure. Pretty much every tech company runs their software on Amazon's cloud services. And now they're a-- I'm not even sure what you call it. They have a direct relationship with consumers where, you know, consumers pay them for access to media, and then they're also making stuff, right?

So part of, I think, the challenge of navigating the uncertainty of everything that's happening is not just simply the fact that we don't have a mental model to understand the change, but I think it's also a fact that the new incumbents are these animals that we haven't really seen before, right? And they themselves are trying to figure out what their own incentives are, and they themselves are finding themselves competing against-- you know, who would have thought at one point that Netflix and Amazon were going to be competitors? Like, that's a-- you know, and potentially Disney.

You know, and these are unprecedented things that are all fundamentally driven by a confluence of all these things. And for the most part, we get to kind of ride along their own individual quest for growth and try to either extract value or align interests whenever we can. And so it's a very, very complicated scenario.

You know, I think the byproduct of this is that the real scarcity today is not in the ability to produce a thing, right? Because it used to be that the ability to make something was so capital intensive, and so in order to make anything-- if you were just able to make something, that in and of itself put you at a certain level of visibility above everybody else. But, you know, that has changed. The cost of being able to produce anything, the cost of being able to make anything has actually gone down.

And what that results in is an explosion, which is creatively wonderful, but it also means that there's a tremendous amount of competition for that attention. Attention is fixed. It's scarce. We have 24 hours in a day, you know? And also, you know, in a pandemic, we have Zoom fatigue, and so thank you everyone for spending your attention on us.

But you're no longer competing within your category anymore too. You're competing with video games. You're competing with childcare. You're competing with wars on Twitter. You're competing with all sorts of things that might garner our interest and attention. So just everything

is complicated.

Oh, you're muted.

- I would say-- and I also apologize because I'm zooming in from France, so it's nighttime here, one, which means I'm going to try and improve my lighting situation.

But, yeah, I mean, you know, I think there's this false dichotomy that has also sprung up. I mean, first of all, I would say that this increasing monopolization and consolidation has been matched as well by increasing authoritarianism in national governments, and there are countries where you can see that very plainly, and there are countries where it's harder to see but, you know, the signs are there. So there is a censorship that's happening by politics, you know, clearly in China or in Turkey. There is a censorship that's happening by this power, whether it's capital or money, or really it's the power and hold that they have on our attention, right?

So then it feels like the individual creator, filmmaker, producer is left with this, you know, what I've come to understand is a false choice between, you know, we make a documentary-- you know, every filmmaker I think has at least one universal desire, which is audience. If you make a film, you want audience. So the desire is to go onto the platform that can reach the largest audience.

And what if you don't get onto Amazon and you don't get onto Netflix or Hulu? Then it feels like your other option is this, you know, what's been branded creative distribution, you know, with going with aggregators who have also rebranded themselves as distributors.

And, you know, and for those who are listening who don't know, an aggregator came about when the platform started, when Netflix started, when iTunes started. And there were companies that would aggregate bundle content, and they would take a small percentage, like 20%, and they would get your film onto iTunes or they would get your film onto Netflix.

Now, some of those aggregators take more and more percentages in exchange for not necessarily marketing as much as a distributor might. But filmmakers-- it almost feels like that's their option, or they spend the next year or two on, you know, quote, unquote, creative distribution or self-distribution.

And, you know, self-distribution, first of all, requires access to networks. It still requires access to networks. It requires labor. It requires resources, and it requires capital. So it's-- you know, there's an interdependency in self-distribution that is belied by the name, and it's not something that everybody can do.

And it also has started to feel to me like a divide-and-conquer model. You know, there's these networks that have sprung up about the, you know, kind of-- what's the word-- you know, just like-- not romanticizing but really celebrating the individual creator. But for a producer like myself, I look at that and think, well, that means I'm doing more work for the same amount of money, right, in terms of marketing my films and so on and so forth. So, you know, what I hope to do later in this conversation is to look beyond this kind of false dichotomy.

- Yeah, that is-- I mean, that's hard because it's very hard to fight against the dynamics of a supply-and-demand equation, right?

I think the one thing that has changed, though-- and I don't know-- and this is definitely not-- this

is not at all an easier path. It's just a different path, which is that I think a benefit of the online networks that we have today is the ability for individuals to amass some sort of influence or power in one realm and then leverage it for the interest that they have.

And so I think previously, you know, it may have been the case that you needed to be able to demonstrate that you can make a thing before you could get anyone to assign value to it. But I think that there are other ways in which you could build a network or community first of some sort, and especially if that community or network is of high-net-worth individuals, through that, have the money to be able to produce what you need.

And if you're able to do it that way, then you're not so worried about what the downstream monetization of the thing-- you're not beholden to that mathematical equation in order for you to be able to pay your rent. But it's a different order of operations.

Like, I think the cleanest example might be that in a time of, you know, before Kickstarter and crowdfunding was a normative cultural kind of force, the way you would make a CD is you would save all of your money. You would maybe borrow from some of your friends and family. You would go record your album. You would print out 3,000 disks, and they would sit underneath your bed before you were able to actually sell them at shows and potentially make money off of that.

But in a world where you have access to an online network, if you can find a community of people who are really into what you're doing, that might give you the leverage to run a crowdfunding campaign where you pay for the whole thing upfront plus, you know, whatever else that you need. And that campaign-- you know, you're shifting the transaction from something that comes downstream to something that comes upstream.

Now, I'm not at all suggesting-- I think making films is obviously much more complicated. I think I'm just showing that as an example that with these new systems, with the ability to kind of build networks that are relevant to you, you could change the way that you work and make that a different type of equation.

- The other thing I want to chat about is also, you know, whose point of view is creating these networks? And that's a conversation I think that is happening quite a lot in the documentary field.

It hasn't-- like, the spotlight hasn't turned as much onto distribution platforms. And someone in the chat reminded us that it's not just the streaming platforms. It's PBS. Obviously there's obviously great independent distributors that do fantastic work.

But, you know, there are still-- like, there is that "New York Times" investigative report that came out on Criterion about why there are so few Black filmmakers in the collection, and it came down to the point of view of the person who runs the company. And, you know, that made-- I just wonder if there's conversations happening maybe that I'm not aware of of whose point of view is structuring these networks, whether it's Kickstarter or Facebook.

You know, with Facebook, sure, that kind of-- you know, there's a lot of dialogue around that. But even around the distribution networks that we have for documentary, you know, I'm curious, like, how many Indigenous acquisition executives do we have looking at films to release?

Because, you know, I think of myself 25 years ago that as an audience member before I got into the film industry, I'm watching what they're choosing to release to me.

- Yeah, I think, like, maybe a decade ago there was a naive hope that I shared that these new online networks would allow all of these creators to just completely route around gatekeepers. But I think the reality of the situation is that once people understood how to wield network power, you just had stronger gatekeepers.

And so-- you know, on the flip side though, you know, so much of I think what is possible for me in terms of reimagining new systems or reimagining new alternatives really kind of ties into basically I think this growing inequality that we have. And I actually think that if I were starting a brand-new venture of some sort, I would be going after all of the people who have made lots of money over the past decade and try to find a set of people who kind of believe in what it is that you want to do, and they become an anchor. They become your seed for being able to kind of, you know, grow from there.

And it's a bit-- it's taking a page out of the idea of creating your own table, but I think it's also starting with the money because, you know, any sort of optionality that you're going to want is going to need to come from that. And also, you know, most of the things that get made today ultimately are coming from family offices, you know, rich individuals, et cetera.

I do think, though, that there are younger folks who have come into wealth that have a different perspective. And I think that's where it becomes-- it's almost like a-- I don't know. It's almost like a white-glove Kickstarter project from a mental-model perspective. Like, what it's going to take for you to be successful as a creator is no longer just proficiency in your craft or proximity to the story that you want to tell. It's like, do you have the anchors that you're going to need from day one who are just as excited about the stories that you want to tell, and can you actually make room for them to bring them along with you?

And that might feel weird. You know, that might be a suboptimal process, you know, creatively. But I think it's rearchitecting how you get started in that way that is really going to change, you know, the optionality that you would have downstream. Otherwise you're going to get exactly what you've been talking about, right? It's very hard-- it's very hard to swim against the current.

- Yeah, you know, I wonder sometimes, like, who-- you know, our distribution system. And one thing that the pandemic has made clear is the way our supply chain works because there's suddenly been a complete shutdown of certain nodes in our supply chain. And I would say the distribution supply chain maybe let's just say in general starts with film festivals and goes through sales agents, you know, aggregators, distributors, exhibitors, and critics.

And you can see at least three of those, you know, nodes on the supply chain have not been able to function or have just functioned partially. And so it's made clear, like, how crucial that-- you know, the way the system works.

But I started to have this question. Like, well, who does the system work for? I mean, maybe-- it's a very small, 1% number of people it works for you. And you look at film festivals. The majority of film festivals cannot pay their staff, their programmers a fair wage. They don't pay filmmakers, and they don't-- you know, it's just not something they're able to do, or some of them have started to do that.

You know, you look at exhibitors. You know, they are struggling too. I mean, many of them are threatening to go out of business. You look at distributors, especially the smaller distributors, are really being squeezed.

So who is this system working for? And so that's one question I have. And if it's not working for the majority of us, then let's get together and figure something else out.

And the other question I have is, you know, if-- you know, one quote that you say, Gary, that really resonates with me is success is a function of access to networks. Success is a function of access to networks, and that's absolutely true when it comes down to distribution, right? As a producer, as a filmmaker, what networks do you have access to?

What do you say to a creator who is just starting out, you know, the person I was, you know, 20-something years ago who had no access to relevant networks, you know, in the field that they're embarking into? Is it, you know, a matter of having to create those networks of spending? You know, 20 years later, now you have some access?

- I think often the-- you know, so I'm trying to figure out if we should go with a intellectual answer here or a more practical one. I'll give you both. I think that-- I think a lot of times what creators need to do is think about what they can make that will get them leverage, right? And I think they're too often focused on-- you know, they have a vision, and that's partially what makes them great is they have an end vision for what they want to do, the story they want to tell, and where they want to go.

And I think that that is eventually going to have to give in to an understanding that they can't just purely be in service of the work. There's got to be a bit more of a pragmatism and an understanding that the first thing they might need to make might be a smaller thing that gets them someone else's attention, which as we've talked about, is really hard. Once you have that, that might give you more leverage that might, you know, grant you a better shot at telling the story that you want to tell.

But, I mean, if you think about it, let's say that you have a thing that you want to do, and it's going to cost you, you know, \$5 million to do it. And you're unwilling to do anything until you get that \$5 million. and you're going to spend, what, like 5, 10 years waiting for that to happen? That's-- you know, your time is the most important asset that you have.

And I think the challenge is you can't really plan out or predict a clear path to where you want to go because there just isn't one. But if you are willing to get started and make something that people can then react to and respond to and if it's out in public, if it's accessible, you give yourself a shot at potentially starting to build a network around your thing.

And so it's this-- it's like you've got to work on the appetizers sometimes before you do the main course. And it might be-- you might be making appetizers for five years. But if you successfully do that and if you're consistent and people understand who you are and why you're trying to do what you're doing and they understand the story behind you, that's incredibly powerful and valuable. And through that process, you might then have the leverage to make what you want to make. You know, also, you might also grow in terms of, you know, your craft as you figure that out. But there's this process of thinking about how you construct your network has to happen in close association with the work that you want to do.

Now, the other thing-- I think I would like to change the word that I used. I think the other hard thing to understand is that you don't really build networks, right? It's not like a table where if you go to the store and you get all the things that you need, you can build a table that you want.

They're much more-- it's much more organic. You know, I think the belief I have is networks form around signals or they don't. And so your job as a creator is just keep putting up signals, almost kind of messages in a bottle. And if a signal doesn't work, you change the signal. You tweak the signal.

But if you put one signal out and you get nothing, it doesn't mean that you stop, right? You have to kind of keep putting that out, and that has to become a normative practice.

Now, where I think things often go off the rails is people end up coming up with these overelaborate things that are extremely expensive and emotionally draining they put out in the world with this expectation that people are going to show up to your party, and then they get disappointed when no one comes. And I think that's where thinking about how you-- you know, what is a lightweight way for you to share something of yourself that you can put out consistently at very kind of low cost to you.

And it's kind of-- I think we're all familiar with Patreon. I think Patreon is exactly backwards in the sense that there's kind of a casual understanding that if a creator creates a Patreon, they are signing up to produce more things for their fans to justify the reward tiers that are out there.

I don't think that's actually a great use of the platform in that way because if you're a certain artist of a certain form, you know, your fans ultimately want you to, like, just make your thing. And so it's incumbent upon you to have to come up with a creative thing that you can release that isn't just more production, and I think there's a lot of room to iterate on what signals matter and what signals can be relevant for, you know, an individual creator because it's not a-- it's not a one size fits all.

- Yeah, and I like the-- I like your thinking around that. I mean, I'd like to-- maybe this is a good time, you know, to frame a brief conversation around possibilities, right, before we get into the questions that are coming in.

Usually when I talk about distribution, I frame it at the very top about why it's so important, and I'm going to do that here because distribution-- what gets distributed determines what gets seen. It determines then what gets made, and it determines who gets to make it.

So, you know, traditionally or historically in our field, distribution is-- who holds distribution, you know, holds the power. And a lot of film talks are often about financing, but I see financing as a direct result of what was distributed, you know?

And we've pointed out, you know, a lot of flaws in the system, like, whose point of view structures these networks-- you know, that filmmakers are presented with almost this all or nothing choice right now. And, you know, filmmakers sometimes will take the nothing choice just to gain access to audiences because there is this monopoly on attention that's been built-- that's been consolidated.

So, you know, there's a working group that IDA has asked us to form specifically for Getting Real. And one of the members, Carlos Gutiérrez, who's been doing work for decades as part of

Cinema Tropical on behalf of Latin American films, he said something that really resonated with me, which is that we need many diverse structures.

You know, so I just did a very quick brainstorm before this conversation about what are possibilities that we haven't explored yet in distribution. And if it's OK, Gary, I'm just going to throw them out as a way to hopefully ask the-- invite, you know, the people listening to, you know, throw in your ideas, your possibilities around distribution. You know, please put them in the chat.

I think that we are so early still to talking about distribution, about this whole supply chain. And because distribution is just this amorphous word-- really, it breaks down into, you know, who the curators are. Who are these gatekeepers? Because there's gatekeepers at many steps of the way, and you have to get through all of them to get to a distribution success, right?

So I invite the participants in the Zoom to throw your possibilities into the chat, but I'm just going to start. I wrote down a few. You know, this is an opportunity and hopefully a continuing opportunity to rethink and to challenge the way the system works. So no bad ideas, right?

- Safe space.

- No, I think that one-- so for example, one thing that's happening is there is a lot of pressure being put to bear on institutions, especially around authorship and accountability. These are conversations I find really valuable. I listen a lot. I learn a lot. I think this same pressure can be put to bear on distribution companies, on the marketing and acquisition side of it. But I think that-- I still think that that's only one path, you know, but that path is a really important one.

So my first question, you know, or possibility is instilling an antiracist ethos into this-- into this entire supply chain. How do we do that? We're just starting to have this conversation. Well, let's shine the spotlight on the distribution supply chain as well. You know, the Criterion conversation got a lot of attention because it was in the "New York Times," but I hope that it's not just that one conversation.

You know, I think we're seeing just today members of the NBA participating in another possibility, which is a point of refusal. It's holding a strike. It's organizing together. You know, and it's been pointing out there's a difference between a strike and a boycott, but those are possibilities too that independent creators and filmmakers have not engaged with, but it is a possibility.

You know, watching the BlackStar panel that Sonya Childress moderated, you know, was really interesting to me, and they talked about taking our lead from social-justice movements and asking for reparations. And that, to me, was a great idea. You know, the fact that there has been so much exclusion of Black filmmakers from the Criterion Collection, just for example-- you know, why isn't reparations the logical next step? You know, that money, that capital could be used to create another structure, another network, another signal, if you have it.

- And I think just--

- You know, one idea--

- Just on that point, I think, like, to apply some of the things that we've been talking about, you know, there are examples of online networks being mobilized to address-- to kind of go after the

advertisers of various TV shows and news channels that are contrary to all the things that you talked about.

And so that's an example of leveraging networks in the service of, you know, some of the policies that you're talking about. You can apply consumer pressure. Like if we embrace the idea that we live in a capitalist society, can we leverage capitalism to accomplish the means that we want here? Which I realize is a little bit kind of like playing with fire, but there are patterns where what you're trying to do-- what you're talking about has happened in other industries, and that could certainly be applied here too.

- Absolutely. You know, and also what structures-- what can we do? The pressure absolutely needs to be brought to bear, but what can we do?

And I think about regional circuits. You know, there's a lot of regional audiences that are underserved. The Southern Circuit, you know, is one that exists. I'm not sure there if there are others, but I think that there can be. There should be. It's something that, if there were capital and resources to build, it would be incredibly useful to filmmakers and to audiences.

You know, I think about collective platforms. Like my micro-distribution company as part of OVID.tv which is a collection of many distributors, many independent distributors. You know, through that collective catalog, collective resources, we're hoping, you know, to have a little-- a tiny bit more power in the playing field.

But what about filmmakers? Can filmmakers work collectively? Like, I threw out this idea on another panel. You know, could filmmakers-- could 500 filmmakers come together, put in \$1,000 each, and create a year-round staffed distribution company with marketers, with, you know, bookers that work on behalf of releasing those 500-- those films, right? I mean, there's lots of, you know, questions in this idea, but just throwing out how can-- if you get a seven-figure offer from a major network, a streaming platform, whatever it is, can you bring another filmmaker with you, especially if you've made a film in a country or in a community where their stories-- the people who live in that community, in that region cannot tell their stories because they're censored by money or they're censored by politics? You know, can you carve out 10% of your acquisition fee for that same platform with 100-plus million viewers to watch a film made by somebody who lives in that community or in that region?

- You know, something that's happening-- something that's happening-- and I'm not sure how successful this will be, but something that's happening in the tech industry that's interesting is the notion of creating-- companies and entrepreneurs putting riders-- sorry. Other venture investors putting riders on their term sheets that not exactly mandate but highly encourage that the entrepreneur go and raise money from a diverse set of investors.

It's highly imperfect because, honestly, I'm not sure if the problem is really with the entrepreneurs as much as it is with the investor side. But what is beneficial is the standard legal language making it a culturally normal thing to do to include that language in deals that you do.

And that's an example where if you can get mass buy-in, you know, whoever has the hot deal of the year that studios want to get into or what have you, you know, you've got that language already in there that might then potentially encourage them to behave in a way that's beneficial for the rest of the ecosystem.

So part of me wonders whether or not there are little small things like that that just make it dramatically simpler for a filmmaker to just be kind of at the ready of the go, and could that possibly, you know, change behavior or steer behavior--

- Yeah. Absolutely. I think that we need more tools, right, to give filmmakers once they get into this supply chain with all the gatekeepers. There's very few tools available right now. I think, really, you're on your own if you don't have access to the networks of sales agents and publicists and whatnot.

And I think there could be-- like another tool, maybe could we have a standardized delivery list for theatrical release? And producers often have to spend months and months and a lot of money creating deliverables. Some producers know they can negotiate a lot of the things on the list. Some producers don't, for example. So, you know, just-- I think that those practical tools are just as important as these larger reimaginings, right?

- And the social pressure to actually adopt them.

- Yes, that's right. Yeah. I mean, you know, and also how do we empower-- how do we support a more diverse multiplicity of points of view and criticism? Because criticism and publicity play a really important role. I mean, distribution, in a way, comes down to publicity and marketing. You know, who has the capital, and who has the tools to create those assets and to get them out there?

- It looks like Maggie's suggesting that we move to the questions

- OK.

MAGGIE BOWMAN: Hi. There's a lot of activity in the Q&A, so I thought that maybe we could go to a few of these. The first question is, "What can be done to assure that films that include audio description will have equal distribution for audio-description versions? Often the described production is omitted from online platforms, and this eliminates access for a blind audience."

- That's definitely not me.

- I think Maggie-- maybe you have thoughts on that question. I think that's a great question.

- It's something that we're definitely going to be addressing at Getting Real, we've been talking about. And I think that this is one of these things where if it's a demand coming from audiences and from makers to establish a new norm, that that's a norm that should always be available, you know, we can go from-- you know, how many budgets have we all seen where closed captioning was a distribution deliverable, you know, that you have to check the box? But instead of thinking about it as a burden, a box checker to create accessibility features, such as audio description, what about seeing the creative potential in some of those modes of expression?

So I think we have some education to do amongst makers, but the audiences are there, and they want the material. But I do think this is-- filmmakers can educate themselves more. But, you know, it's a question of demanding this from distributors. It will be good for them. They will expand their audiences.

- That's a great point. Yeah, and like Gary said, just social pressure brought to bear.

- OK, I'll throw another question, this time for you guys, not for myself. "Today, there are many different outlets for documentaries as opposed to just PBS. However, documentaries can easily get lost in the ocean of content from many streamers and cable networks. So would you say that doc filmmakers also have a marketing problem, or is it better to apply a Darwinian approach of the strongest will survive?"

- Well, I think we're already in that Darwinian approach, unfortunately. You know, we operate from this mindset of scarcity perhaps, or really we operate from this mindset of individual ascension. And individual is a misnomer because every film takes so many people. It takes incredible collaboration. It takes communities to create.

But we all know there's a very finite number of slots at the festivals, and there's a very finite number of slots on the buyers' slate. You know, so it's created this me-against-you, you know, feeling that I'd like for us to think, you know, maybe not in opposition against but just to resist.

You know, and that's why I think reimagining of-- like, collectivity is something that is happening quite a lot organically amongst filmmakers. I'd love to see it happening more in distribution as well. How do we work together? as opposed to you, you know, trying to get into that one slot.

How can we-- even marketing. How can we work together, you know, collectively to bring more attention to docs or to raise more attention, not just one film at a time but, you know, as a field? I don't have the answer, but I'd love for us to reframe our thinking around that.

- OK, the next question I think is something that you've been touching on and referencing, but someone's asking, "How do you think we might be able to start a labor movement in a field like independent documentaries?" And I think that, you know, Karin, you talked about the refusal-- the refusal to work in the NBA yesterday and the power of that.

- That's actually another great question for you, Maggie.

[LAUGHTER]

- Well, it's not. I will just say that one of the working groups Karin mentioned-- the Distribution Advocates is a working group that will be-- that's been meeting and is going to share some work back at Getting Real. There are a few other working groups that are tackling issues, and there's a labor working group to look into that. So, you know, coming from a labor-organizing background, I've always been trying to figure this out within this field, which nonfiction has largely been nonunion.

I guess maybe just to phrase the question for you all, you know, it's a question of collective action. So some of the things that you've been talking about in terms of networks, when a network is big enough, there's a collectivity to it. I wonder if you could just address it in that-- you know, in that light. You know, how many signals-- I guess it was very interesting hearing, Gary, about the way about networks form based on signals.

And when I think about organizing, organizing movements is based-- is built one relationship at a time. So I think there's this parallel nature to how that-- how those two work.

- Well, you know I would say A-Doc the Asian American Documentary Network, which I'm very, you know, happy to be a part of, has been a really interesting network to be in because in a way it is-- you know, it came out of, I think, Grace Lee's talk-- keynote speech at IDA a years ago.

And Leo Chiang also is one of the cofounders. But, really, it's come up quite organically, and it's this incredible network that happens on Slack and creates access and has now started, I think, to create small pods of collective action. You know, so that's come out of need. It's come out of having a space for the community to be able to discuss.

And I'm curious, Gary, because I know, you know, you've worked with Kickstarter and other networks in their early stages, and now you see labor movements, for example, at Kickstarter. Is this, you know, just the eventual trend of when precarity becomes too intense that, you know, collective organizing happens?

- Yeah, that's complicated. I am definitely not an expert. But what I will say is that it's very clear at these, you know, places that have a lot of power-- and I would actually really say we're really more talking about, like, Google, Facebook, Amazon-- that the only leverage, really, at the end of the day, given how much money is flowing through these systems, is the labor force. How they choose to exert that leverage, how they choose to come together, will that look like what we've typically referred to as a union, or will that take place in something very different?

For example, I think one of the most impactful things that has come about in the tech industry has been this work that a former engineer at Pinterest, Tracy Chou, did where there was no discussion at all about diversity in terms of software-engineering teams in the Valley. It was something that, like, people just didn't talk about. You don't talk about it publicly, and, like, no one's like zip, zip, zip, zip.

And she realized that there's a common tool that all engineers use that is designed exactly for collective action. It's collective action in the service of producing software code. But she just basically took that system and harnessed it in the service of collective action to count numbers.

And so within, you know, less than a day, there was this rogue data set of what the actual diversity breakdowns were on software-engineering teams across, you know, most of Silicon Valley. And once that rogue data set was out there, then all these companies were like, whoa. We can't have that rogue data set out there. We're going to come out and-- we're going to come out and forcefully tell everyone how nondiverse our company is and how we're going to improve it.

And then you had other companies saying, no. Well, we're way less diverse than the other company, and here's what we're doing to improve it, right? And so these tools and networks allowed for a transparency that didn't previously exist, which then led to pressure.

So not exactly a union but still collective action, and I think that's kind of-- you know, to your point of reimagining, I think there's so much we can do to reimagine how collective action could be deployed in places that are-- you know, are meaningful to-- but they might not exactly be the same systems that we've looked at historically. They can definitely be informed by that.

You know, for example, protest, you know, preinternet is a powerful mechanism, but it is a very different thing to think about what protest is able to do in a networked world, right? And it's just it has different dynamics, the pace of it, the impact.

And so, you know, it's a different beast, and I think that that's where there's so many things that can be invented at this time because of what exists. But I think it's probably going to be

emergent. It's hard to-- it's hard to engineer.

I think what I will say, Karin, to your point about A-Doc-- and I think, Maggie, I think somewhat of what you're talking before, I think that there needs to-- I think we need to take these systems and practices that we would typically relegate as emotional labor and really think about them as things we need to center and things that we need to intentionally design with the same level of care that we would put into our craft. And that's going to require an iterative process of trying things and learning and seeing what works and evolving and dedicating time and resources to it and taking it seriously versus just thinking that you are convening a dinner party, and then as long as no one dies, you did a good job at running your dinner party.

And so that as a craft I think is a new emergent thing, and I think that in the hands of someone who knows what they're doing can do a lot of damage. Sorry. Long answer on the whole Kickstarter labor thing, but I think I just wanted to--

- It's really interesting. Yeah, and I think that's really helpful. Collective action comes in many forms, and also what we consider labor, we can start to expand that definition as well.

- I think at a much more-- at the complete other end of the scale, I think we're also overdue for both government regulation and a reinvention of corporate structures.

So for example, you know, Facebook is a monopoly, and it is not only harmful in terms of, like, societal and cultural issues but to just look at it from a pure capitalist perspective, there is no venture investor out there that would ever sign a-- do a seed investment in a company that was competing head to head against Facebook, right? Like that-- like, it would have no chance whatsoever. So there's a very strong interest, actually, within, you know, the tech community to have something done about that.

Now, people aren't exactly excited about the idea of breaking it up because of the potential implications of what that might mean to their investments if they happen to create something that was, like, huge and great, but there are some interesting ideas of, like, well, could you instead regulate a company like Facebook by demanding that they open up their data so that this proprietary asset that they have collected becomes a utility that others can plug into?

So that fate is kind of what is currently lingering in the industry, which is going to be an interesting dynamic to see kind of play out in the next 5, 10 years. But that is also a possibility.

I think the other is, you know, there are a lot more interesting ownership models for corporations in Europe than there are in the US, steward ownership as an interesting way to separate who controls the company from who profits from the company. Whereas in the US, these things are intertwined in terms of shareholders in that shareholders want growth. And so if you want that growth, you're going to do all these unnatural things, and that leads to all of this kind of weird behavior that we have. So at some point--

- Could you define that again, that type of ownership?

- Yeah, it's a concept called steward ownership. And so there are companies like Zeiss and Bosch that are structured under this way where the control of the company is actually held in-- it could be a couple of different vehicles. It could be a nonprofit or a foundation, but that's separate from the shares.

Now, we kind of actually have that in the US in the form of dual-class stock owned by, say, Zuckerberg or other folks who have basically super votes, so they can never really get outvoted. And so you end up having these large networks that are basically run by dictators.

So that's almost like the same model but applied in a bad way. You could take that same thing and change it. But, you know, all of these possibilities are really going to come as a function of the will, whether there is a will to do it in this manner, and that's going to be really hard. That's sentiment that takes a lot of time to change.

- So I'm just going to ask-- just post one final question that "when we think of distribution, we usually think of mass, untargeted distribution, always hoping to expand our audiences. Can the panelists talk about distributing to more specific, preinclined audiences but using the worldwide network afforded to us by the interwebs, perhaps akin to how big tech companies use granular algorithms to target ads?"

- Is that a me question, Karin?

- That's a tough question. I just want to say if there's any engineers listening, we need rogue engineers, and someone else said we need a rogue data set. However we can get to data transparency in distribution, I'm all for it.

Yeah, I feel like the question was how do we target audiences through online networks?

- And really being just more specific, this comes up-- I think everyone has a grant question, who's your targeted audience? And to say everyone or the public is not a meaningful answer.

- Yeah.

- And so part of this is on makers to think more about who is the audience? But then I think the question is when we're designing distribution strategies, how can we be more targeted and specific?

- Yeah, I think that's where-- you know, I-- this is me talking somewhat out of naive turn and putting unrealistic ideas out in the world, so please take that as a grain of salt. This is like a huge disclaimer because I'm a total outsider here, but what I will say I think on that point is I think if you think about-- I think if you approach things through what's implied in that question, it's probably too late because, you know, there's an analogous model in kind of the world of technology startups of buying a bunch of Facebook ads, buying a bunch of Google ads, and trying to find distribution for your product or service through that way, and that's the most expensive route you could go.

What people are starting to do and starting to realize is the need to cultivate a community before they even build their product or service, right? And that by having proximity to a specific community, it also ensures that they build the right thing.

Now, making a documentary is not exactly the same thing as a product at all, so I don't want to suggest that here's my advice. You should follow it. But I do think the order of operations should be reimagined. You know, like what could you do-- what is it that you could do to almost make very clear that you care about a certain narrative or that you're interested in a certain area and to spend the time to actually share what you are learning as you go through the process?

So one thing that I teach as well and one of the concepts that I work with my students on is this idea of working in public, and it's very scary because, you know-- which means sharing the artifacts or the exhaust of your research process as you are learning things live versus thinking about solely putting out finished products into the world.

And the reason why it's beneficial is that if you only think about putting a finished product in the world, there's this lag of silence until you finally need people, and then you're like, hey, I need to launch. I need to launch. I need to find people. And it's a really hard gauntlet to run at that point, especially in an attention-scarce world.

But with my students it's like, hey, if you have a question, questions are inviting. Put out your question. Put out what you're learning about your question. You know, when you do research, you know, take the insights from the interview. Share that out. And if you start to share things over a period of time, you're gaining trust with a set of people. You're potentially also pulling people in.

By the time that you actually get to something that you need to launch, you've got all-- you've got a base of people that are invested emotionally in what you're trying to do and may be useful to you. They may be useful to you in ways that you might not even understand or imagine. But if you do that, you're setting yourself up for success. You're giving yourself a shot at actually making something.

And I think that that's where this-- for most of the filmmakers I know, that's a very uncomfortable proposition to do because there's so much power in working in stealth mode. But I think there's an analog I think in the tech industry where people have started to understand that being in stealth for too long is ultimately a disservice to the project. So that's how I would maybe reframe that question.

- Maggie, you're on mute.

- Sorry. Part of that reframing I think is helping us all find the agency in our work and not just-- it's very-- we're in this very strange position as filmmakers of being filmmakers and small-business owners, and I think that this having to-- having the confidence to think about possibilities when you think about the business side of your work, that's challenging. And I hope that over the course of these conversations this year that people can feel a little more empowered to define the terms of-- that will best serve their film and the audience that they want to serve.

Karin, any final words?

- Yeah, I would just say that that question-- I mean, it's a great question, because, in a way, I think it points to how the system is failing audiences and filmmakers if we don't-- you know, there's such a disconnection or alienation, you know, and a monopolization. And I think, you know, hopefully many more conversations like this need to be had to create the space and the dialogue around what are-- you know, what are the many diverse structures we can create so that that question doesn't have to be asked over and over in the future?

- Great. Thank you all so much. We're a couple of minutes over, so I think we're going to have to wrap it up, but I really appreciate-- I think this really set the tone for Getting Real, and thanks so

much. We will be-- this conversation was recorded, and we will be sharing it on YouTube.

And just want to just give a couple of thanks to colleagues behind the scenes. Cassidy Dimon, Niki Bhardwaj, and LeAnn Scrimmager, my colleagues at the IDE. Thanks so much Hope Simon for your ASL interpretation and to Tina Dillon for the live captioning.

And I would like to invite you to join us for the next two Getting Real Now sessions. The next one is Thursday, September 10, a conversation between Maria Ressa and Ramona Díaz, the maker of "A Thousand Cuts" and Maria, the hero of the movie. And that's called Documenting Press Freedom and Impact. And then Wednesday, September 16, a conversation about the intersection of storytelling and community with Louis Massiah and Yvonne Michelle Shirley that I'm very excited about as well.

Registration for Getting Real '20 opens on September 2. It is free this year, so we encourage you to register, and then we will be releasing programming and schedule, you know, as the days approaches. It's going to be five days. Three of those days will be a core programming that's sort of main stage, and then two of those days will be dedicated to various breakout groups.

So thank you all so much, and I look forward to the next session. Thanks. Thanks, Karin and Gary.