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Summit '23: Top three takeaways from "Prognosis for Premium Docs" panel

By Justin Anderson January 25, 2023



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The word "premium" gets thrown around in the documentary and non-fiction space a lot these days, to the point where some would argue it's beginning to lose meaning.

What that term still means was one of the main topics of conversation for the Realscreen Summit's "Prognosis for Premium Docs" panel, held on Tuesday (January 24). Moderated by Station 6 Productions' Tony Tackaberry, the panel included Trilogy Films founder and documentary filmmaker Dawn Porter, PBS' VP of programming and operations Adaora Udoji, Blue Ant Media's EVP of international Solange Attwood, History Channel EVP and head of programming Eli Lehrer, and Anchor Entertainment founder and president Ethan Goldman.

Three major points emerged from the panel's wide-ranging discussion, as main takeaways for the audience:

1. "Premium" can mean many things... but it usually costs more

What actually defines a "premium documentary" can change depending on who you ask, but one thing the panel agreed on was that it often directly correlated to the cost.

"Certainly it's price," Porter said. "It's content that costs more to make. But I think it's more than price, it's also what stories we're telling.

"Premium for some folks could be low seven figures... There's been a lot of price inflation," she continued. "So I think we should think about how we're defining that term."

Another factor that's often inextricably linked to the premium doc genre is talent, added Lehrer.

"For us, the lines on what qualifies as premium is blurry. Something like the series we're doing with Film of Country and Film of the Future, we're not sure if it's premium or not."

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The BBC has announced a pair of non-fiction commissions, with one centering around a 24/7 pet hospital, and the other taking a view into the Leeds Teaching Hospital.

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Ethan [Goldman] and Big Fish Entertainment, *History's Greatest Heists with Pierce Brosnan*," he said. "By the rule of Netflix, that's an ongoing series — it's not a traditional premium documentary — but because it has A-list talent attached, that elevates it and allows us to position that as something different from an *Alone* or a *Curse of Oak Island*."

Attwood added that, for a global distributor like Blue Ant, "premium" often means that a combination of factors are at play.

"On the international market, we're often talking about access as an entry point to premium, we're often talking about talent and budget. So those three levers can define something as being something really special."

## 2. Premium often means finding a partner

Given the often greater costs, partnering with another company can be a way to alleviate some of the financial pressure that can come with a premium project. One example is Goldman's Anchor Entertainment teaming with Blumhouse for the recently announced true-crime series *Look Into My Eyes*.

"This is a perfect example of a coproduction. We knew in this competitive market that it was going to be difficult to set this up without having a big name attached," Goldman said. "So we went to a company that has an incredible amount of cachet and experience in this genre, and that was Blumhouse."

Udoji pointed out that the pros of partnerships can take many forms, and in the case of PBS — which licenses content rather than owning it outright — having that platform on their side for an extended period of time without giving up the rights to their project entirely can be a strong enticement for content producers.

"We're collaborative," she said. "Are you going to make millions and millions of dollars at PBS? Probably not. But we're also not taking your film from you."

## 3. There are still reasons to be optimistic

With the industry entering a transitional phase, as many large corporations are rethinking their approach to content spending following what Tackaberry referred to as the "golden age" of documentaries, there's some doom and gloom entering the business. But many on the panel remain optimistic about the premium doc space.

"Human beings are curious about other human beings," Udoji said. "Form and shape of [documentaries], of course, is going to change, and yes, it was wonderful when the streamers got involved. But documentaries have only been increasing. Look at the last 50 years: you look at all of the surveys, you look at all the quantitative data, all audiences love documentaries across gender, across race, whatever it is, there is a tremendous curiosity."

That sentiment was shared by Goldman, who said he doesn't see a boom-or-bust scenario in the field right now, and believes the "golden age" of documentary is still ongoing. He added that as streamers consolidate, there's going to be a need for each of them to put on programming that feels like an event, and that even at a lower price point a project can have that premium feel if it's sufficiently planned out and executed properly.

"In the instance of some of the platforms that are wanting premium but don't have as much to spend, I think it just means you have to be a bit



spend, I think it just means you have to be a bit more mindful with your production team, with the director, about establishing that vision at the outset."

**TAGS:**

**2023 Realscreen Summit, Adaora Udoji, Anchor Entertainment, Blue Ant Media, Dawn Porter, Eli Lehrer, Ethan Goldman, History Channel, PBS, Realscreen Summit '23, RSS '23, Solange Attwood, Tony Tackaberry, Trilogy Films**

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