

UNC-TV & SOUTHERN DOCUMENTARY FUND NC INDEPENDENTS LISTENING TOUR 2015

Introduction

Thank you for your interest in UNC-TV's work with independent producers. In 2014, UNC-TV underwent an extensive strategic review as part of the University of North Carolina's Strategic Plan "*Our Time, Our Future: The UNC Compact with North Carolina.*" One of the major findings of this study was the recognition that UNC-TV needs to better support and showcase the important content being created by independent producers throughout the state.

North Carolina is home to a large number of independent producers, who contribute to the vibrancy and economy of the state. Two of the key action items coming out of UNC-TV's Strategic Study are to increase the amount of independent productions that UNC-TV distributes on all of its platforms and to more fully support the work of independent producers.

To achieve these goals, UNC-TV partnered with Rachel Raney and the Southern Documentary Fund to organize, promote, and moderate a series of meetings with independent media makers from around North Carolina. Four meetings took place in Raleigh, Winston-Salem, Charlotte, and Wilmington during the fall of 2014 and winter of 2015. We learned much from the frank, honest, and important conversations at each meeting, including:

- How important the independent filmmaking community is here in North Carolina.
- The incredible work independent filmmakers are doing in a wide variety of genres.
- The diversity of viewpoints and voices independent producers can bring to UNC-TV's audiences.
- The role independent producers can play helping UNC-TV connect with communities throughout the state.
- The fact that UNC-TV needs to do more to support the independent filmmaking ecosystem here in the state.

At each meeting, we stressed that this conversation would not end with the last meeting on the listening tour. And it has not! The listening tour and the work coming out of it have been transformative for us. We have continued to talk about all of the information gained during the meetings to develop new ways to work and connect with independent producers. We are also creating a brand-new series called **Reel South** to feature the work of independent media makers from throughout the American South.

You will find out more information about this series, what we heard during the tour, the major themes discussed, and the action steps we are taking in the accompanying report. Thank you for taking the time to read the report, and I invite you to join our efforts to showcase independent productions. At UNC-TV, we tell the stories that make North Carolina home, and we look forward to sharing more of the important stories produced by independent media makers with audiences across the state and beyond.



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REPORT

In the fall of 2014, UNC-TV asked Rachel Raney and the Southern Documentary Fund to organize, promote, and moderate a series of meetings with independent media makers from around North Carolina.

These meetings grew out of the UNC-TV Strategic Study, which urged the network to more aggressively reach out to independent producers around the region to develop and acquire original content. With this mandate in mind, the objectives of the meetings were two-fold: (1) executives at UNC-TV wanted to inform producers about this new priority to work with independents, and (2) UNC-TV wanted to hear directly from producers regarding their past experiences dealing with the network, their feelings about the current content, and ideas for moving forward in closer partnership.

Listening Tour meetings took place in four cities/regions over the course of six months:

Raleigh

November 20, 2014—Trailblazer Studios

Approximately 50 producers from across the Triangle attended the first Listening Tour event. Most were experienced producers, and many had worked with UNC-TV in the past.

Winston-Salem

January 20, 2015—UNC School of the Arts

Approximately 30 producers from the Triad attended this second meeting of the Listening Tour. Several attendees are faculty at the UNC School of the Arts and Wake Forest University. Some local film students also attended.

Charlotte

March 4, 2015—Spirit Square, Blumenthal Performing Arts Center

Approximately 10 producers from Charlotte attended this meet-up. Two faculty members traveled from Appalachian State University in Boone; there were some narrative filmmakers in attendance as well.

Wilmington

April 8, 2015—Jengo's Playhouse, Cucalorus Film Festival

Approximately 30 media makers and community activists attended the last meet-up in Wilmington. The group was diverse and included both experienced and emerging producers. Also present were some professionals with ties to Wilmington's feature film and television crews.



To make the most of these meetings, it was decided to keep introductions and context brief, then divide the participants into smaller working groups to tackle three critical questions. Each group worked on the questions collaboratively and then reported their results to the group at large.

1. As a media maker and viewer, what experiences, positive or negative, have you had with UNC-TV?
2. Besides money, which all producers need, what sorts of resources or support would be helpful from your public TV network?
3. What sorts of projects would you like to see on statewide public television? What sorts of projects would you want to collaborate on with UNC-TV? And what is the best process to make those projects happen?

The conversations that unfolded at the four meetings were honest, direct, professional, and ultimately productive. While there was ample opportunity to discuss past disappointments and grievances, there was an equal amount of energy spent imagining a path forward.

COMMON THEMES

Many common themes emerged at the four meetings:

- This demographic is not watching UNC-TV with any frequency. In particular, they are not watching UNC-TV-produced programs. They stated that much of UNC-TV's content is aimed at children or seniors, that the local productions seem dated in both style and approach, and that overall the content is too North Carolina-branded or focused.
- There is a general perception that UNC-TV is conservative in its programming choices, avoids controversy, and is not covering more pressing or hot-button issues around the state. Part of this perception stems from the funding the network receives from the state legislature.
- In terms of submitting proposals or programs, producers reported a lack of accessibility to UNC-TV staff, a lack of transparency in terms of what kinds of content the network seeks, and no information regarding the resources available for coproductions or acquired programs.
- Producers expressed the following general needs: more engagement and presence from UNC-TV in the filmmaking/media community (at conferences, festivals, etc.); access to production and postproduction resources; letters of support for their projects (for fundraising purposes, et al.); feedback on their proposals and programs; and as much as possible, they would like UNC-TV to serve as a convener and even possible educator of content creators around the state.
- Participants urged UNC-TV to have a bigger presence in the University system and at the many film festivals throughout the state. Specifically, many producers inquired about bringing back **NC Visions**, or a similar series, as a vehicle for showcasing independent work. They also requested that the director of external productions position be filled at the network.



ACTION STEPS

UNC-TV has already taken a number of concrete steps to deepen its engagement with independent producers.

- Building on the e-mails gathered through the Listening Tour meetings and an internal database of producers, UNC-TV will be launching a quarterly newsletter to independents to better communicate directly with the community.
- UNC-TV has moved the two PBS independent documentary series, **POV** and **Independent Lens**, to Mondays at 10 p.m., in line with the national time slots. These programs previously aired on Fridays or Saturdays at 2 a.m.
- UNC-TV has temporarily put its vetting of proposals on hold and is currently revamping the submissions process. The goal is to provide clearer criteria to producers and a simplified online application form. The new process will be launched in fall 2015.
- The network has agreed for the first time to partner with an independent documentary filmmaker in applying to ITVS Open Call. That application was submitted in August 2015.
- UNC-TV has created an Indies Advisory Panel, made up of six producers from around the state. The first meeting took place on August 6, 2015.
- In collaboration with the Southern Documentary Fund and SCETV, the network is creating a new series to showcase independent documentaries about the American South. The producing partners aim to deliver a pilot first season for broadcast in January 2016.
- UNC-TV has recently created two new positions and plans to have them filled this fall: a new senior director of content and a director of independent productions, which is a full-time position to work with independent producers.
- The network is exploring another possible position—a development professional dedicated to raising monies for coproductions and acquired content.

