FWD-Doc
Documentary Filmmakers with Disabilities

Accessibility and Virtual Events: The First 10 Tips

FWD-Doc is a group of filmmakers with disabilities (FWDs) working in documentary film and their allies. FWD-Doc seeks to increase the visibility of, support for, and direct access to opportunities, networks, and employment for disabled filmmakers.

The global pandemic has changed the way the world works and the way the world networks. This is also true for those of us in documentary film. Panels and presentations, networking events, and Q&As have moved online. We want to ensure that virtual events are not limiting and that everyone can participate.

While not comprehensive, the bullet points below are a starting point to promote greater accessibility and inclusion for your membership, as well as for broader public participation in online sessions.

For Individuals/Moderators

- During introductions, when giving your bio, provide your pronouns (if comfortable) and a short image description of yourself and background. Encourage panelists to do the same.

- Remind participants to announce their name before they speak, speak one at a time, and not talk over one another.

- If CART (Communication Access Realtime Translation aka "open captioning") or ASL (American Sign Language) is available, please mention it (and include a note in chat), and explain how individuals may access it. If you aren't sure, check with your session organizer or captioning service (many are well-versed in how to do this and can walk you through it).

- If you have ASL interpreters or CART captioners, please provide them with a line-up of who will talk and any key terms. This allows them to familiarize themselves with the subject matter, as well as plan in advance for when they will switch off.

- Make sure that the ASL interpreter videos are not unintentionally hidden from view. Most platforms allow for spotlighting or "pinning;" one helpful tip is to treat the ASL interpreter as if the interpreter is a speaker or panelist.

- The chat function, while technically accessible, can be overwhelming if there are many participants. Prioritize the Q&A for connecting to panelists and minimize the use of chat for key information.

- If posted in the chat, also provide links, resources and references on a website or to attendees after the fact to ensure that all audience/participants receive the same material.

- Offer a secondary option for questions such as emailing or texting the moderator. In addition to people with disabilities, this is important for global participants for whom using their phone versus a computer may be more prevalent. (For privacy you can use a Google phone number)

- If breakout rooms are part of the programming, ensure that interpreters, captioners, and the people who need them are in the same breakout room, but avoid isolating participants needing accommodations.

- Ask about accessibility, accommodations, and diversity. It lessens the burden on those without privilege when you use your privilege to lift up others.

For Organizations, Associations, Funders and Festival/Conference/Session Organizers

- Ensure that all communications (email, registration forms, websites, announcements) include a prominent notice that accommodations are available and instructions on how to request them. For many people, this is a signal as to whether or not they are welcome in your space.

- Assign a point person or point of contact for accessibility and accommodations.

- Regardless of your online platform, a call-in number and numbers-only passcode allows US-based sign language interpreters to access video conferences (some US interpreter relay services have legal restrictions in how they access video conferences).

- Provide captioning. Live captioning is affordable, and captions afterwards for a recording of a panel are pennies per minute. Providing this automatically for all your online events not only increases accessibility for individuals who are D/deaf but may also be helpful for international participants or those that need their speakers to be turned off in their household environment. In addition, not all participants have visible disabilities, nor are comfortable disclosing.

- Prioritize accessible content. Do films you're supporting/funding/promoting have captions? Do your films have audio description? Do you encourage, fund, or require accessible content?

- Use open captions in any video or video clips shown during webinars, panels, and/or screenings.

- Include a line item in your annual budget for paying for captioning, ASL interpreting, and also to pay panelists and moderators even a modest honorarium, recognizing their expertise.

- Remember, accessibility isn't just for panels. Accessibility is also for informal (and very critical) industry social events, discussions and networking. Without accommodations for networking and similar industry events, disabled filmmakers are prevented from developing meaningful, substantive professional relationships that advance careers and lead to opportunities.

- Include BIPOC, LGBTQ+, and filmmakers with disabilities in programming beyond diversity. We are all filmmakers with a wide variety of expertise and have value and skills beyond our identities. Reach out to FWD-Doc for recommendations of filmmakers who may be suitable for panels.

- You are creating the model for your members/participants. Prioritize and promote accessibility. Fund it. Talk about it. Not only does this encourage more people to be open about their disabilities and accommodation needs, it also encourages others to craft accessible content and engage in creating a welcoming and inclusive environment.

We are all here because of our passion for film. Ensuring we can all share and engage in the discourse isn't just the responsibility of a moderator or organizer, it requires all of us.

Resources

"Ensuring Access to Zoom Programming" (a detailed "How-To" from the Longmore Institute on Disability): https://docs.google.com/document/d/1344ml7HJTMP3Fp_3QvynSLe-Qck5N4lX3lvrxy1eJ-A/edit

Other Links and Resources from FWD-Doc (encompasses captioning and audio description in addition to online event information): https://www.fwd-doc.org/resources