ENHANCING ACCESSIBILITY AND SUPPORT FOR DISABLED NONFICTION MEDIA MAKERS

NAI 2024 REPORT

ida international documentary association | nonfiction access initiative

Ford Foundation JustFilms

FWD-Doc

A NOTE FROM OUR PARTNERS AT FWD-DOC:

The IDA has a special place in the history of disabled documentary filmmakers. In 2018, at the biennial Getting Real conference held in Los Angeles, our community came together under one roof, probably for the first time. After a panel titled **"The Ramp Less Traveled,"** where four documentary filmmakers with disabilities shared their stories, about 40 people moved into an adjacent room to talk and start organizing. Many of us had never met another filmmaker with a disability before.

Potential funders and allies mingled with us. Even the legendary Judy Heumann joined us via Zoom. There was a potent mix of people with a mission to enable the disabled community to have its truths, talent, and storytelling supported in a way that hadn't been achieved before. **FWD-Doc** can trace its beginnings to this meeting.

A few years later, the IDA, FWD-Doc members, and others crafted the **Nonfiction Access Initiative**. The NAI's first order of business was researching the barriers, needs, and overall realities that documentary filmmakers with disabilities experience, and then producing a report. Through the hard work and contributions of many, we present this report.

As the saying goes, "Data is Power." Our community has rarely been part of DEI studies in the past. It is as if we didn't exist. We can say that today, our place in the arts and society is undeniable. Organizations have, as **1in4 Coalition** co-founder Eryn Brown has evangelized, "added the A" to DEI. We think it's fair to say that the vibrant power of storytelling has been a major catalyst for this change. And documentaries have led the way - internationally.

We hope that this report will educate funders and organizations seeking comprehensive guidance on how to remove the existing barriers that disabled filmmakers and storytellers encounter in creating their work.

— Lindsey Dryden and Jim LeBrecht from FWD-Doc

> **I wanna see feisty disabled people change the world."**
> - Judy Heumann

Below is a guide to some essential terminology included within the report. We use both person-first and identity-first language. For a definition of these terms please refer to the <u>Nonfiction Media-Makers with Disabilities Survey Definition of Terms</u>

Access/Accessibility:

In the case of a facility, readily usable by a particular individual; in the case of a program or activity, presented or provided in such a way that a particular individual can participate. The concept of accessible design ensures both "direct access" (unassisted) and "indirect access" meaning compatibility with a person's assistive technology (for example, computer screen readers).

Crip Time:

A concept within the disability community that challenges conventional understandings of time and productivity. It acknowledges that people with disabilities may experience time differently. It emphasizes flexibility, understanding, and accommodation, rather than adhering strictly to standard schedules or societal expectations of efficiency. The term "crip" is a reclamation of a historically derogatory word for people with disabilities, used here to signify empowerment and a sense of community among disabled individuals.

Disability:

Physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities; (e.g., seeing, hearing, speaking, walking, communicating, sensing, breathing, performing manual tasks, learning, working or caring for oneself) a record of such an impairment; or being regarded as having such an impairment (Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990). When we define someone with a disability, we include physical disabilities, developmental disabilities, learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, chronic health conditions, mental health, blindness, low vision, D/deaf, and/or neurodivergence.

Disability Justice:

Centralizes on the needs and experience of folks experiencing intersectional oppression, such as disabled people of color, immigrants with disabilities, queers with disabilities, trans and gender nonconforming people with disabilities, people with disabilities who are houseless, people with disabilities who are incarcerated, people with disabilities who have had their ancestral lands stolen amongst others. **(In accordance with the 10 Principles of Disability Justice created by Sins Invalid)**

Intersectional Identity:

Describes a person experiencing bias based on multiple identities; race, gender, nonbinary, ethnicity, socio-economic status, religion, sexuality, and Disability. A person discriminated against, unsupported, unprotected, and oppressed by systems of power intentionally designed to exclude their well being.

People of the Global Majority (PGM):

A term that refers to individuals who belong to racial or ethnic groups that make up the majority of the world's population. This term is often used as an alternative to "people of color" or "minority groups" in order to emphasize the global context and the fact that these groups are, collectively, the majority worldwide. The term is intended to challenge the Eurocentric or Western-centric perspectives that often dominate discussions of race and ethnicity, and to highlight the diversity and significance of non-white populations globally.

Tokenism:

The superficial inclusion of minority group members to create an appearance of equality, without addressing deeper issues of discrimination and inequality. This can put undue pressure on individuals to represent their entire group.

Universal Design:

A concept in architecture, product development, and education that emphasizes the creation of environments, products, and services that are accessible and usable by all people, regardless of their age, ability, or status in life. The goal of universal design is to create inclusive solutions that meet the needs of a diverse population without the need for special adaptations or accommodations. It is based on the principle that designing for the widest range of users from the beginning is more efficient and equitable than making individual accommodations later.

Unrestricted Fund:

Funds that do not have a specific use required for spending.

In a first of its kind survey conducted by the Nonfiction Access Initiative (NAI), insights from 196 disabled nonfiction media makers reveal critical barriers to accessibility and inclusion within the industry. This report underscores the urgent need for systemic change, presenting actionable recommendations for funders, organizations, and the industry. By embracing universal design, fostering intersectional inclusivity, and providing targeted financial support, we begin to dismantle the barriers faced by disabled creators.

INTRODUCTION

In the vibrant world of nonfiction media, storytelling is enriched by the diverse voices of its creators. Yet, a significant group of talents within this realm — nonfiction media makers with disabilities — faces systemic barriers that limit their opportunities. The NAI 2024 Report seeks to illuminate these challenges, advocate for transformative change, and lay the groundwork for a more inclusive and accessible media landscape.

Knowledge about the experiences, perspectives and vision of disabled media makers is a gap that this report aims to address. Our community-led research sought to receive input directly from disabled nonfiction media makers, and aimed to uncover not only the realities faced by disabled nonfiction media makers, but also their recommendations for the transformation of the industry. Their insights, experiences, and aspirations form the core of our findings and recommendations.

This report is not just a collection of data; it is a call to action for funders, organizations, and the media industry at large to dismantle the barriers and forge a future where every storyteller, regardless of disability, has the opportunity to shape our understanding of the world.

Our findings highlight the urgent need for comprehensive reform — from improving funding mechanisms and support structures to implementing inclusive policies and practices that recognize and accommodate the unique needs of disabled media makers.

This report is a call to action for funders and organizations in the nonfiction media industry to evaluate their practices, policies, and attitudes toward disability. It is also a tool to empower individual practitioners and industry members to demand greater accessibility and inclusivity in our industry.

The Nonfiction Access Initiative (NAI) was made possible through the generous support of the Ford Foundation with the goal of creating a regrant fund for nonfiction media makers from the disability community.

NAI 2024 RESEARCH AND INITIATIVE GOALS:

1

IDENTIFY NEEDS:
To identify the needs of disabled nonfiction media makers

2

INFORM FUNDERS:
To develop recommendations for funders in order to better serve disabled nonfiction media makers

3

AMPLIFY VOICES:
To gather data about disabled nonfiction media makers and share it as broadly as possible

4

CHAMPION CHANGE:
To activate further research and advocacy for the disability community in nonfiction media

Research Design. In late 2022, IDA's Nonfiction Access Initiative convened a group of disability-focused advising partners to create the Nonfiction Media Makers with Disabilities Survey. There is a fundamental lack of data available about nonfiction media makers from the disability community, and we believe that directly-impacted communities are best positioned to lead the research and analysis of the kind of funding and support disabled media makers need, and the institutional and industry transformations that are most required.

Our advisory committee met from November 2022 to April 2023 to develop the survey instrument. The survey was created and conducted through a community-based research process guided by the values of research justice. Research justice is a strategic framework that seeks to transform structural inequities in research. This type of research centralizes community voices and leadership with the goal of facilitating genuine, lasting social change. Input from the international advisory committee was a critical part of our process.

DATA COLLECTION

Conducting research within the disabled nonfiction media maker community presents unique challenges, as it involves engaging a historically hard-to-reach population often overlooked by mainstream studies. To methodologically address the challenges of reaching this historically underrepresented population, we leveraged the extensive networks and expertise of our advisory committee, comprised of disabled nonfiction media makers and organizations focused on disability, to effectively disseminate the survey and facilitate survey-taking sessions within their specific communities. The survey opened in April 2023 and closed on September 1, 2023. The survey was sent out to 450 documentary and film-focused organizations and disability advocacy organizations worldwide to collect responses. The survey was translated into Arabic, Hindi, Spanish, and Urdu. We also offered anyone whose native language is Sign Language the option to take it that way.

The majority of responses came from the United States, followed by Pakistan (where one of our advisory committee partners was located), and the United Kingdom. The survey was completed by 196 respondents. Participation in the survey was voluntary and anonymous. The respondents represent a range of international nonfiction media makers who identify as disabled – directors, producers, editors, writers, and researchers.

DATA ANALYSIS.

Once the survey closed in September of 2023 we began a robust coding process, under the guidance and with the support of Chris Schweidler and the Research Action Design team. Given budget limitations, our first task in the coding process was to identify the most critical questions needed to meet our stated goals. From there, we organized and coded the qualitative data, assuring that the nuances of each narrative response were noted. With the help of Research Action Design and the UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment, we analyzed and mapped the quantitative data. The coding process lasted 6 months, from October 2023 - March 2024.

COMMUNITY FEEDBACK, DISSEMINATION, RESOURCES AND OPEN DATA.

The final phase of the project is the communication of our results with the field, which will begin at the conference Getting Real 2024. We will elicit feedback and organize to gather stakeholders in the community to make action plans for use of this data as advocacy.

A core goal of this research project has been to begin to fill the historical gap in data about nonfiction media makers from the disability community. Though we will carefully clean and further anonymize our data, it is critical that the data is open source. Through a request form on our website we will invite allies of this cause to utilize the complete dataset we have collected in this survey as an aid to support additional research, reports, and/or articles. If you would like to have access to the complete data please fill out the application form on the Nonfiction Access Initiative website. We have made a complete list of the survey's questions available for download as well.

To raise awareness and build community amongst the general public, we created a space for sharing resources through a dedicated listserv and website. This resulted in project sharing, resource sharing, and job postings, as well as increased visibility for the survey. We also facilitated an exchange of ideas and expertise through a series of 15 virtual public programs which included a teachout around accessibility and disability justice by FWD-Doc; "Embodied Infrastructure: Disabled Immersive Nonfiction," a panel on new media practices led by disabled makers; and a special screening of the film *Mafia* which explores d/Deaf aesthetics.

Our focus on broad capacity-building and deep listening enhanced the breadth and community-sourced orientation of the research. Our community-based research (supplemented by our educational programming) resulted in a survey that not only measures quantitative data but, by capturing qualitative responses, also reflects the values and variety of lived experiences of disabled nonfiction media makers. The qualitative questions on the survey allowed respondents to express the emotional impact of industry practices and to share personal narratives.

SECTION ONE: KEY FINDINGS

1. ESSENTIAL AREAS FOR CHANGE

At the heart of this survey was a critical inquiry: What changes are necessary to empower the practice of disabled nonfiction media makers? A respondent encapsulated the sentiment of many:

> "
>
> We need creative professionals as well as diverse stories and representation for society to thrive, therefore we need more funding, support, and opportunities for this to happen. It would also be ideal to set quotas for large to medium productions around diversity and inclusion, for example, must have 10% of crew with disability (or percentage reflective of the disability community) and other underrepresented and marginalized groups."
>
> - Survey Participant

Survey participants from the disability community expressed a strong desire for the nonfiction media industry to improve accessibility and inclusion for people with disabilities, alongside a need for more substantial funding and support for filmmakers within these communities. Participants highlighted the dual need for practical policy adjustments and a cultural shift towards practices that are more inclusive, equitable, and accessible in media production, event hosting, and funding allocation.

==Our research identified critical areas where change is imperative:==

UNIVERSAL DESIGN AND ACCESSIBILITY POLICIES/PRACTICES:
Respondents emphasized the importance of implementing comprehensive accessibility policies and practices that adhere to universal design principles, aiming to create equitable opportunities for people with disabilities across all aspects of media work.

ACCOMMODATIONS AND NON-DISCRIMINATION IN APPLICATION PROCESSES:
Respondents call for making application processes more accommodating and free from discrimination for disabled applicants. This includes a critique of screening questions that may inadvertently act as barriers and the demand for modifications that ensure a fair and accessible application journey for all candidates.

ENHANCED ACCESSIBILITY OF EVENTS AND SCREENINGS:
Respondents highlighted the importance of making industry events and screenings accessible. This involves providing necessary accommodations such as captioning services, ensuring physical accessibility, and maintaining accessibility resources post-pandemic that were introduced during COVID-19 but were later removed.

FUNDING AND SUPPORT FOR DISABLED FILMMAKERS:
A significant portion of feedback centered around the need for more dedicated funding and career support for filmmakers with disabilities. Respondents seek increased resources and financial support allocated explicitly to media projects that focus on disability experiences.

As the survey spotlights the systemic hurdles this community confronts, initiatives addressing universal design, non-discriminatory practices, event accessibility, and dedicated funding support emerge as crucial actions towards an equitable future for disabled nonfiction media makers.

2. BARRIERS TO ENTRY FOR DISABLED MEDIA MAKERS

To grasp the landscape of challenges encountered by disabled media makers, the survey posed an essential question: What are the most common barriers you face as media makers from the disability community?

> "Lack of Representation: People with disabilities are often underrepresented or portrayed inaccurately in media. This lack of representation can perpetuate stereotypes and misconceptions about individuals with disabilities, making it difficult for disabled media makers to find suitable role models or inspiring stories that reflect their experiences."
>
> - Survey Participant

Respondents shared the multifaceted barriers faced by media makers from the disability community, emphasizing systemic challenges that hinder their full participation and representation.

The responses underscore five critical barriers:

1. ACCESSIBILITY ISSUES.

Accessibility remains a major hurdle, not just in physical spaces like industry events and festivals but also in digital platforms and media production processes. The issue of access encompasses a broad spectrum of concerns, from the need for accommodations to the inaccessibility of technology and software crucial for media creation.

FIG #1

Types of access accommodations you would like to be better funded?

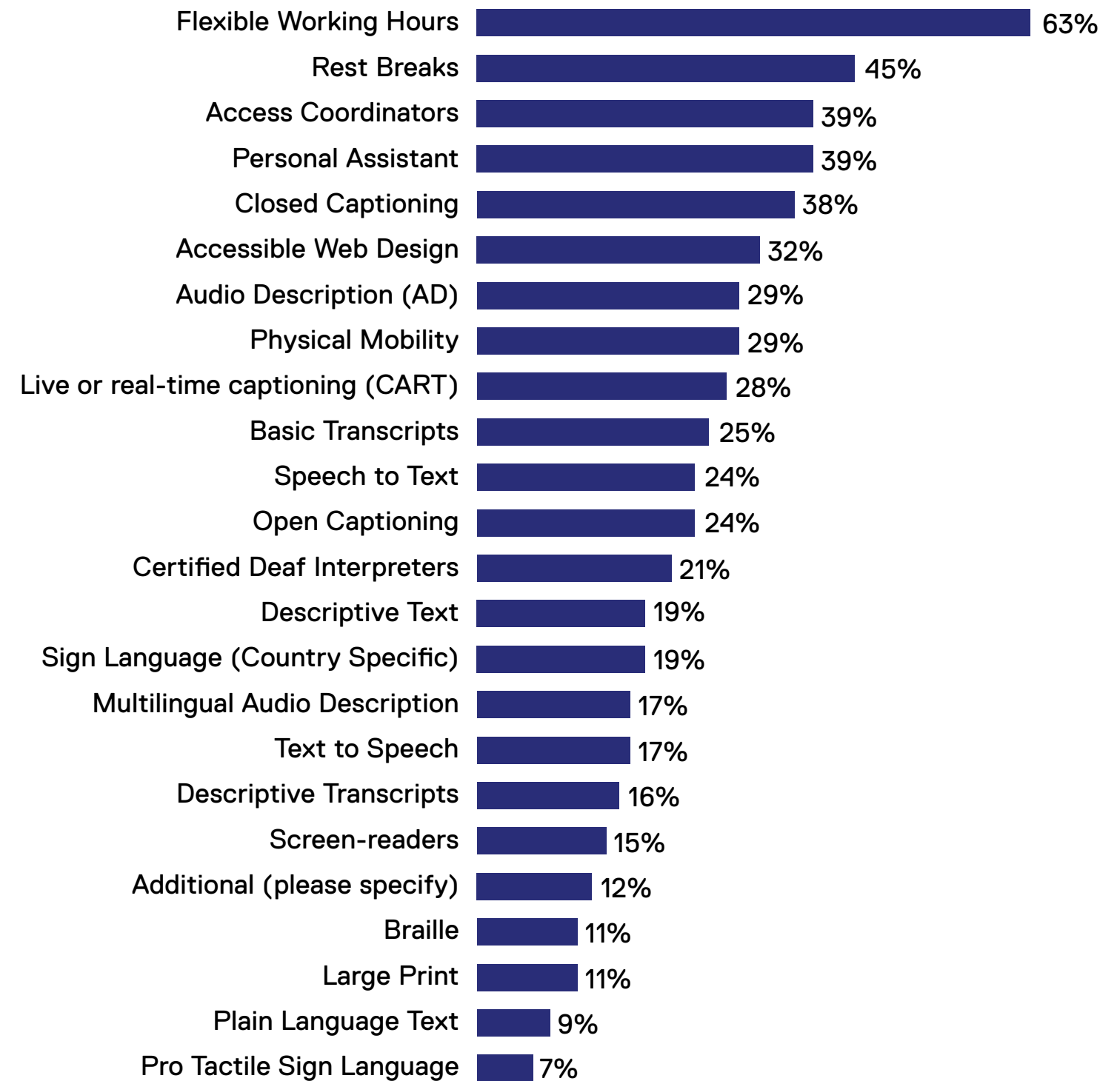| Accommodation	%
Flexible Working Hours	63%
Rest Breaks	45%
Access Coordinators	39%
Personal Assistant	39%
Closed Captioning	38%
Accessible Web Design	32%
Audio Description (AD)	29%
Physical Mobility	29%
Live or real-time captioning (CART)	28%
Basic Transcripts	25%
Speech to Text	24%
Open Captioning	24%
Certified Deaf Interpreters	21%
Descriptive Text	19%
Sign Language (Country Specific)	19%
Multilingual Audio Description	17%
Text to Speech	17%
Descriptive Transcripts	16%
Screen-readers	15%
Additional (please specify)	12%
Braille	11%
Large Print	11%
Plain Language Text	9%
Pro Tactile Sign Language	7%

Fig. #1 For those who responded "Additional accommodations" (12%), respondents specified: technology (e.g. hardware and software needs), services (e.g. mental health, ASL interpreters,etc.), workplace flexibility, inclusion (e.g. funding PGM, rural, underrepresented groups), basic needs, education on available resources, and comprehensive/equitable funding were highlighted as important accommodation funding needs.

2. STEREOTYPING AND STIGMA.
The stigma associated with disability leads to significant challenges, including being closeted about conditions due to fear of negative reactions. This stigma extends to the stereotyping and pigeonholing of disabled media makers, often limiting them to creating content only about disabilities.

3. REPRESENTATION AND MISCONCEPTIONS.
A critical barrier is the underrepresentation or inaccurate portrayal of people with disabilities in media. This perpetuates stereotypes, hampers the visibility of diverse narratives, and restricts role models for aspiring creators within the disability community.

4. RESOURCE AND FUNDING CONSTRAINTS
Disabled media makers often face difficulties in securing funding and resources for their projects, particularly those focusing on disability themes, which can stifle creative expression and project development.

5.EDUCATIONAL AND PROFESSIONAL OBSTACLES
Limited access to training, education, and inclusive hiring practices further marginalizes disabled individuals in the media industry, affecting their career progression and professional opportunities.

The diverse perspectives captured in the survey emphasize how these intersecting barriers create very real obstructions to disabled media makers bringing their stories and artistry to life and achieving career progression.

3. ## NAVIGATING FINANCIAL CHALLENGES FOR DISABLED MEDIA MAKERS

A critical inquiry of our survey focused on the financial challenges and expectations faced by disabled media makers when seeking external funding.

Survey responses underscore the need for funders and institutions to adopt a holistic approach to supporting disabled media makers. By providing targeted financial guidance, flexible funding arrangements, and ensuring inclusivity and accessibility in all interactions, these entities can significantly alleviate the challenges disabled creators face. Holistic support not only fosters a more equitable and supportive funding environment but also empowers disabled media makers to pursue their projects without compromising their financial security or well-being.

==Respondents identified the need for:==

FINANCIAL GUIDANCE AND LEGAL ASSISTANCE:
A critical support mechanism institutions could offer is access to financial and legal advisors familiar with the challenges faced by disabled individuals. This support can help navigate the complex landscape of tax implications and contractual agreements, ensuring they are beneficial and not detrimental to the recipients' financial health or benefits.

> " Financial Guidance: Provide access to financial advisors or experts who have experience working with individuals with disabilities and filmmakers. These professionals can offer personalized advice on tax implications, structuring payments, and managing finances in a way that minimizes negative impacts on benefits."
>
> - Survey Participant

FLEXIBLE PAYMENT OPTIONS AND BENEFITS EDUCATION:
Adjusting payment schedules to align with the financial needs of disabled creators and educating them on how funding impacts government benefits were highlighted as necessary supports. These measures aim to prevent negative consequences on the disabled media makers eligibility for benefits.

ACCESSIBILITY AND INCLUSIVITY:
Institutions should ensure that all aspects of the funding process are accessible, from communication to event participation, and involve disabled media makers in decision-making processes to reflect the community's needs accurately.

RESOURCE REFERRALS:
Connect creators with relevant organizations for support.

MAINTAIN OPEN COMMUNICATION CHANNELS:
Institutions must vigilantly maintain open communication channels in order to address disabled nonfiction media makers' concerns or changes in makers' financial situations. Communication should be approached intentionally and with care.

SENSITIVITY TO PRIVACY:
Institutions should recognize the importance of privacy and confidentiality, especially when discussing disability-related matters or financial circumstances.

The responses highlighted how funding sources can unintentionally undermine financial stability for disabled recipients if not properly structured. The intersections of managing career financing, government benefits, and disability-related costs create a uniquely complex landscape to navigate. The findings regarding financial challenges also underscore the community's aspirations for self-determination and equitable pathways to achieve their creative visions.

4. ADDRESSING INTERSECTIONALITY FOR DISABLED NONFICTION MEDIA MAKERS

Understanding the intricate layers of identity that shape the experiences of disabled nonfiction media makers is pivotal.

> "
>
> Disability itself is intersectional since it is so varied and needs of people with one kind of disability could conflict with needs of another (for example, people with autoimmune disorders/ chronic conditions may need to keep masking which can make communication difficult with people who are hard of hearing). How can we better understand each other?"
>
> - Survey Participant

Respondents highlight the critical need for nuanced approaches to address the intersections of race, gender, geographic location, class, caste, economic opportunity, sexuality, and disability within the nonfiction media space. This will require comprehensive strategies that encompass education, policy reform, diverse representation, and community engagement.

<mark>Key strategies include:</mark>

CONFRONTING STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION:
There's a strong call to confront and reduce stigma, bias, and discrimination. This involves creating environments conducive to open discussions about disability and intersectionality, moving beyond mere awareness campaigns to tangible, on-ground support.

ENSURING DIVERSE REPRESENTATION:
Respondents stress the importance of ensuring a broad spectrum of intersectional disabled voices is recognized. This includes highlighting invisible disabilities and ensuring PGM individuals with disabilities are visible and represented in media.

AVOIDING TOKENISM:
There's a desire for more global representation and complexity in portraying marginalized identities, urging for multifaceted representation that avoids tokenism.

FOSTERING OPEN DIALOG:
Comprehensive education programs and open dialogues are suggested to foster understanding and empathy towards intersecting identities.

ADVOCATING FOR POLICY REFORMS AND ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT:
Advocacy for policies that address specific needs and challenges faced by marginalized communities, alongside economic empowerment programs tailored to these groups, is deemed essential.

PROVIDING ACCESS TO HEALTHCARE AND COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT:
Enhancing access to healthcare and supporting community-led initiatives that recognize and address the unique needs of marginalized communities are highlighted as priorities.

5. EXPANDING KNOWLEDGE ON ACCESSIBILITY AND DISABILITY JUSTICE

Alongside the call to dismantle systemic barriers, the survey also gauged the community's current knowledge levels surrounding accessibility accommodations and disability justice within the nonfiction media landscape.

The survey asked several questions designed to understand the shared knowledge of the community of nonfiction media makers with disabilities:

→ What is your overall knowledge level about access accommodations available in the nonfiction space? (FIG #2)

→ What is your overall knowledge level about disability justice in the nonfiction space? FIG #3)

→ How do you feel about the availability of access in the nonfiction media making space? (FIG #4)
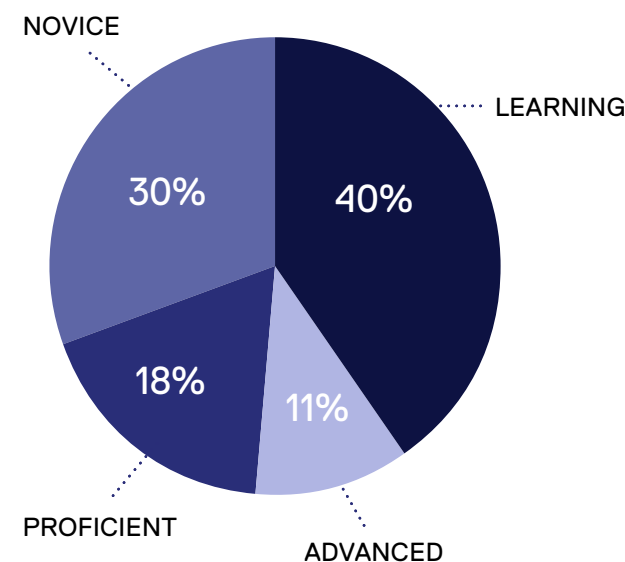
FIG #3

PROFICIENT
LEARNING
29%
35%
12%
25%
ADVANCED
NOVICE

FIG #2

NOVICE
LEARNING
30%
40%
18%
11%
PROFICIENT
ADVANCED

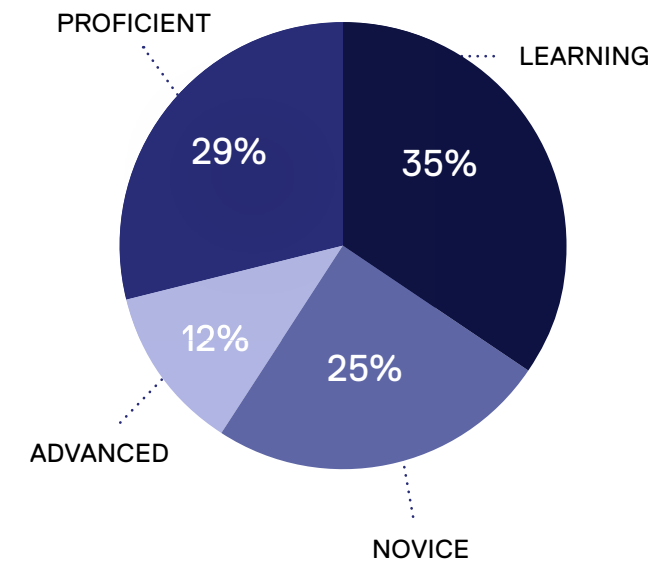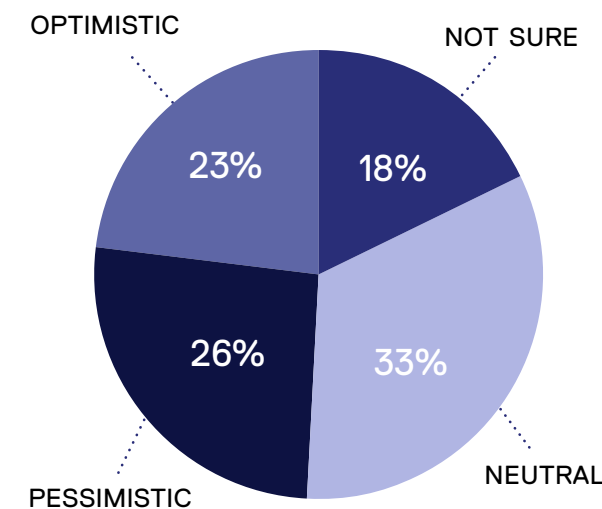**FIG #4**

OPTIMISTIC
NOT SURE
23%
18%
26%
33%
PESSIMISTIC
NEUTRAL

The charts reveal insights regarding the shared knowledge amongst disabled makers about accommodations and disability justice in the nonfiction space as well as makers' general feelings about the availability of access.

MOST MAKERS ARE "LEARNING"
In both the charts related to knowledge levels (Fig. 2 and Fig. 3) the largest segment of respondents is in the "Learning" category. This suggests a widespread recognition of the importance of these concepts, but also indicates that a significant portion of the population is still in the early stages of understanding and developing their knowledge.

MIXED SENTIMENTS ON ACCESS AVAILABILITY
Respondents' feelings about the current state of access in nonfiction media production presented a mixed picture (Fig. 4). With a nearly even spread across neutral, pessimistic, and optimistic responses, it's evident that experiences and perceptions of accessibility vary widely within the community. The largest group is neutral, followed closely by pessimistic and then optimistic views.

THERE IS A NEED FOR TARGETED INITIATIVES
The distribution of feelings and knowledge levels suggests that there is engagement with the topics of access accommodations and disability justice, but also a need for more targeted initiatives to move individuals from the "Learning" and "Novice" stages to "Proficient" and "Advanced" levels of understanding.

6. PROMPTS FROM THE COMMUNITY FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

In response to a recognized gap in existing research, the Nonfiction Access Initiative solicited additional questions from disabled nonfiction media makers, aiming to deepen our understanding of their unique challenges and needs. The resulting questions posed by survey participants span a comprehensive array of themes, reflecting both the diversity of experiences within this community and the critical areas requiring further investigation.

1. Effectiveness of Accommodations:
"What disability accommodations, when provided, have fallen short of achieving its objective, and why?"

2. Economic Viability:
"As a disabled person of color how do you make a living?"

3. Motivation and Persistence:
"Why have you chosen to stay in this industry?"

4. Sustainability Practices:
"What tools help you most to maintain sustainability on a day-to-day basis?"

5. Balancing Health and Work:
"How do you juggle health and work? How does this affect your mood and how in turn does that affect professional relationships? How do you hold boundaries?"

6. Industry Culture and Productivity:
"Is the current culture around productivity/work in this industry working for you? Why or why not?"

7. Disclosure to Employers:
"How do you tell new employers that you have a disability without them feeling nervous to hire you for the gig?"

8. Optimal Working Environments:
"What environments or situations work well for you in creating work, presenting work, and engaging in industry programs/activities? What resources have you used that have helped you navigate these media-making systems?"

9. Cycles of Motivation:
"I'm curious if all people with disabilities deal with this continuous cycle of motivation and demotivation that slows down their progress. How do you do it? Who inspires you? What are grounding practices that you have on set? What new practices are inspiring you?"

10. Budgeting Realities:
"What was the budget of your last film? Was it a realistic budget or did you have to constantly sacrifice quality?"

11. Facing Backlash:
"Have you faced any backlash or criticism regarding your non-fiction media projects centered around disability issues, and how have you responded to it?"

12. Collaboration and Partnership:
"How do you approach collaboration and partnership with disability advocacy organizations or individuals with disabilities when developing non-fiction media projects?"

13. Opportunities vs. Support:
"What do you think would go further - more opportunities specifically for disabled artists or more support when competing for opportunities open to everyone?"

14. Finding Trustworthy Producers:
"Identifying trustworthy producers who understand disability and neurodivergence , and are able to raise money and deal with funders etc to make the production process disability appropriate?"

15. Desired Impact:
"What impact do you hope to achieve with your non-fiction media projects focused on disability-related topics, and how do you measure that impact?"

16. Community and Support:
"Where do they meet with other disabled filmmakers and can we create something that would bring us together? Where have you found the biggest sources of community and support? How did you find it? If we have a forum, where we can learn from each other, it would be very helpful."

17. Supporting Emerging Talent:
"What are each of us doing in our work/practice to both support other developing/young artists, and also to ensure they are getting rigorous training and honest feedback about where there is room for growth in their artistry and skills?"

These articulated queries not only underscore the complexities of navigating the nonfiction media landscape as a disabled creator but also highlight the necessity for ongoing, community-led research endeavors. They serve as an essential step towards crafting a more inclusive and equitable media industry, informed directly by the insights and lived experiences of disabled media makers.

SECTION TWO: RECOMMENDATIONS

This research illuminated the systemic barriers, intersectional challenges, and financial hurdles faced by disabled nonfiction media makers. While formidable, these obstacles are not insurmountable. The findings also provide a clear roadmap for enacting substantive changes that can dismantle existing inequities and create a more inclusive, supportive landscape. The following recommendations, directly informed by directly impacted survey participants' insights, outline crucial actions for funders, institutions, and the industry at large.

1. GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

The survey made clear that dismantling barriers and fostering inclusion for disabled nonfiction media makers requires a multifaceted approach. While large-scale institutional changes are crucial, there are also general recommendations that can initiate progress at an organizational and individual level. Survey respondents identified the following key areas demanding immediate attention.

ACCESS AND ACCOMMODATION

To foster a truly inclusive environment, organizations must prioritize access and accommodation as a fundamental necessity, not an optional consideration.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

→ Workplace education

→ Increased accessibility for disabled makers

→ Disability-specific training

→ Ensure all events are accessible

MISREPRESENTATION & DISCRIMINATION

Combating misrepresentation, discrimination, and lack of understanding is imperative to empowering disabled media makers' voices and narratives.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

→ Encourage representation and participation of underrepresented groups in decision-making processes

→ Reconsider hiring practices in the field

→ Disabled community spaces

→ Greater inclusion of those with neurodivergence

→ Community education regarding disability

> " Having people understand my disability as it's not visible but affects me every hour of the day. It's harder to speak, breathe, sleep, and ambulate. The arthritis hurts more, especially as I've gotten older.
>
> — Survey Participant

> " Having accommodations seen as optional and that people don't need to go the extra way to accommodate, protect, or support those with disabilities. For example, not requiring masking for indoor public events is seen as the standard rather than raising the bar to meet the needs of a vulnerable minority of the population.
>
> — Survey Participant

> " As someone who has ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) but often is perceived as neurotypical, it is intimidating to admit to needing accommodations in a fast-paced industry. It would be nice for job listings to include language that is inclusive of neurodivergent people.
>
> — Survey Participant

MENTAL HEALTH

Safeguarding the mental health of disabled creators requires proactive measures by implementing support systems, education initiatives, and flexibility within workplace policies.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS:

→ More mentorship opportunities and better support networks

→ Disability education for employers and the general public

→ Flexible work schedules

Implementing these general recommendations is a vital first step in acknowledging and addressing the access, representation, and workplace challenges uniquely faced by disabled media makers. However, survey insights also revealed complex financial barriers that require tailored solutions. However, survey insights also revealed complex financial barriers that require tailored solutions.

"

Long and unpredictable hours are difficult, and you show any weakness and will be replaced. Difficult to work on things that require management and deadlines if you've ever once had to say you need a break because of a mental health problem - it makes most believe you are not capable of the task.

— Survey Participant

"

The mental health impacts of this industry are life-threatening. And the internalization and isolation of struggling with difficult projects makes it worse.

— Survey Participant

2.   FINANCIAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Securing funding is a critical aspect of nonfiction media production for disabled creators. For many reasons, including those highlighted above, successfully securing funding frequently also creates hurdles for many disabled nonfiction media makers. The survey responses highlighted innovative strategies many employed to navigate financial complexities, but also underscored the need for systemic changes to funding models and mechanisms.

NAVIGATIONAL CHALLENGES:

A significant portion of the community feels overwhelmed by the challenge of navigating funding processes. Institutions should streamline application processes, reducing bureaucratic hurdles and offering guidance sessions to applicants. Simplifying paperwork and providing clear, accessible instructions can demystify funding opportunities.

CREATIVE FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT:

Despite the obstacles, several respondents highlight creative financial strategies to manage funding effectively. Foster peer sharing networks that support media makers to exchange insights, tools, and techniques that have proven effective in their work, fostering a culture of innovation and mutual support in navigating the financial landscape of media production.

FISCAL SPONSORSHIP:

Advocated as a viable solution for managing funds without the bureaucratic complexities of establishing a legal entity. Funding bodies should promote fiscal sponsorship as a recognized, viable option for disabled media makers, possibly establishing partnerships with organizations willing to act as fiscal sponsors, thus broadening access to grants and donations.

DIGITAL FINANCIAL TOOLS:

The adoption of digital tools like Cash App for flexible financial transactions signifies a shift towards innovative, tech-savvy solutions. Encourage and facilitate the use of digital financial tools by ensuring that funding disbursements can be received through modern, accessible platforms like Cash App, PayPal, or direct bank transfers, accommodating the diverse needs of recipients.

ABLE ACCOUNTS:

The strategic use of ABLE accounts reflects a nuanced understanding of how to safeguard government benefits while managing project funds. Support educational outreach and access for disabled media makers to the benefits and uses of ABLE accounts through informational resources and webinars, ensuring they can maximize their financial resources without jeopardizing eligibility for government benefits.

ASPIRATIONS FOR AUTONOMY:

The suggestions underscore a collective aspiration for financial autonomy and supportive mechanisms that mitigate the impact of accepting funding on eligibility for benefits and personal financial health. Develop funding opportunities that specifically address the autonomy and agency of disabled media makers. This could include unrestricted grants, project development funds, and emergency financial assistance tailored to their unique circumstances.

The financial insights captured emphasize how thoughtful, disability-centric funding frameworks can empower artistic voices. Respondents call for more accessible, empathetic, and innovative funding frameworks that address the unique hurdles faced by this community. As funding bodies and institutions review these recommendations, they have a profound opportunity to lead transformative change.

3. RECOMMENDATIONS TO FUNDERS

The survey's findings underscore a critical need for funders and institutions to adopt more nuanced and inclusive funding practices to support disabled nonfiction media makers effectively. Drawing from the articulated experiences of survey respondents, we identify four specific areas where targeted interventions can significantly enhance support structures and funding mechanisms.
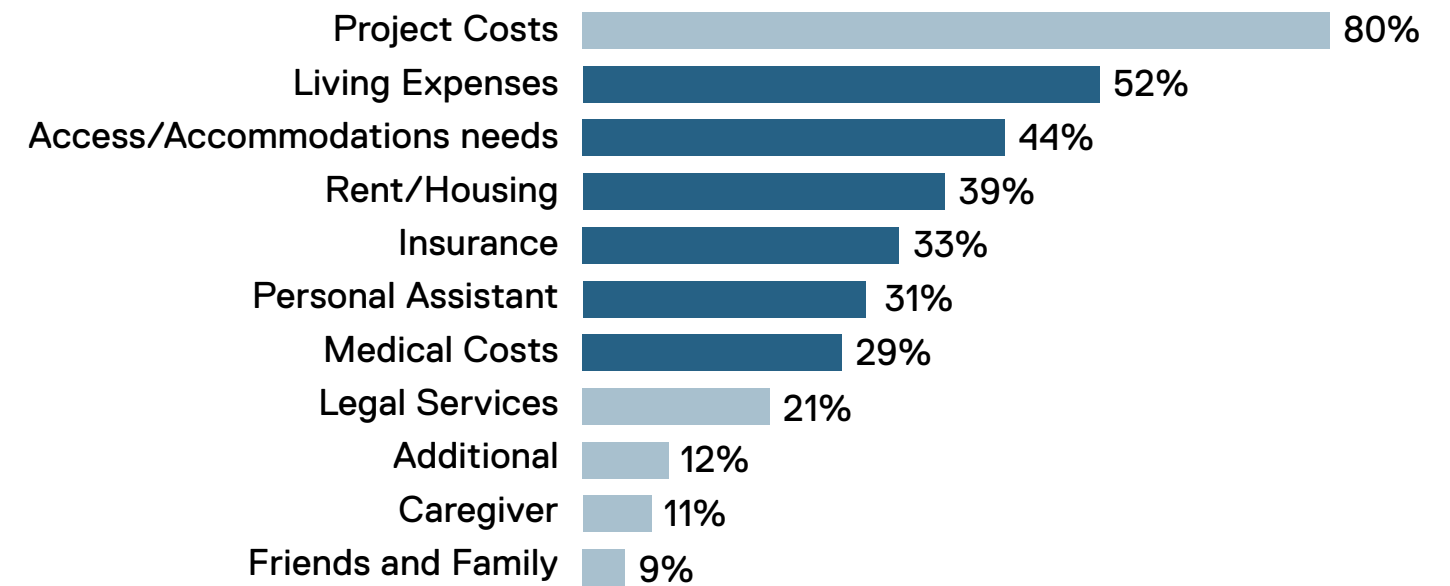
1. UNRESTRICTED FUNDING

The call for unrestricted funding emerges as a pivotal solution against the backdrop of financial constraints that disproportionately affect disabled media creators. This recommendation is rooted in the understanding that flexible funding models are instrumental in dismantling the barriers to creative expression and project completion faced by this community.

2. FLEXIBLE FINANCIAL SUPPORT

Survey respondents have articulated a pressing need for funders to adopt more flexible financial support mechanisms. This analysis recognizes that addressing the diverse and often overlooked financial needs of disabled creators—ranging from healthcare to adaptive technologies—is fundamental to enabling their full participation in the media production process.

FIG #5
Types of access accommodations you would like to be better funded?

Category	Percentage
Project Costs	80%
Living Expenses	52%
Access/Accommodations needs	44%
Rent/Housing	39%
Insurance	33%
Personal Assistant	31%
Medical Costs	29%
Legal Services	21%
Additional	12%
Caregiver	11%
Friends and Family	9%

" If both disabled people and media creators had more access to unrestricted funding, these challenges would not exist as much.

— Survey Participant

" Funders should consider covering other financial needs of people with disabilities. I may not be able to receive a full-time salary for writing and directing my project, but I may need to cover other expenses related to my health condition (counseling services, complementary therapies, house adjustments, carers, physical exercise, fuel to attend Hospital appointments, etc).

— Survey Participant

3. DE-CENTERING COMPETITION

The critique of the competitive and bureaucratic nature of current funding processes highlights a misalignment with the core values of artistic creation and disability inclusion. This section argues for a paradigm shift towards a more personalized, artist-centric funding approach, emphasizing the importance of nurturing talent and creativity over competition.

FIG #6
"Do you feel like you underquote the cost of your own projects in order to be competitive?"

NOT SURE
16%

YES
51%

NO
33%
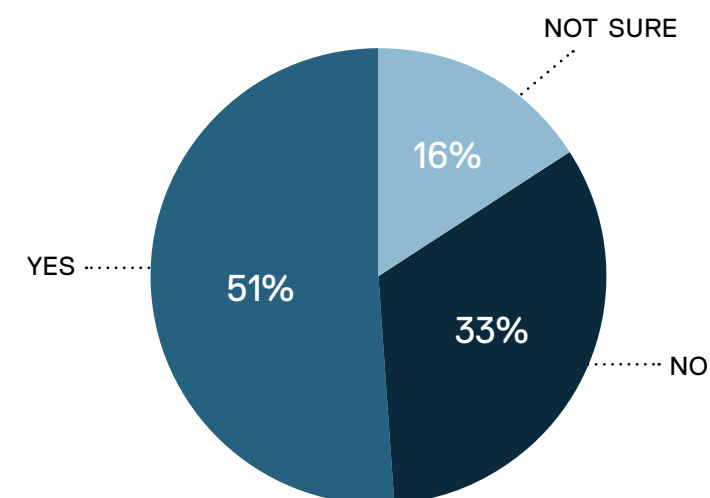
> "
> I think the entire funder support process is very bureaucratic and competitive. As filmmakers, we spend lots of time filling out forms or applications and then waiting to see if we "win" support. In my mind, the entire process is very anti what it means to be an artist or a disabled person. As artists and disabled people, we are looking for inclusion, not competition. We are not making films to win or compete with other artists for funding. It would be great if the entire process were more human, individual, and specific to the artist, not the funder/institution.

— Survey Participant

> "
> I believe in holding myself to a high standard. But, in addition, as a disabled person I think I'm accustomed to putting in extra work, energy, etc. to make sure my product is on par or better. If I'm only on par with other artists/projects, there are other disability reasons that when it comes to the final decision could be easy grounds for them to choose others (for instance, having to find other accessible housing for a residency because their usual housing doesn't work for me). I feel like I have to put in the extra effort to make an extraordinary project from the get-go so that they are so enthusiastic about the project, they will support it regardless of other considerations. So, I think under-asking and over-producing has become a constant of my work.

— Survey Participant

4. ATTITUDINAL SHIFTS

The necessity for funders to undergo attitudinal shifts towards disability is underscored by respondents' experiences of marginalization and misunderstanding. This analysis calls for a concerted effort to cultivate empathy, respect, and a deep understanding of the unique challenges faced by disabled media makers, paving the way for more supportive and inclusive funding practices.

> Any funder must be understanding of my disability and be considerate of my limitations while also realizing I'm independent and have survived many years without them. No patronizing or paternalistic hovering is needed. Grace and acceptance would be fully appreciated.

— Survey Participant

Funders and institutions can play a catalytic role in ushering in a new era of equity, access, and empowerment for disabled nonfiction media makers. From providing unrestricted funding and flexible financial models, to eliminating discriminatory practices and embracing attitudinal shifts - these strategies pave the way for authentic inclusion.

However, tangible and lasting change requires a sustained commitment that extends beyond this initial report. In the next section, we explore the critical next actions and further resources needed to build upon this foundation and continue advancing the disability community's narratives through nonfiction media.

SECTION THREE:
NEXT STEPS AND FURTHER RESOURCES

This study represents an initial phase in what the NAI envisions as an ongoing, longitudinal research endeavor. A primary objective of the survey, yet to be fully realized, was to delineate the barriers confronting multiply marginalized media makers, particularly those from communities of color, economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and regions outside of the Global North. This gap in understanding extends to individuals engaged in diverse media disciplines beyond nonfiction filmmaking, who, for various reasons, have found access to the field challenging. Notably, the demographic composition of survey participants—predominantly White, mid-career directors and producers—underscores an imperative for expanded research and community outreach efforts aimed at engaging People of the Global Majority (PGM) and practitioners across a wider spectrum of industry roles. Further research would include more robust outreach and intentional engagement of these makers.

Another limit and important issue we encountered while conducting this research were big differences in the ways in which disability is understood and manifests around the world. In certain regions, the stigma attached to disability is still prohibitive and makes centering disability a delicate, even dangerous practice. Differences in definitions and repercussions of identifying as disabled are realities that need to be taken seriously and with care. A goal of further research is to engage more international partners in order to build a shared understanding of how disability presents in the nonfiction media making field.

Despite these limitations, the survey, a first of its kind, successfully engaged a population characterized as hard-to-reach and underrepresented in research. Far more is needed. Disabled media makers are significantly under-researched within both academic studies and industry analyses. This gap exists despite increasing awareness and calls for inclusivity in media production. Historically, the representation and challenges of disabled individuals in the media industry have been overlooked, leading to a scarcity of data and research that could inform better practices, policies, and support systems. This lack of research not only impedes the development of inclusive policies and practices but also fails to highlight the contributions and potential of disabled individuals in media making. The under-researched status of disabled media makers reflects broader issues of accessibility, representation, and equity in the media landscape, necessitating targeted research efforts to address these disparities and unlock the full potential of this diverse talent pool.

The findings of this report underscore the urgent need for systemic change within the funding and support structures of the nonfiction media industry. It is imperative that funders, institutions, and organizations take heed of the recommendations presented in this report and actively work towards creating an environment that not only accommodates but also celebrates the diverse voices and perspectives of disabled creators. We have included a resource list below and have developed a number of additional guides

that you can access in the appendices of this report that can help you start or deepen your organization's commitment to access.

The call for financial guidance, legal assistance, flexible payment options, and sensitivity to privacy is a testament to the unique challenges faced by disabled media makers. These needs must be met with comprehensive support mechanisms that address financial and logistical barriers to accessibility and inclusivity. Moreover, the survey highlights the importance of rethinking traditional application processes, accounting for crip time, ensuring that accommodations are not viewed as optional, and questioning an organization's assumptions and biases. This report is meant to serve as a roadmap to a more inclusive environment for disabled media makers.

What is next involves conducting further research to address knowledge and understanding gaps within the industry, particularly with funders and markets; to better reach disabled makers from multiply-marginalized communities in order to understand their needs; and to identify more industry leaders who can champion these changes. Additional research is also needed to quantify the number of industry professionals who identify as disabled. The more people feel comfortable identifying, in every level of our industry, the more accommodating and safe the industry becomes as a whole. It's also important to identify where more disabled individuals are needed in positions of power, decision-making, and policy-making in the nonfiction field. As we move forward, it is imperative

that the industry takes clear action to address the challenges identified in this report and to embrace the diversity of experiences within the disability media making community so we can unlock the full potential of disabled nonfiction media makers and ensure their stories are valued and embraced.

FURTHER RESOURCES

→ 1IN4 Coalition Authentic Disability Representation Rubric

→ Inevitable Foundation Disability 101

→ FEAW: Film Accessibility Vendor Database

→ FEAW: Film Event Accessibility Score Card

→ Ford Foundation: Road Map for Inclusion Changing the Face of Disability in Media

→ FWD-Doc A Toolkit for Inclusion & Accessibility: Changing the Narrative of Disability in Documentary Film

→ FWD-Doc Engagement Pack

→ FWD-Doc Films to Watch

→ MIT Open Documentary Lab / Co-Creation Studio Accessibility Resource List for Interactive and Immersive Media

→ Sins Invalid 10 Principles of Disability Justice

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This report was created with insight and expertise from D/deaf, disabled, and neurodiverse media makers from around the world. Special thanks to Nasreen Alkhateeb, Maya Chupkov, Reid Davenport, Ben-Alex Dupris, Violet Elliot, Maria Santos, Delbert Whetter, Research Action Design, and the UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment.

We would like to recognize and thank our individual Advisory Committee members for their support and expertise in designing questions for the survey:

· Dr. Grishma Shah, Artist, 1IN4 Coalition
· Stephen Letnes, 1IN4 Coalition
· Olivia Dreisinger, Artist
· Jason DaSilva, AXS Lab/AXS Film Fund
· Naomi Middleton, AXS Lab/AXS Film Fund
· Reveca Torres, BACKBONES
· Lawrence Carter-Long, Co-Director, DisArt
· Haya Fatima Iqbal, Documentary Association of Pakistan
· Jim LeBrecht, FWD-Doc
· Lindsey Dryden, FWD-Doc
· Amena El-Saie, Helm Consulting
· Judith Heumman, The Heumann Perspective Podcast
· Tameka Citchen-Spruce, Independent Filmmaker
· Dr. Lindsey Felt, Leonardo/ISAST
· Vanessa Chang, Leonardo/ISAST
· Joanna Wright, MIT Open Documentary Lab / Co-Creation Studio
· Ren Putz, Morpheyes Studio
· Darian Slattery, Morpheyes Studio
· Liam Coleman, Morpheyes Studio
· Ernest Roszkowski, Morpheyes Studio
· Ezra Benus, United States Artists / Disability Futures
· Lee Heinemann, United States Artists / Disability Futures
· Lu Zhang, United States Artists / Disability Futures
· Dr. Shweta Ghosh, University of Reading

APPENDIX:

APPENDIX A: SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

This section describes the demographics of the media makers who completed the survey.

56% have a graduate degree

80% regularly work on their own projects without pay.

63% are unable to make their primary living from their nonfiction media making practice.

52% self-fund more than 50% of their own projects

33% have an undergraduate degree only

69% are between the ages of 25-49

The majority of respondents have an undergraduate degree and 56% have graduate degrees. That said, education does not seem to correspond with annual income. 61% of respondents earn less than $50,000 per year.

The prevalence of unpaid work and self-funding indicates a passion and commitment to the field, but also raises concerns about sustainability and access to resources.

A total of 196 people from 18 countries completed the survey.

69% identify as female or non-binary

50% identify as White.

46% have been filmmakers for more than 10 years.

39% identify as LGBTQ+

11% have been film-makers for less than 2 years.

The majority of respondents have worked in the field for more than a decade.

Though we have a large number of respondents who identify as female, nonbinary, and/or LGBTQ+, there is a lack of racial/ethnic diversity with the majority of respondents identifying as White.

The demographics responses to the survey show:

→ Most respondents work primarily in conventional documentary storytelling and a blend of both traditional and contemporary media formats.

→ Makers in this field often take on multiple roles, with a focus on directing, producing, and writing, but there is also a significant involvement in research, editing, and visual storytelling.

→ While some roles are more common, the field also accommodates a variety of specialized interests and skills, from new media artistry to immersive media creation.

The survey asked: "Are there any questions that come to mind for you that you would like to ask of industry professionals and funders?"

Take a few minutes to read through these questions and reflect on how your organization is or isn't considering these concerns from the perspective of disabled makers.

- How are you integrating intersectionality into your support strategies to ensure that initiatives related to disability are inclusive and cater to the diverse needs and experiences of individuals at the intersection of disability and other marginalized identities?

- How are you making the process accessible and inclusive for others?

- Are you considering the impact of too many application questions as a form of adding barriers/taxing the applicant with undue and unnecessary work?

- How do you ensure that your non-fiction media projects accurately represent the perspectives and experiences of individuals with disabilities?

- Why in the disabled space does it still seem okay to have disabled stories produced by abled-bodied filmmakers?

- Do you ask your applicants to disclose their disabilities?

- Do you create an environment where disclosing disabilities is safe?

- Will you fund disabled filmmakers on projects that have nothing to do with the subject of disability?

- What is your personal conception/experience of disability?

- How do you address the ethical considerations surrounding consent, privacy, and dignity when funding non-fiction media work that features individuals with disabilities?

- What is your accessibility policy? Does it go beyond accommodating disabilities and seek to create more equity for people with disabilities in all aspects?

- In what ways are you encouraging artists with disabilities to apply to your programs?

- Do you think it will be too difficult and expensive to work with filmmakers with disabilities?

- Are you taking into account creatives who are neurodivergent or have invisible disabilities?

- Why do people not consider those who live with disability to be a part of DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion)?

- How can you change the traditional funding application for disabled applicants' projects? What can be done to move to a more accessible model?

- How important is it that ethics and standards of care be implemented in your organizational practice?

- How valuable is the disabled voice in the projects you fund? How has this been shown?

- How are you using your power to make space for disabled media makers?

- How are you confronting ableism in your work?

NAI used the findings of the survey to develop the Direct Access Fund which awards small targeted funds for access accommodations and services that would otherwise be unfunded. From our learnings in developing and administering the fund here are some Dos and Don'ts to consider when designing applications with disabled people in mind.

DO!

DISABLED-FIRST LANGUAGE
This approach is part of a broader effort to promote inclusivity and respect for individuals with disabilities. In practice, disabled-first language involves using terms that highlight the person's identity as a disabled individual, acknowledging their experience and perspective as being central to their identity. Please note some members of the community prefer "person-first" language.

DO!

ACCOUNT FOR CRIPTIME
Criptime is a concept that challenges and redefines societal norms and expectations related to time, particularly within the context of disability. Coined within the disability community, crip time acknowledges that individuals with disabilities may experience time differently due to various factors such as accessibility issues, medical needs, or the unpredictability of their conditions. When designing your application consider announcing your program with ample notice and allow for an extended application period to allow for flexibility.

DO!

ASSISTANCE IN FILLING OUT THE APPLICATION + TRANSLATIONS
Offer multiple translations of your application. Consider having a sign language application option for those whose first language is sign language. Consider accepting video or audio responses to questions as an alternative to written responses. Always provide clear contact information for support or alternative ways to fill out the application.

DO!

ENCOURAGE ALL CAREER LEVELS TO APPLY
Due to lack of access barring the disabled community from receiving funding

DO!

KEEP AN OPEN LINE OF COMMUNICATION
Always provide clear contact information that allows applicants to ask questions.

DO!

BE CONSIDERATE WITH THE PRIVACY INFORMATION
Be respectful of privacy and confidentiality, especially when applicants provide materials for disability-related matters or financial circumstances.

DON'T!

DEMAND AN OFFICIAL DIAGNOSIS OR REQUIRE DOCUMENTATION OF DISABILITY.
You do not need an official diagnosis to apply to the fund. If disability, neurodivergence, or chronic illness is something that resonates with your experience, please apply. Focus on fulfilling an access point rather than identifying the specific disability. Instead ask: What accommodations do you require that allows you to fully participate?

DON'T!

MAKE YOUR APPLICATIONS LONG AND ASK UNNECESSARY QUESTIONS
Fatigue and capacity all factor into barriers barring disabled makers from completing applications. Look through your content and identify what is absolutely necessary for your organization.

DON'T!

REQUIRE LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION
Lack of access to referrers and mentors make letters of recommendation and reference letters barriers to intersectionality marginalized makers. Shifting their use as assessment tools can allow for a broader range of people to receive funding and aspirationally mentorship through the visibility awarded.

APPENDIX D: QUESTIONS AND COMMENTS FROM THE FIELD

Please use this QR code to access a brief feedback form where you can leave your questions and/or comments.

THANK YOU