

Filmmaker Survey: Generative AI and Documentary Film

Preliminary Findings (June 2025)

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Introduction

To guide the evolution of the Nonfiction Core Application AI Addendum, this survey was launched by a coalition of partners, including members of International Documentary Association (IDA), the Archival Producers Alliance (APA), the Sundance Institute Artist Accelerator Program and Google’s Artists + Machine Intelligence (AMI) team to gather feedback from filmmakers on their use, concerns, and disclosure priorities regarding generative AI. The findings directly informed the creation of new, optional questions in the application and are designed to foster transparency and ethical dialogue in the documentary filmmaking industry.

Methodology

This survey gathered insights into documentary filmmakers' perceptions and intended use of generative AI. Data were collected from 146 respondents between March 3, 2025 and April 2, 2025. The survey instrument, a structured questionnaire administered via Google Forms, measured variables including AI familiarity, intended applications, motivations for use, and perceived concerns.

Respondent Profile

The survey respondents were independent documentary filmmakers. Most (59%) identified as Director/Producer, while the remaining respondents were split between Director (21%) and Producer (20%).

Key Finding

Regardless of AI use, respondents prioritize practical disclosures about AI usage, with approximately two-thirds emphasizing the importance of clearly communicating how AI is used to both funders (70%) and audiences (68%).

Furthermore, respondents place higher importance on disclosing certain impacts to funders than to audiences. For example, 49% believe disclosing the impact of AI on the film's artistic approach is important for funders, compared to 36% for audiences. Similarly, 45% prioritize disclosing potential ethical harms of AI to funders, versus 35% for audiences.

The research clarified filmmaker priorities around AI disclosure and identified three opportunities to evolve the Core Application to address the practical, artistic, and ethical dimensions of AI use in documentary filmmaking.

Detailed Findings & Outcomes

1. Filmmakers view generative AI as an emerging creative tool that saves time.

Findings	Just over one-fourth (26%) of respondents do not plan to use generative AI within their films. Among those who do plan to use generative AI in their films, the most common motivations for using AI are to save time (29%) and to expand creative abilities (27%).
Outcome	The updated Artistic Approach question asks filmmakers to articulate the connection between their use of generative AI and their creative vision, and disclose any related generative AI use in their Current Sample / Rough-cut. Similarly, the Comprehensive Line-Item Expense Budget encourages filmmakers to reflect on generative AI-related costs in their submitted budgets.

2. Inaccuracy and audience trust rank as filmmakers' top AI-related concerns.

Findings	When rating their concerns about the potential impacts of AI, filmmakers are most concerned by inaccurate representations (average score of 4.1/5), eroding audience trust (4.0), followed by labor (3.9), bias in generated outputs (3.7) and environmental impact of AI use (3.1).
Outcome	The Accountability and Community Care and Audience Consideration questions have been updated to allow filmmakers using AI to address potential impacts on the communities of their subjects and their disclosure plan.

3. Today, filmmaker’s Intended use of AI is concentrated in early-stage research and development.

Findings	Today, filmmakers show a strong preference for using generative AI for tasks in the 'Research and development' phase, particularly for writing proposals or applications (64%), topic research or critical inquiry (64%), and pre-visualization (47%).
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	The majority of respondents do <u>not</u> intend to use generative AI in core creative tasks like score composition (79%), scriptwriting (66%), and audio narration (64%), possibly reflecting caution around AI’s capability to produce nuanced creative expression.
Outcome	The Rough Cut / Current Sample question has been updated to ask filmmakers to disclose any AI-generated elements in their work.

Conclusions & Future Work

The survey identified filmmaker priorities for disclosing the use of generative AI in the practice of filmmaking and directly informed updates in the Nonfiction Core Application 3.1.

As the documentary filmmaking field continues to navigate today’s rapidly evolving technology landscape, future work will build on these foundational findings by continuing to monitor the adoption of AI use in filmmaking through future surveys, tracking the implementation of the updated Core Application questions among funders, and developing educational resources for the industry.

If you’re interested in extending this survey to your organization, please contact funds@documentary.org

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to all industry partners and filmmaker respondents, whose open-ended responses were particularly instrumental in enriching this research. Their willingness to dedicate their time and share their unique perspectives significantly deepened our understanding.

Survey Design

1. What is your role in the filmmaking process? *Select all that apply.*
 - a. Director
 - b. Producer
2. Select the category that best describes the type of films you make. *
 - a. Independent
 - b. Commercial and/or Commissioned
3. What types of funding sources have you applied to, or plan to apply to, in the future? * Select all that apply.
 - a. Grant-making programs e.g. Sundance Institute Documentary Fund, Catapult Film Fund
 - b. Broadcasters e.g. BBC, Channel 4, ITVS/PBS
 - c. Private equity investors
 - d. Private donors and/or crowdfunding
 - e. Corporate sponsorship
 - f. Other
4. Describe your familiarity with generative AI uses for the following production tasks.
[Scale: Not Familiar | Somewhat Familiar | Very Familiar]
 - a. Writing proposals or applications
 - b. Topic research or critical inquiry
 - c. Scriptwriting
 - d. Pre-visualization
 - e. Still images
 - f. Video production
 - g. Animation
 - h. Audio narration
 - i. Sound design
 - j. Score composition
5. Describe your intention to use generative AI at any of the following filmmaking stages.
[Options: Research and development | Production | Post-production | Distribution and launch | Do not plan to use generative AI]
 - a. Writing proposals or applications
 - b. Topic research or critical inquiry
 - c. Scriptwriting
 - d. Pre-visualization
 - e. Still images
 - f. Video production
 - g. Animation
 - h. Audio narration
 - i. Sound design
 - j. Score composition
6. What is your primary reason for using (or wanting to use) generative AI technologies?
 - a. Save money
 - b. Save time
 - c. Create audiovisual material that doesn't exist
 - d. Protect or obscure identity of participants
 - e. Expand my creative capacities
 - f. Do not intend to use generative AI in my films
 - g. Other
7. What information about your use of generative AI in a documentary film is important to communicate to funders?
Select all that apply.
 - a. How AI will be used within the context of the film
 - b. How AI use relates to, or expands, my film's artistic approach
 - c. Names of AI tools to be used by filmmaker
 - d. Names of AI models to be used by filmmaker
 - e. Datasets used to train the tools or models selected by filmmaker
 - f. Benefits of using AI to your film's participants or community
 - g. Harms of using AI to your film's participants or community
 - h. Your AI workflow or process, start to finish
 - i. Other

8. What information about your use of generative AI in a documentary film is important to communicate to audiences? *
- Select all that apply.*
- a. How AI will be used within the context of the film
 - b. How AI use relates to, or expands, my film's artistic approach
 - c. Names of AI tools to be used by filmmaker
 - d. Names of AI models to be used by filmmaker
 - e. Datasets used to train the tools or models selected by filmmaker
 - f. Benefits of using AI to your film’s participants or community
 - g. Harms of using AI to your film’s participants or community
 - h. Your AI workflow or process, start to finish
 - i. Other
9. How confident are you in reducing biased outputs (e.g. racial/gender stereotypes) when working with AI technologies in film?
- Scale: 1 (Not confident) - 5 (Very confident)*
10. If you have used generative AI in your audiovisual documentary film content, have you consulted legal counsel?
- a. Yes
 - b. I haven't, but I plan to
 - c. I haven't and I'm not sure where to start
 - d. I have not used generative AI in my filmmaking
11. How concerned are you with each of the following potential impacts of AI use?
- Scale: 0 (Not familiar), 1 (Least concerned) - 5 (Very concerned)*
- a. Environmental
 - b. Labor
 - c. Bias
 - d. Inaccurate representations
 - e. Trust of film's audience
 - f. Trust of film's participants
12. Is there any additional information you would like to share outside of the above questions?
13. May we contact you with follow-up questions?
- a. Yes
 - b. No
14. First and last name
15. Please provide your preferred contact information (email or phone). *