

Foreword

Streaming platforms and, more specifically, OTT (Over-The-Top) markets are an essential part of the contemporary film distribution landscape. The means to distribute online is far easier than it has ever been, however there are some crucial obstacles for the independent filmmaker to overcome in order to access territory-specific and global markets so their films can achieve a maximum audience.

If you're self-distributing your indie film, and trying to get on major VOD platforms, obtaining an **aggregator** is essential.

What is an Aggregator?

Aggregators are the gatekeepers between you and the big platforms (*i.e* Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Hulu, Disney+ etc). They're both experts in encoding and delivering your film to the technical specifications required by each OTT/VOD platform as well as maintaining strong relationships with them and keeping up-to-date with ever-changing technological and consumer-facing advancements.

For a fee or a percentage of the film's revenue, an aggregator will handle these important technical steps for you. When your film generates revenue, they report and send it back your way.

How To Get Started: Defining a Strategy

Compared to an indie feature film's distribution strategy which is usually considered (in part or entirely) during the developmental & pre-production phases and may become the ultimate 'end-goal' after the film has played its 'theatrical run' in a territory (or multiple territories), an indie short film's distribution strategy is often overlooked.

It is important for the filmmaker(s) to figure out (as early and as appropriately as possible) the distribution strategy for a film. In today's competitive marketplace, this is *especially* important for an indie short film as the filmmaker's likely goal is to achieve notoriety - be that through awarded accolades at film festivals and/or high levels of viewership and interaction on self-hosting platforms such as YouTube, Vimeo or Facebook. Typical distribution trajectories for short films vary. Largely, this is dependent on the filmmaker's intentions with the short film in question which may be determined by said film's flexibility or restriction by its core factors such as budget availability, legal aspects, star quality and other aspects ultimately determining its credible viability to pursue such routes.

The core difference between both films is *running time*. Both types of films are characterized by their running time with short films ranging from between zero and twenty minutes (though festival requirements make this subjective and difficult to define) whilst feature films can run from anywhere between 70 minutes and beyond. An often queried thought is what category would films in between these running time ranges fit into; and the answer is that this is often highly subjective to both filmmaker and intended market(s).

Usually, content in between the 20-70 minute range often pertains to 'TV' or 'broadcast' material since 25-30 minute and 50-60 minute content is often preferred by those mediums as they're easier to programme in their broadcast schedule which in turn maximises the amount of content available to audiences daily. Commercials can also be interspersed evenly to make up the 'broadcast half-hour' or 'broadcast hour' as a whole. Conversely,

short films are often said to have a golden running time of between 12-15 minutes (*though 16-18, is also favoured by some, largely these are determined by genre*).

This so-called 'golden running time' is highly favoured by top-tier film festivals not least because not only do short films that exceed this 'golden running time' often don't get made (due to budgetary limitations or otherwise), there are certain qualities - namely story, plot and theme(s) which may begin to unfold and fall apart the longer the 'short film' lasts. Additionally, it is in a festival's very interests to want to garner as much public attention (*for the purposes of hosting future editions, longevity and growth*) as possible - and as such, the shorter the films are - the more a festival can programme in a day or season.

It is because of these aforementioned factors that short films are difficult / virtually impossible to economise on (*make any form of capital*) by a short film's very nature as well as how that fits into the distribution-to-consumer landscape. Whilst filmmakers may have a specific story they want to tell that can only be told in the language of the short-form, most filmmakers make short films because they want to make (*or end up making*) feature-length films.

How To Get Started: Working out the film's End-Goal & Distribution Route(s)

Before diving into the mechanics and how-tos of OTT/SVOD/TVOD distribution, these are some of the 'template' trajectories of shorts and features. Whilst these trajectories (otherwise known as '*routes & end-goals*' for a film) are up-to-date based on industry practice, they only serve as general guidance. Not all films and moving-image products/content will fit these models and may require specific alterations or completely re-worked distribution campaigns altogether to suit its needs.

It is also important to note that, filmmakers have (or may not have) specific reasons for making a short film though usually the very purpose of making one is to attract specifically-targeted or wider acclaim to their body of work (*indicative of perhaps future work that said audience are likely to take interest in*) or indeed themselves and their creative voice. This apparent 'exposure' and attention would in-turn hopefully create one or some of the following resultant effect(s) for the filmmaker(s):

- **paid work**
- offers of (*and the means to create*) **more film work**
- **more high-end work** (*a 'calling card' to short films, feature-films and TV commissions*),
- work which generates an income - not just being paid for the work, but a film which can in turn **break-even financially** (*the revenue generated paying for all its production/distribution costs and miscellaneous overheads itself*) and **turn a profit** (*to produce & distribute more, increasingly ambitious, films*).

Typical Indie Film Distribution trajectories			
Short Film		Feature Film	
General Goal(s): To obtain the means (funding, pool of collaborators and public interest) to make a feature film, or make more short films and then make a feature.		General Goal(s): To inform, educate and/or entertain a wide or limited audience. To generate financial, social and artistic capital. To make more features. Sequelisation, 'spin-offs' and merchandising.	
<p align="center"><u>General Prerequisites:</u></p> <p>When the film is finished, you will need the correct master files (usually a 2K/4K DCP + QuickTime ProRes 422HQ/4444) and Distribution Assets/Paperwork such as <i>Trailers, Posters, Electronic Press Kit (EPK), Press Notes, Company Contact Details & Information</i>. This information should be given to a Sales Agent (who acts on behalf of a producer) to assess the production's commercial value and who will make deals with theatrical, non-theatrical and OTT/SVOD/TVOD distributors/platforms.</p>			
End Goal	Distribution Route (how to get to the end-goal)	End Goal	Distribution Route (how to get to the end-goal)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Obtain funding for a slate of planned short films for your production company 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make a short film (<i>as proof of your existing work</i>) prior to pursuing funding. Creating production package (PDF) treatment consisting of spec info relating to the planned films Pursue backers/funding via BFI Film Audience Network, LiveTree and other sources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To partake in festivals competitively and win awards & accolades. (<i>Self Distributing and not interested in generating revenue</i>) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Submit finished film to festivals directly or via filmfreeway.com Film is selected/not-selected at festivals submitted Await the outcome of all festivals and subsequent awards processes (<i>if any</i>) After the festival run is completed, upload film to YouTube or Vimeo.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use short film as a 'proof-of-concept' piece of work to obtain interest from potential cast, crew and investors/funders 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make a short film (<i>as proof of your existing work</i>) Send film to festivals, win awards/accolades Create Press Release on the film's success, use this to generate hype for future slate. Approach collaborators/investors with film/production package 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To garner as wide an audience as possible (<i>Self-distributing, maybe interested in generating revenue</i>). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create Distribution Assets (<i>Trailers, Posters, Electronic Press Kit etc...</i>) To Generate Audience & Revenue: Contact and pay fee to a digital aggregator to manage the film's output on streaming platforms and report views/sales. To Generate Audience only: Upload film to YouTube or Vimeo.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use short film as a 'proof-of-concept' piece of work to obtain funding for a spec feature film 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Make a high-end short film (<i>as proof of your existing work</i>). Genre(s) and Theme(s) should be indicative of intended feature film work. Do not publish the film online/anywhere especially if it is a shortened version/uses footage you intend to use in feature. Approach backers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> To get a distribution deal and garner as wide an audience as possible. (<i>Wants to generate revenue and be profitable</i>) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create Distribution Assets (<i>Trailers, Posters, Electronic Press Kit etc...</i>) Secure a Sales Agent (via meetings, film marketplaces etc...) Sales Agent takes some commission money. Sales Agent makes deal(s) with distributor(s) & streaming platforms. Filmmaker(s), entities, cast & crew earn royalties (one-off or periodically over time)

Film Distribution Routes (General Trajectories)

Note this; dependent on the filmmaker(s) intentions (*but more often than not it is the producers and production companies responsibility*), any given feature-length film will usually take one of three distribution routes outlined below:

- Route 1 (Festivals > Theatrical Run > Streaming Run / Ancillary Markets)
 - Route typically taken by 'low-budget' studio films or films with niche/limited commercial appeal.
 - Production company (or filmmaker) enters the film into the **festival circuit**
 - The film is seen by a **sales agent** (or one of their assistants/ reps)
 - Film's producer secures sales agent usually via a film's marketplace (i.e AFM or Cannes..), sales agent takes commission and **organises deal(s)** with theatrical distributors and streaming platforms / ancillary markets.
 - The film enters its **theatrical run** (is shown in cinemas) with staggered release dates for every 'territory' (usually a continent or specific country) covered in the deal for maximum global impact. Each film's territory is usually managed by one distributor (who in turn communicate with and manage screening files/reels with its cinemas) but in the case of major studio films - they are usually distributed 'in-house' by their own distribution arms. Some films may only ever be available in a few territories / countries.
 - **Film finishes theatrical run**
 - **Film's aggregator publishes film to streaming platforms** (this may have been previously organised/included in the sales agent deal or not, in which case production company pays for and secures a digital aggregator)
 - **Home Media** is authored and distributed to stores and online retail platforms. (DVDs, Blu-Ray Discs, 4K UHD Blu-Ray Discs) to stores and online retail platforms for purchase
 - **Non-Theatrical screenings of the film** (film society/clubs, schools, community and outdoor screenings - this particular step may not apply to some other countries).
 - **Film's broadcast rights are loaned out to TV channels / networks** globally on a per-screening or rolling basis.
- Route 2 (Theatrical Run > Streaming Run / Ancillary Markets)
 - Route typically taken by 'high-budget' studio films, including blockbusters and films with wide appeal.
 - The film's production company is also the studio which distributes its own productions or has subsidiaries/entities with distribution arms.
 - The film's **distribution rights are usually 'pre-sold'** to the studio *before* the film is completed. For more information on pre-sales in film finance, [click here](#).
 - The film's **producer(s) and studio's executive producer(s) create distribution strategy**, often based on a formulaic 'tried-and-tested' model that has worked out well critically/financially for similar films in the past. This part of the budget is often factored into the whole budget before pre-production is greenlit.
 - The film enters its **theatrical run** (is shown in cinemas) with either a single release date for all territories or is staggered per territory, usually throughout an eight to twelve-month period to maximise global impact.

- **Film finishes theatrical run**
 - **Studio publishes film to streaming platforms.**
 - **Home Media** is authored and distributed to stores and online retail platforms. (*DVDs, Blu-Ray Discs, 4K UHD Blu-Ray Discs*) to stores and online retail platforms for purchase
 - **Non-Theatrical screenings of the film** (*film society/clubs, schools, community and outdoor screenings - this particular step may not apply to some other countries*). Additionally, the nature of the studio-film market tends to be incompatible with that of the 'non-theatrical' market (*which generally benefits less commercially-viable titles such as low-budget features / indies*), and as such many studio films are not available for 'non-theatrical' screenings in the UK.
 - **Film's broadcast rights are loaned out to TV channels / networks** globally on a per-screening or rolling basis.
- Route 3 (Streaming Run / Ancillary Markets)
Route typically taken by independent feature films / self-financing/represented filmmakers.
 - **Filmmaker / Production Company pays and secures a digital aggregator.**
 - **Aggregator publishes film to streaming platforms**
 - **Non-Theatrical screenings of the film** (*film society/clubs, schools, community and outdoor screenings - this particular step may not apply to some other countries*). Though largely uncommon, It has been known for some independent feature-length films and shorts to use this step to 'simulate' the practice of having a 'theatrical run' and touring a film - since non-theatrical groups, collectives and screening communities often have more of a willingness to take risks and experiment compared to their theatrical counterparts.

It is not uncommon for Routes 1 & 3 to be combined and exercised by both independent shorts and feature-films - namely the convention of sending a film to festivals followed by publishing the film to streaming platforms to maximise its audience, viewership and possibly revenue too. This practice is increasingly becoming common nature for most high-end shorts and indie feature-features.

Where do you want the film to be seen?

There are a huge range of streaming platforms, channels and hybridised online environments that can combine distribution/aggregation to platforms, marketplaces for buyers & programmers and more, here are some of the primary players:



(From left-to-right:

Row 1 - Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Hulu, Disney+, YouTube TV, HBOMax

Row 2 - Sling TV, Crunchyroll, Apple TV, MUBI, NowTV, Sky Store)

Below is a table of how these platforms are nested in the wider technological construct of VOD 'Video on Demand'. This includes subsets of VOD, their respective definitions, examples and what content they're most suited for / can often be discovered.

Medium	Subset	Definition	Examples	Suitability
VOD	OTT (Over the Top)	Content distributed directly to viewers over the internet.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Vimeo On Demand OTT can be used to describe the services below. 	Indie Short Films, Self-Distributed / Self-Financed Feature Films You can monetize and earn revenue on Vimeo On Demand, most effective for targeted marketing efforts.
	AVOD (Advertisement-based Video on Demand)	Free to consumers, consumers need to sit through advertisements.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> YouTube DailyMotion All4 (Channel 4) ITV Hub 	Professionally-aggregated & distributed feature film content. You can monetize and earn revenue on YouTube, most

(Video on Demand)				effective for channels with huge subscriber counts.
	SVOD (Subscription Video on Demand)	Similar to traditional TV packages. Users can consume as much content as they desire at flat monthly/annual rate.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sky (NowTV) • Netflix • Amazon Prime Video • Hulu • Apple TV • HBO • Disney+ 	Professionally-aggregated & distributed feature film content. Some short films too.
	TVOD (Transactional Video on Demand)	Consumer purchases content on a pay-per-view basis. Higher revenues to rights holders, timely consumer access to new content.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • iTunes Store • Sky Box Office • Amazon's video store 	Professionally-aggregated & distributed feature film content. Some short films too.

Finding and Securing a Digital Aggregator

The filmmaker / production company must now find and secure a digital aggregator. The aggregator will take care of authoring, encoding and delivering film assets to streaming platforms & channels. There's a huge variety of aggregators based all over the world - each with their own specialisms, levels of outreach, and fees/packages.

It is vital that the filmmaker undertakes thorough research on their own accord before signing up with any aggregators. These are just a handle of top tidbits of advice, to get more grips with the process as well as ensuring the companies are suited to what the filmmaker is looking for:

- Talk to a rep at a company and ask specifically about:
 - How do they handle client royalties/revenue?
 - What other sources of revenue does the company have besides aggregation?
 - Talk to other filmmakers who've worked with them before and ask for their opinions.

Established International Aggregators with UK offices

Juice Worldwide - <https://www.juiceworldwide.com/distribution/>

- Aggregator
- London Office: 3 More London Riverside, London, England, SE1 2AQ

Visual Data Media Services - <https://www.visualdatamedia.com/distribution/digital-platform-distribution/>

- iTunes 'Preferred Plus' aggregator, Netflix Preferred Vendor and Google Play technical partner
- London Office: 316-318 Latimer Road, London, W10 6QN - +44(0) 20 8962 2600

Bitmax - https://www.bitmax.net/content_distribution/

- Aggregator
- London Office: Unit 31, Tileyard Studios, Tileyard Road, London, N7 9AH, London - +44(0) 20 7700 0072

Established International Aggregators that have U.S offices and/or are online-based / virtual

FilmHub - <https://filmhub.com/>

- Aggregator, distributor and marketplace where VOD platforms can also shop for content.
- Main benefits are that the film doesn't require any payment upfront, you can reach a substantial number of niche VOD platforms in all global territories.
- Like many distributors, FilmHub takes 20% on the backend in perpetuity. It's what many distributors charge, but unlike a distributor, you maintain full control of your film's rights at all times.
- Click the link above to see full info including terms and conditions.

IndieRights - <https://www.indierights.com/>

QuiverDigital - <https://www.quiverdigital.com/>

- Aggregator
- It was the preferred aggregator for Sundance's Creative Distribution Initiative.
- Quiver charges up front. For feature-length films - their fee is \$1395 for the first retailer the filmmaker selects and \$225 for each additional retailer.
- Their standard pricing includes delivery to all of the countries that accept English language films without translated subtitles or official ratings.
- Click the link above to see full info including terms and conditions.

If your primary goal is to get on Amazon, you may not even need an aggregator. Through *Prime Video Direct*, you can upload your film directly to Amazon's SVOD (*Subscription video-on-demand*) and TVOD (*Transactional video-on-demand*) services.

As of June 2020, there have been some key changes to the way Amazon pays royalties on Prime streaming. It's now £0.01 per hour. Additionally, they've pulled thousands of titles from the platform without warning, and with no way to get them back on. This has been majorly contentious for filmmakers however Amazon has yet to provide comment.

Sources Consulted:

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