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The Human Rights Film Network: Festival resilience in the time of Covid-19

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The year 2020 was marked by Covid-19 health emergencies disrupting lives and societies on a global scale. No country or sector of our everyday life has been left unscathed by these unprecedented levels of sudden change and urgent adaptation that we all have experienced in different ways. Creative sectors also needed to quickly adapt and cope, while the importance of culture and the arts have once more emerged as key elements for resistance and nurturing in a time of crisis. Film festivals across the world and the film industry have also been impacted – some events were cancelled such as Cannes, Tribeca, Telluride, SXSW, Mumbai, and Edinburgh Film Festival; many opted for online versions such as Sheffield, Sarajevo, Thessaloniki, New York, HotDocs, and CPH:DOX. From September onwards a few have started to run again physically – Venice, London, Toronto, Pingyao, Jenvou, Busan – at times combining some blended elements of online streaming to reach out to global audiences missing the usual international festival calendar, especially film industry delegates.

This article focuses on how human rights festivals across the world have creatively and resourcefully resisted and adapted to Covid-19. It analyses the impact of this crisis on festival organisations within their contexts and on the global outreach that was possible thanks to the connections of the Human Rights Film Network (HRFN). The findings in this article are based on a survey that collected testimonies of how HRFN members responded to Covid-19 between April and November 2020 as well as from a global virtual meeting that was organised in July 2020 as an opportunity to ‘bring us closer together at this time of difficulty and uncertainty, allowing all members to meet, share

ideas for online activities to work more closely and collaboratively in the future'.[1] As producers of human rights film festivals who are members of the network and who attended these live meetings, we experienced firsthand the conversations that emerged, the reactions from fellow festival producers, as well as the importance of having such spaces to share concerns and advice. These reports help us understand how human rights festivals across the world have experienced this crisis within their geographic contexts and to ask questions such as: What was the impact of such emergencies on festival organisations in different contexts? What role did creativity, resistance, community solidarity and social networks play in the different local contexts? And finally, what was the role of the HRFN and its global outreach, in terms of connections, solidarity, and sharing of knowledge?

We are positioning this article in the light of existing writings on film festivals in general and in the context of the Covid-19 emergency in particular. Recent scholarship includes 'Reflections on the proliferation of online festivals during the Covid-19 Global Pandemic'[2] and on 'Vulnerabilities and resilience in the festival eco-system in pandemic times'.[3] The issue is also covered in trade publications such as *Screen* and *Variety*. Wide focus was given to the ways in which festivals across the world have coped with the pandemic, updating the calendar of the festival circuit. We would like to contribute to this emerging literature – both academic and professional – by sharing some insight on the experience from within the HRFN and the experience of human rights film festivals.

Human rights film festivals have in fact been largely left out of the plethora of industry and academic reports, online discussion events, and testimonies that emerged during the first wave of Covid-19. Nevertheless, their strategies are worth exploring for the ways in which they adapted despite adversity, finding inventive ways to reach out to vulnerable communities and to contribute to human rights culture. They are also worth investigating for their spirit of solidarity which extends to a global level, through HRFN. We argue that HRFN became a hub where these experiences were gathered and shared, opening a virtual space that allowed member festivals from all over the world to connect.

Since its launch in 2004, HRFN has been fostering exchange and cooperation between human rights film festivals around the world, encouraging the distribution and exhibition of films that cultivate a shared understanding of human rights cinema and issues.[4] As of 2020, HRFN consists of 44 festival members from all over the world of various formats, sizes, organisational

structures, and programming practices. Being a member can be particularly advantageous for festivals. For instance, it facilitates the building of relationships with other festivals. Similarly, it enables festivals to access industry events. Furthermore, it provides festivals with a collective voice defending the independence of festivals or demanding justice for artists who are being persecuted for their human rights work.[5]

From March 2020, the HRFN website and social media channels have been flooded with announcements of festival cancellations and postponements. Shortly after, the Network released a statement addressing concerns over the effects of the pandemic and lockdowns on their constituents' sustainability, many of which were already operating in precarious situations. Access to public health care and to digital provisions were noted at the forefront of discussions about human rights. Here the concern was for the communities that human rights festivals serve. They are often the most vulnerable, 'living similar realities to those portrayed by the films we screen: prisoners, refugees, people under occupation, the unhoused; victims of persecution, discrimination, marginalization or conflict who struggle daily against injustice'.[6] These concerns were re-iterated during the online meetings organised by HRFN, which functioned as a springboard for ideas and solutions to overcome these challenges.

Some festivals including the HUMAN International Documentary Film Festival in Oslo and the Human Fest in Valencia concluded their festivals just before lockdown started. Others were surprised by lockdown and quarantine just as they were launching their programmes: One World in Prague had to cancel mid-way through their 22nd edition; Festival du Film et Forum International sur les Droits Humains (FIFDH) in Geneva cancelled at the last minute although guests had already arrived. They had to swiftly move online, and so did other festivals that took place around that time – such as Movies that Matter in The Hague. Lastly, some festivals were forced to postpone or cancel their events – for instance ACT HRFF in Colorado, US and San Sebastian in Spain among others. Most festivals explored strategies and alternatives for shifting towards online or hybrid models, while adapting to ongoing Covid-related circumstances. Webinars were then organised by HRFN to share experiences, tools, and know-how among festival members.

The experiences shared in the survey and in the webinars reveal the incredible resilience, inventiveness, responsibility, and professionalism of HRFN festival organisers. While festivals across the world reacted in a similar

manner, human rights film festivals encountered an additional set of challenges. As will be discussed in more detail below, many of these festivals are operating in a precarious financial state; they are dependent on project-based foreign funding, private donations, and ticket sales. Some of them are also under political and legal pressures due to their critical approach to authority. Their main mission is to address inequality, injustices, and human rights abuses, which have only been exacerbated by the pandemic. It is worth acknowledging that festivals within HRFN are very different in size, format, programming, audiences, and the resources they have available. The Network brings together and connects these organisations at a global level, surpassing physical restrictions, and reaffirming the added value of their presence and activities across the world. Such responses highlight the potential of the international dimension of HRFN for sharing experience, knowledge, and solidarity, especially at times of emergency. Consequently, this study reveals that global bonds and interconnectedness constitute major tools for resistance in the context of health and political crises.

Context, focus, and findings

One of the main points that emerged from the initial virtual meeting was the need to exchange ideas and discuss the practicalities of running a film festival online. The HRFN board organised a more formal webinar where several members – Docudays UA in Ukraine, Movies that Matter in the Netherlands, and FINCA/FICDH in Argentina – presented their experiences of moving their festivals online and how they adapted in terms of programming, technical capacity, and communication strategy. Each speaker delved into the platforms they used for both screenings and non-filmic live events, discussing the levels of security and protection they offer, their costs and their design. They also touched on audience figures and ways of interacting with them virtually, through social media. All the guest speakers assessed their festivals as a success in terms of viewership, together with the advantage of having guests and filmmakers participate in the festival without the added expenses of travel and accommodation. However, they viewed these changes as temporary measures until they will be able to return to in-person events.

The reactions to the first wave of the pandemic expressed at HRFN meetings and through the survey reveal the hope and resilience of festival members. Many of these festivals carried on preparing for postponed editions,

others engaged in contingency plans. Censurados in Peru, FiSahara, or Seoul Human Rights Film Festival among others hoped to be able to return to cinemas in autumn 2020.[7] Meanwhile, some festivals organised online screenings or events, delivering social media campaigns as a way to keep the connection with the audiences and the artists' community, while encouraging creativity and solidarity (see, for instance, the *Energia Creativa* online event organised by Human Rights Nights in Italy). As such, human rights film festivals continued to develop, maintain a presence, and organise events in some form or another, act responsibly towards the communities they work with, and inspire others to celebrate human-rights oriented cinema during difficult times. When HRFN brought these global ideas and events together through virtual meetings and online research, they highlighted the resilience, inventiveness, responsibility, and professionalism of these festivals, drawing inspiration from each other to keep going.

Resilience, creativity, and inventiveness were the strategies implemented by festivals to resist and adapt to the complexity of the situation. The pandemic has, however, added further strain to the already limited resources of human rights festivals. It has also further impacted communities and at times even personal liberties. Many human rights film festivals have thus reacted to the pandemic by cultivating solidarity with independent filmmakers and precarious cultural or political organisations. For example, in between their festival editions, the Nuremberg International Human Rights Film Festival in Germany (which takes place every two years) shared their resources, such as a Zoom Pro account, with cultural workers and political groups who could not afford to have one of their own. According to festival director Andrea Kuhn, publicly funded festivals and those that enjoy a more secure funding structure should seek out ways 'to find sustainable and clever ways to share and re-distribute funds' and put pressure on funding bodies to increase their support towards vulnerable organisations, festival contributors, filmmakers, and other guests.

In other parts of the world, many human rights film festivals struggled to raise funds and survive amidst political and financial pressures. The *Muestra de Cine Internacional Memoria Verdad Justicia* (International Film Festival of Memory Truth and Justice) in Guatemala explained that cancelling their festival left them in a very precarious state, as the festival lost public funding and staff. The coordinators missed part of their wages and they had to find additional jobs, the international partners – NGOs and embassies – paused their funding opportunities, and the team continued to work using their

emergency reserves. Other festivals such as the Festival Internacional de Cine de los Derechos Humanos 'El Séptimo Ojo es Tuyo' in Bolivia, Freedom-FilmFest in Malaysia, and ActiveVista in Philippines echoed the same concerns over the unpredictability of project-based international funding and the lack of local government support towards culture and the arts. As such, these festivals had a limited capacity to reach out to their most vulnerable communities and to continue their activism against human rights violations. These challenges forced human rights film festivals to cultivate resilience and solidarity both locally (among their communities) and internationally (fostering partnerships and collaboration with other festivals). One of the positive consequences that emerged after going through several waves of restrictions was the possibility to connect to other festivals digitally, through the meetings facilitated by HRFN, as well as through informal online meetings and groups formed between festivals. For instance, human rights film festivals across Latin America reached out to each other and built relationships of support and solidarity, forging new partnerships and new ways of working through the crisis.[8]

The international dimension of HRFN and these formed regional networks were instrumental in enabling festivals to not only share their experience and knowledge, but also to create a sense of solidarity in times of emergency – this pandemic stressed that global bonds and interconnectedness can be tools for resistance. The global pandemic and several lockdowns pushed some of these human rights film festivals to reaffirm and redefine their roles as festivals that bring together human rights organisations, the film industry, and local audiences. Prior to 2020, human rights film festivals' main activities revolved around the screening of films (in a diversity of formats and genres) and organising non-filmic events that pursue human rights agendas either directly or indirectly. Being together and experiencing these activities in the same spaces were seen as the most effective ways to encourage collective action and organised unruliness.[9] When such gatherings were no longer possible, some human rights film festivals used their resources and position to find other ways to contribute.

For instance, FiSahara usually screens films to the local refugees and foreign guests who travel to the Sahrawi refugee camp. Moving online was not an option due to poor internet access. As such, they re-deployed their work and funding towards alternative engagements in the community. They launched education campaigns around health and hygiene, organised filmmaking opportunities for children and young people, and continued the

distribution of films on Western Sahara at the international level. Another HRFN member – Active Vista in the Philippines – was more confident in delivering some screenings and events online. They however dedicated their resources to support public health. They started to actively fundraise and campaign for protective equipment for medical staff. They promoted mass testing and solidarity with the film community. In this way, they also countered misinformation and addressed the authorities' handling of the public health crisis.

These reactions and initiatives confirm that human rights film festivals are active participants in human rights culture, supporting collective efforts to address issues on the public agenda and frame them within human rights discourses, such as, in this context, public health and education. On the other hand, they raise questions around the meaning and function of human rights film festivals when films are at the periphery or even absent. Would these forms of direct engagement through education or campaigning remain part of these festivals, and what roles, if any, will the screening of films have?

Human rights film festivals reacted to the pandemic by demonstrating resilience, creativity, and solidarity with their communities, filmmakers, activists, and other festivals. Their response was to share resources and foster a way of moving forward amidst uncertainty with responsibility and solidarity. Depending on their local context, on how the restrictions were implemented and their outreach, festival workers had to reinvent themselves and create new platforms for engaging with cinema, human rights, and activism. As in other fields, the pandemic only exacerbated the existing inequalities and the struggles of organisations that are vulnerable and precarious. Consequently, the funding cuts and lack of public support for cultural organisations and their workers affected the survival of human rights film festivals, who had to re-think the format, role, and delivery of their editions, and the overall sustainability. As demonstrated in this article, as well as throughout its history, HRFN is a springboard of global ideas and voices, where approaches and discourses around human rights cinema and activism are constantly debated and redefined.

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Notes

- [1] HRFN email exchange, 2020.
- [2] Zielinski 2020.
- [3] De Valck 2020.
- [4] Colta 2020; Grassilli 2012.
- [5] HRFN 2019.
- [6] HRFN 2020.
- [7] The postponement extended beyond autumn 2020: the 7th edition of Censurados took place in April 2021. As of spring 2021, FiSahara and Seoul Human Rights Film Festival have not yet announced new festival editions.
- [8] Festival Entretodos session 2020.
- [9] Tascón 2015.