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One World Human Rights Documentary Film Festival: Limits of (de)centralised management during the pandemic

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The One World Human Rights Documentary Film Festival (One World), which takes place in March, opens the Czech festival season. Since its inception in 1999, initiated by a human rights campaigner Igor Blažević, this has become a reputable event and one of the major European human rights film festivals. In terms of the total number of film screenings and visitors, One World is the largest documentary film festival in the Czech Republic. As the Festival grew, it gradually spread into the Czech regions. Today, the Festival comprises the main two-week-long event in Prague and a fluctuating number of regional, several-day-long events in other Czech cities, called One World in the Regions.

The 22nd edition of One World opened on 5 March 2020. As the coronavirus pandemic spread throughout Europe, the festival was influenced by this unprecedented situation. A few days after opening, the festival management decided to cancel all planned activities due to government restrictions. This decision affected the regional component of the festival, with some of the regional events scheduled to take place in the late spring and summer season. The festival management promised to continue the edition of One World in the fall of 2020, but while the main part of the festival based in Prague indeed took place, the regional parts had to be cancelled. The exceptional decision was made to also postpone the 23rd edition of One World to May 2021, and under the pressure of this situation some regional teams decided to no longer participate.

This review focuses on the specific organisational structure of One World in the Regions and considers the degree of management (de)centralisation. The pandemic situation reveals the hierarchical relationship between the festival headquarters and the regional teams that can be a source of the festival's destabilisation, jeopardising its outreach and educational mission, for it is precisely the regions that form a significant part of the festival's total attendance.

One World in the Regions as part of an audience-oriented strategy

One World is organised annually by a non-governmental and non-profit organisation – People in Need (PIN) – supporting human rights, social justice, and humanitarian aid worldwide. The very close connection between the festival and PIN is essential, since it understands documentary films as a powerful medium for education and social change.[1] PIN frames One World as an educational and awareness activity provided to the general public.[2]

One World has a particular role in the film festival circuit. The annual human rights film festival hosts Festivals Meet Festivals, the international gathering of documentary film festival organisers, and collaborates closely with the East Doc Platform. The festival programme also includes individual thematic competitive categories. These activities are primarily a tool for better positioning in the film festival circuit and strengthening producers' motivation to submit documentaries to the festival, but they are not the festival's primary mission – that would be outreach and education in human rights. As such, using Peranson's distinction between business and audience festivals,[3] One World is best understood as falling precisely between the two ideal models. The business model is visible in the orientation at film premieres, the presence of guests presenting the films, and the organisation of retrospectives. The audience model, on the other hand, is applicable too, as evidenced by low operating budgets, the small staff and volunteer work, and the program's stable size. In the case of One World, however, all of its features and activities are subordinate to its human rights mission and its efforts to intervene and educate the audience. The business model's features are then necessary to contextualise in relation to the festival's mission as supportive activities increasing the festival audience impact, not as economic income and business opportunities.

The festival mission is most visible in the content of its programming and the efforts undertaken to improve the programme's accessibility. As an audience-oriented festival, the festival programme presents mostly narrative and observational documentaries, usually accompanied by debates with human rights experts, film directors, and protagonists to elaborate on the topic and make it better understandable. Although artistic quality is required, the program director explains that a documentary's thematic seriousness and factual accuracy are the most significant indicators in the selection process.[4]

Due to the effort to reach a broad audience, the festival uses a strategy to reduce physical and psychological barriers that would discourage specific target groups. One World collaborates with consultants for accessible culture to avoid mobility and orientation obstacles by using sign-language interpreting, induction loops for hard-of-hearing spectators, audio descriptions of films for visually impaired audience members, and half-price tickets for handicapped audiences and free tickets for their assistants. There are also special screenings for the audience with intellectual disability (autism or epilepsy) and screenings for parents with children. Some offerings exist to encourage target groups with barriers to participation due to socio-economic circumstances or age. One World collaborates with NGOs supporting seniors, low-income groups, and homeless people and offers price-cut or free tickets to these audience members.

Efforts to make the festival accessible to broader society as a part of the education mission are reflected in school screenings for primary and secondary school students. These activities are co-organised by a particular educational program One World in Schools, and these screenings follow strict guidelines discussed by psychologists. The attendance of school screenings makes up half of the total attendance of the festival,[5] and most of these screenings take place in the Czech regions.

The festival management understands the festival's regional parts as essential in achieving its educational and outreach purpose,[6] because the Czech Regions sometimes deviate from Prague's metropolitan character in sociodemographic data (nationality and cultural diversity, age structure, political orientation, income, and cost of living). One World in the Regions is organised in conjunction with local partners. The main organiser (PIN) signs a cooperation agreement with the local partners, defining the rules of collaboration and the local partners' powers and management competencies, who are carefully selected. Roughly one-third of local partners are local branches

of PIN; another third is mainly represented by local municipalities' contributory organisations, which are expected to have a certain degree of financial solvency and longer-term sustainability. The final third is represented by associations of civic or culturally engaged citizens.

The local partners are seen as co-producers of One World in the Regions. Although they sign the contract directly with PIN, they are subject to the festival management (hereinafter, also referred to as headquarters). There is also a Coordinator of Regional Festivals within the headquarters, who ensures supervision for regions. Local partners must follow the production schedule and centrally defined rules (e.g. both the period in which the regional parts can happen and the minimum number of film screenings per day are regulated). Copyrights and licences, contracts, the central Festival theme, and its related visual identity, graphic and press materials, and film synopses, are addressed centrally. At the headquarters level, recommendations include the organisational structure of local teams, fundraising, and communication activities.

Local partners have a degree of autonomy in programming. The headquarters does the pre-selection of films, from which the local teams compile a programme that considers the specifics of the Region and local communities. The preparation of post-film debates is only partly up to the local partners and must follow the recommendations from headquarters. Local partners are expected to collaborate actively with local communities and the identified target groups. It is the headquarters, however, that provides a best practice guideline. In terms of finance, the local partners can apply for a People in Need grant, but at the same time, they should provide multi-source funding from local sources. There are some rules again, and the headquarters monitors which stakeholders local partners may collaborate with in order to maintain the festival's ethical standards.

The ties between the headquarters and the local partners are solid. The management is centralised mainly at the level of strategic planning. It is expected that the local partners understand the festival's philosophy and have a high degree of loyalty. Specific steps of programming and event production are delegated to local partners, i.e. at the executive level. But it still comprises relatively limited decision-making powers and a hierarchical structure of relations between the headquarters and regional partners. Collaboration with local partners should create a unique atmosphere for each regional version of the Festival, assuming that it can make the event more accessible to local

communities. This is sometimes in contrast to the limited delegation of powers.

Limits of centralised management in pandemic times

One World takes place in Prague as an international, almost two-week long event with an official opening and closing award ceremony. Only after the main event's closing ceremony can the regional parts begin. In contrast to the event in Prague, the regional parts have a limited number of screenings, debates, and guests, corresponding with each locality's specifics.

At the beginning of March 2020, the coronavirus pandemic manifested itself in the Czech Republic in the dozen cases concentrated in particular localities. Festival production was affected mainly by restrictions on international mobility, due to which some international guests could not attend the event. Everything else seemed to go as planned. Thus, the 22nd One World event – carrying the motto: *Not till a hot January*, describing one of the core characteristics of climate change – started on 5 March 2020 with the Academy award-winning film *Honeyland*. Precisely in the middle of One World, representatives of the National Security Council announced containment measures that forbid events with more than 100 participants to take place. In response to it, the headquarters decided to suspend the festival on 10 March, and the management announced the possibility of resuming the festival in autumn.

The decision to suspend had the most significant impact on One World in the Regions; it was obligatory without any exceptions. In the dynamically changing situation, which escalated into further government regulations in the following days, it was the logical strategic decision, especially from the headquarters' point of view and concerning the festival's main part in Prague. It would have been challenging and expensive to incorporate the measures and new restrictions on visitor numbers for the Prague-based event. For regional partners this meant an overly directive regulation infringing on their sovereignty. Some of them understood the situation as temporary, thinking that, in their case, the festival could be held even under new conditions or only postponed to a future summer season. They could organise the event according to local pandemic rules and independently decide on the postponed date, reacting to the local health situation. Such an individualised strategy adapted to the needs and possibilities of each regional part is also

supported by the decentralised organisation of the Czech public administration, in which the Regions act as self-governing territorial units with crisis management powers. Simultaneously, regional hygienic stations with considerable powers also operated to manage the Regions' epidemic situation. Alongside the nationwide state of emergency, the delegation of powers allowed measures to be taken tailored to a specific location.[7]

The pandemic situation thus exposed the centralised nature of the overall festival management and the hierarchical relation between the headquarters and local partners. It seemed that simultaneously both the declared collaboration based on partnership and the expected level of self-management of local festival teams had disappeared. Moreover, realising the somewhat unbalanced partnership was accelerated by the headquarters' decision to stream selected documentaries online, including documentaries presented in the Regions. This also concerned international premieres, such as the film *Doggy Love*. Although the health situation improved during the late spring and summer, local partners could not realise the planned regional versions of *One World*.

As the festival director states, the festival management tried to fulfil its promise of a continuation.[8] The autumn continuation of *One World* followed the traditional format – the main part of the event took place in the Czech capital as the first (11-22 September), followed by festival versions in the Regions (19 September and 24 October). The regional events did not have any chance to be implemented independently without the festival's main event. The break between the spring and autumn versions of the festival was too long, which meant re-planning everything. This could have been avoided if it were possible to implement the regional events at the local partners' discretion during the summer months. Therefore, only two-thirds of the original local partners decided to participate. The pandemic's expected second wave hit the autumn edition of *One World*, and the deteriorating situation led to new regulations. Finally, only the main part was held, and the vast majority of regional festivals did not manage to be realised.

Conclusion

One World in the Regions is part of the audience development and outreach strategy of the festival management. Although *People in Need* has branches outside Prague, it operates in only half of the Czech Regions, with a primary

interest in social work. Collaboration with local partners is therefore essential. These partners help spread awareness and education about human and civil rights to distant places from the capital's metropolitan character. This collaboration is based on volunteers' enthusiasm and local partners' personal commitment, without any assumption of profit. They are rewarded with a good feeling from producing a socially valuable event, to which they logically feel an emotional relationship. However, the impression of partnership is distorted by moments that reveal a high degree of centralisation, limiting regional teams' decision-making powers.

The pandemic situation has intensified this ambivalent relationship between local partners and central Festival management and, along with it, also the effort by local partners for emancipation. Without denying the necessity of central control in this type of organisation, this is probably the time to consider a greater degree of autonomy for regional teams.

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Notes

[1] Blažević 2012.

[2] Kovalčík 2020.

[3] Peranson 2009.

[4] <https://zpravy.aktualne.cz/zahranici/jeden-svet/> (accessed on 16 February 2021).

[5] One World in Regions was visited by 82,690 attendees, of which 53,484 were spectators of school screenings. In the total attendance of 132,227 the regional school screenings dominated. The data from 2020 are significantly misrepresented because the schools were closed.

[6] Hudečková 2018, pp. 22-24

[7] According to the OECD, the Czech Republic is now one of the countries with an above-average local autonomy index. (Plaček 2018, p. 77).

[8] The festival director's statement is available on the website news titled *There will be just one One World. This year all of it will happen in May*. Furthermore, published press releases are already helping to reconstruct the past year very well.