



INSIGHT REPORT

# TONY BENN: WILL & TESTAMENT

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## CHAPTER TWO

# INTRODUCTION

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### The following report analyses the near day-and-date release of *Tony Benn: Will & Testament*

This report, supported by the New Models strand of the BFI Distribution Fund aims to answer three core questions:

- Can the release of a niche film through special events increase and diversify the audience?
- Can events become the catalyst for success in terms of cinema release, home entertainment and on demand revenues?
- What is the effect on revenues of an event release followed by a shortened theatrical window?

#### 1.1 METHODOLOGY

The study is based on a range of evidence:

**Exit Polls:** Exit polls were carried out at four ‘town hall’ screenings of the film in London,

Bristol, Oxford and Manchester. Just under 500 questionnaires (497) were completed.

**Industry data:** The report used a range of data, including box-office receipts, and home entertainment and VOD returns, supplied by the film’s producer Praslin Pictures. The report also looks at online and social media activity.

**Analysis:** The conclusions are based on analysis of the available data, interviews with participating companies, and is informed by growing evidence from other event releases and new models, some of which have been supported by the BFI New Models fund.

#### 1.2 BFI NEW MODELS FUND

The release was supported by the New Models strand of the BFI Distribution Fund.



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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- *Tony Benn: Will And Testament* is a documentary, directed by film-maker Skip Kite and produced by London-based Praslin Pictures
- The film looks at the life and legacy of one of the UK's most controversial politicians, Tony Benn, who supported and endorsed the film
- Production began in 2012 and was completed by October of that year
- The film had its conventional premiere at the Edinburgh Film Festival, where it won the Audience Award
- A version of the film was screened at various political events before its release
- In the month before the main release, the film was screened at nine town hall events at locations with particular significance to Benn. The screenings were each accompanied by a Q&A session, attended by Benn and/or by other contemporaries, colleagues and allies
- The town hall events were supported through localised marketing spend on local radio, evening newspapers and flyers
- Crucially, events were supported by local trade unions, Labour Party branches and left-leaning organisations. The support of allied groups proved extremely valuable, ensuring that the events generally sold out
- The target audience for the town hall meetings was left-leaning politically engaged people
- The audience skewed towards older people, with 40% more people over-55 than under-35. The age of the audience reflected the fact that Benn was at the height of his political powers in the 1960s, 70s and 80s
- Less than 10% were under-24 (8.2%)
- The town hall audience included a large proportion of infrequent cinemagoers. Almost half of the audience (47%) went to the cinema less than once every two months
- Social media activity was strong with an active Facebook community that has attracted 76,000 Likes
- The social media operations have continued to be active, some time after the release of the film, in part because of the renewed interest in Benn's ideas that underpinned the victory of Bennite MP Jeremy Corbyn to the leadership of the Labour Party



## CHAPTER TWO

# PLANNING AND RELEASE

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### 2.1 THE FILM

*Tony Benn: Will And Testament* is a documentary about the life and legacy of one of the most controversial and influential figures of the post-War era in the UK.

It is the second feature-length film to be directed by Skip Kite. It was released in October 2014 by London-based Praslin Pictures, which was founded in 2008, and had also been responsible for releasing Kite's 2011 debut *Peter: A Study For A Portrait Of A Serial Killer*, about Peter Sutcliffe, the Yorkshire Ripper.

Tony Benn was a divisive figure for much of his political life: To a large extent he led and defined the Left of the Labour Party during some of its most turbulent years in the 1970s and 80s.

The power of the 'Bennite' legacy has been best illustrated by the election of one of his key allies Jeremy Corbyn to lead the Labour Party – an eventuality that was hard to imagine at the time the film was made.

Since leaving parliamentary politics in 2001, Benn had become something of a 'national treasure', with his diaries and speaking tours praised across the political spectrum.

His strong stance on Peace in the Middle East, as President of the Stop The War Coalition, became much more mainstream as the 2000s progressed. Serious illness had also increased public affection.

Benn was approached by a number of filmmakers hoping to capture his life story but he opted to support the Praslin project.

*Tony Benn: Will And Testament* is a polemical film that clearly supports the ideas and admires the man. It features interviews with those who knew him and tries to capture what it was about him that inspired so many people.

The film is clearly aimed at those on the left of the political spectrum.

### 2.2 THE STRATEGY

*Tony Benn: Will And Testament* was not expected to make a major impact – or at least to achieve its potential – through a traditional cinema release.

It faced the same challenges that any low-budget British documentary by a relatively unknown director faces in a crowded market.

But the film was also ambitious in trying to reach beyond the demographic and geographical limitations of the arthouse cinema circuit.

It was self-consciously determined to reach working class supporters of Benn, beyond the usual reach of the arthouse cinema circuit.

The idea of releasing the film through a series of events seemed like a natural fit for a number of reasons:

- It enabled screenings in venues where the target audience felt at home and where it could emulate the atmosphere and dynamism of a political rally
- Benn himself would be a major draw and he was willing to appear in person, and other key allies and thinkers would also be a draw
- And it was hoped that the excitement of the event would create momentum that could be carried into box-office, DVD and VOD sales

There is also an established tradition of unconventional screenings of political films, stretching back to the agitprop trains of the early Soviet Union.

More recently, film-makers, such as US radical Robert Greenwald (*Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War On Journalism*) and UK environmentalist Franny Armstrong (*The Age Of Stupid*), have embraced home and community screening of films that the conventional cinema circuit is reluctant to show.

The town hall political rally is also a feature of left-wing politics in the UK.

The use of live satellite links between live events and participating cinemas is now a firmly established format, familiar to cinema audiences.

Cinemas have become more receptive to the idea of a one-off event, followed by a multi-platform release outside the established exclusive theatrical window.

The test for all films, however, is how far the events can create the momentum to drive later platforms.



## 2.3 THE RELEASE

The film was completed in October 2012. A shortened version was screened at 11 political and film events during 2013 and 2014, including the Edinburgh Film Festival and the Durham Miners' Gala.

The release did not use traditional distributors, opting instead for a 'direct release' strategy, buying in distribution and marketing expertise, while retaining rights.

Praslin worked with two of the most experienced UK direct distribution practitioners, Deborah Rowland (We Are The Tonic) and David Shear (Shear Entertainment), who had formed a joint venture, called Shear Tonic.

The plan was to create a series of events, supported by local marketing and social media, that aimed to build powerful momentum for each platform.

The earliest screenings were 30-minute previews in 2012, including sell-out events at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, the Cromarty Film Festival and the Coronet Cinema in Notting Hill Gate, London, featuring a Q&A with Tony Benn himself. (It also made an early appearance in the Scottish mobile cinema, The Screen Machine.)

In the month before the main release, there were 11 town hall and assembly rooms in places, which had particular significance to Benn: Manchester, Chesterfield, Leeds, Glasgow, Liverpool, Cardiff, Oxford, Bristol and London. (The exit polls were taken at the events in London, Cardiff, Oxford and Bristol.)

Each event had special guests and was marketed locally. The London premiere, for example, was at the Islington Assembly Hall on September 24, and featured Jeremy Corbyn in a Q&A, before his unexpected success in the Labour Party leadership contest in 2015.

The events were intended to feed into a day-and-day strategy, which meant that the film was available on multiple platforms soon after the theatrical debut. (The conventional release normally includes a 17-week protected cinema-only window).

The film debuted in 21 cinemas on October 3 with 73 Q&A event screenings on October 5, 2014. It had a multi-platform release the following day, including iTunes, blinkbox, Curzon Home Cinema, Amazon Prime, Google Play and 55 cinemas.

The DVD was released in November, hoping to turn the momentum from the other platforms into a successful Christmas gift release.

## 2.4 INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media was an essential element of the strategy, as it has proven for all direct distribution and 'event' releases.

While direct local word of mouth is important, the hope is that those attending events will use their personal online networks to start a viral wave.

Given the expectation of an older audience, the producers focused on the established social media, capable of cutting across generations, principally Facebook and Twitter.

While the development of those networks were driven by young people, the fastest growing user groups are older. Today, 63% of all adults between 50 and 64 use Facebook and 56% of all over-65s.

Facebook and Twitter are widely used by political groups as a low-cost means of gathering and mobilising supporters. (The Stop The War Coalition, of which Tony Benn had been president, has more than 130,000 Facebook Likes.)

A YouTube channel was launched in August 2012, followed by the website – [tonybennfilm.com](http://tonybennfilm.com) – in October 2012 with the intention of building an active community of interest.

Both were valuable marketing tools, directing users to the different release platforms and offering a dynamic means of building momentum.

## 2.5 MARKETING

The marketing campaign was based on a P&A budget of £155,000, £55,000 of which was to be covered by the BFI New Models Fund. Given initial median box-office estimates of £250,000, the investment seemed relatively sound.

The unusual nature of the release, however, left more room for doubt about the budget more than the standard film campaign and it was anticipated that there would be some improvisation required.

The events, in particular, required fresh thinking, based around a highly localised marketing campaign, quite different to the approach to the film release as a whole.

Money was spent in the local and regional press, which still has strong market penetration. There was also a fliers and voucher campaign.

The marketing also focused on working with local political organisations. Trade Unions, Labour Party branches and activist bodies played an important role in spreading word of mouth.

The Unite union and the TUC advertised the event screenings through their websites and social media networks. That support continued into the DVD release, which was also promoted to members.

This approach clearly had an impact (see Section Three) and was able to reach out beyond regular cinemagoers, and certainly beyond arthouse film lovers.

The question mark was always understood to be how far that relatively expensive local campaigning would translate into a subsequent cinema and multi-platform national film release

As the table below demonstrates, there was significant overspend around the events. In a sense, the film was a victim of its success, with sell-out events requiring more staff, better AV, etc.

P&A BUDGET	PROJECTED	ACTUAL
Print costs	£10,500	£8,700
Media costs	£28,000	£26,500
Publicity costs	£55,000	£72,400
PR production costs	£20,500	£25,300
Misc costs	£40,000	£42,000

## CHAPTER THREE

# REACTIONS AND IMPACT

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This section looks at the make-up of the event audience, the reactions to the film and the way that momentum built up.

### 3.1 AUDIENCE REACTION

The event release of *Tony Benn: Will And Testament* intended to reach audiences in groups that conventional distribution tends to miss – in particular, working class audiences with little interest in arthouse cinema.

In that respect, there were clear signs of success. The exit polls showed that the audience was made up of people interested in politics, rather than cinephiles.

Nearly half of the audience (47%) said they went to the cinema less than once every two months

While a third (33%) went once a month, less than 10% said they went more than once a month. There were regional variations: 44% of the audience in London said they went to the cinema once a month or more, compared with 29% in Oxford, perhaps reflecting easier access to a wider variety of films on more screens.

(By contrast, the audience for the 'event' release of Lars Von Trier's *Nymphomaniac Volume I* and *Nymphomaniac Volume II* earlier in 2014 were dominated by frequent cinemagoers, with 61% of the London audience saying they went to the cinema once a week.)

The exit polls suggest a large majority (67%) were primarily interested in Benn and his politics rather than cinema as a form. Less than 5% went to the film because of an interest in documentary.

The regional differences were small: 61% of the London audience said they were primarily interested in Benn or his politics, compared with 71% in Bristol.

The less cinephile audience was a challenge for marketing, weakening the influence of trailers and film page advertising.

Easily the biggest influence on attendance at all four venues was the recommendation of a friend. It was cited by 37% of the audience.

That number does not necessarily mean that the emphasis on local media marketing was ineffective. The power of local media tends to be its ability to start a conversation, rather than offering definitive recommendations and views.

The second influencer was online articles and reviews (13%), reflecting a strong social media campaign.

Local political organisations, which were targeted by the marketing campaign made some impact, directly influencing the decision to attend of around 8% of the audience (although many more will have heard about the film through fellow members of those organisations).

A second salient point about the audience was that it was older than average for cinema screenings: 58% of the audience were over 45, 36% over 55, and 13% over-65. By contrast, only 7% were under-24 and less than 1.5% under 18.

The age spread is not surprising given that Tony Benn's most influential political years were between the 1960s and 1980s.

There was some regional variation: London skewed a younger (46% over 45), and Oxford much older (72%). But the patterns were similar, with limited interest from younger audiences.

The sense that it was a form of cinematic obituary underpinned much of the coverage and the audience reaction. More than 20% of the audience described the film as 'moving' or 'sad.'

The overall audience reaction to the events was very positive, perhaps unsurprisingly given that the majority were already sympathetic to Benn and his politics.

More than two-thirds of the audience (69%) gave the film the highest 'excellent' rating, and more than 99% gave it a positive score (good, very good, or excellent).

More than 65% said the film was 'better than expected', which is impressive, considering that nearly 70% said they had 'quite' high expectations beforehand.

84% said they would 'definitely' recommend it to a friend. Just under 40% said they would recommend watching the film in a cinema now (20%) or soon (18%).

Given the older demographic, it is perhaps unsurprising that the next highest choice was to wait for the television screening (13%), or to buy on DVD (11%).

Only 10% suggested TV On Demand at £7.99, and just 9% download-to-own at £13.99. In both cases, the percentage who said they were interested were still higher than those that did not.





The main responses focused on the politics with more than 14% described the film as ‘inspiring’ and 13% interesting.

The interest in cinema after the film were less easy to gauge. 46% of the audience said they were ‘more interested in documentaries’ after the screening

### 3.2 CRITICAL REACTION

The critics response to the film was generally positive but there was a general view that it was a somewhat uncritical and unchallenging.

Peter Bradshaw, in a four-star review in *The Guardian*, perhaps captured the key point, that the film was a ‘eulogy’.

The film won awards at a number of film festivals around the world, beginning with the Audience Award at the 2014 Edinburgh International Film Festival.

Other honours include the best documentary awards at the Irish Times Ticket Awards and at the Bryon Bay International Film Festival in Australia; and an Honourable Mention in the documentary section of the International Film Awards in Berlin and second prize in the doc section of the International Urban Festival in 2015.

### 3.3 SOCIAL MEDIA

The social media campaign gathered 700 followers on Facebook soon after its launch. But it gathered momentum with each pre-release initiative.

The release of a 30-minute taster version was a particularly strong driver of social media and within two months there were 20,000 followers.

That following represented an unusually active community with higher levels of engagement

than most small independent films because of the strong political edge. Interest was further encouraged through competitions and prizes, such as copies of Tony Benn’s celebrated diaries.

The Facebook page continued to grow, reaching 66,000 Likes in August, 69,000 in September and 72,000 in October. It was still increasing long after the end of the release, reaching 76,500 Likes by the start of 2016.

More than half of Facebook users (58%) were over-45, and there were twice as many visitors over-65 as those under-24. Those figures closely mirror the exit polls for the events.

More significantly perhaps, London made up just 21% of visits. It was followed by major cities with a strong radical history, including Glasgow (9%) and Manchester (6%).

The unusual, and promising, aspect of the social media campaign is that it managed to create an afterlife.

There have been more than 5,000 additional Facebook Likes since the release of the film, with an active community that has gathered over time, including a number of contributions from overseas.

The still active community has a number of causes. The film has continued to pick up awards, adding the Best Feature Documentary award to its honours list in October 2015.

But it also became a focal point for a shift in UK politics, particularly during and since the successful campaign that saw Bennite MP Jeremy Corbyn become leader of the Labour Party.

It is perhaps unfortunate timing that the Corbyn phenomenon happened a year after the release but it might also offer promise of a particularly long tail for sales, which are unusual for a low-budget independent film.

## CHAPTER FOUR

# RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

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### 4.1 BOX OFFICE AND EVENTS

By the end of 2015, the cumulative gross total of the total theatrical reach was £78,321, well below the original estimate of £250,000.

The town hall screenings were strongest, with the town halls and assembly hall venues achieving gross revenues of £34,340. Almost 3,000 people attended the largely sold out events during September, which is a strong performance given that the audience was made up of a majority of infrequent cinemagoers.

Unfortunately, the cost of marketing, staffing and running the events increased to nearly £56,800, above the £40,000 original costs.

The logic of the original estimates was that they would create momentum that would be picked up by the rest of the release. In box-office terms, however, there was a disconnect.

The Q&A satellite linked cinema events took place on October 5, 2014. The 71 cinemas around the UK and the Republic of Ireland taking the live feed – dominated by Picturehouse theatres and Odeon and Vue multiplexes – generated net box office revenues of more than £22,000.

The later release of the film on its own was curtailed by the decision to shrink the window between theatrical and on-demand release, which generally leads to resistance from cinemas.

The resistance from cinemas should not be overstated. The reality is that a low-budget documentary release would have had a severely limited, if any, theatrical release in the current over-supplied market.

Some 17 cinemas took the film for a full week's run on October 3, before and including the event release. Another 44 cinemas have shown the film since, mainly as one-off screenings.

Total net box office revenues were £35,832.84 with an opening week screen average of £947.

### 4.2 ON DEMAND SALES

Video On Demand sales were relatively modest, reflecting perhaps the lack of use of VOD among the core demographic group.

In the opening three months, there were 883 sales on iTunes with revenues of £3,435.

Revenues from Filmflex were £2,345 from 1,015 sales.

Revenues from Amazon were just under £400 from 149 sales (44 purchase, 105 rental).

There were 95 rentals through Blinkbox over the same period with revenues of £159.



### 4.3 CONCLUSIONS

*Tony Benn: Last Will And Testament* was a highly challenging proposition and not only because it was a low-budget theatrical documentary from a relatively unknown film-maker.

The chief problem with the release, and its biggest virtue as a new model, was that it was determined to reach beyond a narrow arthouse demographic.

Like Benn himself, it was intended to be a film that would have an impact way beyond the arthouse cinephile audience, and certainly way beyond a London liberal arthouse elite.

It deserves recognition in that respect, attracting a national audience of people who were infrequent cinemagoers. While it is a counterfactual point, it is hard to imagine a more conventional theatrical release having the same reach.

*Tony Benn: Will And Testament* was a strong fit for this kind of event-led release for that more diverse reach.

It might be argued that there were other clear advantages. One is that while the targeted left-leaning individuals may be beyond the reach of conventional cinema releases, they do constitute a clear and relatively cohesive niche.

They tend to be members of pre-existing organisations, such as trade unions and political parties. Those organisations can be recruited as useful allies in marketing.

There is a sense of shared purpose and community with social media playing an important role, even among older people: internationalist organisations, such as the Stop The War Coalition, which had been chaired by Tony Benn, have strong social media presences, which act as a centre for debate.

Many will choose to read the same newspapers: The Guardian, for example, was easily the most cited by those who said they had been influenced to attend by newspapers.

Organised niches have clear advantages for the event release. They have a known and active potential market, and often look for content that reinforces their ideas and the bonds between members.

The danger of niches is that they can become exclusive and excluding. The events arguably created a specific word of mouth around the film: that it was a celebration of a certain kind of politics and was strongly focused on supporters.

That may have undermined potential interest among those who were interested in the man but less interested in his politics.

### 4.3.2 MOMENTUM

The producers put together a marketing strategy that was designed to build an active community of interest that would provide the foundation for a wider release.

It was a well thought-out approach with a strong logic to its timing. The social media presence, YouTube channel and website were available before the film was completed.

The use of preview content in Q&As featuring Tony Benn himself in 2012, before post-production had been completed gave the film a headstart.

The two-show event at the Edinburgh Festival in August 2012 received valuable publicity.

The strong building of social media interest at an early stage offers lessons for other producers.

These are early days for event releases, however, and the optimal timing is still a work in progress.

The final revenues seem to suggest that the momentum was not achieved but that does not necessarily prove weakness in the thinking behind the approach.

The right timing necessarily involves a degree of luck and Praslin did not have that. Benn himself, who might have been a major part of the drive, died in March 2014.

And if the leadership election for Benn ally Jeremy Corbyn had taken place a year earlier, there might have been a very large surge in interest.

Those elements of luck are true of many other film releases.

In hindsight, the strength of the event in attracting an older non-cinephile audience, was also a weakness.

While people were deeply enthused by the film and said they would recommend it to others, in practice that desire could not be realised.

The older audience did not have the knowledge of VOD platforms to help drive sales, and number of screenings in arthouse and independent cinemas limited the theatrical reach.

In other words, those outside the arthouse cinema culture and with little experience or interest in VOD, are poor candidates for turning events into successful sales.

### 4.3.3 LOCAL VERSUS NATIONAL

The marketing for the events around *Tony Benn: Will And Testament* was necessarily local, focused on filling seats at specific locations.

While social media clearly plays an important role in such work, there is little or no substitute for local marketing.

The events around the film were strongly built around local media, partnerships with local organisations and street-level work, including flyers.

Activities included a voucher campaign in evening newspapers, which remain widely read across a wide spectrum of the population in many towns and cities in the UK.

There are advantages in highly targeted neighbourhood campaigns, dramatically reducing the wastage of marketing.

On the other hand, trying to scale up a local campaign for an event into a full-blooded national cinema and multi-platform marketing release is a serious challenge.

It is deeply reliant on mobilising the event audience into active campaigners, who can drive word of mouth through their own personal online and offline networks.

The barrier to the approach is really cost. It is expensive to create local events, particularly given the need to then spend more on national campaigns.

The experience of *Tony Benn: Will And Testament* does suggest that event releases can be effective in mobilising active audiences.

But costs may need to be reduced, perhaps by greater emphasis on partnerships and sponsorship on the ground, or through getting audiences to take the lead, perhaps through techniques, such as crowdfunding.

The alternative is to that much more money is made from events themselves, with less reliance on momentum. In this case, the events effectively broke even, with little opportunity for real expansion.

It is possible to see how films may lend themselves to new kinds of experience-led releases. But they would have to be premium-priced events, which would restrict the demographic reach.

#### 4.4 LONG-TERM ADVANTAGES

The hope of the film-makers is that audiences who might have visited the cinema only because of interest in politics, might have been inspired to return.

There is some positive evidence. Just under half the audience (47%) said they would be more likely to watch documentaries as a result of the film.

The figures were boosted by the numbers for London, where a majority said they were interested. That might reflect the fact that there are considerably more opportunities to watch film documentaries in the capital.

There is still interest and an active social media conversation around *Tony Benn: Will And Testament* on its social media pages, a full year after the film was launched.

The producers have not necessarily exploited that potential to the full. Tony Benn's Wikipedia page, for example, does not have a link to the film.

The international reach of the film was initially limited. Tony Benn was a famed internationalist, and a leading light in Stop The War and anti-nuclear campaign.

The Facebook page visits in the main online marketing phase of the film were almost 95% based in the UK.

The numbers reflect the fact that all marketing was locally based and that they were centred on events in specific locations.

Since the launch of the film, however, there has been a significant growth in interest overseas for two reasons.

The second seems to reflect the internationalist nature of socialist politics, which has been growing strongly in some countries.

The film was screened at the National Arts Festival in South Africa and at the Marxism Festival in London.



# FINAL CONCLUSIONS

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*Tony Benn: Will And Testament* found a way to create an active audience for a film that would have had very weak prospects through a traditional cinema release.

Crucially, it managed to attract politically committed people who were infrequent cinemagoers. That success was achieved in part through partnership with local groups and organisations and through social media.

The experience of the film, however, also clearly demonstrates the challenges for any niche interest film wishing to use an event release.

Local events require the investment of time and money in the surrounding area.

The chance of recouping serious money from even successful events aimed at a diverse audience are slim, meaning that return on investment depends on local momentum turning into national, or even international success.

For a low-budget film in what remains a niche interest work, the extension to a broader audience is currently deeply challenging, particularly where a large part of the audience does not regularly attend cinemas.

There may be opportunities for improvements in both creating stronger return on investment from events; and in supporting the transition to cinematic success.

One part of that approach is to convince supporters of the film to make a bigger contribution, through sponsorship, or crowdfunding. The other is to build premium-price high-end events that do not rely on later cinema and VOD revenues.

But the core of the challenge of event releasing is to create momentum from event to commercial release.

*Tony Benn: Will And Testament* offers valuable lessons in reaching beyond the core arthouse demographic. It is also a reminder that these are the early stages of new releases.

The timing of strategies, integration of local and national campaigns, the effective use of the right social media, etc. are developing every day, as are the ways in which audiences watch films across platforms.

Even in hindsight, the logic of the release seems sound and it is hard to argue that any major mistakes were made.

One can make a case that the film appealed to the wrong demographic but that is dangerous ground at a time when diversity is at the top of the industry agenda. Arthouse and independent cinema must reach beyond its core metropolitan demographic.

A more interesting exercise is to look at how far changes in audience media use would make the release more viable in the rapidly evolving market today, in which social media has become more sophisticated and where VOD is reaching a mass market.

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