

New Documentary Filmmaker Group Calls for Industry to Establish AI Guidelines: An Open Letter

As seen in the recent WGA and SAG strikes, generative AI (GAI) is revolutionizing the film industry. We can't know the future, but we believe we have a responsibility to use GAI in accordance with the journalistic values the documentary community has long held. Foremost is the implicit promise to the audience that what is presented as authentic media, is in fact authentic. We see that representation being skewed by GAI, and believe it is time for the industry to establish standards in response to the new technology, so that trust with our viewers will remain unbroken.

We are the Archival Producers Alliance, a passionate group of filmmakers using our collective knowledge to influence policy and affect change within the industry. Our completed works include Emmy-, Oscar-, and Peabody-Award winning films for networks, streamers, museums, and theatrical releases. As archival producers, we collaborate with directors, producers and editors to research, source and license all forms of audio-visual archival materials. In the documentary space, we're on the front lines of preserving integrity and journalistic ethics for archival material used in the films we work on - and together we're raising our concerns about how GAI will affect our work, and documentary films as a whole.

A few examples of GAI use that members of the Alliance have started to see:

- A lack of transparency with audiences when historical voices are generated by AI, leading viewers to believe they are hearing authentic primary sources when they are not.
- Creating AI-generated 'historical' images to depict people and events, rather than sourcing real ones where available, in order to save time and money.
- Generating fake newspaper articles and headlines, removing viewers from fact-based sources.
- Generating recreations and non-existent historical artifacts without identifying them as such.

We recognize there may be good reasons for documentarians to use AI-generated media: to bring to life the stories of people who are missing from history, or to take viewers to a time or place without adequate visual representation. But without standards, use of GAI threatens to distort history and transform the relationship we have with audiences. Generated material presented as "real" in one film will be passed along – on the internet, in other films – and is in danger of forever muddying the historical record. The commingling of real and unreal taints all of it; if neither images or audio can be believed, then the nonfiction genre is hopelessly compromised.

The survival of the documentary industry, in all of its power and promise to help us understand and interpret our history and our present, is contingent on maintaining a truthful and transparent relationship with viewers.

Particularly in the absence of regulations around this quickly-evolving technology, we feel that it is imperative that the documentary community lead by example in setting a precedent of transparency and best practices.

Signed,