

Producing Documentary Films in High Definition

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Producing documentary films in HD or staying in the conventional Digital Beta or DVCAM? In 2010, this question is less relevant than before. A producer planning on worldwide sales will find out that now it is much harder to distribute a standard definition film than last year or the year before. The HD revolution is here, and it is no longer limited to high-end documentaries, TV dramas and feature films.

My company, [Highlight Films](#), produces and provides production services to many international productions arriving to Israel and Palestine. In the last three years we took part in dozens of high definition productions of documentary films throughout the Middle East. To judge by the productions we handle, in 2010 only one of ten documentary productions is in standard definition. Nine were filmed in HD.

The biggest consideration used to be cost. Today, even in low budget docs, the availability of small, non-expensive HD cams such as the Sony EX3 or the smaller models of the Panasonic P2 series is often less expensive than hiring a digi-Beta camera set, or a Sony 450 camera.

As far as editing, both the Panasonic and the Sony workflows are now fully compatible with Avid and Final cut NLEs. Since the costs of storage drives have dropped significantly in the last two years, it is often less expensive than digitizing tapes, re-digitizing for post production, and the storage costs involved.

Is standard definition dead? I believe it is, or will soon be so. As more and more broadcasters switch to HD, and the speed of internet connections worldwide is improving, there will soon be no reason to stay in standard definition. I think that the more crucial question is whether HD will stay for long... Many TV commercial spots, feature films and high-end corporate videos are already shot in 4K or 8K, but RED or the re-adjusted DSLR cameras.

The RED gives filmmakers excellent output, but the technical hardships of running a trouble free production outside a climate-controlled studio are still quite a nuisance. I refrain from using RED for outdoor documentary shoots, although I love adding RED filmed GVs and beauty shots to HD documentary projects. The DSLR cameras, while superb in quality, have their own limitations and their super-quality often results in high post production and storage costs.

So my educated guess is that High Definition is here to stay, at least for the next 4-5 years, and certainly for documentary films. The Sony F900R and the Panasonic 2700 and 3700 are superb cameras, following the same operation logic of previous standard definition models hence easy to operate for experienced cameramen. The smaller cams provide a sufficient solution for corporate videos, low budget docs and similar categories.

We were one of the first companies to buy the Sony F900R in 2007. Several months ago our camera was stolen, and we had to decide what will replace it. I have always worked with Sony cameras, and felt some insecurity to switch to Panasonic. After long deliberations we have decided not to decide. We bought two new Sony EX-3 cameras, and decided to wait with the big guns until Panasonic and Sony reveal their professional 3D cams. In October 2010, once we will be able to test and compare, I'll be able to make the final decision.

It's a hectic time as far as TV formats are concerned. For equipment buyers, there can be more wrong decisions than right ones. But for the end user, whether documentary filmmakers or small production companies, the safest bet is to go HD and stay there. The HD broadcast of the World Cup tournament has demonstrated to many of us how significant the move to HD is. It will take 3D TV sets at least five years until they become a household necessity, and even that is not certain.

These days we are launching a new international venture: JewishBiography.net. This venture requires filming in various camera sets all over the world in broadcast quality, and uploading raw footage for editing in Israel. We have decided to film only in HD and only on digital storage cards. From day one, JewishBiography.net will be tapeless. It's exciting, and this is the best way to work with present means and future uses. The risk of High Definition becoming obsolete does not exist, at least not in the next decade. That, at least, is what many of us hope...

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