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Finding allies in pandemic times: Documentary film festivals and streaming platforms

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This chapter explores the convergence of exhibition and distribution practices in the contemporary festival landscape, focusing on the documentary festival circuit. With the Covid-19 crisis, film festivals had to reinvent themselves, which included starting collaborations with Video-on-Demand (VOD) platforms as an alternative to theatre screenings. While in previous years the circuit of major festivals such as Cannes, Venice, or San Sebastián displayed a reluctant attitude toward new players in film distribution like streaming platforms (especially Netflix), the documentary festival circuit developed an alternative approach. This is due to the different economic role played by specialized festival circuits, such as the documentary festival circuit, whose relationship with distributors and commercial movie theatres has not been as close (and dependent) as that of festivals focusing on fiction features. In this context, and with the aim of filling the gap of commercial distribution beyond the festival realm, some documentary festivals had already embarked on online distribution initiatives, including the creation of their own specialized VOD platforms (see Vallejo 2014, 2020).

In this chapter, we focus on two pioneering streaming platforms for documentary distribution that were created by (or in close collaboration with) film festivals. The first, DAFilms, originated out of an alliance of seven European documentary festivals. The second, Tënk, is an initiative by the French festival États généraux du film documentaire. By contrasting the discourses put forth by the representatives of these platforms with those of the festivals with which they collaborated before and during the pandemic, we identify key factors that contributed to the success or failure of their alliances. We pay particular attention to the processes by which curatorial practices either complement or clash with technical limitations and organizational patterns on both sides of the partnerships.

Our study of collaborative practices employs two concepts, one developed within anthropology and other in management studies. The first, the anthropological concept of "reciprocity," (Mauss 1925; Graeber 2001) allows us to evaluate the social dimensions and dynamics of cooperation. The second, "strategic alliance," (Garrette and Dussauge 1995; Doz and Hamel 1998; Aliouat and Taghzouti 2009; Philappart 2001) is derived from management studies and is used to assess the implications and results of alliances forged between partners. Our method combines in-depth interviews with content analysis. First, we conducted in-depth structured and semi-structured interviews with the representatives of the platforms and festivals. These encounters took place by telephone or videoconference between January and March of 2021, as detailed in the end of the reference section. Second, we analyzed the structure and content of the DAFilms and Tënk websites, as well as the websites of the festivals with whom they collaborated (including previous

versions of the websites)[1]. In order to track changes and analyze how these platforms and festivals adapted their activities to respond to the pandemic, we did additional close readings of their social media posts (in particular, posts by their Twitter and Facebook accounts) and newsletters, as well as materials appearing in trade publications (interviews and festival reviews).

In what follows, we examine two examples of platform-festival collaboration during the pandemic. In our first case study, DAFilms, we analyze why a VOD platform born out of an alliance of festivals was not necessarily the preferred streaming option for all its partners during the pandemic. We pay particular attention to organizational aspects, focusing on technological issues and geo-cultural positioning. Moreover, we stress the importance of social connections to understanding the collaboration between partners in a rapidly changing environment. In our second case study, Tënk, we focus on curatorial strategies, examining how the shift to a new collaborative model between festivals and this platform during the pandemic failed to work in the long term. Here the analysis revolves around issues of distinction and symbolic value, as well as examining the controversies surrounding issues of quantity vs quality brought about by the surplus of festival-provided films on this online platform that had previously distinguished itself through its editorial identity.

1. DAFilms

DAFilms is a VOD streaming platform managed by Doc Alliance (DA), a creative partnership of several European documentary festivals that formed in 2008. DA originally included the founding members Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival in the Czech Republic, Visions du Réel in Switzerland, DokLeipzig in Germany, and Millennium Docs Against Gravity in Poland. The alliance was later joined by CPH:DOX in Denmark (in 2009), FIDMarseille in France (in 2012), and Doc Lisboa in Portugal (in 2013). Since its inception, DA has been funded by the European Union and by Czech public institutions. The most important activities managed by the alliance are the "Doc Alliance Selection" and the "dafilms.com" VOD platform.

In 2005, the Jihlava IDFF created the Doc-air.cz portal for downloading documentaries. In 2009, it reconverted to an international VOD platform: dafilms.com. Originally, it offered free or pay-per-view options only, but today it also offers a subscription option. Its catalogue, which has steadily grown from 600 films in 2011 to more than 2,500 in 2021, is made up of creative documentaries and experimental films. It includes a selection of films screened at partner festivals, plus "creative films with strong auteur perspectives from other festivals (e.g. IFF Rotterdam, Locarno), and […] retrospectives of renowned directors" (Tabakov in Slováková 2020, 203). The platform also includes films submitted directly by filmmakers, with about one out of every twelve submissions being accepted (idem).

[1] These were accessed through The Internet Archive (wayback machine): https://archive.org/web/

1.1. Doc Alliance, DAFilms and film festivals: collaboration and reciprocity

The most common form of collaboration between the platform and its affiliated festivals before the pandemic was the presentation of curated programs of six to seven films selected from the festivals on the DAFilms platform. Some examples include: the presentation of films developed within the industry program DOX:LAB by CPH:DOX in 2013, a selection of award-winning films from FIDMarseille in 2014, a special program of animation and documentary by DOKLeipzig in 2017, and a retrospective of Portuguese filmmakers at the "Echoes of DocLisboa" in 2018, among many others. From the start, the platform has always offered complementary video materials, such as masterclasses recorded at film festivals (presented, for example, by Millennium Docs Against Gravity[2] in 2010). In addition, the platform has curated similar programs in collaboration with festivals that were not members of the alliance, principally from Eastern Europe, but also from America and Asia.[3]

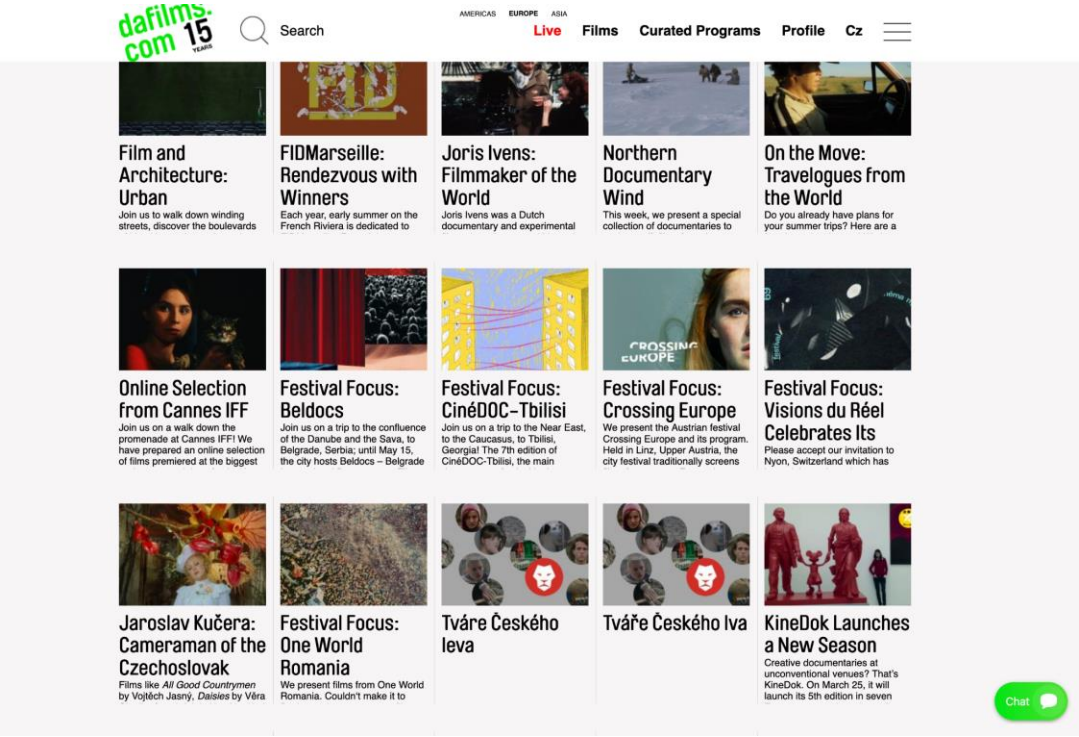


Figure 6.1: A selection of curated programs selected from festivals as presented on the DAFilms platform in 2019.

Most of these curated programs were available for a limited period of time (from two to seven days) and were strategically presented just before or after the festival dates, therefore contributing to the festivals' publicity and furthering the impact of the films' circulation. The most common practice consisted of presenting films from previous editions of the festivals. This responded to release-window policies

[2] At that time the festival was named the Planet Doc Film Festival.

[3] Festivals that collaborated with DAFilms presenting a curated program include: International Film Festival Cinematik, and Febiofest IFCF! (Slovakia), Zagrebdox (Croatia), Sarajevo Film Festival (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Beldocs (Serbia), One World Romania and Astra Film Festival (Romania), Verzio Film Festival (Hungary), Cronograf IDFF (Moldova), and CinéDOC-Tbilisi (Georgia), in Eastern Europe; Visegrad Film Festival (Ireland), Open City documentary festival (UK), and Trieste (Italy), in Western Europe; RIDM: Rencontres Internationales du Documentaire de Montréal (Canada), in North America; and É Tudo Verdade/It's All True (Brasil), in South America.

prevailing before the pandemic, when rights holders signed online distribution deals only after traveling the festival circuit and/or attaining theatrical release. Nevertheless, the fact remains that DAFilms had already offered simultaneous screenings onsite and online during festival dates before the pandemic.

These partnerships were based on reciprocity, whereby both parties profited from free publicity among diverse audiences while working toward the common goal of increasing documentary films' exposure and circulation. The organizational logic of these partnerships was based on *ad hoc* bilateral agreements that changed from year to year, as opposed to stricter and more continuous partnerships like the annual "Doc Alliance Selection" and award.[4] Understanding this logic allows us to better understand how collaboration was mobilized during the pandemic. In the absence of a regular or official agreement, some DA festivals did not necessarily consider DAFilms to be a preferred streaming partner. Moreover, negotiations to curate films online necessarily involved a third party: the rights holders (sales agents and/or producers), who were the ones that signed the distribution contracts with the streaming platforms in the first place. In what follows, we analyze how the pandemic affected these modes of collaboration, first from the point of view of the festivals, and then from the point of view of DAFilms.

1.2. Searching for partners during the pandemic: the 2020 calendar

When the first measures against the Covid-19 pandemic were implemented in Europe starting in the spring of 2020, DAFilms offered a pre-existing infrastructure for moving festivals' programming online. Yet the platform was not necessarily the first choice of all members of the alliance. In Figure 6.2, we can see the DA members' festival calendars and a list of their online partners during the pandemic:

Figure 6.2: DA festivals organized per position in the 2020 and 2021 calendar years.

	Festival Dates 2019	**Festival Dates 2020**	**Festival Dates 2021**	**Associate Platforms 2020**	**Sections**
CPH:DOX (Copenhagen, Denmark)	20-31/03	18-29/03 – extended through April. Online only	21/04-12/05	Festival Scope	Whole Festival (didn't work)
				Shift72	Whole Festival
Visions du Réel (Nyon, Switzerland)	5-13/04	24/04-02/05 Changed to: 17/04-2/05 Online only	15–25/4	Festival Scope+Shift72	Whole Festival
				PlayRTS (Swiss TV)	Swiss Competition
				DAFilms	Competition: Grand Angle + 2 Retrospectives

[4] The "Doc Alliance Selection" is a regular annual activity held by DA festival partners. It consists of the selection of one documentary produced in each of the alliance members' countries, and then the presentation of an award to one of them. The award is presented at a festival of bigger impact, such as Locarno or Cannes. This initiative has provided continuity and, more importantly, a logic of participation in which all festival partners affirm their commitment to the project and share a sense of belonging to the alliance. As we see below, this did not necessarily happen with the Dafilms VOD platform.

				Tënk	2 Competitions
				Visions du Réel at School (own VOD platform)	Fest. Selection by Didactic Themes
Millennium Docs Against Gravity (Warsaw and other cities, Poland)	10-26/05	8-18/05 (Replaced by pre-festival screenings) [1] Festival postponed to 4-13/09 Hybrid (Online + Cinemas)	14-23/05	Ninateka	Online Event
				VOD.pl	Online Event
				Virtual Pod Baranami Cinema Theatre.	Docs Against Isolation
				Own Platform	Live festival – Fest Dates
				VOD.MDAG.PL	Festival Films after the Festival
Fid Marseille (France)	9-15/07	07-13/07 Delayed to 22-26/07 (In Cinemas)	22-26/07	Tënk	Usual Collaboration
				MUBI	Usual Collaboration
				Festival Scope	Usual Collaboration
				DAFilms	Selections from Previous Year
Doc Lisboa (Portugal)	17-27/10	22/10-1/11 + 5 "Moments" (5-11 Nov/Dec/Feb/Mar)[3] (Online + Cinemas)	21-31/10	**DAFilms (2020)**	International Program + Curated Programs: Labor, Georgian Docs, Student Films.
				Festival Scope+Shift72 (2021)	Full Sections of 3 of the "Moments"
Jihlava (Czech Republic)	24-29/10	27/10 – 8/11/2020 Same (+ Extended Screenings = "Echoes") (Online Only)	26-31/10	**DAFilms**	Whole Festival
				Own Website (DAFilms embedded)	Whole Festival
Dok Leipzig (Germany)	28/10-3/11	26/10-3/11 Online + Cinemas	25-31/10	Own Website	Whole Festival

Source: Original research (based on interviews and content analysis of websites, social media and newsletters).

As we see in this table, all DA festivals collaborated with streaming platforms during the pandemic. These alliances took different shapes depending on the restrictions imposed in each country and the period of time each festival took place (from total lockdown, to cinemas' closure, to the limitation of collective gatherings under specific measures). Among VOD services chosen by DA festivals, we must draw distinctions between 1) platforms that already existed and had a defined curatorial line (including DAFilms); 2) new, specialized platforms created by the festivals themselves (such as VOD.MDAG.PL); and 3) new, hybrid platforms created explicitly to put festival programs online (Festival Scope+Shift72).

CPH:DOX (Copenhagen, Denmark) was one of the first festivals to take place once the lockdown was announced and was the first to make the decision to become an online event. Their first-choice VOD partner was Paris-based Festival Scope, which specializes in festival films. The platform had built an international reputation among festival professionals, distributors, and sales agents (not only those specialized in documentaries) and had two branches: Festival Scope Pro (for professionals only, operating since 2010), and Festival Scope (created in 2015 to reach cinephile audiences) (Taillibert and Vinuela 2021). Nevertheless, the platform could not handle the amount of user traffic created by the festival audience on the opening night, and CPH:DOX had to change strategy. As Niklas Engstrøm, head of programming, recalls, they mobilized contacts with former festival participants who could help find a better solution. Sten Saluveer,[5] a former speaker at the CPH:DOX conference, recommended that they contact Shift72, a company based in New Zealand that provides digital infrastructure for online screenings (Int. Engstrøm 2021). This new player, which was not a curated platform, but rather a streaming infrastructure that would allow the festival to show its program on a dedicated website, ended up succeeding in making the festival content available online within one day.

This first experience of collaboration highlights the two main problems that festivals would face in their pursuit of becoming online events: technological limitations and, more importantly, platforms' reputations. In the ensuing months, filmmakers would struggle with the decision to jump the classic distribution chain, bypassing exhibition windows such as movie theatres or television, and directly going online. Trust was therefore a key issue, and Shift72 was unknown within the industry. This brought about a new partnership: Festival Scope+Shift72, which was tested for the first time in late April 2020, during the second festival of the Doc Alliance to be held during the lockdown: Visions du Réel (Nyon, Switzerland). This alliance of streaming platforms monetized the trust of the "community," leading them to become the leaders of the market.

According to Martine Chalverat, administrative director and head of the production and communication departments of Visions du Réel, the festival was still waiting for governmental guidelines when it decided to go online five weeks before the opening date. Their main concern was how to provide an easy-to-navigate platform for the audience and a trustworthy environment for filmmakers (Int. Chalverat 2021). This brought about negotiations with Festival Scope and Shift72, who signed a contract to create a partnership that would offer streaming services to festivals in subsequent months: Festival Scope would provide their reputation as a trustworthy platform, while Shift72 would provide the needed technical infrastructure. Additionally, Visions du Réel opted for a multi-platform strategy targeted at different audiences, allocating sections of the program to pre-existing curated platforms. Their VOD partners included the online services PlayRTS (Swiss TV) (for the national competition), Tënk (for non-competitive feature-length documentaries), and DAFilms (for retrospectives). Additionally, the festival created its own platform "Visions du Réel at School," launched in November 2020 and intended for secondary school students, following the success of the online use of documentaries for educational purposes during the online festival.[6]

FidMarseille (Marseille, France) was the first festival of the alliance to take place onsite after the lockdown, with a masked audience present in theatres. The program was presented onsite to the local audience,

[5] Specializing in audiovisual media innovation, technology, and policy strategy. https://www.tlu.ee/en/sten-kristian-saluveer

[6] https://www.visionsdureel.ch/en/cultural-participation/vdr-at-school/

increasing the number of screening venues to satisfy social distancing safety measures. The collaboration with DAFilms remained the same as in previous years, consisting of the presentation of a curated program with seven films from the previous year (Int. Tabakov 2021). Furthermore, like in previous editions, the festival continued to collaborate with other platforms, such as MUBI and Tënk for the French audience and Festival Scope Pro for international professionals. The only section that took place exclusively online was the international co-production section FIDLab, an industry meeting presenting the works-in-progress of filmmakers from different countries who could not travel to France.

According to the yearly festival calendar, Millennium Docs Against Gravity (Warsaw and other cities, Poland) should have taken place in May, but it was postponed to September due to the pandemic.[7] They presented a hybrid onsite and online version of the festival, offering their program at several theatres as well as on online platforms. As noted by festival director Artur Liebhart, their strategy during the pandemic was from the very beginning focused on the Polish audience. To that end, they collaborated with several Polish platforms, including Ninateka (the online multimedia library of the National Audiovisual Institute), VOD.pl (a commercial Polish VOD platform), and the virtual cinema of Pod Baranami (the online branch of an arthouse theatre in Krakow). In addition, they hired local IT freelancers to develop their own VOD platform, hosted on the new website of the festival (Int. Liebhart 2021). Once the festival was over, in December 2020, they launched VOD.MDAG.PL, a year-round streaming platform showcasing documentaries, as well as some fiction films.

Autumn is usually a busy month for DA festivals, as DocLisboa (Portugal), Jihlava IDFF (Czech Republic), and Dok Leipzig (Germany) take place in October. In order to provide the opportunity for industry professionals to attend all three of them, they usually coordinate their dates to prevent overlap. In 2020, the pandemic prevented international guests from visiting festivals (with a few exceptions), and therefore the overlapping of dates was no longer a problem. In this context, DocLisboa, Jihlava IDFF, and Dok Leipzig took place nearly simultaneously, and DAFilms users could see some of their sections sharing virtual space (see Figure 6.3). Yet, both their onsite and online programming strategies differed widely.

[7] Nevertheless, during the lockdown, they presented an online version of the festival with a short selection of films from the previous festival edition called “Docs Against Isolation”.

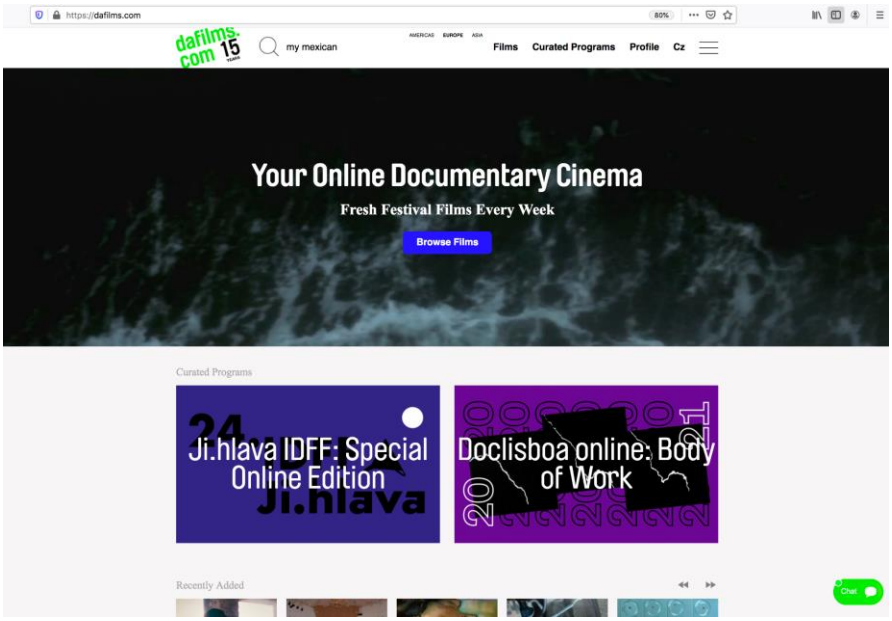


Figure 6.3: Jihlava IDFF and Doclisboa curated programs sharing space on Dafilms in October 2020.

DocLisboa (Lisbon, Portugal) adopted a long-term hybrid strategy of online and onsite screenings that allowed the festival to adapt to changing governmental restrictions. As festival directors Joana Sousa and Miguel Ribeiro assert, their priority was to maintain onsite screenings. Thus, they decided to extend the festival dates six months beyond the festival's official dates. They created new thematic sections, cancelled competitions, and declined to demand international premieres, instead only demanding Portuguese (Int. Sousa and Ribeiro 2021). This involved a change in the program structure, which now featured six "festival moments" that each focused on a different topic. Although the festival prioritized onsite screenings, it also developed a hybrid strategy, developing its own online platform created in collaboration with Festival Scope+Shift72[8]. Due to safety measures, three of these "moments" had to be presented online on this platform from February to March 2021.[9] The industry section Nebulae took place totally online. DocLisboa's collaboration with DAFilms had been more active than other DA festivals in previous years, and in 2020, DAFilms offered its international program and three curated programs, including a special retrospective on Georgian documentaries, in the festival program.

Dok Leipzig (Leipzig, Germany) also adopted a hybrid strategy, combining onsite[10] and online screenings. Similar to other festivals, they adapted their program by reducing the number of films and sections, and by reorganizing and renaming the sections. Although the festival had six months to develop its online strategy, finding the right platform was no easy task. This was in part due to the organizers wanting to make the onsite and online experiences as similar and connected as possible (in terms of schedule, premieres,

[8] https://online.doclisboa.org/
[9] The sections presented online included "Ficaram Tantas Histórias por Contar," "Arquivos do Presente," and "Origens – Práticas e Tradições no Cinema."
[10] By the end of October, the contagion curve was just beginning to rise in Germany. As Christoph Terhechte recalls, "the cinemas were limited to a 50% occupation rate, but we finally had a 10 to 35% rate of occupation, as people were terrified (and some who had already bought tickets didn't attend)" (int Terhechte 2021). Cinemas in Germany were closed entirely starting right after the closing night of the festival.

attendance of live events, access according to type of accreditation, and so on). In the initial phase of planning, Dok Leipzig contacted Festival Scope+Shift72, but, as Christoph Terhechte (artistic and managing director) notes, they were "not flexible enough to provide what we needed"[11] (Int. Terhechte 2021). They subsequently hired an IT company based in Berlin[12], but they too were unable to fulfill all the requirements they had agreed to with the festival. Therefore, there was very little time for testing the platform and many technical problems during the festival (idem).[13] Looking back, Terhechte acknowledges that they should "have lowered their expectations," and that for the next edition they "will separate the physical festival from the online festival," although they still have to decide exactly how that will be done (idem).

Finally, the Jihlava International Documentary Film Festival (JIDFF, Jihlava, Czech Republic) had to be organized entirely online, as the Czech government announced the closure of cinemas just before the festival started.[14] In this context, JIDFF chose DAFilms as the exclusive platform to screen the whole festival program. Users could access the films on DAFilms or on the festival website through an embedded player that connected to the VOD platform,[15] and these films were available for seven days and, in most cases, without limits on viewership. The international audience also had access to a selection of 80 films through DAFilms through pay-per-view options. The industry section was organized by the festival through different platforms like Youtube or Zoom. In addition, the festival created the "Echoes of Jihlava" program in 2021, offering Czech audiences the opportunity to watch films from the 2020 edition. This was extended to Belgium (March 11–17), France (March 18–25), and New York (March 19–25), through the application of geo-blocking.

For the 2021 edition, all DA festivals have already presented or confirmed the presentation of at least part of their programs online, either through their own platforms or in collaboration with others, such as DAFilms. Thinking of future editions without pandemic-related restrictions, many have already stated that they will continue to employ hybrid formats, which would include both online and onsite activities.

1.3. Modes of collaboration with DAFilms: partnerships, identity, and belonging

Among the types of collaboration developed between DA festivals and the DAFilms VOD platform during the pandemic, we have identified four main levels (as seen in Figure 6.2):

1. An exclusive collaboration, putting the whole program on DAFilms (Jihlava IDF)
2. The partial inclusion of a specific program section on the platform (Visions du Réel or DocLisboa)

[11] These included access to different content depending on the type of accreditation, that the films would be available right after the premiere or when the film could be watched, management and use of tickets for watching films, and so on.
[12] The company had previously collaborated with Dok Leipzig to sponsor wi-fi for the festival.
[13] These included that, for example, in a session including several short films, only the first film would run, or that the subtitles were not properly scaled (because they wanted to have different subtitles available in different languages), as they were not burnt onto the films.
[14] For a study of the adaptation of some Eastern European Film Festivals (including Jihlava IDFF) to online streaming during the pandemic, see Hanzlík and Mazierska (2021).
[15] The festival accreditation pass had to be bought through the professional festival-management platform Cinando.

3. A curated program with films from previous editions of the festival (FidMarseille)
4. An absence of collaboration (CPH:DOX, DokLeipzig and Millennium Docs Against Gravity)

From the point of view of DAFilms, there are several factors that explain how alliance members reacted to the sudden necessity to put their programs online. As Diana Tabakov (executive director and head of acquisitions at DAFilms) notes, changes in festival staff through the years has made it difficult to develop stable strategies of collaboration, as some new festival staff members displayed little knowledge about the VOD platform (Int. Tabakov 2021). This was, for example, the case of Dok Leipzig. Christoph Terhechte, who had been newly appointed as the director of the festival just before the pandemic, acknowledged to us that he possessed little knowledge about DAFilms (Int. Terhechte 2021).

A second aspect affecting this collaboration was the different perceptions of what it meant to belong to DAFilms on the part of festival partners. For example, because its organizational structure centered on an office located in Prague, the platform was perceived by many as a "far away" activity (Int. Tabakov 2021). As Tabakov notes, "we [DA members] are not in one office. Fluctuation of people at film festivals is so big that not everyone acknowledges that we are their VOD platform" (idem). Nevertheless, new strategies could help overcome these limitations. Just before the pandemic spread, Doc Alliance was granted new funding by Creative Europe[16] to increase collaboration between festivals. This would allow for festival staff to create working groups, meet on a regular basis, and fund joint actions. The impact of increasing social contact and collaborative patterns within the alliance and, more specifically, with DAFilms, is therefore still under development (idem).

Thirdly, despite the ideal of the internet as a global community without borders, the organization of festivals online brought about a reinforcement of the nation-state framework as a reference to delimit festivals' target audiences. Transposing the logic of premiere policies to online streaming required geo-blocking, and platforms themselves worked within national (and at times linguistic) frames, as is the case with Tënk or MUBI, who are widely known in the French-speaking context. As Tabakov notes, international curated programs without geo-blocking performed better for DAFilms in terms of audience, both before and during the pandemic. She explains that in the case of Visions du Réel, they had to redirect some of their users from their festival platform to the DAFilms section of their program, which was geo-blocked to Switzerland during the festival. Despite the fact that DAFilms made a French translation for Visions du Réel, it did not work as well as the local platform (Int. Tabakov 2021). The limited knowledge of DAFilms among their national audiences was also noted by some DA festival representatives, such as Engstrøm from CPH:DOX, who declared that it was their intention to build their own Danish platform (Int. 2021), or Terhechte from Dok Leipzig, who noted that "it would have been great if they had something like Tënk for Germany" (int. 2021).

The tension between the international vs national scope of the platform has affected the strategic policies of DAFilms from its inception. Initially, the DAFilms portal was offered in the seven languages of the partner festivals (including French, Portuguese, Dutch, German, Czech, Slovak and Polish). According to Tabakov, the existence of versions in several languages in different domains created problems in the

[16] Doc Alliance has been one of the four film festival networks recipients of the Action 2 of the new Film Festivals scheme that supports European Networks of Festivals (call number EACEA/26/2019). https://www.creativeeuropeuk.eu/news/four-film-festival-networks-supported-media

positioning of the website on internet search-engines like Google (Int. 2021). These and other constraints led to a limitation of the number of branches of the platform. Today, it can be accessed through three local domains (dafilms.cz for the Czech Republic, dafilms.sk for Slovakia, and dafilms.pl for Poland) or an international domain (dafilms.com). The international domain displays three different interfaces, each devoted to one continent: the Americas, Europe, and Asia. They are available in English and require a separate subscription. The Slovak and Polish domains, launched in 2020, have a dedicated team to acquire films for these territories, and they are managed by two people working from a Bratislava office and a Polish worker working from the Prague office, respectively.

The fact that the Polish branch of DAFilms was launched just before the Polish festival Millennium Docs Against Gravity created its own VOD platform explains the absence of collaboration in that instance, as well as demonstrating how interests may clash between DAFilms and DA members. In the case of Millennium Docs Against Gravity, the institutional nature of the festival as the main activity of the distribution company Against Gravity may explain its differing strategy compared to other DA festival members, as it is mostly focused on exhibition. While the festival remains a member of the alliance, it lacks the need (or obligation) to collaborate with DAFilms. This may also be the case with other festivals that develop their own platforms (such as CPH:DOX), but in this case, the absence of a Danish branch of DAFilms undercuts the possibility of a national competition, which seems to be the framework in which streaming platforms are performing best.

The success (or failure) of DAFilms' role during the pandemic and its collaboration with DA festival partners helps us understand how film festivals adapted (or may adapt in the future) to the business of online streaming. By looking at their decisions, we find three factors that help explain why the platform worked for some festivals but not for others. The first is practical, as the technological limitations of DAFilms disallowed them from providing some services that were vital for festivals to have at that point, such as providing up-to-date information about users and statistics or imitating the live festival experience.[17] The second factor is ontological, as the shared identity between the platform profile and the festival profile is a key issue when transposing a festival program online. In this case, the international scope of DAFilms played against the platform, as its presence and image varied considerably in each of the DA members' countries. This was one of the reasons why it was the perfect partner for Jihlava IDF, but not necessarily for other festivals, like Visions du Réel or CPH:DOX. The third factor relates to the social and organizational aspect of partnerships, which is of particular importance in the cultural realm. Long-term relationships and mutual trust form the core of film festival operations, and reciprocity is the key for mutual sustainability. This can explain why underlying most of the practical and strategic decisions described above, there had been a previous onsite physical contact between two potential allies that had taken place at a film festival. These include new allies contacted during the pandemic, such as those who developed dedicated festival platforms like Shift72 or the IT company that developed Dok Leipzig's platform. Moreover, these dynamics also underline the importance of continuity in festival staff for maintaining the relationships established through the years that allow for more stable practices of collaboration in the long term.

[17] As Tabakov notes, "funding for the technical development of the platform from European Union is no longer available, and we have to monitor the changes in audience behavior every day and we don't have algorithms, so we have to make it ourselves" (Int. 2021).

2. Tënk

Tënk is an interesting case for thinking about the relationship between platforms and film festivals, as it was born as a feature of the festival "États Généraux du Film Documentaire". Originally conceived as the "Cinéma de pays et région" in 1978 in Lussas (France, Ardèche; 1,100 inhabitants), today the festival focuses on "activist and unformatted documentary cinema" (Tënk 2018a). After adopting its current name in 1989, the festival quickly became an important site for documentary professionals. It turned the village of Lussas into a documentary ecosystem by progressively extending its activities into film production, distribution, education, and archiving/documentation.

In 2016, this ecosystem allowed for the creation of a subscriber-based VOD platform dedicated to documentary filmmaking: Tënk. For six euros a month, the subscribers have access to 70 films available for two months, with a system of "rotating selection" (Taillibert 2020). This plan includes, since 2020, a slate of 700 films on a fee-for-service basis available to subscribers (Tënk 2020b). Despite this evolution, Tënk was explicitly built as a curated platform. The bi-monthly program of 70 films is arranged in "thematic tracks" managed by two dedicated programmers. An expanded team of 20 professionals discuss the whole program once a semester. These meetings, conceived as "thinking laboratories" (Tënk 2018b), illustrate the importance of curation to the platform's identity.

2.1. Tënk and film festivals, a constitutive link

Festivals have nourished Tënk's program since it began. The slogan "Tënk, a Permanent Festival" has accompanied the development of the platform, as noted by its general director Pierre Mathéus (Int. 2021). The Lussas ecosystem largely explains this tendency: since it was founded, Tënk has echoed the annual festival programming. Other partnerships were created with festivals such as Cinéma du Réel (Paris), Visions du Réel (Nyon) or Les Rencontres du Film Documentaire de Mellionnec (Côtes-d'Armor), and many other smaller festivals. Today, this partnership network "is part of the identity of the platform" (Mathéus, Int. 2021).

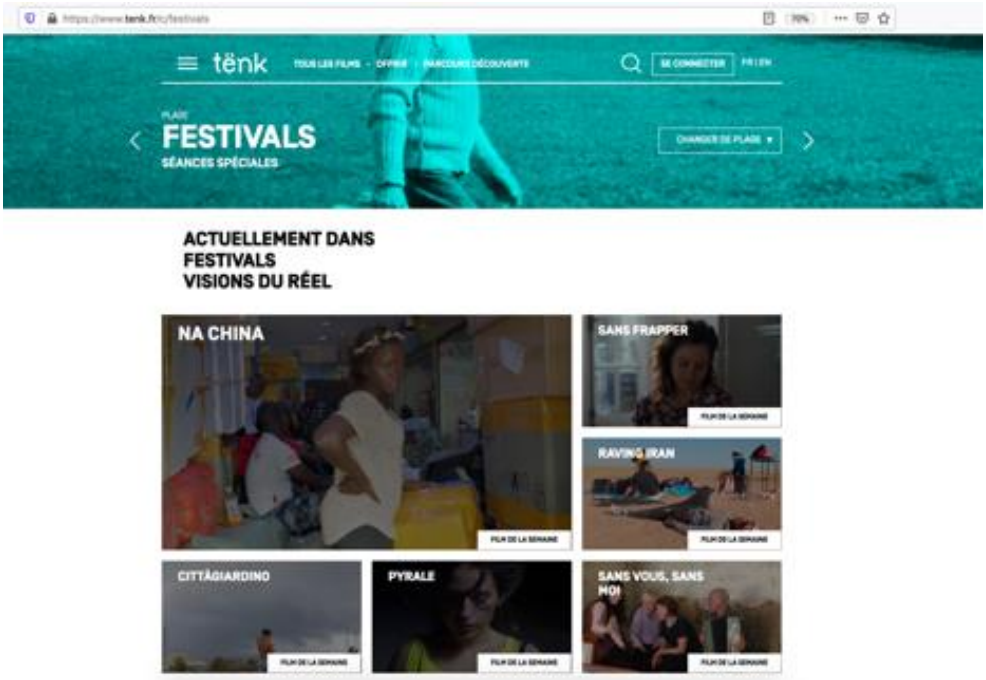


Figure 6.4: "Festivals" page (section) within the Tënk platform.

The collaboration between the platform and film festivals can be understood as a win-win situation in the context of a strategic alliance that binds both parties. Following Bernard Garrette and Pierre Dussauge (1995), we define strategic alliances as "partnerships between several competing–or potentially competing–companies, that choose to run a project or a specific activity by coordinating the necessary competences, means and resources, instead of compete on the activity in question, merge with each other or decide to divest or acquire some activities." Thus, strategic alliances characterize the cooperative models between actors who are *a priori* competing within the market segment that brings them together, because they "insure allied companies to maintain their independence and to preserve their own interests, apart from the common interests which justify the alliance" (Garrette and Dussauge 1995: 25). This is particularly the case with the associations we analyze here, because both parties retain their independence beyond the partnership terms that temporarily connect them. These partnerships do not rule out the existence of some (potential) competition between the two parties (Detrie 2005: 333-334). Indeed, film festivals perform their activities in a non-commercial framework, while the VOD platforms are engaged in a commercial activity–even if it is influenced by deep cinephilia and a mission motivated by a common goal. More than a financial problem, competition is therefore linked to questions of access to the works, plus the corporate identity issues explored below.

For Tënk, the advantage of this alliance is twofold. First, as most of its programming is dedicated to heritage films, film festivals allow it to renew its catalogue, "providing news about contemporary creative works" (Mathéus, Int. 2021). Secondly, documentary film festivals are attended by audiences who might be interested in what Tënk has to offer. With the aim of building a critical mass of subscribers, the platform has developed operations of targeted communication at these events, what Mathéus calls "back-scratching" (Int. 2021).

Film festivals that collaborate with Tënk see this alliance as an extension of their own activities, one that allows them to work with a renowned player who shares the same artistic and political positioning as they do. In that respect, Pierre Bachman (director of Cinémathèque du Documentaire) describes Tënk as a "natural partner" for film festivals (Int. 2021). Being on Tënk offers visibility to festivals, extending the reach of the event beyond their local or regional audience, with no threat of audience migration. Indeed, the content offered on Tënk for film festivals does not constitute an online alternative to the festivals, however incomplete. Rather, the idea is to "bring news" of the festival, to offer an "echo" (Mathéus, Int. 2021), which entails selecting a limited number of films (usually four or five films, seven at most). These films are often chosen from the program of previous editions of the festival, not from the current one. This avoids creating redundancy with the festival programming, as well as limiting the possibilities of further distribution due to online exposure of the films. Requests from festivals have been numerous even before the pandemic, but Tënk's leaders nonetheless only engage with events one at a time so as to preserve their editorial identity.

In order to highlight this kind of partnership, the "stopover" platform Cinémathèque du Documentaire also displays films from various festivals. This public-benefit corporation proposes ten or eleven programs a year on Tënk on different themes, conceived both autonomously and with film festivals. In the latter case, the programming is a collaboration between the Tënk team and a programmer within the festival team. The work accomplished in this framework is totally voluntary; the writing of the texts is the only work for which a remuneration is paid. This reinforces the idea that film festivals are primarily motivated by corporate image issues when they accept these types of partnerships.

Tënk also collaborates with festivals by awarding films. A "Tënk Award" is given at the Festival dei Popoli (Florence) and at Visions du Réel (Nyon) on a regular basis. Again, this initiative is meant to be a win-win proposition. Film festivals are good partners in this endeavor because their work becomes doubly valued: in a symbolic way thanks to the prestige of Tënk, and in material terms because Tënk offers services in kind for its award. Moreover, the platform shows its interest in young creators and reinforces the "Tënk brand" (Mathéus, Int. 2021) in the documentary world. These factors reinforce the idea that film festivals accept these types of partnerships primarily due to a desire to augment their corporate images.

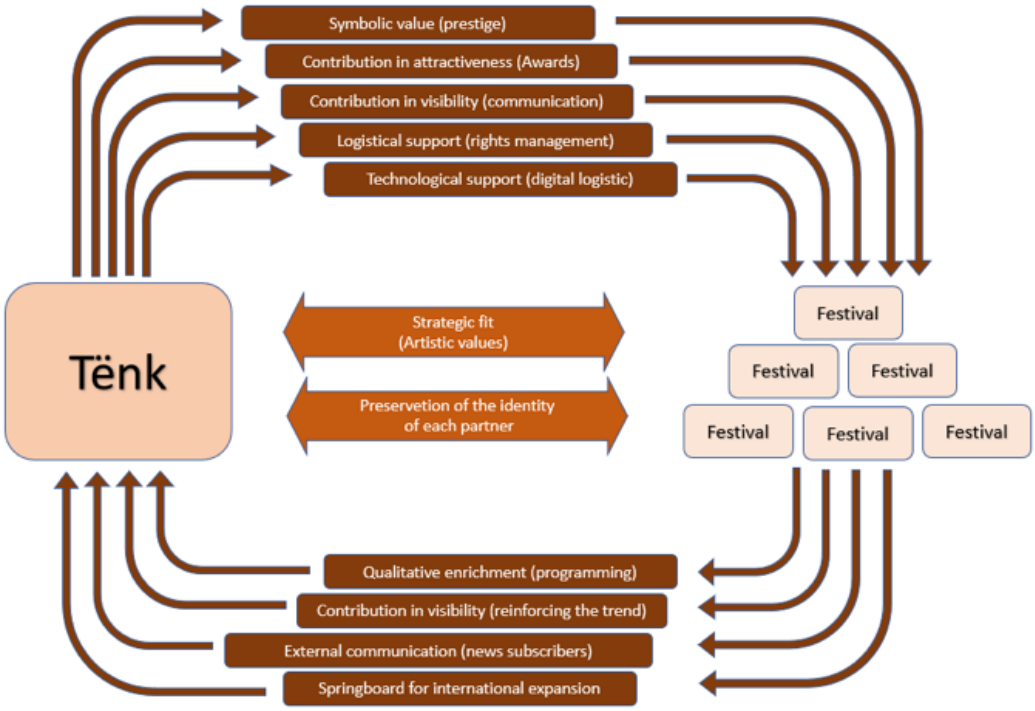


Figure 6.5: Diagram of the strategic alliance between Tënk and film festivals (© Christel Taillibert)

Thus, since its creation, Tënk's relationships with film festivals have been part of its identity as a platform. Tënk collaborates in the creation of each program on a voluntary basis stemming from those partnerships: editorial control is coupled with a proactive approach when dealing with festival films, which ensures the strict compliance of the programming with its own editorial criteria. As for the alliance's governance model, Tënk's team retains complete control over the process for the entire duration of the partnership. The co-construction of curated programs is carried out under its supervision at all levels: in terms of themes, the number of films, the choice of the films, exhibition dates, the duration of the online releases, and so on. This imbalance in the control of the alliance, rather than being an obstacle to its implementation, explains its success, preserving the identity and the interests of both partners.

2.2. 2020, the Covid year: revisiting the alliance

Starting in March 2020, the French government's restrictions in response to the Covid-19 pandemic limited the circulation and gathering of people. This led to the cancellation of several cultural events and, by default, they moved their programs online. In this context, the strategies by which the alliance of streaming platforms and festivals created value became even more important. As Yves L. Doz and Gary Hamel explain, these strategies include: 1) gaining competitive capabilities through co-option, 2) leveraging co-specialized resources, 3) and gaining competence through internalized learning. Immediate responses to the pandemic seemed to increase the benefits that these strategies already offered to Tënk and its partner festivals. For example, the number of partnerships increased, the technological infrastructure of the platform was leveraged to move festivals online, and experiences of success and failure occurred within a rapidly changing environment.

Film festivals, along with most public events, were cancelled during 2020, though some succeeded in maintaining a physical edition that respected social distancing during the period between the two lockdowns. These cancellations caused a lot of distress for film festival professionals, and many of them considered the possibility of exhibiting films online. In some cases, this decision had to be made very quickly. For instance, Cinéma du Réel (Paris) was cancelled in March 2020 even though the inauguration of the festival had already occurred. The "Friends of Cinéma du Réel" association immediately thought of ways to bring the event live, and they contacted Tënk. The Tënk team shared their distress in the face of the unfolding situation, and solidarity seemed to be the only possible response (Int. Mathéus 2021). They agreed to open the platform to the event. One week later, four programs from Cinéma du Réel were online on Tënk: French feature films and international short films during the first week, and international feature films and French short films during the second one.

Since this first experiment, two rules were adopted by Tënk that were later renewed for all partnerships of this kind. First, the duration of the online release was reduced to respect "the ephemeral nature of a film festival" (AFC 2020). Second, "as the number of seats is limited in a theatre" (AFC 2020), the number of views was limited to match the number of spectators who could have seen the film during the festival. For example, for Cinéma du Réel, only 800 views were possible for each film. This decision responded to distributors' concerns, since they were less than thrilled about the idea of showing their films online.

Other film festivals experienced the same nightmare. Some of them were welcomed in the same way on Tënk: documentaries from Cinélatino (Toulouse, March 20-29, 2020) and Visions du Réel (April 24 - May 2, 2020) were presented on the platform. The way Astrid Da Silva, programmer for Visions du Réel, tells us how the decisions were made reflects the process observed during numerous other events as well:

> "During the early days of the pandemic, we had no idea what the impact of the pandemic on our activities would be. It seemed impossible to show the films online because they are worldwide premieres. In the following weeks, we realized that the situation was going to persist long-term, that it was not a few weeks' problem… We talked about the films online because we thought it was the only potential alternative in this situation which will be for months, and we had to find a way to bring these films alive, to give them visibility." (Int. Da Silva 2021)

The festival team decided to organize an online event with different platforms that were already partners (Festival Scope, Tënk, and DAFilms). But this time the collaboration was different because, as Da Silva notes, they did not propose only "an extension of the festival, IT WAS the festival!" (Int. 2021). Two sections of the festival were welcomed on Tënk: a retrospective on the work of Claire Denis, and a section called "Latitudes," which included very recent documentary films. The very complex rights management was renegotiated case-by-case by the Tënk and Nyon teams. Once again, the number of views was limited (500 for each film) and the duration of the program was set at twice a week. A single interface was created on the festival's site to redirect the users to the requested movies, and this simplified access to the online programming that was distributed among several platforms. At the same time, a hotline was created to answer the questions of users who had technical problems or did not understand how to access the films. This plan was a success: according to Tënk, all 500 "online tickets" were sold for the 130 films of the program. For film festivals, these traumatic experiences had upsides, too. For example, many people who could not travel to Nyon were pleased to be able to discover the films: "At the end, this experience has been

quite positive. This comforted us, because we were very sad not to experience the festival, not to meet all the film teams. But we received calls from people who were very happy to see these films." (Int. Da Silva 2021)

Despite these positive aspects, the outcome of these experiments overall remains mixed. Festival directors, even if they were relieved to present their work to an audience, were not fully satisfied by the online format. Stating an obvious fact, the Cinéma du Réel team writes: "The success of online programming has been particularly satisfying. But the 42nd edition of the festival did not take place. A festival is this alchemy between movies, film directors, a team and an audience" (Cinémathèque du Documentaire 2020). Elsa Charbit, director of the Entrevues festival (Belfort, France), echoes this view: "The scope of a festival is not, in any way, to add up to the long list of online proposals. A film festival is a gathering place, one cannot replace the other" (Int. 2021). Documentary filmmakers whose films were shown online were not more satisfied, because, as Anne Pomonti, director of the Cinémathèque du Documentaire, recalls, "for them, it's important to have a direct contact with the public, a discussion before or after the film. They insisted a lot on that." (Int. 2021)

Tënk, as with most online cultural actors, benefited from the enthusiasm generated by moving festivals online: the number of subscribers rose by 30%, from 8,000 to 11,000 subscribers at the end of 2020, while institutional subscriptions (schools, universities, media libraries, etc.) rose from around 50 to 70 in the same period (Int. Mathéus 2021). These new subscribers were also retained during the following months, the churn rate remaining stable. This expansion was noteworthy because of its impact on the future of the platform, since, as its president, Jean-Marie Barbe points out, this helped Tënk reach financial equilibrium (Cauhapé 2020). Nevertheless, Mathéus, the Tënk director, sees the balance-sheet as still quite bleak: "We realized with the first attempts that if we did that, we weren't Tënk anymore, we didn't have the control of our editorial line anymore" (Int. Mathéus 2021). Indeed, because the platform has constructed its identity based on strong editorialization, when it was loses the control of which films end up hosted on it, this represents a conflict with its core purpose. The sheer abundance of films also represented a problem, as it undercuts the platform's original concept. Pierre Mathéus (Int. 2021) recalls that hosting Cinéma du Réel involved the arrival of 70 films onto the platform, rendering its overall editorial identity illegible. Further, each film was seen fewer times and thus suffered in this way from the situation. On the consumer side, the dilution of the editorial identity of the film offerings was not appreciated by Tënk's subscribers, who were generally not very excited about these festivals' programming. As explained by Pierre Mathéus, "Our overall impression is that they [the festivals] didn't attract more viewers. Rather, when they were not in our editorial line, they could confuse our subscribers who didn't understand." (Int. 2021) Thus, from this point of view, the online hosting experiment failed to provide unique value to either partner in the collaboration, and the profound unease felt by the Tënk director fueled fears about future alliances between the platform and film festivals.

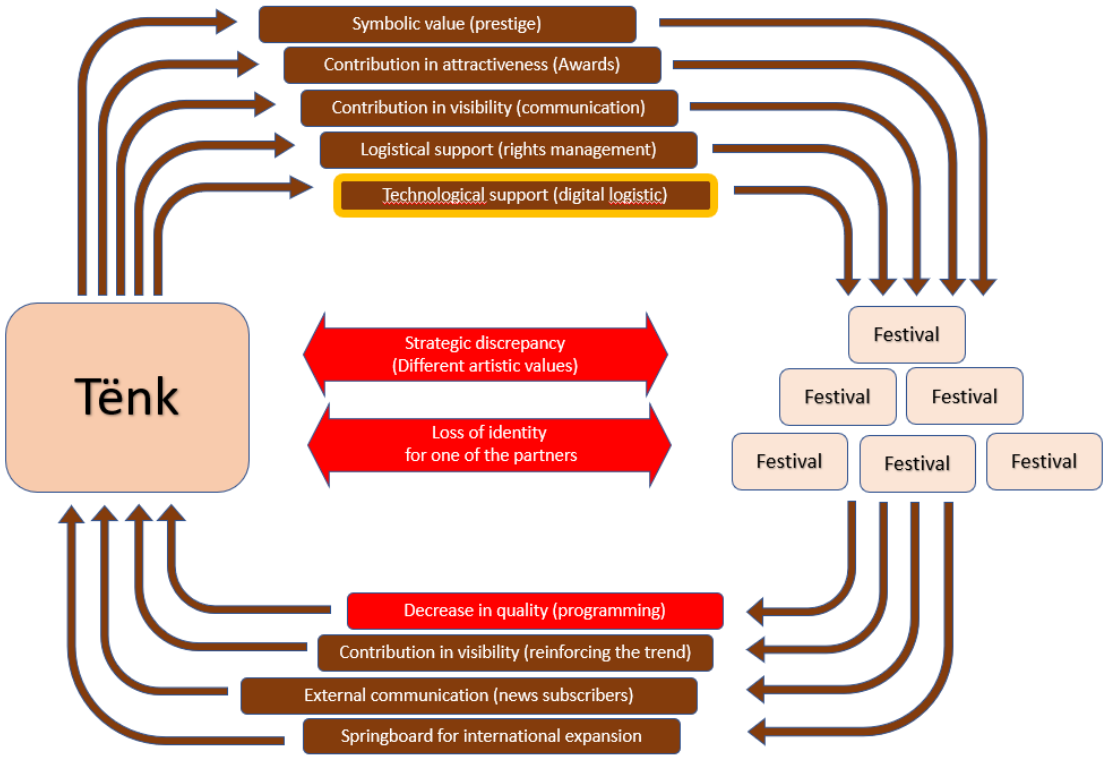


Figure 6.6: Unbalance within the strategic alliance between Tënk and its partner festivals (© Christel Taillibert)

2.3. Return to the original equilibrium of the alliance

This unease felt by the Tënk director indicates why they so quickly returned to the terms of the alliance as they existed before the pandemic. Hence, the platform had to decline (not without some soul-searching) the numerous calls for help—numbering four or five per month—they received from cancelled film festivals. The Tënk team returned to their original model for partnering with film festivals, and this included the cancelled ones. For example, the collaboration with the Locarno Film Festival resulted in programming six films from the competition, along with one other film that had won an award in Locarno in 2013 (Tënk 2020a). The number of films (seven) and the approach (an echo of, rather than a substitute for, the live event) were in accordance with the partnership model employed previous to the pandemic.

The collaboration between Tënk and the Entrevues festival (Belfort) provides an illustrative case of this kind of partnership with a cancelled film festival. Originally, the Entrevues team decided to present two sections online (on Festival Scope Pro), the international competition and the "Films en cours," and to postpone the rest of the festival. But while discussing this decision, Eva Tourrent, head of the artistic department of Tënk, contacted them. As the festival's artistic director recalls: "She explained to us that the Tënk team likes the editorial line of Belfort a lot. She said she would like to construct an Escale de la Cinémathèque du Documentaire with us" (Int. Charbit 2021). Thus, they decided to curate a program based on one of Belfort festival's cancelled retrospectives, entitled "Net Found Footage." The process developed through a series of discussions and debates until they agreed on a program of eight films (down from the

twenty or so included in the original retrospective). The “Escale " was then added to the platform’s offerings for three months (November 2020-January 2021), complemented by a live round-table discussion on YouTube.

Hence, after a tumultuous period during the first lockdown, Tënk has subsequently offered its subscribers programs created in conjunction with festival teams (F.A.M.E., Les Etoiles du Documentaire, FIPA Doc, etc.) that remain faithful to their original collaboration and editorial model.

Coming back to the variables to measure the performance of an alliance as proposed by Philappart (2001, 26-28), we see that in this case in particular, the dominant position of Tënk was decisive because this dominance allowed the platform to regain full control of the situation. All the stakeholders accepted the decision because trust, respect, and artistic interests were aligned among the partners, who ended up fully satisfied by the clear and precise structuring of the alliance. This positive result legitimized the model imposed by the platform. The lack of equality in control was therefore balanced by consensus among the partners’ profiles and the clarity of the level of their strategic fit in the alliance.

Conclusions

In this chapter, we have analyzed the collaborative practices between the streaming platforms DAFilms and Tënk with film festivals during the pandemic. These alliances were already in place when the platforms originated (2005 and 2016, respectively), as they were created partly in response to documentary festivals’ need to create an infrastructure for film distribution once the event was over. These collaborations increased in number and were accelerated by the sudden necessity to move film festival programs online. In this context, the pandemic served to identify the point at which win-win situations turn into lose-lose ones. From the point of view of the festivals, this point occurs due to losing their identity within the platform, failing to reach their intended audience, and struggling to maintain a sense of liveness online; from the point of view of the platforms, factors such as keeping curatorial identity (in the case of Tënk) and reaching new audiences and positioning themselves in various national contexts (in the case of DAFilms) determined the success or failure of these experiments in collaboration. Positive aspects included an increase in subscriptions and in the number of films added to the platforms’ catalogues, as well as the ability to reach new festival audiences (including younger audiences and rural populations) and explore new forms of utilization (such as in educational settings). A close look at these processes contributes to a better understanding of festivals’ and platforms’ operational logics, their positioning within the production-distribution chain, and their own perceived self-definition and future goals.

When we look at how these alliances were mobilized, reciprocity is key for understanding not only why both partners were willing to collaborate, but also which partner would be contacted in the first place. This also explains why working with platforms that already had a reputation within the industry and among the public was critical for festivals (and the filmmakers they represented). Furthermore, we can see why some festivals committed to putting their programs on platforms with whom they shared a professional trajectory and history of collaboration (such as Jihlava and DAFilms, or Tënk and the États Généraux du Film Documentaire), while others did not feel this sort of need or obligation.

Finally, the pandemic has forced the development of some practices, infrastructures, and professional alliances that will remain once all restrictions are over. In the documentary realm, many festival directors have declared that they will keep hybrid practices for their festivals. Moreover, many festivals are developing their own VOD platforms. These will profit from the festival brand to create new commercial distribution channels within the audio-visual market, especially in national contexts like Denmark or Poland in which there are no established platforms specializing in documentary film.

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