

DOCUMENTARY

Adam Neuhaus on how the Nonfiction Hotlist might "reverse power dynamics for creators"

By Barry Walsh

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A mere few months ago, non-fiction development and production veteran Adam Neuhaus — a former exec with RadicalMedia and ESPN Films, among others — took to LinkedIn to share his experiences as a producer pitching in a contracting market. Significantly, he closed the post with a proposal to both his network and the industry at large: to create a non-fiction version of the popular Hollywood Black List survey, which brings a curated compendium of yet-to-be-produced screenplays to industry members' inboxes. Out of the more than 1,000 projects featured on the Black List since its first edition in 2005, at least 450 have been made into feature films, including such Oscar-winning projects as *Argo*, *Juno* and *The Revenant*.

The idea of bringing that model to a challenged documentary business generated palpable excitement, prompting Neuhaus to put it into motion. Assembling a team of 20 industry members, ranging from producers such as Carol Paik and Amanda Muscat to former network execs such as Todd Weiser, Neuhaus put out a call for submissions, which ultimately numbered in the hundreds. These were then whittled down to 23 projects, which were revealed in the inaugural Nonfiction Hotlist that was released late last Friday (March 7).

In this Q&A with *Realscreen*, Neuhaus (pictured) discusses the catalyst behind the list, the process of putting it together, and next steps for both the projects featured and the initiative itself.

The non-fiction content industry has shifted from a recent “golden age” to a more challenged environment, with budgets decreasing, commissioning slowing down, and the commissioning process itself undergoing fundamental changes in the streaming era. How much did these factors play a role in the idea for the list?

Adam Neuhaus: The market shift was definitely a catalyst. Through my own experience bringing projects to market over the past few years, I’ve witnessed a troubling disconnect: buyers pulling back on commissioning without regard for the actual quality of projects available.

With budgets dropping, many creators are willing to adapt — yet, instead of capitalizing on exceptional projects at better value, buyers have simply chosen to buy less. Creative leadership has contracted, mandates have narrowed toward “safer” projects like celebrity docs and true crime, and the results are predictable: safe picks yield safe, and often underwhelming, results.

The balance has tilted dramatically against creators, and we felt compelled to highlight projects that deserve a path forward regardless of these market forces.

You initially put the idea for the Hotlist across via a LinkedIn post. Were you surprised by how much it caught fire? Is that indicative of a general sense among creators/producers in the business that the commissioning process is “broken”?

Neuhaus: My LinkedIn post was simply an authentic expression of what I was experiencing. Having taken an extraordinarily strong slate of projects to market over two years without [getting any] traction, and hearing similar stories from production companies of every size, I knew this wasn’t isolated.

> **“What we’re experiencing is a transition phase where creators must do more than just make content — they need to market and find audiences themselves.”**

The phrase “Blacklist of non-fiction” was intentional — a nod to what they’ve built in the scripted world — but I never expected the overwhelming response. Over 700 reactions, 100+ comments, and 45K impressions later, it’s clear this touched a nerve.

I hesitate to call the system “broken” because there are positives in the current climate: the ability to retain more rights, find direct audience connections, and create value outside traditional systems. What we’re experiencing is a transition phase where creators must do more than just make content — they need to market and find audiences themselves. Meanwhile, many commissioners seem paralyzed, acquiescing to their CFOs’ preference to wait rather than seize opportunities in this moment.

Tell me about putting the Hotlist team together. Was that also an organic process of people within the business reaching out to you and wanting to take part?

Neuhaus: The team came together organically through that LinkedIn post. The call to action sparked dozens of comments and private messages from people wanting to contribute. Through many Zoom conversations, we assembled a group with diverse perspectives, experiences, and, most importantly, the time and passion to make this happen.

As submissions increased, we added more team members to ensure we maintained a thoughtful, careful review process. The collaborative spirit has been remarkable — people stepping up simply because they believe in supporting exceptional storytelling.

How many projects came through, and what were the criteria for evaluation?

Neuhaus: We received 639 submissions and selected 23 projects. Our process embodied the change we want to see in the industry: moving efficiently (countering the “everything must take forever” mentality) while maintaining thoughtfulness and transparency.

Every project received multiple reviews using criteria around originality, feasibility, urgency, access, and audience potential. We combined analytical scoring with human judgment — allowing reviewers to champion projects they felt strongly about regardless of scores.

Through four rounds of review, we continuously refined our approach, introducing fresh rubrics in later rounds to identify truly irresistible projects regardless of format. We sought projects with breakout potential that made us say “wow.” The quality level was extraordinary — we could have easily selected another 23 projects, but chose to focus attention on fewer to maximize impact.

Now that the list has been released, what are the next steps?

Neuhaus: We’re guided by the phrase “paint the back of the fence” — doing the work thoroughly even when no one’s looking. Each project includes a specific “how to help” section, enabling the community to offer support beyond just funding — potentially reducing budget needs while giving creators more leverage as they seek financing or distribution.

Throughout this process, companies and individuals have reached out asking how they can contribute resources. Our goal is to facilitate these connections and, in a few months, hear creators tell us about unexpected opportunities that emerged through the Hotlist.

We're sharing the list widely, particularly looking to cross-pollinate between traditional non-fiction circles and adjacent industries like brands and foundations who might benefit from this pure market curation.

Have you had direct contact with commissioners/buyers about the Hotlist? Is there interest from that community, and are you hearing from that side of the fence that it's a welcome initiative?

Neuhaus: All the major buyers have signed up to receive the list. Our core aim is to subtly reverse the power dynamics for creators. Typically, a project might take six months to reach all relevant buyers —pitching, waiting, and more waiting on the buyers' timeline.

With the Hotlist, we hope to create a scenario where we generate interest with buyers and ultimately clear a viable path forward for these projects, potentially creating competition that didn't exist before. Quality is undefeated, and we believe these exceptional projects deserve their moment.