

## From the commercial model to social impact: a comparative analysis of film distribution circuits in Latin American countries

*Del modelo comercial al impacto social: comparativa de circuitos de distribución de cine en países latinoamericanos*

*Do modelo comercial ao impacto social: comparação entre circuitos de distribuição cinematográfica em países latino-americanos*

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Latin American cinema has had low audience numbers in theaters, a trend that commercial distribution has failed to reverse. In this context, a distribution model based on social impact campaigns has emerged, relying on alternative circuits and specific audiences. To evaluate this alternative, a comparative qualitative methodology and a theoretical framework from cultural studies and the political economy of communication are used. Analytical categories are created to compare the two distribution circuits studied, and this approach is applied to documentaries from Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia that were distributed through both models. The cases analyzed show that impact distribution better fulfills the social and cultural function of cinema, while also reaching a larger audience.

**KEYWORDS:** Latin-American cinema, film distribution, impact campaign.

*El cine latinoamericano ha tenido poco público en salas, tendencia que la distribución comercial no logra revertir. En este contexto, surge un modelo de distribución por campañas de impacto social basado en circuitos alternativos y públicos específicos. Para evaluar esta alternativa, se utiliza una metodología cualitativa comparativa y un marco teórico desde los estudios culturales y la economía política de la comunicación. Se crean categorías de análisis para comparar los dos circuitos de distribución abordados y se aplica esta propuesta a obras documentales de Brasil, México y Colombia que fueron distribuidas a través de ambos modelos. Se observa que la distribución de impacto cumple mejor con la función social y cultural del cine, y alcanza a un público mayor.*

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Cine latinoamericano, distribución de cine, campaña de impacto.

*O cinema latino-americano tem tido pouca audiência nas salas, uma tendência que a distribuição comercial não consegue revertir. Neste contexto, surge um modelo de distribuição por campanhas de impacto social baseado em circuitos alternativos e públicos específicos. Para avaliar esta alternativa, utiliza-se uma metodologia qualitativa comparativa e um referencial teórico a partir dos estudos culturais e da economia política da comunicação. Criam-se categorias de análise para comparar os dois circuitos de distribuição abordados e aplica-se essa proposta a documentários do Brasil, México e Colômbia que foram distribuídas por meio de ambos os modelos. Observa-se que a distribuição de impacto cumpre melhor a função social e cultural do cinema e atinge um público maior.*

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Cinema latino-americano, distribuição cinematográfica, campanha de impacto.

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## INTRODUCTION

Among cultural expressions, cinema is arguably one of the most revealing sites for examining the legacies of colonization and the dynamics of domination and hegemony imposed by the Global North on Latin America. Control over distribution has historically been the primary means through which Hollywood studios have established power over other national cinemas worldwide (Smits, 2019). While the United States came to dominate exhibition spaces through the major studio system, efforts by Latin American countries to develop their own film industries have not been reflected in screen outcomes (Getino, 2007). In Mexico, for instance, 88 Mexican films were released in 2022 (22% of total releases), yet they accounted for only 3.6% of market share, compared to 88.82% for U.S. cinema. Films from the rest of Latin America represented less than 1% of the market (Instituto Mexicano de Cinematografía [IMCINE], 2023). In Brazil, although 41.6% of theatrical releases in 2021 were national productions, market share did not reach 2% (Entidad de Gestión de Derechos de los Productores Audiovisuales [EGEDA], 2022). In other Latin American countries, the situation for national cinema is even more critical: “The smaller the national film industry, the larger the portion of the distribution ‘pie’ taken by the US majors” (Falicov, 2019, p. 136).<sup>1</sup>

This issue extends beyond the market when cinema is approached from a cultural studies perspective, as a symbolic good that contributes to the construction of identities. As a mass communication medium, cinema plays a significant role in shaping collective values and meanings that structure societies. It produces symbolic frameworks and imaginaries that influence power relations (García Canclini, 1990, 2000; Martín-Barbero, 1987).

The political economy of communication, in turn, shows that Hollywood’s industrial film model is organized around capital as its guiding principle, structuring the entire process from distribution to production in order to convert symbolic value into economic value (Buquet, 2005; Ulin, 2014; Zallo, 1988). These two theoretical perspectives are complementary and provide essential insights for understanding the importance of film circulation, particularly in light of the power relations that characterize the distribution market.

In Latin America, attempts to replicate the industrial distribution model persist even within public policy frameworks, emphasizing the construction of a “film industry” and its integration into the hegemonic market (Falicov, 2019). This approach overlooks the fact that local production models are fundamentally different, as they are largely structured around public funding justified by cultural promotion. The failure of commercial distribution for Latin American cinema, however, is rooted in the structural conditions of the mechanism itself, designed according to macroeconomic logics that favor the concentration of power and capital and reinforce the dominance of major studios (Buquet, 2005). This results in a dual failure of public film policies: first, they do not succeed in establishing the long-desired “film industry” in economic terms; second, they fail to fulfill the cultural objectives that justify public support –such as the construction of local identities and imaginaries– due to the very limited audiences these films reach. This scenario calls into question the very nature of traditional distribution mechanisms and invites consideration of alternative forms of circulation.

Alongside this landscape, an alternative strategy for film distribution has begun to take shape in Latin America in recent years, shifting the emphasis from commercial success toward the pursuit of social impact through campaigns designed around individual films. This article refers to this approach as distribution through social impact campaigns, hereafter referred to as *impact distribution*, a model that involves the strategic design of alternative exhibition circuits tailored to specific audiences in order to generate social change through critical engagement with films<sup>2</sup> (Chattoo, 2020; Doc Society, 2020; Finneran, 2014).

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<sup>2</sup> Exhibition venues may include commercial movie theaters or alternative spaces, and are defined according to the audiences a campaign seeks to mobilize. These may include identity-based minorities or social groups (for example, the transgender community, secondary school students, etc.), change agents (such as policymakers, business leaders, and others), and amplifiers or replicators (including celebrities and digital media influencers).

Beyond the social impacts generated by these experiences, they have also demonstrated strong audience outcomes and, in some cases –particularly in Europe and the United States– financial returns. Nevertheless, impact distribution remains underexplored in academic research, especially in Latin America, where experiences are still limited compared to the Global North. This study seeks to address this gap in scholarship on film distribution and circulation in the region. It constitutes an initial approach that does not aim to exhaust the topic, but rather to highlight key aspects that may encourage further research in this field.

This emerging mode of feature film distribution has gained visibility, generated spaces for debate, and inspired training initiatives in recent years. Rather than introducing new tools to integrate films into the traditional market, it represents a new paradigm for content circulation (Fitzgerald, 2017). Strategies developed by professionals known as “impact producers” aim to mobilize audiences toward actions aligned with specific social objectives defined for each film (Doc Society, 2020). These impact goals may vary widely –from environmental protection to legislative change or consumer boycotts– but must be concrete and measurable in order to enable evaluation. Each film is conceived as a catalyst for social change, and a customized strategy is designed to circulate it and reach designated audiences according to the movements the campaign seeks to activate, often through free public screenings (Chattoo, 2020; Doc Society, 2020; Finneran, 2014; Nash & Corner, 2016).

Impact distribution originated in documentary cinema and traces its roots to alternative forms of community-based distribution within social movements of the 1960s (Chattoo, 2020). Collectives formed to tell stories by and for communities underrepresented in mainstream media developed community distribution practices to reach audiences outside the commercial system. Traditional markets had little space for this type of disruptive, low-commercial-appeal production; moreover, the intended audiences often lacked access to conventional exhibition venues (Chattoo, 2020). The digitalization of production and distribution expanded the possibilities for community-based circulation. This period coincided with the rise of participatory media platforms and

new forms of public engagement with social issues. The accessibility and interactivity inherent to the Internet were key factors in advancing impact campaign practices with films (Chattoo, 2020). Social media transformed spectators into disseminators of both the cause and the film, sharing messages, petitions, trailers, or even the films themselves. In this context, the volume of socially relevant films whose narratives are directly connected to the issues they address increased (Fitzgerald, 2017).

The formalization of impact distribution began in the second decade of the twenty-first century through the articulation of impact producers with philanthropic and third-sector institutions that financed these activities, such as the Ford Foundation and the Sundance Institute (Chattoo, 2020). Its main actors include funders, facilitators (organizations that promote training and coordinate with funders), impact producers (responsible for campaign design), and change agents (opinion leaders, community leaders, consumers, among others). The consolidation of impact distribution as a distinct field, with defined methodologies and professional roles, remains an ongoing process marked by increasing professionalization (Nash & Corner, 2016).

Initially centered on documentaries, impact distribution later expanded to fiction and other formats. In Latin America, impact distribution emerged through connections between local festivals and labs –notably DocMontevideo, DocSP, and Doc:co Labs ¡Acción!– and institutions based in the United States and Europe, particularly Doc Society (C. Misorelli, personal communication, August 1, 2023; L. Zaffaroni, personal communication, August 7, 2023; V. Cuervo, personal communication, August 16, 2023). However, unlike the Global North, budgets in the region remain extremely limited (L. Zaffaroni, personal communication, August 7, 2023).

This research addresses film distribution by questioning the hegemonic commercial model and exploring the potential of an alternative approach based on social impact campaigns. Despite the rise of digital platforms, the analysis focuses on theatrical distribution, as movie theaters remain the primary commercial window while also playing a central role in impact-driven distribution strategies. Moreover, theatrical exhibition enables quantitative comparison through audience indicators.

Movie theaters continue to represent a key space for independent cinema, not only because of their symbolic and commercial value –since theatrical circulation influences performance in subsequent windows– but also due to requirements imposed by festivals and, particularly, public funding mechanisms.

## OBJECTIVES AND RESEARCH QUESTION

The primary objective of this research was to compare, from a critical perspective and through a theoretical-methodological proposal, two distinct models of film circulation –impact distribution campaigns and commercial distribution– highlighting the different paradigms within each model. This comparison also sought to assess the potential of impact distribution in relation to the hegemonic commercial model, traditionally adopted by companies and supported by public policies. In doing so, the study aimed to challenge the centrality of theatrical commercial distribution as the primary avenue for audience access and to highlight the diversity of values inherent in cinema as a cultural expression beyond its economic dimension –an aspect often overlooked in analyses of film distribution.

Within this broader objective, the research addressed the following question: given the barriers imposed by the commercial model, can impact distribution campaigns represent a more efficient alternative for reaching audiences, understood in a broader sense than commercial movie theater consumers?

## METHODOLOGY

A qualitative methodological approach was adopted, centered on comparative techniques and complemented by quantitative analysis. In addition to a literature review –reflecting the still limited development of academic research on impact distribution– knowledge about it was gathered through participation in specialized laboratories, events, and forums focused on impact production, as well as through in-depth interviews with professionals in the field in Latin America, including representatives of institutions, funds, and impact producers. This

process also generated the necessary information to identify the case studies discussed later in the article, which serve to exemplify and analyze impact distribution in practice.

Given the research objectives, the comparative method proved to be the most appropriate analytical approach, particularly drawing on Sartori's framework (1994), which emphasizes classification through mutually exclusive categories (Gonzalez, 2008, p. 7). Sartori (1994) argues that comparative research must address three fundamental questions: what is being compared, which defines the objects of study (I); why are they compared, which establishes the theoretical approach guiding the comparison (II); and how the comparison is conducted, which describes the tools used and delineates the spatiotemporal framework (III). This approach transforms comparison into a rigorous methodology situated within a historical-cultural context, moving beyond mere description or juxtaposition of data (Silveira, 2003).

In this study, Sartori's questions (1994) were operationalized as follows: the objects of comparison (I) are the hegemonic model of commercial distribution and the alternative model of distribution through social impact campaigns, or impact distribution. The rationale for comparison (II) lies in the fact that both models function as mechanisms of circulation, connecting films and audiences. Drawing on the political economy of communication and cultural studies, the analysis seeks to identify the relationship between these models, the industrial paradigm, and the social role of cinema. The operationalization (III) was grounded in theoretical concepts and involved defining the field of study (Latin American cinema), the general concept (film circulation), and the analytical categories. The concept was then specified into two objects of study, which constitute the units of analysis to be compared (Azcona et al., 2013): commercial distribution (UA1) and impact distribution campaigns (UA2).

To compare the two units of analysis, four qualitative analytical categories were defined based on the adopted theoretical-methodological perspective, encompassing the most relevant characteristics of circulation in relation to the research problem: importance, mechanisms, purpose, and results.

The first category, *importance*, focuses on understanding the historical foundations and values that guided the development of each model. The second category, *mechanisms*, is operational in nature and describes the logics and strategies employed in the implementation of each model. The third category, *purpose*, derives from the first, as the purposes of each system are directly linked to the values that define their importance. The final category, *results*, examines how each model achieves its stated objectives. For this category, a complementary quantitative comparison was conducted using audience reach as an indicator. This enabled the establishment of concrete comparative results for the selected cases. It should be noted, however, that for impact distribution these figures are secondary for evaluating outcomes: although they are easy to calculate and may reflect reach, they do not necessarily capture impact or subsequent actions, which constitute the model's primary objectives (Finneran, 2014, p. 26).

To illustrate impact distribution and facilitate understanding of its structure and functioning, in contrast to the market paradigm and in support of the social role of cinema, six qualitative case studies were analyzed: two documentaries from Colombia, two from Mexico, and two from Brazil –countries with the most developed impact distribution practices in the region. In this article, which presents a synthesis of the broader research, only the three most emblematic cases are discussed: *Chega de fui fui* (Frazão & Kamancheck, 2018) from Brazil; *Hasta los dientes* (Arnaut, 2018) from Mexico; and *9.70* (Solano, 2012) from Colombia.

Although impact distribution is an informal modality and numerical data remain scarce in Latin America, it was also possible to include a quantitative comparison of audience reach between the two models. This comparison was based on seven Brazilian documentaries for which data were available for both impact distribution and commercial distribution, in terms of audience attendance and geographic reach. Data on impact distribution were obtained from publications in the FLACIS Mediatheque (2023) and from a report by the distributor Taturana (2023). Data on commercial distribution were drawn from reports by Brazil's OCA-ANCINE observatory (Agência Nacional do Cinema [ANCINE], 2023a, 2023b).

For this analysis, the corpus was limited to documentaries addressing social issues. Films released in 2018 and 2019, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, were selected in order to compare the two units of analysis without interference from external events affecting the audiovisual sector.

## RESULTS

This section presents the comparative analysis between the two units of analysis –commercial distribution and impact distribution campaigns– contrasting their differences across the four proposed analytical categories: the sources of their importance, the structure of their mechanisms, the purposes that guide them, and the ways in which their results are measured. In addition, case studies are included solely as practical examples of impact distribution application, and the interaction between the two units of analysis in practice is examined.

### QUALITATIVE COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

This section highlights the differences between the two units of analysis by confronting the theoretical analytical categories specifically developed for this research. As noted in the methodology section, information on each unit of analysis was drawn from specialized literature on commercial distribution (Smits, 2019; Ulin, 2014) and on impact distribution campaigns (Chattoo, 2020; Doc Society, 2020; Finneran, 2014; Nash & Corner, 2016), as well as from interviews with impact distribution specialists. The analysis is grounded in concepts from the political economy of communication and cultural studies, which emphasize the social role of cinema and the ways in which market logics shape its circulation (Buquet, 2005; Falicov, 2019; García Canclini, 1990, 2000; Martín-Barbero, 1987; Turner, 2003; Zallo, 1988).

#### ANALYTICAL CATEGORY I: IMPORTANCE

This category refers to the “why” of each mechanism, examining its historical development and identifying the motivations and values that shaped each model.

Commercial distribution, which has consolidated itself as hegemonic worldwide, originated in the United States in the early twentieth century, when major Hollywood studios began to structure cinema as a profit-oriented economic activity (Wasko, 2007). Since then, the industry has been organized according to commodity logic, with distribution positioned as the strategic core of the system (Buquet, 2005; Finler, 2003). Over time, major studios developed global circulation networks based on the exploitation of copyright, emphasizing control over audience access (Smits, 2019). Audiences are thus conceived not as cultural subjects, but as consumers. Far from being spontaneous, this model was designed to serve the interests of the majors, consolidating a global film market structured around expansion, vertical integration, profitability, and symbolic domination (Autran, 2010; Buquet, 2005). Commercial distribution therefore responds not only to economic interests, but also contributes to the reproduction of cultural domination, imposing narratives from the Global North and displacing peripheral expressions.

In contrast, distribution via social impact campaigns reaffirms the social role of cinema and is articulated as a tool for civic participation. This model proposes a relationship between film, theme, and community, transforming viewing into a collective experience oriented toward reflection and action. Rather than prioritizing profitability, impact distribution focuses on generating social impact, adapting its strategies to the specificities of each film and its audiences.

The origins of impact distribution can be traced to social movements and documentary filmmaking in the 1960s and 1970s, when collectives formed by women, Black communities, and other marginalized groups developed militant and community-based distribution practices, with screenings held in alternative spaces such as schools, unions, and churches (Chattoo, 2020). The objective was to bring films directly to the audiences represented on screen –audiences often excluded from commercial exhibition spaces– and to create spaces for dialogue and collective action (Chattoo, 2020). As Chattoo (2020) argues, the infrastructure that currently enables the circulation of social documentaries was not created by the market, but by social movements and the demands of previously invisible audiences.

Impact distribution thus represents not merely an alternative circuit, but a redefinition of what it means to circulate a film: rather than monetizing a product, the goal is to activate processes of social transformation through cinema.

TABLE 1  
COMPARATIVE FRAMEWORK. ANALYTICAL CATEGORY I: IMPORTANCE

Commercial distribution (UA1)	Impact distribution campaigns (UA2)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasizes the commercial role of cinema</li> <li>• Central axis of the hegemonic film industry</li> <li>• Commodification of symbolic goods for domestic and export markets; integrates cinema into the market</li> <li>• Market structured around the interests of large U.S.-based corporations</li> <li>• Shaped by international political-economic power relations</li> <li>• Audience role limited to consumption</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasizes the social role of cinema</li> <li>• Tool for civic participation and local activism</li> <li>• Cinema as discourse and instrument of social transformation; integrates cinema into civil society</li> <li>• Rooted in and supported by local social movements</li> <li>• Motivated by the inclusion of marginalized groups</li> <li>• Audience as an active participant in the campaign</li> </ul>

Source: The authors.

#### ANALYTICAL CATEGORY II: MECHANISMS

The commercial distribution mechanism (UA1) is structured around a market paradigm and based on the exploitation of intellectual property rights. Copyright functions as the legal and economic axis of the model, granting exclusive rights to use and commercialize the work (Govil, 2007; World Intellectual Property Organization [WIPO], 2020). Distribution therefore consists of negotiating exhibition licenses by market segments—the so-called *windows*—following a predetermined order and ensuring territorial and temporal exclusivity in each one (Ulin, 2014).

The model seeks to maximize revenue by limiting access, configuring a logic of artificial scarcity in which consumption is stratified according to spectators' purchasing power (Reiss, 2010).

This system operates through clearly defined agents: distributors, sales agents, digital aggregators, and exhibitors. Each plays a specific role aimed at monetizing the work across multiple platforms and territories. The first window is typically a theatrical exhibition, where the film's profitability is tested. Box-office performance directly influences the film's market value in subsequent windows (Smits, 2019). Independent distribution, lacking the backing of major studios, faces structural barriers such as high marketing costs (P&A), limited negotiating power with theaters, and dependence on festival validation (Falicov, 2019).

By contrast, impact distribution campaigns (UA2) are grounded in a sociocultural paradigm, seeking to generate concrete and measurable social, political, or environmental change. For that, campaigns design circulation strategies aligned with the themes of the film, its protagonists, and audiences capable of activating processes of change (Doc Society, 2020; Finneran, 2014).

The impact distribution ecosystem remains under construction and is considerably more fluid. The roles of its agents –including impact producers, facilitators, change agents, and funders– are configured collaboratively and contextually (Chattoo & Das, 2014; Nash & Corner, 2016). Exhibition windows do not follow a fixed hierarchy nor require exclusivity, and typically involve accessible or strategic spaces such as schools, parliaments, digital platforms, and community-organized screenings, often labeled as *non-theatrical* or *educational* circuits (Doc Society, 2020; C. Misorelli, personal communication, August 1, 2023). Funding derives primarily from foundations, NGOs, and, to a lesser extent, public funds or donations, and does not require commercial return (Chattoo, 2020; R. Giesteira, personal communication, July 28, 2023).

In summary, while commercial distribution optimizes the economic value of content through access restrictions, impact distribution activates alternative circuits oriented toward social change, adopting flexible methods to expand reach. Whereas the traditional model (UA1)

is consolidated, UA2 remains in the process of formalization, presenting both opportunities and challenges due to its still-developing structure.

TABLE 2  
COMPARATIVE FRAMEWORK. ANALYTICAL CATEGORY II: MECHANISMS

Commercial distribution (UA1)	Impact distribution campaigns (UA2)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Definition:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Commercial restrictions on the use of artistic creation (copyright)</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Operational structure:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Rights, licenses, exclusivity</li> <li>◦ Windowing system with exclusivity</li> <li>◦ Theatrical release as the primary window</li> <li>◦ Festivals and markets reinforcing hierarchies between central and peripheral cultures</li> <li>◦ Funding: major studios, independents, and public incentives</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Ecosystem:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Established, though constantly adapting to market changes</li> <li>◦ Clearly defined agents oriented toward market share dominance</li> <li>◦ Key players: distributors, sales agents, aggregators, exhibitors</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Definition:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Strategic use of film to promote social impact actions</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Operational structure:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Impact vision, impact goals, exhibition circuits and screening strategies</li> <li>◦ Exhibition windows: non-theatrical and educational</li> <li>◦ Funding: evolving model; philanthropy and NGOs</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Ecosystem:                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Under construction, fluid, and context-dependent</li> <li>◦ Agent roles vary case by case and often overlap</li> <li>◦ Key agents: funders, facilitators, impact producers, change agents, community screening organizers</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

Source: The authors.

### ANALYTICAL CATEGORY III: PURPOSE

The two units of analysis compared here share a close relationship with audiences, yet they are guided by distinct purposes. In commercial

distribution (UA1), the primary objective is profit: generating financial returns through the sale of exhibition rights, maximizing profitability, and recovering investments in production and marketing (Kuhn, 2002; Ulin, 2014). This purpose is embedded within the paradigm of the cultural industries, in which symbolic goods circulate as commodities, reinforcing structures of economic concentration (Buquet, 2005; Zallo, 1988). Content selection—even at the script development stage—is shaped by financial return criteria, as evidenced by dominant production models in Hollywood (Fitzgerald, 2017).

Audience size is another key objective in commercial distribution (UA1), since box-office figures directly influence the valuation of a film for subsequent windows (Falicov, 2019). However, this reach is measured in strictly quantitative and anonymous terms: it is irrelevant who watches the film or what effects it produces; what matters is how many tickets are sold.

By contrast, the primary purpose of impact distribution campaigns (UA2) is social change (Chattoo, 2020; Finneran, 2014). Rather than generating profit, impact distribution seeks to promote transformations that, for practical and evaluative purposes, can be categorized as changes in mindsets, behaviors, structures, or the strengthening of specific communities (Doc Society, 2020). According to Chattoo (2020), documentaries have contributed to shaping public debate, setting agendas, and even influencing legislation and public policies; impact distribution formalizes this potential of cinema as a tool for social intervention.

Audience reach is also a relevant objective in impact distribution, but not in numerical terms. The goal is to engage specific audiences with the potential to amplify the message or act upon the reality portrayed, even when screenings are small or directed at decision-makers (Finneran, 2017).

Finally, unlike the commercial model, impact distribution may include fundraising objectives, not as an end in itself, but as a means to sustain the campaign or support the represented cause (Chattoo, 2020). Nevertheless, access and social change remain the primary priorities. In this sense, impact distribution reconfigures the logic of film circulation, shifting the focus from profitability to civic engagement. Drawing on Turner's (2003) idea that the function of narrative is to symbolically

resolve what cannot be resolved in reality, impact distribution can be understood as a form of reverse engineering of this process, mobilizing practical resolutions through symbolic narratives.

TABLE 3

COMPARATIVE FRAMEWORK. ANALYTICAL CATEGORY III: PURPOSE	
Commercial distribution (UA1)	Impact distribution campaigns (UA2)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Profit-oriented creative industry               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Sale of rights (copyright)</li> <li>◦ Maximization of economic returns</li> <li>◦ Control over intellectual property</li> <li>◦ Recovery of P&amp;A investment</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Audience reach:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Primarily quantitative</li> <li>◦ Attracting audiences to theaters</li> <li>◦ Passive audience</li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social change               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Changing mindsets</li> <li>◦ Changing behaviors</li> <li>◦ Structural change</li> <li>◦ Community building</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Audience reach:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Primarily qualitative</li> <li>◦ Reaching audiences where they are</li> <li>◦ Participatory audience</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Fundraising for the cause or the campaign</li> </ul>

Source: The authors.

#### ANALYTICAL CATEGORY IV: RESULTS

The final analytical category in this study refers to the types of results typically produced by commercial distribution models (UA1) and impact distribution campaigns (UA2), in relation to their respective purposes and operational dynamics.

In the commercial model (UA1), results are primarily expressed through quantitative indicators: box office revenue, number of spectators, weeks in release, and number of screens occupied. These metrics, standardized and widely disseminated by public observatories and private platforms (such as IMDb Pro and Comscore), guide decisions related to acquisition, production, and programming. However, they do not account for audience profiles or the cultural effects of films. The centrality of these indicators ultimately favors high-budget productions

with strong marketing investments, reinforcing dynamics of economic concentration, content homogenization, and cultural colonization.

In contrast, the primary objective of impact distribution (UA2) is to generate concrete social change. For this reason, its approach to audiences goes beyond numerical indicators, even though improved measurement systems and evaluation tools are still needed. The expected outcomes of impact distribution are social transformations, ranging from legislative change to the creation of community networks, access to public services, or the re-signification of collective imaginaries. Moreover, as impact campaigns often align with pre-existing mobilizations and forms of activism, their results should not be understood as isolated achievements, but rather as contributions to broader collective processes. To assess these impacts, diverse methodologies –quantitative, qualitative, or mixed– are developed and adapted to each campaign and to varying levels of professionalization. Tools such as surveys, content analysis, network mapping, and case studies make it possible to evaluate the extent to which films and their campaigns have contributed to the desired change (Doc Society, 2020; Finneran, 2014).

Although impact distribution rarely generates direct financial returns, some campaigns achieve media visibility that benefits the commercial trajectory of films (R. Giesteira, personal communication, July 28, 2023). Cases such as *Espero tua (re)volta* and *Virunga* demonstrate that the visibility generated by impact campaigns can open opportunities in other distribution windows (C. Misorelli, personal communication, August 1, 2023). Furthermore, this model has facilitated access to non-traditional funding sources, including NGOs, institutions, and companies aligned with the causes addressed by the films.

The analysis also indicates that each model tends to favor a specific type of film. UA1 benefits high-budget productions with mass appeal, generally not independent works. UA2, by contrast, is restricted to films connected to social causes and is most commonly applied to documentaries, although it is adaptable to various formats.

In summary, commercial distribution produces standardized and easily measurable results oriented toward profitability, whereas impact distribution generates diverse, contextual outcomes closely tied to social objectives. For independent Latin American cinema –often

excluded from the hegemonic circuit– impact distribution represents not only an alternative circulation mechanism, but also an invitation to rethink the very meaning of “results” within the audiovisual field.

TABLE 4  
COMPARATIVE FRAMEWORK. ANALYTICAL CATEGORY IV: RESULTS

Commercial distribution (UA1)	Impact distribution campaigns (UA2)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasis on revenue               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Model suited to blockbusters; tendency towards content homogeneity</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Standardized commercial results               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Standardized measurement tools; measurement capacity varies by country</li> <li>◦ Precise measurement of commercial audiences</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Limited outlets: a revenue- and audience-driven perspective focused on a specific film type</li> <li>• Vertical structure; creation of commercial alliances or subordination</li> <li>• Encourages access for a geographically and economically selected audience</li> <li>• Logic of scarcity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emphasis on social change               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Suitable model for films about causes; prevalence of documentaries</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Diversified social outcomes               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Varied measurement tools; variable measurement capacity depending on each campaign</li> <li>◦ Imprecise measurement of total viewers</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Unlimited outlets: broader audience reach, but not linked to revenue</li> <li>• Horizontal work; network building</li> <li>• Promotes access to diverse and marginalized audiences</li> <li>• Availability logic</li> </ul>

Source: The authors.

## CASE STUDIES

This section presents case studies of films from Brazil, Mexico, and Colombia, examined according to the analytical categories proposed in this research.

The objective is neither to measure the individual success of each work nor to provide an in-depth account of their distribution processes –detailed information can be found in the sources cited from the FLACIS Mediatheque. Rather, the aim is to illustrate, through concrete cases, how impact distribution campaigns operate in practice. Unlike the commercial model –which follows a standardized logic applied relatively uniformly to films regardless of origin, theme, or audience– impact distribution presents flexible structures and adaptive processes.

Impact distribution campaigns are uniquely structured for each film, according to their themes, target audiences, alliances, territories, and social objectives. For this reason, their analysis requires a situated perspective. Although the sample is limited, the selected cases help illustrate this operational diversity, demonstrating how campaigns adapt to each work and how the four analytical dimensions –importance, purpose, mechanisms, and results– materialize in specific contexts. For each film, only basic production information is presented, followed by a table summarizing the application of the analytical categories.

**Case 1. *Chega de fui fui*** (Dirs. Fernanda Frazão and Amanda Kamancheh, Brazil, 2018, documentary).

Title in English: *Enough with the catcalling*

Synopsis: Are cities designed for women? *Chega de fui fui* portrays the stories of Raquel, Rosa, and Teresa, residents of three Brazilian cities, who, through activism, art, and poetry, resist harassment and propose new ways of (co)existing in public spaces.

TABLE 5  
CASE STUDY 1

IMPORTANCE Context (Why?)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• According to the Brazilian Public Security Forum, 45 460 cases of rape were reported in Brazil in 2015, corresponding to 22.2 cases per 100 000 inhabitants; however, reported cases represent only 10% of the total (Martinelli, 2018).</li> <li>• 86% of Brazilian women have experienced violence or sexual harassment in public spaces (ActionAid, 2016).</li> </ul>
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 99.6% of Brazilian women report feeling uncomfortable with verbal harassment, and 70% do not react out of fear (Think Olga, 2014).</li> <li>• In 2013, the NGO Think Olga launched the mobilization campaign <i>Chega de fu fu</i> (“Enough with the catcalling”) to combat sexual harassment in public spaces. The film was produced as part of this campaign.</li> </ul>
PURPOSE Specific goals (What for?)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To raise awareness among adolescents and pre-adolescents about harassment, abuse, and gender-based violence.</li> <li>• To provide information to women in vulnerable situations regarding gender-based violence.</li> <li>• To secure approval of the sexual harassment law under debate in the Brazilian Congress.</li> </ul>
MECHANISMS Concrete actions (How?)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Screenings at universities, schools, and social organizations.</li> <li>• Screenings at institutions such as the Brazilian National Congress, the Judiciary, and police departments.</li> <li>• Screenings at UN Women, and promotion among working groups on masculinities and educators researching the topic.</li> <li>• Mapping of women and girls in schools, universities, and women’s collectives that organized community screenings, reaching thousands of people.</li> </ul>
RESULTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Contribution to the approval of Law 13.718/18 in Brazil, which criminalizes harassment in public spaces.</li> <li>• Creation of the first course on sexual harassment at the Police Academy, in which the film is mandatory material.</li> <li>• Creation of the website webLIS for federal judges of the Regional Federal Court, featuring content related to the history of the sexual harassment law from perspectives of gender, race, and social class.</li> <li>• Expansion of debate in schools and in domestic violence groups working with male aggressors.</li> </ul>

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Source: The authors based on data from the FLACIS Mediatheque (Kamanchek, n.d.).

**Case 2. *Hasta los dientes*** (Dir. Alberto Arnaut, Mexico, 2018, documentary)

English title: *To the teeth*

Synopsis: In 2010, the Mexican government announced the killing of two alleged hitmen, supposedly armed “to the teeth”. In reality, they were Jorge Mercado Alonso and Javier Arredondo Verdugo, two outstanding students from the Monterrey Institute of Technology, who were tortured and murdered inside their school by the military.

TABLE 6  
CASE STUDY 2

IMPORTANCE Context (Why?)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Between 2008 and 2013, the Mexican army committed serious human rights violations.</li> <li>• Jorge and Javier were killed by military personnel, who alleged that they were <i>sicarios</i> supposedly “armed to the teeth”.</li> <li>• In 2018, a legislative proposal to legalize the presence of the army on the streets was under debate in Congress.</li> </ul>
PURPOSE Specific goals (What for?)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Truth and justice: to clear the names of Jorge and Javier and preserve the memory of the murdered students.</li> <li>• To obtain judicial accountability as a guarantee of non-repetition.</li> <li>• To contribute to the public debate on Mexico’s security model, opposing militarization.</li> <li>• To block the bill legalizing the army’s presence on the streets.</li> </ul>
MECHANISMS Concrete actions (How?)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Partnership with the Todxs Somos Jorge y Javier collective from the early stages of production.</li> <li>• Collaborative construction of both the film and the campaign with the families of Jorge and Javier to give a voice to the victims.</li> <li>• Alignment of screenings with activist actions organized by the collective.</li> <li>• Screenings supported by student groups at the Monterrey Institute of Technology campus, where the murders took place.</li> </ul>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development of a discussion guide to accompany screenings.</li> <li>• Alliance with Amnesty International and the #SeguridadSinGuerra movement, offering the film as a mobilization tool for the peace agenda.</li> <li>• Screenings for decision-makers: Senate, Chamber of Deputies, Supreme Court, and the cabinet of President López Obrador.</li> </ul>
RESULTS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Mexican State formally accepted accountability and issued a public apology, restoring the reputations of Jorge and Javier.</li> <li>• Community articulation and empowerment of victims’ families and the Todxs Somos Jorge y Javier collective, generating sustained media visibility.</li> <li>• Collection of over 20 000 signatures leading to the cancellation of a lecture at the Monterrey Institute of Technology by former President Calderón, who was in office at the time of the murders.</li> <li>• Successful advocacy contributing to the rejection of the national security law in Congress, although the subsequent creation of the National Guard perpetuated militarization.</li> </ul>

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Source: The authors based on data from the FLACIS Mediatheque (Iliná et al., n.d.).

**Case 3. 9.70** (Dir. Victoria Solano, Colombia, 2012, documentary)

Synopsis: 9.70 tells the story of how the Colombian people –particularly an agricultural community– fought against a harsh trade regulation that criminalized the planting of native seeds used for generations.

TABLE 7  
CASE STUDY 3

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IMPORTANCE Context (Why?)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Within the framework of the U.S.-Colombia free trade agreement, the Colombian government approved Resolution 9.70 in 2010, allowing only</li> </ul>
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	<p>the planting of certified, patented seeds owned by multinational corporations and prohibiting native seeds.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In 2011, 70 tons of rice grown from native seeds were destroyed under this regulation.</li> </ul>
<p>PURPOSE Specific goals (What for?)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• To raise awareness in Colombia of the harmful effects of the Free Trade Agreement on food sovereignty.</li> <li>• To strengthen rural communities and mobilize broader civil society support.</li> <li>• To repeal Resolution 9.70.</li> </ul>
<p>MECHANISMS Concrete actions (How?)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Free release of the documentary on YouTube during a nationwide farmers' strike and protest.</li> <li>• Creation of a YouTube channel providing expanded information beyond the film's narrative.</li> <li>• Use of the film by rural leaders to collect signatures for a petition demanding repeal of the resolution.</li> </ul>
<p>RESULTS</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Viral growth of the film on YouTube (10 000 views in the first 24 hours, 200 000 views in the first week).</li> <li>• Massive public debate triggered on social media, driven by viewers of the film.</li> <li>• Audience members became promoters of the film and engaged in cyber-activism, creating memes, cartoons, and drawings inspired by the documentary, with support from artists and digital influencers.</li> <li>• Farmers' strike gained urban popular support, with citizens mobilizing in cities to demand repeal of Resolution 9.70.</li> <li>• Inclusion of the issue on the public agenda, with mainstream media incorporating farmers' voices.</li> <li>• Repeal of Resolution 9.70.</li> <li>• Simón Bolívar Journalism award to the campaign.</li> <li>• Subsequent use of the documentary in Chile and Argentina to oppose similar legislation.</li> <li>• Continued use of the film in Colombian schools and universities to discuss the impacts of free trade agreements on rural economies.</li> </ul>

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Source: The authors based on data from Doc Society (2017).

## QUANTITATIVE CASE ANALYSIS

Although the primary emphasis of this research lies in the qualitative theoretical-comparative analysis of distribution models, it was considered relevant to incorporate quantitative data to better understand the actual reach of each mechanism. This section presents audience figures for a selection of Brazilian documentaries that were distributed both commercially and through impact distribution campaigns.

It is important to stress that impact distribution, as a model oriented toward social change and designed on a case-by-case basis, cannot be evaluated solely through audience numbers. Similarly, the outcomes of commercial distribution are also subject to market fluctuations. Nevertheless, numerical audience data constitute the only indicator shared by both units of analysis, despite their significantly different measurement methods and objectives. For this reason, observing this indicator –even with its limitations– helps visualize how the four analytical categories proposed in this study operate in practice within each model.

It should be noted that the universe analyzed consists of Latin American documentaries addressing social issues. The data presented here are not intended to be statistically generalizable, but rather to illustrate, through concrete cases, the contrast between two fundamentally different logics of distribution.

The data indicates that audience reach through impact distribution is significantly higher than through commercial distribution, reflecting the limited opportunities available to independent national documentaries in the theatrical market. When considered alongside commercial distribution, impact distribution substantially expands total audience reach. Moreover, the documentaries with the highest reach through impact distribution are also the only ones that surpassed 1 000 spectators in commercial theaters, suggesting that this model does not negatively affect paid theatrical attendance.

Impact distribution audience reach is particularly significant when compared to commercial distribution more broadly. According to AN-CINE (2023a), of the 137 Brazilian documentaries released between 2018 and 2019, more than 50 % attracted fewer than 1 000 spectators,

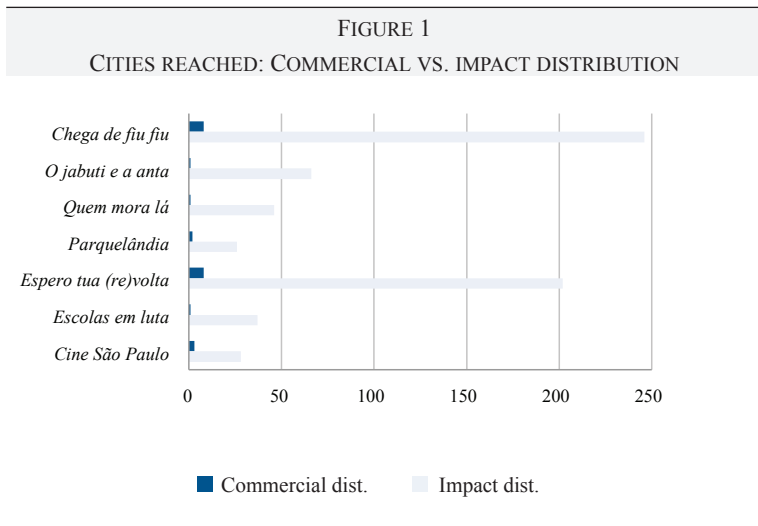
TABLE 8  
AUDIENCE REACH OF SELECTED DOCUMENTARIES (COMMERCIAL DISTRIBUTION AND IMPACT DISTRIBUTION)

		Commercial	Impact	Total Audience	% comercial	% impact
2018	<i>Chega de fui fui</i>	1 048	13 097	14 145	7	93
	<i>O jabuti e a anta</i>	202	2 074	2 276	9	91
	<i>Quem mora lá</i>	91	2 201	2 292	4	96
	<i>Parquelândia</i>	239	752	991	24	76
2019	<i>Espero tua (re)volta</i>	2 834	6 170	9 004	31	69
	<i>Escolas em luta</i>	311	1 507	1 818	17	83
	<i>Cine São Paulo</i>	438	1 707	2 145	20	80

Source: The authors based on Taturana (2023) and ANCINE (2023a, 2023b).

and only three titles exceeded 10 000. However, non-paying audiences are not included in the official counting system. If they were, the documentaries with the greatest impact distribution reach –such as *Chega de fui fui* and *Espero tua (re)volta*– would rank among the most-watched films of those years (ANCINE, 2023a).

Another relevant metric concerns the number of cities reached by impact distribution. The geographic distribution of commercial movie theaters is driven by commercial interests and generally covers only major urban centers. In the cases analyzed here, impact distribution proved to be a powerful tool for facilitating access to films beyond the reach of the commercial circuit.



Source: The authors using data from Taturana (2023) and ANCINE (2023a, 2023b).

Brazil has only 3 592 commercial theaters located in 474 cities, covering just 9% of the national territory (ANCINE, 2023b). In this context, impact distribution has enabled broader dissemination, surpassing the structural limitations of commercial distribution.

It is important to note that commercial distribution and impact distribution are not mutually exclusive, but rather complementary. Films

often employ both mechanisms. Impact distribution and commercial distribution can generate a virtuous cycle, with mutual influence between social media and traditional media. Nevertheless, commercial distributors remain reluctant to engage with impact distribution strategies (R. Giesteira, personal communication, July 28, 2023).

## CONCLUSIONS

This research emerged from two key observations: the persistent difficulties faced by local independent cinema within the commercial market and the discovery of impact distribution campaigns as an alternative circulation model operating outside market logics. From this perspective, the central research question was formulated: can impact distribution constitute a more efficient option for Latin American independent cinema?

A positive answer was anticipated for two main reasons. First, the inefficiency of the hegemonic model has been extensively documented in the statistical reports and academic studies cited throughout this article. Second, understanding cinema as more than a mere product aligns more closely with the social and cultural roles that this art form plays in Latin American societies. However, the research process required a careful examination of what “efficiency” actually means in this context. Initially, a market-oriented mindset sought answers in numerical indicators, equating efficiency with higher box-office revenues and larger audiences. Under this logic, a comparison of these two metrics would suffice. The development of the study, however, demonstrated the inadequacy of this approach, as impact distribution transcends purely quantitative evaluation and addresses broader, more complex dimensions that demand qualitative assessment. If cinema is understood as a collectively shared symbolic good, the effectiveness of its circulation cannot be reduced solely to numerical metrics. A purely quantitative comparison therefore fails to capture the true scope of impact distribution and to fully answer the research question.

Within the defined scope, the qualitative comparative analysis corroborated the initial hypothesis. The findings indicate that the logics governing commercial distribution were designed by and for the

hegemonic film industry, operating under a commercial paradigm, whereas Latin American cinema is largely produced within a sociocultural paradigm supported by public funding. The breakdown of UAI across the selected analytical categories revealed that its operational characteristics –which favor industrial cinema and disadvantage national Latin cinematographies– are structural rather than circumstantial, and cannot be attributed merely to insufficient investment.

In this sense, impact distribution proved to be considerably more suitable for fulfilling the social and cultural functions of cinema, as argued throughout the article. Its origins in social movements reflect a fundamental concern with the circulation of discourse and, above all, with access –an issue often overlooked in debates on film policy. In the conflict of interests among producers, distributors, and exhibitors, audiences have largely been excluded from the equation. Within impact distribution, audiences are the central element around which the entire strategy is constructed. They are not conceived as anonymous consumers, but as active participants and members of a culture they also help transform. The core objective is to ensure that films are seen so that they can trigger social action. In this way, impact distribution restores films to their symbolic role as collective narratives through which reality is understood and (re)created.

Regarding quantitative analysis –acknowledging its limitations– the cases examined indicate that impact distribution is more efficient in reaching larger audiences, including those who, for geographic or economic reasons, lack access to commercial theaters. Impact distribution treats audiences as cultural assets rather than mere numerical indicators.

With respect to revenue generation, the study found that Latin America faces cultural barriers that hinder the consolidation of sustainable impact distribution mechanisms, particularly due to negative perceptions of profit in the context of social work–perceptions that have challenged the model’s long-term viability. By contrast, although the commercial model is profit-oriented, it generates negligible average revenues for independent Latin American cinema. In this respect, both approaches face significant challenges regarding economic viability over time.

Finally, the study highlights the relationship between both distribution mechanisms and the production model of independent cinema in Latin America, which is largely based on public funding. While public investment in production is justified on both economic grounds (employment generation, exports, etc.) and cultural grounds (national identities, language, etc.), the distribution stage often ignores the cultural dimension entirely. The dominance of major studios clearly demands state intervention to ensure national cinema's presence in commercial circuits. However, such intervention typically protects only the economic aspects of cinema, emphasizing copyright and the commodification of culture. Even so, audience and box-office results reveal that the economic sustainability of film production in Latin America does not lie in the commercialization of works. Therefore, the emphasis placed on the market by public policies entails a certain alienation from the realities of that very market.

In this context, impact distribution emerges as both an example and a reminder of the cultural dimension neglected in debates on circulation. It demonstrates that dissemination beyond the market does not harm a film's commercial trajectory and is, in fact, essential for its social and cultural role. Beyond being commodities, national films embody expressions, representations, and ideas that reflect the diversity and multiplicity of Latin America. This cultural richness can only come to life through access. Therefore, it is essential that public policies assign greater importance to this dimension within the broader framework of film circulation.

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