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At Venice Film Festival, foreign journalists decry lack of interview opportunities with big talent

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Over the decades that I have been covering movie festivals like Cannes, Venice and so on, I have noticed a reluctance to offer interview slots with celebrities to international journalists. Me too. In Venice, the Italian Press is preferred; in Cannes, the French. And these festivals call themselves international! And someone like me from India is hardly given any importance; my repeated requests for interviews are politely declined. Lack of time is one reason that is always dished out. And mind you, the festivals are not guilty of this; it is the PR companies that are. So much so that I have stopped asking for interviews for some years now. I have realised the futility of it all! Why run around seeking interviews and being disappointed and devastated?

This year, foreign journalists in Venice have been perved over the lack of interview opportunities. Major talents like Lady Gaga, George Clooney and Brad Pitt, among others, have been kept out of bounds for journalists from other countries.

Yes, most movie stars and directors do hold press conferences and do offer one-to-one interviews with a very few top media companies. But the others, the vast majority, are left by the wayside, and these men and women have to be satisfied with press conferences, each just about 20 minutes that often get hijacked by atrociously stupid questions. I have heard journalists ask questions like, "What do you think of Venice or Cannes on day one or two of the festival?" I even recall one asking a top talent what her favourite colour was.

A media report says that 50 journalists this year at Venice have lamented in a signed petition the lack of interview opportunities across Europe, and this includes Venice, Cannes and Berlin. Most of them are freelancers and do have to rely on these kinds of chances to earn some money.



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This petition was posted on the Venice Festival Journalists, which has 70 members, including movie publicists and programmers. The petition said "the economics of sending journalists from across the world to these festivals will no longer work if they can't rely on interviews with major stars (which will inevitably have a knock-on effect on the coverage of smaller, independent films). The letter warns that film journalists may well decide to boycott the event in the future.

"Eventually the protest could involve the festivals themselves, which risks seeing the departure of hundreds of accredited journalists and publications and where the commentary on movies and the opinion of their authors will be left to artificial intelligence," asserted the petition.

If further added: "Cinema journalism is at risk of extinction. The Venice Film Festival has just started, and we know already that many movies with a world premiere at the festival this year will

not have interviews to the press. This decision, influenced by the studios and supported by many publicists, puts in jeopardy an entire category of journalists, particularly freelancers, who with their passionate and relentless work often help in the success of films, give voice and prestige to directors and actors, and contribute to igniting the debate on projects that aim for the Oscars, the Golden Globes, and other prestigious awards. After having gone on strike for months in Hollywood to save thousands of jobs, new directors and actors, embracing the policy of the same studios and producers who were previously their enemies, are putting just as many jobs at risk, denying interviews to journalists who manage to survive, thanks to those interviews.

"These days, due to rapid and profound changes in the media landscape, more and more journalists are becoming freelancers, which means they sustain themselves single-handedly. That means they do what is called 'pitching' to sell

stories, which allow them to survive. Every day, they put their best foot forward to write about what's meaningful, innovative and of great artistic value. But the outlets always favour names, stars and mainstream projects. If journalists get those stars, then they can also make sure the first-time filmmakers, the innovators, along with all the beautifully talented artists without commercial appeal can get their media exposure too, through their effort. Just like organisers need big stars for the eyes of the world to turn to the event, the international press needs interviews with them for their work to be viable."

The Festival chief, Alberto Barbera, has promised to look into this grievance, although he said that he had no control over marketing decisions.

The Festival is now on and will wind up on 7 September on the island of Lido off mainland Venice.

The writer is a senior movie critic and author who has covered the Venice Film Festival for over two decades.

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