Morgan Spurlock takes part in a panel at the 2013 Realscreen Summit
photo credit: Rahoul Ghose

The **Realscreen Summit** in Washington, D.C. purports to be the largest annual gathering of producers, buyers and distributors of non-fiction TV programs in the world — and it probably is, as January's 15th annual Summit was the biggest yet. "We had to close registration early when we reached capacity [of 2,250] for the Renaissance Washington D.C. Hotel," says Realscreen Magazine Publisher Claire McDonald. "Next year, we're moving to the D.C. **Hilton**, which can accommodate an even larger crowd. Enrollment has been increasing by at least 200 per year for the past several years."

The Summit's sheer size and the enthusiastic participation of so many networks and channels have created an annual feeding frenzy of producers, production companies, TV programmers and distributors. With this concentration of talent and commercial clout, the Realscreen Summit has become the premier meet-and-market place for serious players on the non-fiction TV stage. For many attendees, one of the event's biggest allures is its producer-friendly design. "We try to foster a sense of community among producers, agents [and] distributors, etcetera, and to create a level of access that they may not otherwise enjoy, particularly to network executives and, in that sense, to level the playing field for everyone," explains Walsh. Realscreen Editor Barry Walsh, a prime strategist for the Summit, reports that attendee feedback has indicated that many partnerships and deals are made or at least originate at the event each year.

First and foremost, the Realscreen Summit is packed with sessions that explore many of the latest trends and issues impacting today's producers. The panels of programmers and producers are eminently qualified to address topics ranging from the ascent of feature documentaries and unscripted content to the demise of the last big thing. The event is also loaded with workshops, interviews and panel discussions covering a wide spectrum of professional issues, like trending and franchising hit shows or making global co-productions work. Over the years, the Summit has also become an invaluable "dating" site for producers, offering a full menu of meet-and-greet opportunities, such as sponsored coffee breaks, breakfast and luncheon roundtables, cocktail hours, and the ever-bubbling delegate lounge. Screening suites and demo booths are available for privately pitching projects, and there are

semi-private speed-pitching sessions with network executives. The Summit also offers aspiring producers mentoring opportunities with “master” producers, and the always popular “30 Minutes with…” sessions have broadcasting spokespersons delivering “state of the channel” talks and pitching pointers followed by Q&As and one-on-ones for an exchange of business cards. Many producers find these sessions invaluable for keeping them abreast of the new viable opportunities.

The Summit’s ubiquitous “keep it entertaining” mantra is best exemplified by its “So You Think You Can Pitch” session. Here, indie producers can pitch their pet projects to a panel of TV execs and a ballroom of industry peers. Pitches are scored on a scale of one to ten based on passion, presentation, the strength of a sizzle reel, and the project’s pertinence to a judge’s particular niche or channel. This year’s winning pitch was given by Dafna Yachin of the Philadelphia-based production company Lunchbox Communications. She dazzled the judges with her pitch for “The Stable,” a docu-series about 20-something boxers who overcame great personal and economic obstacles to achieve athletic prowess and glory on television. The knockout punch came when the pugilists — clad only in boxing shorts — paraded before the panel during judging. Yachin’s dazzling teaser and showmanship wowed the judges, earning her a Go Pro HD Helmet HERO camera package, a year’s tuition at CableU, and a free pass to next year’s Summit. More importantly, Yachin now has bragging rights and potential deals with the channels represented by the judges.

“So You Think You Can Pitch” - 2013 Realscreen Summit
photo credit: Rahoul Ghose

Besides creating a friendly environment for business relationships, Realscreen organizers also make room for those hoping to change the world through their work. “This year we featured documentaries a bit more than in the past, with sessions on feature docs and those for TV with top-rung filmmakers, like Alex Gibney, Morgan Spurlock and Nick Fraser of BBC *Storyville*,” says Walsh. HBO recently premiered Gibney’s
Mea Maxima Culpa: Silence in the House of God
, about the Catholic Church’s coordinated cover-up of its priests’ sexual abuse of hundreds of boys. “If I didn’t demand that the Vatican disgorge its secrets, I’d feel complicit in their

cover-up," says Gibney, the Oscar-winning producer of *Taxi to the Dark Side*. "We all need to demand that they come clean!" Gibney also doesn't go easy on pop heroes like Journalist Julian Assange, who's the subject of his documentary *We Steal Secrets: The Story of Wikileaks*. "When I peeled back the curtain, I found a sad little man with a big voice, who unfortunately got corrupted by fame," he says of Assange. Armed with an impressive resume of powerful docs, including *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room*, Gibney has simple advice for other truth-seeking documentarians: "Be sure to make [your doc] so interesting that people feel they must see it!"

Filmmaker Morgan Spurlock revealed that the inspiration for his first hit documentary *Super Size Me* was the book "Fast Food Nation." "I felt that it was important to get that information to a much larger audience than the book could," Spurlock recalls. "To do that, I had to deliver the core message in a way that anyone could relate to it. And then [I] decided to be the guinea pig in *Super Size Me*. The filmmaker's travails paid off big as the doc has grossed over $20 million worldwide. "It was a prime example of doing well while doing good," he says. Spurlock's fellow "Entertainment vs. Altruism" panelist Mette Hoffman Meyer of the Danish Broadcasting Corporation echoed the viability of doing well ratings-wise while "doing good." Meyer's documentary series "Why Poverty?" has been viewed by over 700 million people worldwide. "Our approach to this stark subject was inquisitive rather than preachy," says Meyer. "We posed a simple question, 'Why do one billion people in the world live in poverty?' We answered it with our TV series on poverty, which has drawn large audiences around the globe."

"Entertainment vs. Altruism" speaker and Participant TV President Evan Shapiro declares that one of the goals of his new network was to break out of the cultural bubbles that we live in. "At Participant, the world isn't black or white, but instead is many shades of grey," he explains. "We want to be the place for smart programs that transcend cultural silos." Shapiro notes that a fair portion of the initial programming would be unscripted. Vinnie Malhotra, CNN's senior VP of development and acquisition, also has an eye on unscripted fare. The "30 Minutes with…" speaker unveiled a new unscripted feature programming initiative at CNN with two new personality-driven series. The first is "Parts Unknown," a travelogue hosted by globetrotting foodie Anthony Bourdain and featuring his trademark visceral "street" approach to exotic trips. And in the new series "Inside Man," host Morgan Spurlock samples American subcultures by exploring the back roads and alleys where people live and work. While there currently aren't designated program slots for one-off docs, Malhotra remains open to these projects. "We'll be experimenting with new approaches to programming at CNN this year, and plan to use some documentaries as tent-pole events," he explains. "As a 24-hour news channel, we have the scheduling flexibility that many other channels simply don't."