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'Freakonomics' Documentary May Be a Rarity: Profitable

By MICHAEL CIEPLY

If Steven D. Levitt and Stephen J. Dubner, the authors of "Freakonomics," were to examine the movie business, they might ask: Why do documentary filmmakers keep doing it?

It can't be the money, because the world is awash in documentaries that make little at the box office or are not distributed at all. Occasionally, though, a documentary makes a buck for those involved — and the new documentary based on "Freakonomics" could do just that.

Magnolia Pictures is expected to announce on Monday that it has acquired domestic distribution rights to the film, which was produced by the Green Film Company and directed, in parts, by a series of well-known documentarians. Those include Alex Gibney ("Taxi to the Dark Side"), Rachel Grady and Heidi Ewing ("Jesus Camp"), Morgan Spurlock ("Super Size Me"), Eugene Jarecki ("Why We Fight") and Seth Gordon ("The King of Kong").

"Freakonomics," the film, got started when Chad Troutwine, a producer who worked on an earlier multidirector movie, "Paris, Je T'aime," became interested in the best-selling book, which looks into matters like the socioeconomic implications of baby naming.

Dan O'Meara, who with Chris Romano and Mr. Troutwine is a producer of "Freakonomics," said the movie cost just under \$3 million, which is not small potatoes in the documentary world.

One financial hurdle, Mr. O'Meara said, was that the big-name filmmakers, unlike many on the festival circuit, actually had to be paid. Mr. O'Meara declined to say exactly how much each received, but all were paid the same, he said, and the amounts were "a pretty reasonable fee, above guild minimums."

Mr. O'Meara also declined to say what, if anything, Magnolia was paying upfront for its distribution rights. But, he said, Magnolia's plan to release the film in theaters, through video-on-demand and on DVD —

coupled with a recently announced spot as the closing night film at the coming Tribeca Film Festival — will help foreign sales. And that should put “Freakonomics,” the movie, in the black.

Magnolia’s president, Eamonn Bowles, whose company distributed “Man on Wire” and “Food, Inc.,” figures that “Freakonomics” is just weird enough to work.

“This is the business of exceptions and idiosyncrasies,” Mr. Bowles said.