

Open and Portable

Andrew Garton, August 2009

Lecture for film-makers and new screen producers to assist in a more collective, less competitive approach to the availability of their content to audiences world-wide and the extent to which it may be possible to support one self through these means. Prepared for Open & Portable, curated highlights from the Portable Film Festival, Alliance Francaise, Cape Town, 5 August 2009.

Introduction

In this lecture I will describe some of the means by which film-makers are making use of the internet to find new audiences and what may be possible in terms of income generation online.

It is not within the scope of this lecture to instruct how film-makers may generate income from the Internet, but rather, provides a general philosophy towards the generation of ideas that may well produce results you had not yet anticipated.

As such, this lecture is prepared on the premise that the way **you** market, license and screen **your** work may well be the **great new idea**. Why? Because there is no single methodology on the internet that will work for every one.

On the internet one size does not fit all.

Who are we?

Before I begin any lecture, I'd like to know who I'm talking to.

- How many people here are film-makers?
- Is anyone earning a living from film-making?
- Who has, or is publishing their films online?
 - If so, where?
 - What are your experiences?
- Who has heard of Creative Commons licensing?
 - Are you using CC licenses and if so, in what form?
- Who would like to know more about CC licenses and how they can work for and with film-makers?

The internet and the commons

The internet is big. It's growing at an astonishing rate. How it will sustain itself into a future plagued by resource depletion, power cuts and climate change remains to be seen. In the meantime, it's here and it shapes our lives as much as we shape it.

Apart from search engines like Google and information resources such as Wikipedia, there are no maps for the Internet. You must learn to find your own way, develop a use for it that suits your needs, your style of work, your personality, your community. You can do this alone, but preferably, you will be far more successful if you do it in collaboration.

What would it look like if after this evening everyone in this room shared their contact details and a commitment to network, comment on and link or subscribe to each other? We would have an instant

community of peers, effectively cross-promoting each others work, learning from each other and building into, or onto another one of the Internet's great features - the global information and knowledge commons.

This global commons is where you films reside. Where your community participates and shares their skills and knowledge, growing, or becoming part of networks of networks of participatory actors that engages with, informs and educates producers of cultural content and their audiences.

We are talking about the internet as a commons space that is open to:

- new audiences that would not have access to your films through traditional means;
- new mediums for your work to be seen on;
- and distribution where there are fewer and fewer middle-men and women, giving artists more control over their intellectual property, how it's used and whom may have access to it.

The internet is no longer a social experiment. My own personal view of the Internet - and I've been involved in online communications since 1989 - is entirely about participatory processes: collective endeavours that bring us closer to the kind of humility that would reduce the demand for the things we want over the things we really need.

I share the same goals as a growing number of people, best outlined by William McDonough¹, co-author of Cradle to Cradle design. Our goal is a delightfully diverse, safe, healthy and just world, with clean air, clean water, soil and power - economically, equitably, ecologically and elegantly enjoyed²! I can't see anything wrong with that, do you?

The internet is a means, not an end. It's part of this solution, and making films, being an active producer of critical, socially relevant and much needed cultural content is part of this goal. I am unable to separate the two and make no apologies for it.

This is what drives opportunity, far reaching networks and new forms of income generation. Yes, a few have managed to make outrageous amounts of money from being at the proverbial right place at the right time. The internet is that big. Anyone in this room could do the same. But how much money do we actually need to live and work in a reasonable manner?

All this comes back to the fundamentals of what I'm taking about. If you set your self up with high expectations, with huge demands that may tax the resources of your emerging communities you'll be creating a typical kind of pyramid scheme where those at the base - and that base gets larger the further it is from the tip - will fall off, benefiting the few at the expense of the many. We can no longer work this way. Enough is enough.

As artists, we are the eyes and ears, the heart and cultural minds of the worlds we experience, inhabit and seek to share. It's a responsibility, a vocation if you like.

Okay, so lets now take a look at some of the means by which you can improve your outreach, perhaps even support yourself in part... keep doing what we do best... making stuff!

1 William McDonough & Michael Braungart, Cradle to Cradle, North Point Press, 2002

2 From lecture and presentation given at Ted.com, Feb 2005,
http://www.ted.com/index.php/talks/william_mcdonough_on_cradle_to_cradle_design.html

Get in amongst it

The only way you'll know how to make this work for you is to **get right in amongst it**. Get your trailers, short films, or your entire catalogue and put it online.

But where, you might ask?

Depending on whether you own the rights to all your content, and you have online releases for content you've had to license the use of, I'd suggest putting some of your films every where and leave the good stuff for the one or few services you can set time aside to nurture.

For example, publish trailers, off-cuts, bloopers, anything that you have rights to, on Youtube. The rest, all the good stuff, I'd recommend putting on Vimeo. Vimeo has become the video distribution platform of choice for many film-makers.

Another choice for film-makers, those who wish to archive their material for perpetuity, under open licenses, should take a look at the vast store of materials available from Archive.org.

- <http://archive.org/>

You should also look at sites that are genre and regional specific. Democracy Now and Peter Gabriel's Witness.org, a site specifically for films dealing with human rights, might be more appropriate. Alternatively, EngageMedia hosts critical media and documentaries produced in the Asia Pacific region and have contributed to the development of an open source video distribution platform called Plumi. If appropriate, why not use them as well?

- <http://youtube.com/>
- <http://vimeo.com/>
- <http://witness.org/>
- <http://engagemedia.org/>

These are of course international initiatives. By using **meta data** (keywords, tags and brief descriptions of your films) you can reach audiences any where there's a decent net connection.

You can reach your peers too. New sites and applications such as Celtx are designed to assist film-makers to not only find each other, but to assist in developing, or improving each others work.

- <http://celtx.com/>

Will you make money on any of these sites? At the outset, entirely unlikely, but you can never tell. Broadcasters, festival curators scour some of these sites, looking for popular content. This is where the Portable Film Festival and more and more initiatives like it are attracting the attention of broadcasters and curators.

Portable Film Festival

The Portable Film Festival was established as an alternative means of assisting film-makers to promote and distribute their work online and to portable media such as 3G mobile phones, Play-stations and other compatible devices.

The Portable Film Festival's Terms & Conditions state that when you submit your film and video to

the Portable Film Festival, you grant [them] a non-exclusive license to distribute your work through their website, through other online portals such as MySpace and Youtube as well as mobile devices including mobile phones, iPods and PlayStations.

This also includes presenting your work for promotional activities that may include editing elements of your film(s) into promotional footage or screening it at workshops, launches or seminars. The Portable Film Festival states quite clearly that they do not own your film, you grant them a non-exclusive license to use it.

Given the recent success of this exclusively online festival, broadcasters and curators have a ready means to select films audience ready. They've been rated by online viewers, not guest judges. It's an audience awards schema. Many of the films we will see tonight are from the 2009 Festival being judged as we speak.

So, if for instance a broadcaster expresses interest in the festival program, the Portable Film Festival would contact you, requesting permission to act on your behalf to negotiate and obtain broadcast rights. Fifty percent of the revenue will be passed straight on to you.

It doesn't cost you anything to participate in the Festival other than producing your film and getting it online. That's why you'll find some films featured in the Festival are "sponsored" or include advertising. All revenue generated through such means goes towards the Festival's running costs.

- <http://portablefilmfestival.com/>

Going open

A more radical means of distribution, by which you can also gain access to resources from, is to produce with **open licensed content** and to release your final work under such a license yourself.

For example, I may record a series of atmos sound tracks from the forests of Borneo. I put them up onto the freesound.org archive licensing them for re-use on the basis that I am credited.

- <http://freesound.org/>

You need an exotic atmos track for a documentary and you're working to a very tight budget and time frame. You can't afford to record the atmos yourself, you don't have time to clear rights from a standard sound archive nor can you afford their license fees... oh, and you want something that's not been used 100s of times.

You search freesound.org and find our atmos tracks. You like them and want to use them straight away. The license is published to the site. You have all the information you need and you don't have to contact me for permission. And, guess what? You can download a high resolution version of the audio file ensuring you can work with it immediately.

If it's a not for profit project, you don't have to contact me. If, however, there are commercial outcomes, my contact details are available on the website and we negotiate an agreement direct.

Some open or Creative Commons licenses may require you to release your film under a similar license which means you'll need to understand what you can or can't do with the open licensed material you find. By doing so you're supporting these more independent initiatives and maybe giving voice to talented people that would otherwise never hit the mainstream.

There's another argument for going open. It depends entirely on the type of content you work with. My current documentary series is based on the last forest communities of Sarawak. I call them micro-docs, made for anyone, to be seen any where and pretty much made with anything.

According to my lawyer, everything I shoot is legally mine. That is, regardless of what I shoot, I own the copyright to that material whether I want to or not. But I have a problem with shooting, say the performance of a rare indigenous instrument and calling it my own. I've shot it, but the content has nothing to do with me, it has everything to do with the people I've been invited to spend time with.

So, I've signed over my entire rights to my company, Toy Satellite³. My company, so long as I'm involved in it, releases the series, and all associated materials, under a suitable Creative Commons license.

The Sarawak Gone micro-docs will be released online under a share-alike license. This gives people permission to **download and copy** the films as often as they wish so long as its use is for non-profit purposes. Any commercial use would require a license which would be negotiated with Toy Satellite. Fees accrued through licenses would go towards recouping our costs, which once covered, would flow into the next project. All other assets associated with the project, not used within the series, would be made available for re-use for non-commercial purposes.

This contributes to the international pool, the global commons of available content for film-makers, NGOs, educators indirectly sustaining awareness of the issues raised in the documentaries as well as the documentaries themselves.

Sites that support open licensed videos include:

- <http://engagemedia.org/>
- <http://archive.org/>

Free your content

I often get asked by people who have produced a lot of material, mostly sitting in personal archives, what they should do with it all?

It's a very simple answer. **Free it!** Don't sit on it, free it up and if it's any good, even if it's not any good, get it online so that those who want, can see it. Sitting in archives does nothing but prevent your work from being seen. If it doesn't earn you any money sitting in a box, it should at least be online where it's doing something.

A more **radical option** would be to put your entire, stale and long unwatched films online under an Attribution only license. This means that anyone can do what ever they want with your film, include make money from it, so long as you are credited. I look at it this way. If you can't make money on it, why not let someone else? It may just lead opportunities you'd not considered.

- <http://creativecommons.org/>

³ Toy Satellite is a trading name of apc.au Pty Ltd, formally a not-for-private, but now a private company trading under a not-for-profit charter and “open” business practices where legally possible under the Australian Corporations Act.

Network, inform, engage

You should also get yourself, if not already, onto Facebook, MySpace and Twitter. They will assist you in finding your audiences, networking with your peers, informing yourself and others and engaging in activities that bring more people to your films.

Get yourself a blog site and integrate the lot. Learn how to make these tools work for you and find people you can trust to help. If anyone promises you success and fortune, don't believe them. All they have going for them is a good bullshit story and a high fee.

There's no single pattern for success on the Internet – it's literally **all systems go!** What works for me may not work for you, I can guarantee you that!

About Andrew Garton

Andrew Garton is an Australian born nomadic composer, performer and media arts producer. He started out in Australia's community broadcasting sector going back to the mid-70's. He had also established himself as a multi-instrumentalist, composer and performer in Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne's independent music, theatre and film scenes over three decades.

From the late 80s to mid-90s he was extensively involved in the coordination and establishment of independent media / computer networks throughout Australia, the Pacific Islands and Southeast Asia.

Andrew was co-founder of the new media artists collective, Toy Satellite, the net label Secession, and was the inaugural Program Director of Australia's leading screen resource centre, OPEN CHANNEL up until 2007.

Andrew's own electronic and acoustic art works, entailing a combination of generative processes and in recent years, the design and production of live Machinima (films made with computer game engines) in collaboration with the artist, John Power, have been broadcast, installed and/or performed throughout Europe, Indo-China, Latin America, South Korea, Taiwan and the Philippines.

A strong advocate for open platforms, Andrew is also a supporter of flexible licenses for all forms of cultural practice and learning. He is co-founder of Open Spectrum Australia and serves as Board Secretary of the international ICT and Internet rights organisation, the Association for Progressive Communications, and is a founding Director of its Australian member, apc.au, a virtual production and online media advisory trading as Toy Satellite and Secession Records.

Andrew has returned to production, for both stage and screen, working where ever his projects and commissions take him, from Borneo to Japan, Austria to South Africa. He is based any where.

<http://agarton.org/>

Twitter: freq_ghost

Email. ag@agarton.org

<http://apc.org.au/>

Twitter: apcau

Email. office@apc.org.au