

Written by: Ms. Jodi Nelson
Jn89@sussex.ac.uk

ABSTRACT:

- Purpose and prospective readers: academics and practicing scholars of new media and digital interfaces
- Significance of contribution: Case study measures and outcomes of emerging production practices.
- Practicality and usefulness of my work: paradigm shifts in new media and production methodologies are shifting cultural mindsets and artistic practices while engaging with participatory audiences online.
- Implications of study and future areas of work: the implications of the work are necessary to determine methodology practices, and emerging fields of digital humanities works. Future areas are as follows: Narrative Fiction and Documentary Film; Performance; Social Media; Emerging online arts practices and how the artist works in an online, participatory environment; Online/Distance learning particularly as experienced through communications and performative practices; Digital technology and new media methodologies and communications practices.

Online Media: Scopes and Challenges in New Paradigm Shifts of Production Methodologies

With the new paradigm shifts in the film industry and online video content, cheap digital technology and the democratization of the filmmaking process, filmmakers now can connect to an ‘expert’ global, niche audience with more immediacy through the internet; engaging virtual communities, utilizing crowd funding support and fan-building initiatives through a variety of social media landscapes.

CASE STUDY

My own work has revolved around two kinds of practice; the first, a traditional methodology invented by the Hollywood studios, which, from a small independent filmmaker standpoint proved futile at best. With little, to no resources to pull off a production like the big studios do, with their huge studio budgets, political backing, global media support and accounting practices, today it seems a waste to pursue an independent film production in this manner. The second practice I’m engaging in is participatory filmmaking. This method enables others to articulate their experiences through my artistic vision via cheap digital technology and social media. It is through this process, they have just as much (or little) control as possible as the filmmaker. But, why you ask, would filmmakers want that?

In creating the participatory film project and case study entitled: *Single Girl in a Virtual World: What Does a 21st Century Feminist Look Like* this practice engages multiple social media communities such as; Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, Wordpress, YouTube, and crowd funding sites such as Kickstarter and IndieGoGo and asks people to participate in the film project with a sense of creative input. During the production, I have asked the communities to read the film site’s blog, watch podcasts, comment on news feeds and follow me on Twitter. I

have discovered through technical learning efforts these are the practicalities necessary for audiences to participate in the film project itself – either creatively, financially or both.

The project's content began to emerge and appear in its raw shape as video diaries of sorts, with participants weighing in on the topic of the week, freely giving their insights, thoughts and feedback through the multiple social networks channels – either in video, textual or both. For the filmmaker, this serves as a rich valley of resources that can be integrated in the film's narrative. However, when attempting to construct a narrative thread by gathering content in this way, it can bring up many potential problems with transparency, authenticity and intimacy while engaging the fans on the social networking sites. Jerry Rothwell states the medium of a video diary as opposed to a written diary implies a mass audience (Rothwell, p. 154), which alters the perspective of the viewer the filmmaker is trying to reach.

ONLINE COMMUNITIES

One of the exciting things about these new possibilities for filmmakers and audiences alike, despite the potential ethical pitfalls, is the creative flow of information, access to resources and sharing of content. Independent filmmakers who are limited on budget, time and production technologies can gain a tremendous amount of quality production value by sourcing content in this way.

Whichever way they came into the community, the goal is to keep them there, involve them in the production efforts and keep them just as excited as you are about the project. And to do that, there must be a transparency between the creator and the fan-base participating in the project itself. This covers a multitude of scenarios such as; copyright issues, ethical boundaries, life-rights, video-audio rights and original content ownership. By simply asking for their permission seems to be fair enough for their participation.

When I started this case study, I had an overall fear of intellectual property thievery; which stemmed from my traditional, Hollywood studio practice experience. Delightfully, once I began my practice in this participatory way, I could begin to see it actually had many benefits of being 'stolen' and shared virally. The more I blogged and podcasted calls-to-action, the more activity my social networks would see, and more members would sign up for my news feed, follow me on Twitter, 'Like' me on the Facebook page, and read my Wordpress blog.

"The on-going conversation with your audience can be a source of inspiration, motivation and ideas. It's this powerful new link with the audience that the old power players don't understand" (Kirsner, p.4). I can no longer imagine going back to a traditional filmmaking practice hoping to make a modest living, or even attempt to have a sustainable career by playing by the old rules of the studio production and delivery system. The windows of financing and distribution are just too complex, too expensive and too long of a cycle to have any hope of quick returns on investments or to gain access to huge marketing budgets for global exposure of film product.

Alexandra Juhasz states that by empowering ordinary people to speak as experts, they become entitled to speak as if they are the ones in power (Juhasz, p.304). It is with this notion that is measuring how social media, digital technology, alternative production methodologies and various new delivery strategies are providing impact of the film's message and its creative process. Participation with the online community provides a creative collective not found in traditional processes.

My practice shows that audience participation does, in fact, impact both the audience and the filmmaker inherently by creating art in this way. Instead of outsourcing functionalities to other resources in a traditional sense, I had to become an all-encompassing

expert. But, one now asks the question - who is in control? Who is the 'auteur' with the vision? What happens if the film's narrative thread goes off-track? Who are the performers and what ethical considerations are at stake?

How can I draw an audience into the reality of the situations being dramatized? "To authenticate the fictionalization...what are we to make of films where real people apparently 'play themselves' (or variations on themselves)?" (Ward, pg. 192). It is the originator's role, or the creator in this sense, to ensure that the participatory environment also abides by the community rules of transparency, honesty and attributes of authentic form. Ward also notes that people accused of not being themselves is problematic for the status of the documentary itself" (Ward, p. 192). Not seeing these participants in person; looking them in the eye – how is the filmmaker to know what is factual or fictitious?

The community does, in fact, communicate amongst themselves and will certainly 'police' any activity that does not acquiesce within the group. This 'policing' by the community assures transparency, trust, authenticity and protection against spam and unwanted advantages a filmmaker or other community member may seek to squeeze information and/or money out of its community for personal gain. "The immediacy of new online forms should not be mistaken for a lack of mediation...authenticity is highly prized by audiences" (Birchall p. 282-283).

TECHNOLOGY CURVE

A greater embrace of innovation and experimentation in this method is needed in leveraging these projects with the ability to fail without showing loss of value. Technological knowledge and new creative approaches to build communities and better business models that filmmakers and artists alike are needed. It is possible, however to achieve a quality film production with inherent.

By engaging in filmmaking practices in these fundamental ways, a shift of power away from the larger powers of the studios, and back into the hands of the creative filmmakers and their loyal fans should be embraced, not feared. Danny Birchell raises the question for makers, consumers and scholars of moving images that if the documentary online offers anything more than just another means of distribution" (Birchall, p. 279). In my case study, I believe it does offer more than just another form of delivery, in that the community has a more invested relationship with that of the filmmaker and the subject of the film in which they have participated. A process of creative flow, execution and community outreach is a necessary part of this practice to maintain a sense of shared community.

A profound new shift in mindset is certainly needed to set off on a new course of practice; even though outcomes are uncertain. Differences in workflow patterns, a means of gathering content, and a creative approach within high production value considerations, compromises and technical limitations stretch limits on what is possible. Not to mention the tremendous learning curve of understanding the politics and culture of online communities and how they fit within the artist's agenda of making a film that includes them; not manipulating them for personal gain.

Thousands of entries via Facebook news feeds and comments, Tweets, sharing of videos and user-generated content (UGC) via YouTube and other content-rich video sites by community members fill the coffers of the needs of the filmmaker. Skype interviews also became a relevant resource of production activity for capturing remote interviews, even though the media is still not of high value. During this process, I discovered I was developing a rich social network of people I knew in my personal social circles including friends, family, co-workers, business associates, etc. Suddenly, I became keenly aware of the project I was

making and the community was eager, or at least willing when pressed, to participate in the project.

User generated content (UGC) has been the most pervasive amount of content, shared and streamed by the community members so others can comment, share and watch within the framework of the social network sites. This aids the independent filmmakers who need open-source, archival clips in order to create a film narrative, which also includes recycled clips attained via YouTube's creative commons license. However, there are ethical and intellectual rights considerations that must be mentioned.

PRODUCTION VALUE

It is also important to note, because technology is cheap, social media pervasive and artistic democracy entering the creative fold, doesn't mean the value of the art or the filmmaker behind its creation should be valued any less. The reality of the new entrepreneurial filmmaker is not only making a film project, but rather building a community of like-minded people who want to support a film project and future projects – in essence building a sustainable brand. This takes an inordinate amount of time, effort, management and technical trouble-shooting. Not to mention, technological requirements, necessary to connect all of these networks in a functional and significant way - once they are functional and put in motion, should self-perpetuate. This is an ongoing resource of time and labor that must be considered.

I have discovered however, the benefits in making art in this way far exceed the amount of time and effort it takes to build an online brand and identity. Other filmmakers too, are building sites with the intention of creating a sustainable business model, as well as attracting a built-in fan base that can't be bought with traditional advertising and press campaigns by the larger studios. Films are now being made everywhere and there are audiences out there who are looking for them. Audiences, are fickle, however, but entrepreneurial filmmakers have a distinct advantage over the big studios by creating art that is meaningful and creatively autonomous, while building a loyal fan base, which will enable the artist to self-sustain.

Some further questions of note: Does the 'audience' participating in the early stages of a creation raise expectations for the audience? What about for the filmmaker? Does it impact the artist's methodology of creation itself? In my case study, participation between the audience and filmmaker enable each to develop a relationship that goes deeper than merely one from a consumer or isolated artist's point of view. It becomes a two-way process; although being the auteur and the creator of the project, driving the subject matter, its pacing and narrative criteria; provided an overall control and direction for the project.

It is important to note that the film's subject or production method itself wasn't diminished in value, nor did it have the perception of being an amateur product. In fact, it's the opposite, which emphasized stronger value for both the filmmaker and the project being created with the audience. The process has allowed a more authentic, accessible and transparent relationship to develop amongst the community, which makes the film's subject, and experience, more tangible. Having the film aimed specifically towards a key, niche audience, seems to make them keen to be involved and stay invested for future projects. It is the script or narrative and production value which must be the best possible so there is a perception of professionalism throughout the production.

There are certain sacrifices that must be made outside of the normal filmmaking agenda; such as engagement in crowd sourcing campaigns, new technological learning curves and social media training, traditionally hired out (i.e. media partners, technology programmers, sales/fulfillment houses, marketing firms) must be learned. There are many perceived benefits, as well as challenges in this new era of digital technology and social marketing tools that are advantageous for both the filmmaker and their audiences.

Measurable changes in production practices must also be adhered to by utilizing these online tools and cheaper production technology. How does this change the storytelling process? There are certainly advantages and disadvantages in telling stories in this manner. However, what lacks from a traditional viewpoint, offers multiple opportunities for transmedia and convergence in this methodology. For example, technological considerations must be made for the lack of financing and a large crew. The entrepreneurial filmmaker is now essentially a ‘one person crew’ where every single shot, direction, post-production/editing, writing, producing, marketing and digital online development and management can be achieved with the sole artist. Aesthetic compromises can also be at stake. However, it is worth noting that with small cinema, mobile and online video distribution choices that are growing every day, there are many outlets of distribution that do not require a 35mm or HD production aesthetic to tell a story. Ultimately, the script is still at the heart of every film – it is only the methodology and system of delivery that has changed.

MONETARY SUSTAINABILITY

With the attraction of crowd funding sites such as, Kickstarter and IndieGogo, financial resources are now available for filmmakers, who don’t have access to rich uncles, mix with the Hollywood investor crowd, or can fund their projects across a mass of credit cards. Ted Hope states that expectations have changed considerably, audiences and buyers are behaving differently and products are being offered on different levels (Hope, 2010). Therefore monetization strategies must also change with these new times. The production and fundraising of a film in this crowd funding environment is beginning to evoke a more valuable, sustainable, niche-market product for audiences and filmmakers changing the traditional market structure of distribution and delivery for independent filmmakers outside of the Hollywood system. It is also providing a platform for artists in countries without the support of film communities, government subsidies or fundraising activities. This perhaps can enable a global access to films and stories that might otherwise never be told. “On the face of it, *Kickstarter* is pretty harmless...It’s great that people can raise money for cool things from the crowd...Now, the people can decide what gets funded” (Newman, 2011).

Still, further questions for scholarly and industry debate continues. Will it be profitable? How can a filmmaker, who makes a film online for free ever hope to see a profit, much less sustainability? For Hollywood, what affects the bottom-line ultimately, is the question they [studios] are waiting to see emerge profitable. If it is profitable, how will this change the open democracy of the ‘wild west’ we see now in this new trend? Will these online, participatory, transmedia interactions incentivize the audience to buy the finished product and any subsequent ancillary products associated with the creative product? What about future projects the filmmaker produces? Can there be added sustainability in this model? These questions and more that arise through research and practice will continue to merit further case study practice. With arts funding continuing to dwindle, such as the reduction in grants and lottery funding, filmmakers have turned to crowd funding to finance their livelihoods – but will the audiences enable that to become a reality, or will the studio systems in place prevail?

We must engage filmmakers in how to use marketing tools and social media; otherwise it diminishes the discovery of each potential film. “Creators, Distributors, and Marketers have accepted a dividing line between art and commerce, between content and marketing (Hope, 2011). In the participatory environment on a larger scale, projects in this realm will emerge answering the question of how this new methodology of filmmaking relates to a wider economic, cultural, environmental and social scale and perhaps driving the dividing lines amongst different sectors in the industry closer to a more cohesive unit and beneficial to all.

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