



BookShorts REPORT

New Dogs, New Tricks: New Media Goes to the Movies Conference Session at SXSW

Moderator, Scott Kirsner Editor, CinemaTech
David Gale, Exec. VP, MTV New Media
Rick DeVos, CEO, Spout LLC
Seth Nagel, VP Content & Acquisitions, iKlipz
Scilla Andreen, Co-Founder, IndieFlix

Moderated by Scott Kirsner, this was the first session I attended and it set the bar high, at least in terms of a successfully moderated session. All too often at these kinds of things, the organizers do their best to get people who are well-regarded in their respective fields, but the context of the actual presentation, any useful information is either fragmented or has to be forcefully inserted into proceedings, which inevitably makes the person into a shill. So, kudos to Scott, he is well-informed, up-to-date, and gave the panellists solid guidance through a cogent session.

First question – is there a power-player in the field now? Consensus was that if there is one, and likely there is not, it would be iTunes. Others were mentioned: Amazon's Unbox, which has the DNA but not very effective promotion; NetFlix, which is now acquiring and selling films; most other majors have elements but since the most bestest model for films has not yet captured market share, its not yet there.

A word about the companies repped on the panel:

DeVos of Spout.com reports that their company is all supporting niche filmmakers in finding their niche audiences, based on the assumption that technology has evolved so much that making films is the easiest part of the equation.

David Gale of MTV New Media bows with the age-old truism that the field is always changing. What a revelation! He says, he doesn't know what his job is, and says it without a trace of irony. MTV replaces internal innovation (again) with acquisitions – this time Gale reports they have “just bought a company that makes comics graphic novels and kids books

and makes them new media.” Maybe he'll follow up on my suggestion and call Jack Romanos, CEO of the also-Viacom-owned Simon and Schuster, launch a division called ahem, BookShorts, or something like it. Then Viacom will let him keep his non-job. In the meantime, we'll see how Gale fairs hustling MTV through an “always changing” media landscape.

Scilla Andreen of IndieFlix was the one executive on the panel who is coming to her job as an authentic artist. With a background as a filmmaker, its not surprising that IndieFlix shares her vision in building a foundation for the company that allows is to move in whatever direction consumers steer. Signing with strategic partners such as Joost (Internet TV, where they share ad revenue 70 / 30 in favour of the filmmaker) is one element in a strategy that also includes broadcasting films with advertisements place pre-, mid- and post-roll (they choose the insertion point), and continuing with DVD product. Scalability for them is key.

iKlipz is also an aggregator of films, offering filmmakers an advertiser supported site on which to post films. The team at iKlipz watches each and every one. Their point of differentiation is their Advisory Board, made up of some industry heavyweights such as Arianna Bocco, Ruth Vitale, Jon Landau, Ed Burns amongst others. While the iKlipz management team facilitates distribution deals on behalf of submitting filmmakers, and makes “features of the week” for added film visibility, these Board members are presumably plotting and planning just where and how they can throw their considerable weight around to break the next big thing.

Other interesting comments from this braintrust that bares considered attention in the immediate future:

- iTunes made its first acquisition recently, a film whose duration was between 30 and 60 minutes which they priced at a TV-episode fee of 1.99 – watch to see if it leads to an ongoing initiative from the company most feel is in the best position to become the new power-player
- Watch the talent – they'll develop properties that take more advantage of the attributes of the media they're playing with, for instance, story-telling in environments like Second Life
- Break-out producers will use the behaviour differences of audiences on different platforms to create new economies, and help monetize content in ways particular to each
- Building strong characters is one of the most exciting aspects across all these modes of delivery; a distinct personality, whether fictional or real, has even greater opportunity to find exactly its niche audience in a multimodal distribution strategy; case study: Four Eyed Monster
- Micro-financing, or cinema shares, where audiences are invited to invest in films at the pre-production stage has an increasing number of precedents; although there are security laws that impact this type of financing, and some dud examples like One Second Film (will it ever actually come out?) in other sessions during SXSW the topic was broached repeatedly which several successful implementations (see other blog entry)

I have to admit, my marketing head was having an observational heyday at all these conference sessions. The people attending ranged from gray-hairs to high-school look-a-likes, from suites to polo shirts to funky-ass trendies, and happily an equal mix of gals and guys. What all had in common of course, was a commitment to technology, evidenced by the fact that few, a very few, were *just* taking notes or listening. From where I sat at the back of the room, 4 of 5 had either a laptop, PDA, or cell phone with which they were variously taking pictures, posting images to their Flickr page, setting up calendars on the new SXSW application, or "twittering" – that last

of which you'll read lots around its presence at SXSW. In a poll from the podium, over one-third of the audience already have IP connections to the TV in their living room, in anything from a Linux modified Xbox to Tivo – one guy drilled a hole in his wall and plugged his computer in directly, just a whatzits connector to the whozits plug and voila. Obviously an early adopter club at SXSW.

OK, so who's making money from distributing films and other content online. Apparently the funny boys at Ask a Ninja have made about 20-thou, and the Mentos Extreme folks netted a whopping 35K. Not quite the bonanza one would expect from the buzz. Seems that our panels of those in the know think that the people making money are / will be the consolidators of content, and those making content searchable. Pandora was cited as an example. Customization is a mandatory, then consolidating enough content to draw a critical mass audience, whereupon advertising makes sense. A small twist - - the ads themselves will have to have a high-entertainment quotient, otherwise audiences disperse elsewhere.

Looping back to the opening statement – there is no one be-all-to-end-all-others, so producers are stuck with trying them all out now, while the trying is relatively cheap. Relatively, because as I can attest myself, this process is labour intensive and time-consuming, and there really is no other best solution to know what is best for your own content than experiencing the process yourself – from learning the tech, to conforming the media, to participating in communities – the whole kit and caboodle. Parallels with traditional media will continue to exist, and with a slight shift in perceptions, the new media film / content producer will realize that a 10 thousand dollar production netting 40 thousand in revenues makes for tidy profits in a fast-turn, quick in quick out kinda world.

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