

Title: Children of the e•volution: the curator’s role in the user-led content revolution

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The Internet, like life, is not a spectator sport; the moment you connect, you are a part of it – you *count* both metrically and metaphorically. In the months leading up to the Communications Policy and Research Forum 2006, several pieces of user-led innovation featured in both Internet and traditional media. When this paper was being proposed, *Bus Uncle* was the talk of the town or the buzz of the node, so to speak. For those of you who were otherwise engaged – or perhaps, disengaged – *Bus Uncle* started out as a simple moment of everyday Hong Kong urban conflict captured on a mobile phone on 29 April 2006. Within four weeks of its having been posted on the Internet there were Mandarin and English sub-title versions, a rap remix, dance remix, a karaoke version, a shadow puppet version, academic and media commentaries, T-shirts, mugs, teddy bears, and shopping bags [EastSouthWestNorth, 2006].

Posted on YouTube, it became part of the Tube-metrics of media commentary where the success of something is measured in how many YouTube hits it has had. Tube-metrics are perhaps best captured by Chris Anderson’s [2006] comment on longtail.com where he described that his role at a Director’s Guild of America “Digital Day” was to “scare the crap out of them with YouTube statistics.” Those statistics refer to what he summarised as, “100 million streams a day for flash animations, Apple ad spoofs, and other three minute fare from an army of amateurs ... and probably not a DGA member among them.” [Anderson, 2006]

The recent controversies about lonelygirl15, the Al Gore bores the penguins spoof video, and the UK Cabinet Office uploads challenge broad categorisation of

YouTube content as ‘amateur’, but as this paper will argue, that is perhaps the least critical measure of what is occurring. One of the most important points I want to make about how Internet use is evolving is the increasing predominance of its tools and content in everyday life.

When people want to shop, go to a movie, find an address or phone number, know the time of day in Spain, buy a house or a car or find a job, the Internet is becoming the *first* source of information and direction. RSS subscription feeds provide news, video and audio content, and industry updates faster than most people can consume them. BitTorrent seed aggregators provide RSS feeds to collect user-filtered content and the very idea of being out of email contact can give some people a shiver of fear that would make Stephen King or M. Night Shyamalan green with envy. That is a reference for those who still indulge in books and films; for those who have transitioned to Net-culture as a sole source, perhaps that should read ‘a shiver of fear that *Vampz* creators, EESA (Ecole Européen Supérieure d’Animation) would envy’.

This transitioning to the Internet has not gone without notice. Mainstream traditional media players are falling over themselves in an attempt to catch up. In May of this year, while the MPAA [2006] was busy gloating that Pirate Bay’s servers had been raided by the Swedish authorities, Disney, Warner Brothers, and a host of start-ups were trying to figure out how to control getting their content onto the Torrent. The urgency of getting content directly to eager recipients is forcing major players such as Universal to make blockbusters like *King Kong* available to download [Wazir, 2006]. As Disney-ABC Television Group President Anne Sweeney said in response to piracy and the realisation that it could not be stopped, “We thought we were in charge of the consumer experience.” [Smith, 2006] Her comment was made as Disney/ABC started releasing its top-rating dramas through ABC.com arguing that, “We need to begin

building businesses around these customers.” [Smith, 2006] These customers being people who were not prepared to wait for networks to cook, cut up and spoon feed content to them in bites and flavours determined by the network chefs. Similarly, the Sci-Fi Channel has realised that its fans (existing and to-be-wooded) are easiest to find on the Internet and has started releasing *Battlestar Gallactica* webisodes to win new audiences [Glater, 2006]. Locally, networks have been spruiking their Internet savvy for the shows *PS Trixi* (Yahoo7) [The Australian, 28 August, 2006] and *The Chaser’s War on Everything* (ABC)[Hearn, 2006].

In the evolving media arena it is *game on* for amateur and professional alike. The New York Times Kelefa Sanneh wrote a critic’s notebook feature entitled, “Outshining MTV: How Video Killed the Video Star” [2006] and four days later the Sydney Morning Herald waxed lyrical about a Brisbane teenager’s 1.3 million hits on YouTube for her rap song video. [Hutcheon, 2006] As the article from the New York Times observes, “While viewers used to complain about the dearth of music videos on MTV, that complaint itself now seems old-fashioned. Anyone who cares about music videos can find them elsewhere, sometimes courtesy of MTV itself.” When fan-made Star Wars content was removed from YouTube an announcement was made stating that Lucasfilm “would like the fan film community to know that this was not done at our request” and that Lucasfilm had asked for the content to be restored. [Lucasonline, 2006] So while it is game on in all quarters, the responses of IP holders to fan and user-made content is sufficiently unpredictable to suggest that it is a game played on a field that is neither level nor fixed in time and space. Much of the content that is emerging is neither wholly amateur nor professional but a mash up of both, as comments below indicate, nor are these terms immune to the changes taking place.

For a film festival, that once-upon-a-time rare chance to see short films, international and independent – or what might be called user-led – films, the Internet is a force to be reckoned with and one that requires an immediate response. Of course there is the MPAA option of trying to hold back the waves Canute-style or there is the ‘close your eyes, Luke’ response which embraces the force and learns how to become a part of it. History and pop-culture have certainly given us the requisite cautionary tales to figure out which is the way to go and this paper documents what might be called the Jedi position as a case study for the future.

The Sydney Film Festival’s digital strand traditionally comprised two programs; one for Australian digital short films and the other for International digital short films. To be included in these programs films had to have used ‘digital technologies’ in their creation and could not have had a public screening in the Sydney Metropolitan area.

The idea that using digital technologies is sufficient to distinguish a category of film is almost as quaintly old fashioned as expecting to find music videos on MTV, it would seem. From sound and image capture through editing and on to delivery and distribution, filmmaking is increasingly a digital process. As a result, the films selected by the curators of these programs wound up being digital short animations, many of the local ones adopting a low-cost black-and-white, digitally achieved hand-drawn style.

The condition that the content be fresh to the Sydney audience, proved to be a much harder hurdle than that of finding films that were sufficiently digital.

Traditionally, films have done the festival circuit and this has been an important way for them to enjoy theatrical exhibition. Certainly this has been the case for digitally-crafted short films however some of the films considered for the International short

program this year, the kind of films that would have appeared at International festivals before coming to the Sydney Film Festival, were not eligible for selection because DVDs of the international festival programs had become available for local screenings prior to Sydney's annual program. Furthermore, films in the program are increasingly available on the Torrent long before a festival's opening night. In a world where content circulates swiftly – almost instantly – there is a greatly reduced opportunity to premiere content at a once-a-year geographically bound event.

Furthermore, the geographical-boundedness of a film festival, another characteristic that is held to be part of its attraction, can become less relevant in a connected world. As video archive sites proliferate and film festivals leave geography behind and opt to exist solely on the Internet, that is where more people expect to find and access everything, including traditional festival content. To survive, a festival has to consider how it connects and fits into this all-access world. The 2006 Sydney Film Festival sought to achieve this without sacrificing the delights of the festival experience for those attending in person.

Our strategy for making the shift from traditional festival to web-present, Net-aware programming took into account two assumptions. First, filmmakers – especially those participating in festivals for the first time – are very often in that curious limbo of being neither amateur nor professional and therefore it was reasonable to consider our audiences to be filmmakers or potential content creators. Accordingly, we approached a number of our digital strand sessions from the perspective of the craft and practice interests of such an audience.

Second, the festival itself had to engage with the Internet and create and host content that reflected our relationships with the community – local and web-based, filmmaker and film connoisseur. We also had to think about our relationship within

the community of festivals and how our content could support filmmakers going on to other festivals.

One of our early strategies involved creating podcasts of festival content. Lynden Barber, the Artistic Director of the 2006 Festival, undertook a series of interviews with filmmakers and also provided direct-to-camera content in the form of the Director's recommendations for the first weekend, the first week, the second weekend and the last week. These podcasts were posted in time to allow people to book tickets for upcoming films but also were released in a way that kept the website 'live' and active with new content during the festival.

The first podcast we posted was a direct-to-camera piece by Mark Pesce, our keynote speaker for a Hyperdistribution Masterclass. It is commonly held that while Australians are among the heaviest of downloaders, we have been slow to upload our own content and this craft session was designed to encourage participants to contribute to the swarm. This podcast was an online invitation to come to the festival and it was followed by a series of podcast interviews with participating filmmakers. As it turned out, for some sessions, there were as many viewers of the podcasts as there were attendees at the physical screenings.

Our other craft sessions in the digital strand included a session by multi-award-winning sound mixers and editors from Soundfirm and a conversation with the creative digital visual effects leaders Animal Logic, Andrew Mason (producer of *The Matrix Trilogy*, *Silent Hill*, *Dark City*), and Bruce Hunt (director of *The Cave*) in a session called Trick of the Byte. These latter sessions not only addressed craft issues but highlighted the internationally acclaimed work of local talent which is a significant responsibility that most festivals undertake.

The podcast interviews with the filmmakers themselves demonstrated important points in relation to the issues of user-led innovation. One of the distinctions that is drawn in the professional versus amateur debate is whether or not someone is paid to undertake their creative role and whether or not their product makes money; two measures that quite often do not hold for the makers of the content that has filled film festival programs for decades. Invariably this debate becomes caught up in issues of quality and merit where financial returns become a de facto measure of value. The ability of people to use the Internet and digital tools of production to craft and distribute their own content disturbs this assumption for a variety of reasons.

As Darren Sharp noted in his paper “Participatory Cultural Production and the DIY Internet” [2006], the evolution of the Internet and its use by all of its participants “is taking place at the periphery of traditional enterprise structures and, in many cases, routes around them altogether.” This bypassing of commercial publishing and distribution systems is driving the search for the perfect business model but as Lorne Manly wrote in the New York Times [2006], “all content providers face an unclear business model, with subscriptions, à la carte sales and ad-supported free models jockeying for position ... and they must figure out the role user-generated content will play in the mix.”

The scramble by traditional media structures to engage with user-led innovation and to make customers of them is not only an intention to monetise this emerging arena for business purposes, but becomes a way to institute new controls on the means of production and distribution, new mediating mechanisms and re-establish traditional standards of value. Copyriot’s publication of the response to the raid on Pirate Bay describes the use of copyright law as a way to confirm vertical mass-

distribution instead of recognising that the evolution in file sharing is a horizontal activity. [Fleischer & Torsson, 2006] The blog posting by Rasmus Fleischer of Piratbyrå's "The Grey Commons" paper at the Reboot 8.0 conference states, "The war against file-sharing is essentially a war against the distribution of **uncopyrighted** metadata, **not** against the distribution of copyrighted material." [Fleischer & Torsson, 2006] It describes this as an attack on "the very possibility to interconnect metadata of private archives." [Fleischer & Torsson, 2006] Piratbyrå considers this an attempt to force the Internet to conform to the model already in place for traditional media.

Of course, as Edward Jay Epstein has described, Hollywood was built by filmmakers seeking to avoid Edison's patent lawyers and tried to squash the emerging technology of television by refusing it access to studio libraries [Epstein, 2005; 3-23]. Media corporations also have fought the introduction of video recording and a range of subsequent technologies in the same way that the music industry fought cassette tapes.

The tried and true method of dealing with impending technological advances is to try to kill them off and, when that fails, attempt to force them to fit into an existing business model. As Piratbyrå argue most attempts to control the Internet are less about legality than they are about imposing traditional "one-way mass media" models on the Internet and classifying P2P exchanges as 'illegal' in order to prevent competition from establishing any kind of legitimacy. [Fleischer & Torsson, 2006] Their argument is that "talking about how to 'compensate the creators' is to obscure the truth about the social production of culture" and that "such talk establishes the myth of the copyright as some kind of 'wage' for artists, and the strange idea that real-time performative aspects of culture are secondary or unimportant." [Fleischer &

Torsson, 2006] They argue that, “for the very notion of ‘compensation’ to work, there must be someone filtering out the ‘worthy’ forms of artistic creation from ‘unworthy’.” [Fleischer & Torsson, 2006] Which of course is what monetising creative production is all about.

However, financial reward is but one mechanism of mediation, selection by a film festival is another mediating process, one that can lead to financial reward but, if nothing else is an awarding of recognition that distinguishes a film from the others in the enormous pool of new works. The Internet itself is evolving its mediating mechanisms through search engines, social networking frameworks, and rating systems that its very structure generates in so many myriad forms. Recommendation engines like that at pandora.com are re-shaping music distribution and sales. [Leeds, 2006] YouTube categorises its massive data archive as: most recent, most viewed, top rated, most discussed, most linked, recently featured and top favorites (which has the subcategories of: today, this week, this month, all time). Its home page offers videos or channels or groups or categories. Channels are broken down into most subscribed, most recent, most viewed. And this is but one example of the multitude of mechanisms that are in place to capture the metrics of every person on the Net’s webpresence.

Piratbyrån’s Reboot paper describes the Internet as ‘communication’, a perspective of the Internet that I want to explore as an enormous conversation. As Piratbyrån has said, “The drive of discovering, thinking and inventing alternative processes of production is an affirmative power of life as a vital experiment of complexity. Internet piracy is all about desiring-production, and its long-term effects are beyond our human capacity to compute.” [Fleischer & Torsson, 2006] Although, I would add, apparently not beyond our computer networks’ capacity to count.

The discussion here is not about the rights and wrongs of piracy per se. However, as curator of the digital strand, it seemed cowardly not to reflect upon the burgeoning content finding audiences on the Internet. Accordingly, the digital strand included an enormously successful free conversation about Net culture. Led by Mark Strong (Channel Ten) and Guy Gadney (Big Pond), their choice of user-led/independent content-producers' web-distributed products were screened, quite appropriately, in an underground nightclub and the clips sparked animated discussion. The content included material from that range of questionable production practices such as machinima (which uses others' IP as a tool for generating new content) and spoofs that entailed the presumably unlicensed use of songs, images and others IP – including for example unapproved use trademarked objects such as Lego. The excitement and enjoyment the session generated is at the heart of what makes the user-led evolution of production so very powerful and complex.

An emerging voice in this conversation is that of Ze Frank. In his webshow – 'the show' – he comments on life with an increasingly polished and engaged zeal, responding directly to emails that he uses to shape his content thus creating an ongoing, global interaction in the true sense of that word. His competition for the most ugly on myspace is an essay on 'good taste' that unashamedly incorporates others' content in much the way that his work is being referenced here. He argues that as people start learning how to use these new tools of production, they do not necessarily even know, let alone follow, the rules and this scares the established arbiters of good taste. It is Ze Frank's assertion that consumer-created material will create new norms. In essence, that we are the e•volution.

Trip Hawkins, formerly of Apple and the establisher of Electronic Arts, has remarked, "Content is just a means to an end, so there's something to talk

about.”[Manly, 2006] He is not alone in this opinion egoli.com in its discussion about media advertising has described the Internet as “one big water-cooler conversation.” [Arena, 2006] However while uploading favorite things to YouTube has been one of the ways people make themselves heard in this big conversation, those who have their content uploaded to YouTube without their permission respond in varying ways. For some the resultant fame leads to commercial opportunities. For others, it leads to fame but a lost opportunity for financial reward. Stories abound about failed sitcoms being revived because Tube-metrics proved their viability but for Ze Frank, who relies on advertising to support his daily webshow, fans posting favorite Ze Frank episodes are undermining the metrics of his own stream. This itself, of course, is something else Ze Frank has made a show about and been part of a thread of content now woven into the fabric of the Net by other commentators. [Green, 2006]

This tension between the twin rewards of attention and compensation is usually balanced by a perception that without fame the money will not flow. Certainly that is how the marketing and advertising industries have justified their fees for quite some time now, but the knotty problem of monetising what is happening on the Internet remains. It seems that you can build it, and they will come but getting them to pay for it is another matter altogether. Yet the vast majority of the content being generated by users is not aimed primarily at making money; for these auteurs and artistes the chance to contribute to the conversation, to make themselves heard, to be noticed and acknowledged is the driving motivation.

For many of the filmmakers interviewed in our podcasts, the films they made are how they want to engage in this global conversation. For Melanie Hogan, *Kanyini* was an accidental film, one that came about because she wrote to tell Uncle Bob Randall how inspired she was by his book. Her filmed conversations with Uncle Bob

elicited the opinion from friends that “the world had to know about Uncle Bob”. And so her recordings turned into a film. In turn, the Festival’s podcast is part of its engagement with her as a filmmaker and a way to enter into conversation with the wider community, to engage them in the program and to recommend her to other festivals, amongst many other ways that exchange can contribute to the massive conversation that is the Internet.

This engagement can support the community in many ways. An idea we had but were not able to explore within the context of the 2006 Festival was the potential to link from our podcasts to sell-through mechanisms for filmmakers. This seemed a logical extension of how to translate the recommendation about a film into a material benefit for its creators. The opportunities for festivals to help build niche markets, ‘brand’ content and continue to serve as a ‘cool hunter’ online is completely in line with its traditional role.

Establishing a ‘brand’ is another way of being a recognised voice in the conversation and again is achieved through the mediating process of being accepted as authoritative and attention-worthy to observers. Brian Seth Hurst has said that the editorial voice of branded content will be an important force in the emerging structures of Internet content. [Flavell, 2006] What helps film festivals compete in the authoritative voice competition of Internet content recommendation is that they have trust relationships with the filmmaking community and working this into the fabric of a festival’s netpresence can be fundamental to how it approaches its place in the online community. After all, what is a festival but a way of promoting and supporting user-led innovation? Curators are indeed the beneficiaries of this global explosion of innovative and engaging content.

While the availability of content on the Net is not always under the control of the producers, that does not preclude them from putting that content out there in a way that does allow others to interact with them in the way that they want. For filmmakers the support of, and relationship with, a festival is one that can be extended by online tools. That said, while the Internet is proving to be one of the most powerful social communication systems in the history of our species, the desire to regulate, control and set rules for this communication is testing us.

Who owns *Bus Uncle*? I rather doubt the camera operator bothered to get release forms from the participants and the copyright case on Bus Uncle's catchphrase, 'This is not resolved' undoubtedly would whet the intellectual appetites of any number of lawyers. In some ways the idea that we can own and control these moments in life, get rewarded for all the good we do or even be punished for all the bad we do (be that large-scale, unlicensed commercial production of someone else's cultural product or simply stealing someone else's jokes) is a struggle that we have never before managed to resolve. Bus Uncle is right – this is not resolved! Ultimately the measure will be what it means to you because you are the metric. How you value and respond to what you engage with on the Internet is the statistic that counts but primarily in real terms by what it has communicated to you.

How we are sharing what matters is evolving and will continue to evolve. We will develop ways to introduce each other, to recommend each other, to top each other's jokes, improve on each other's stories, to collaborate, exchange cash, credibility and collective acknowledgment. We will do all the things we have always done and we will do them in ways that will make us angry with each other, make us inspired by each other and connect us in a new, global and instant yet hopefully *enduring* way.

On the Internet, as in life, the quality of the contribution and the way it is made will influence its reception. Those who want to silence others in this conversation or censor their comments will continue to be at odds with those who want to raise dissenting voices, speak freely and share their thoughts. At this point each voice, each observation is valued simply because it is. If we seek to limit this, we seek to limit ourselves. How we shape our own participation can be the most powerful thing we can do in how we shape the evolution of this form. This revolution will not be televised but it will continue on the Torrent within nanoseconds.

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