

Funding your Film in the Digital Age

There was a palpable ripple of excitement in the room during the Good Pitch at the BRITDOC Festival this year as filmmakers in the audience had their eyes opened to new funding opportunities in the space of one high-energy afternoon.



By Ingrid Kopp

INSTEAD OF THE USUAL COMMISSIONING EDITORS WHO participate in most pitching forums, the Good Pitch observers included NGOs, foundations, corporate brands, online social networks and national newspapers. Even the British Beekeepers Association was there to listen to a pitch about the global threat to bees from CCD, a mysterious disease that could wipe out the species responsible for one third of our food.

Katie Bradford from the Channel 4 Documentary Film Foundation, the team behind the festival, says that they have been laying the groundwork for introducing documentary filmmakers to new sources of funding and partnerships, and vice versa, since the Foundation was established over three years ago. “From all the events we had done, especially the fantastic feedback we got from the Third Sector after the Media Conference we organised in 2007, we knew that the will was there to collaborate and the Good Pitch seemed like an innovative way to turn intent into action.”

There is a huge demand for content across different media at the moment and filmmakers who can feed this demand with a flexible, forward-thinking and possibly multiplatform approach are in the sweet spot. Gael Garcia Bernal, Marc Silver and Thomas Benski, the team behind RESIST—one of the hits of the Good Pitch—are combining innovative financing with participatory multiplatform elements to tell their story of people “who are fighting for a very different vision of the future and whose very existence relies on resistance.” You can become part of the project at resistnetwork.com.

Bradford says that many of the best ideas around documentary funding are percolating through from the US where there are a number of innovative funds and finance opportunities, like Jeff Skoll’s Stories of Change: Social Entrepreneurship in Focus Through Documentary, a new initiative spearheaded by the Sundance Institute Documentary Film Program.

Filmmakers are being forced to find new ways to raise money for their films as traditional pots of money dry up and more and more filmmakers compete for what is left. Slava Rubin is one of the founders of *IndieGoGo.com*, an online social marketplace that gives filmmakers the ability to connect with an audience and gives them the tools for project funding, recruiting, and promotion, while enabling the audience to discover and connect directly with filmmakers and the causes they support. He says that we are in a best of times/worst of times situation at the moment. On the upside the web has given us the ability to connect with people, and hence sources of funding and potential audiences, in ways we could not have imagined a decade ago. On the downside there is more content than ever competing for attention and people are reluctant to pay for it because of the increasing tendency to expect content to be free in a world where YouTube is dominant.

IndieGoGo are tapping into the democratisation of fundraising, production and distribution by allowing filmmakers to build an audience at the same time as they finance their films through crowd-funding. IndieGoGo works by allowing individuals to give donations, rather than make investments, so the complicated legal requirements around investment deals are avoided. Rubin points out that the US elections are pushing everything else forward in terms of thinking and practices around online fundraising. The Obama campaign raises \$1 million each day through donations below \$1000. That means that an awful lot of people are getting comfortable making online transactions to support their political candidate of choice and this will have ramifications in other areas



Slava Rubin



Marc Silver and Gael Garcia Bernal pitching RESIST during the Good Pitch at BRITDOC 08.

as creative, grassroots fundraising becomes more sophisticated.

IndieGoGo are certainly not the only game in town tapping into the world of social networks to make films happen. There are a number of new websites and individuals doing similar things, many taking inspiration from other areas, like the funding of entrepreneurial projects in the developing world through micro-lending (pioneered by Nobel Peace Prize winner Mohammad Yunus, who set up the Grameen Bank and seen today in sites like *Kiva.org*).

Micro-financing has become a big buzzword and Web 2.0 connectivity makes it possible for all of us with access to the Internet to access these opportunities very quickly and cheaply. Paul Devlin raised money for his "science-adventure" documentary, *BLAST!*, through ArtistShare, a site used mainly by musicians. Matt Hanson is earning the title of "film futurist" creating the £1 million film *A SWARM OF ANGELS* through community participation. Lance Weiler's Workbook Project is an open source social experiment for content creators, which brilliantly reflects the



possibilities available for filmmakers willing to think about connecting across the web. The filmmakers behind *FOUR EYED MONSTERS* raised money to get themselves out of debt after their film was completed through partnerships with Spout and OurStage. Meanwhile back in ancient history (2006) Robert Greenwald raised \$267,892 in 10 days for his film *IRAQ FOR SALE: THE WAR PROFITEERS* through an e-mail campaign to potential supporters.

Even more traditional companies are needing to look at new ways of doing business. Ryan Harrington, is a seasoned industry expert who is currently head of IndiePix Studios in the US, the production arm of a web-based distributor. IndiePix Studios invests equity into films and then sells the rights at festivals. Once they have recouped their investment they start the process again, finding new films to support. They act as executive producers and help to raise other funds for the films and bring partnerships to the table. These partnerships, many of which are in the digital arena, allow them to maximise revenue for the films they get behind. Harrington says that as traditional models disappear, he is looking to overseas money and co-productions to get films financed. One of the problems with the current trend in film production, he says, is that everyone is looking to see films in a rough cut stage, playing it safe and waiting until they know what they are looking at, and "filmmakers are left with the burden of getting their films shot on their own." This is clearly less of a risk for funders and distributors but it means that documentary and independent narrative budgets are getting smaller and smaller because filmmakers are often not getting the financial support they need from the get go.

It would obviously be nice and simple if we could all just go to a broadcaster, big production company, distributor or studio and get them to give us the money we need to make our films and then have them shepherd us through the distribution and marketing process afterwards. These opportunities are few and far between now, however, and you will invariably lose a good deal of control

over your project if you go down this route. This can mean that other people may not support your film in the way that it should be supported and it can also mean that you may get a raw deal in terms of the money you personally see, or rather don't see as is so often the case!

New approaches to funding necessitate a good deal of creativity and tenacity on the part of the producers making the projects happen but they also allow for innovative production and distribution practices, empowering artists and changing the way that we make and see films. "I feel hopeful about the future for independent film," says Harrington. "We are at a time when anything can



It is indeed the best of times and the worst of times but filmmakers now have more resources and better technology at their fingertips to fight the good fight.

happen and more production and distribution models exist than ever before. I'm excited to be a part of it all and lucky to be working with a group of individuals committed to thinking outside the box."

It is indeed the best of times and the worst of times but filmmakers now have more resources and better technology at their fingertips to fight the good fight. The pots of money may be smaller and more dispersed but you can do a lot more with them because the tools are there and many of the online distribution channels are wide open. What remains to be seen is what kinds of films will be produced in this changing landscape. There are still issues, for example, about how the public service remit fits in to this digital future and what role broadcasters, and others, in the UK will play in supporting challenging, informative, varied and editorially robust work. But that is a subject for another article. ■