

The traditional independent film distribution model is in trouble. Distributors are struggling to get hits in a crowded marketplace, filmmakers are getting raw deals, and everybody is feeling frustrated.

By Ingrid Kopp

# The Distribution Frontier

PURPLE VIOLETS



**T**HANKS TO DROPPING PRODUCTION COSTS more people are making films than ever before but most of these films never get distribution deals and never make it to a cinema or television screen. The good news is that filmmakers now have other options and having options is what it is all about for the pioneers of new distribution models on the Internet.

The world of online distribution still feels like the Wild West in many ways: plenty of undiscovered terrain and no doubt a few cowboys out there trying to make a quick buck. The truth is that everybody is trying to figure out how they will fare in the digital future. The Hollywood studios have not exactly been at the cutting edge of alternative distribution but they are nevertheless still keen to protect their share of any future online revenue, as the recent WGA strike negotiations clearly demonstrated. Even Madonna is talking about seeking web distribution for her directorial debut *FILTH AND WISDOM*. As Emerging Pictures CEO Ira Deutchman told *Variety*, “We’re in the transitional post-major studio pre-Internet era. Models will be clear in the future. We’re still heading toward Web 2.0.” It is a handful of truly independent filmmakers who are blazing the trail in this transitional era, and they are showing the rest of the indie community what is possible when you seize the reins and take some degree of control over your finished film.

There is certainly a need for change. The indie film marketplace is glutted and, as previously stated but worth underlining, the vast majority of films never get close to getting picked up by a traditional distributor—and this includes films that make it to the promised land in Park City. Only a handful of the 100 or so features at this year’s Sundance Film Festival found theatrical distribution.

Even if a film is picked up for distribution, it is still an uphill battle to get it noticed when there is so much competition in the indie sector. Films are frequently not given time to build an audience through word of mouth and are replaced a week later, making it difficult for even the most dedicated film lover to get to all the films they want to see.

Industry folk often complain about the sheer number of films being produced. However, at the 2007 Gotham Awards in New York IFC Entertainment President Jonathan Sehring said, “I can assure everyone that independent filmmakers are not going to stop making movies—they all have stories to tell—it is up to the distribution community to be creative and help filmmakers find a way to reach their audiences.” To this, one could add that it is also up to the filmmakers to find their *own* way. As Tiffany Shlain, director of a short film called *THE TRIBE* and founder of The Webby Awards, puts it: “Filmmakers would spend all their resources and then just hope, hope, hope that someone would pick it up. They need to recalibrate their energy because it is so much more empowering when you start making decisions about what to do with your film and realise that the tools are already there to help you.” So what are these tools?

The truth is that the current state of alternative distribution can flummox even the most technically-minded among us because there are now so many ways to access and watch films. Content (an agnostic term that angers some purists) can be delivered through streaming and downloads to personal computers, set-top boxes providing cable and satellite content, and gateway Internet devices like AppleTV.

There are a huge number of online sites offering films—to buy, to rent and free to view—and these sites are increasing as the technology improves. We are now living in a world of infinite shelf-space due to “an emerging on-demand universe of content” as filmmaker and innovator Lance Weiler puts it. iTunes is one of the first operations to successfully monetise their delivery of films. Edward Burns and his producer Aaron Lubin took advantage of this to release their latest film *PURPLE VIOLETS* exclusively through iTunes for \$14.99 and they made it to number three on the download list. It should be noted, however, that actually getting your film for sale on iTunes is far from easy. iTunes uses aggregators to source content which means that you are still facing a gatekeeper.

Luckily there are now a number of companies offering DIY solutions for filmmakers, covering everything from DVD fulfilment to online checkout software and marketing tools. Filmmakers have the choice to self-distribute, selling DVDs through their own websites and even offering iTunes compatible downloads like Hunter Weeks did with his documentary *10 MPH*, in his case using E-Junkie to process transactions.

Withoutabox.com has expanded its brief to go beyond festival-submissions and now offers a range of distribution tools for filmmakers. And they are not the only game in town. The exciting thing about this moment in time is that so many companies are exploring the possibilities at the intersection of film and the web and there is some healthy Venture Capital behind many of them.

The ability to stream and download films is important but what is revolutionary for filmmakers is the ability to use the web to reach audiences directly. Radiohead’s release of *In Rainbows* direct to their fans through their website shows that this direct-to-audience approach is not restricted to filmmaking. Social online networking, the *folksonomy* of tagging, and the connectivity and participation that the web allows are changing the way that all of us find and interact with content. Through “embed and spread” technology filmmakers can now post a short film or trailer on YouTube in London and see it show up on a blog in Sydney within seconds.



Lance Weiler has pioneered many of these new methods through his own films *THE LAST BROADCAST* and *HEAD TRAUMA*. Weiler's latest endeavour is a web resource called Workbook Project that he describes as an "open source experiment for content creators." The Workbook Project provides a wealth of information for filmmakers wanting to learn more about this brave new world. Weiler collaborates with filmmakers and forward-thinking industry people to show how the tools of Web 2.0 can be used to help filmmakers build an audience and distribute their films, with or without the help of a traditional distributor.

Weiler's latest project is called *FROM HERE TO AWESOME* and is a collaboration with *WE ARE THE STRANGE*'s M. dot Strange and *FOUR EYED MONSTERS*' Arin Crumley. Together they are using their experience to provide a "discovery and distribution festival" for other filmmakers whereby they connect filmmakers and audiences directly. They have a number of online partners on board, including YouTube, MySpace and a new venture called IndieGoGo. "There is a permission based culture around filmmaking and *FROM HERE TO AWESOME* is a step toward letting filmmakers know they have options—that not getting into a major festival is not the end of their movie's life but just the beginning."

Slava Rubin of IndieGoGo sums up one of the tenets of this new breed of filmmakers/DIY distributors: the audience should never be an afterthought. "At IndieGoGo we like to tell filmmakers to start thinking about the audience from the beginning, including fundraising. Start creating your community as soon as you come up with an idea for a movie." Brian Chirls, who worked with Arin Crumley and Susan Buice on the innovative distribution strategy for *FOUR EYED MONSTERS*, thinks that being able to create a personal audience, or what influential consultant Peter Broderick calls a "core audience", is key to putting more power in the hands of the filmmaker so that they no longer need to feel that they are going cap in hand to a distributor. Filmmakers often think, "Why is this my problem? I'm a filmmaker, why should I think about audience and marketing?" Chirls says.

Filmmakers need to learn to think about the marketing elements as part of the creative process of filmmaking. This can be a powerful tool in that it can extend the possibilities of the film beyond the film itself, allowing the audience to engage with the story in a variety of ways. Tiffany Shlain agrees pointing to the educational curriculum and discussion kits she developed to accompany *THE TRIBE*, "The film is a trigger for so much other discussion and having a direct, ongoing relationship with your audience is so satisfying. This is what has kept me going." *THE TRIBE* became a very successful download on iTunes thanks to Shlain's marketing efforts. At the very least Shlain says that you should always include a URL for your film in the credits and make sure that people can sign up on the website to receive further information—which means that you then create a database of your potential audience.

The *FOUR EYED MONSTERS* approach was to create a series of podcasts to promote the film and thereby cultivate a community around it well before it was ever shown in any cinemas. As Chirls points out "The web allows you to go straight to audience with almost no barriers." Chirls doesn't discount the power of a theatrical release but says that the current model doesn't give most indie films a fighting chance. He says this is what inspired them to try their Thursdays in September experiment. They organised special weekly screenings in cities where they already knew they had fans of the movie thanks to their tracking of the zip codes of people who expressed interest in the movie online. Digital cinema projection makes this kind of online/offline approach much more affordable now.

There is certainly a worrying marketing gap for films being released without any kind of theatrical presence. Ted Sarandos of Netflix calls this a

"cold start" on the Internet. It is also true that it is easier to tap into the niche markets of the long tail if you have a film that lends itself to online audiences. Genre films and documentaries tend to be more successful since they can access already available fan-bases and people coalescing around an issue. Indie narrative features, on the other hand, still have a tough time without the major media critical support engendered by a theatrical release.

IFC films have developed a day-and-date strategy in an attempt to embrace the best of both worlds, releasing films theatrically concurrent with cable and VOD distribution. Many of the filmmakers I spoke to believe that the marketing gap will be solved as things evolve. Lance Weiler puts it this way: "The promise of digital distribution has yet to be realised. The industry is looking for one breakout example that they can hang a model on but the reality is that there will be no one model. Besides the obvious values of filmmakers taking control of their own distribution paths the reality is that media consumption habits will shape digital distribution. And until it is easy to find and consume digital media; filmmakers, distributors and audiences will continue to struggle with the digital divide."

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Most of these distribution experiments are taking place in the U.S. but there are filmmakers in the UK exploring this new terrain too like Matt Hanson and his *SWARM OF ANGELS* project and Jamie King with *STEAL THIS FILM*. Liz Rosenthal, a producer who is very much in the eye of the storm with regards to new distribution approaches, has this to say about the difference between the two countries: "In the U.S., developments move much faster in terms of innovation in filmmaking and new online possibilities for finding audiences. We live in a "permissions" based culture which looks to funding bodies first for money and permission to make films, but the indie community here is definitely ready and willing to change. I noticed the amazingly positive reception to my first *Power to the Pixel* Forum last October in London, where I invited many of the world's leading pioneers in alternative distribution to discuss how they are creating new ways of reaching audiences. There was a general acceptance that the film business as it is, is irrevocably broken and a hunger to learn from the pioneers that were talking."

We live in interesting times. Film distribution is changing in ways that give filmmakers a tremendous array of options to explore on the new frontier. "It is incredibly exciting," says Tiffany Shlain "There are not many rules, you can try anything. It's a yee ha! spirit and we want others to join us!" ■

**WORKBOOK PROJECT:** [www.workbookproject.com](http://www.workbookproject.com)

**POWER TO THE PIXEL:** [www.powertothepixel.com](http://www.powertothepixel.com)

**THE TRIBE:** [www.tribetbefilm.com](http://www.tribetbefilm.com)

**FOUR EYED MONSTERS:** [www.foureyedmonsters.com](http://www.foureyedmonsters.com)

**SWARM OF ANGELS:** [www.aswarmofangels.com](http://www.aswarmofangels.com)

**WE ARE THE STRANGE:** [www.wearethestrangle.com](http://www.wearethestrangle.com)

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