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Docs Interactive

Questions, answers, and perspectives on various issues for the working documentary filmmaker.

MONDAY, JANUARY 21, 2008

A Polar Opposite Approach to Fundraising: Paul Devlin and BLAST

For regular readers of the [Docs In Progress website](#) and the [Docs Interactive blog](#), you know we are as obsessed as you are with the state of funding for documentaries. One of our very first blog entries focused on some [resources for fundraising](#) and we've also shared the wisdom of [Robert Greenwald](#) in connecting funding and outreach strategies, and provided the perspective of [Trinh Duong](#) of the Funding Exchange on raising funds from foundations. As a continuation of that theme, we wanted to talk to another independent filmmaker about strategies for fundraising success.

That took us to **Paul Devlin**. He is an Emmy-winning editor whose first documentary [SlamNation](#) on the cuthroat world of spoken poetry competitions premiered at the South by Southwest Film Festival and was ultimately screened on HBO/Cinemax and Encore/Starz. His second film, [Power Trip](#), looked at how former communist states were undergoing difficult transitions to democracy and market economies, by using the former State of Georgia and its electricity crisis as a case study. It screened at more than 60 festivals worldwide (including winning prizes at the Berlin Film Festival, Hot Docs, and the Florida Film Festival), was nominated for an Independent Spirit Award, and was screened on the PBS series *Independent Lens*. With a track record like this, Devlin would seemingly be the poster child for an easy road to funding.

But the reality is far different. Contrary to popular myth, a track record does not ensure automatic fundraising success for independent filmmakers. But the same wiles and passion which serve the indie filmmaker in finding and telling a story can be put to use on the trail of money. Let's see what Devlin had to say about his own journey to success.

Q: First of all, tell us a little bit about you and your background as a documentary filmmaker.

About Me

Name:
Docs In Progress

Docs in Progress supports the development of independent documentaries and educates filmmakers and the public about documentary. It was founded by Washington DC-area filmmakers Adele Schmidt (Producer/Editor, Journey Films) and Erica Ginsberg (Producer/Director, CineCitizen Media).

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I started making Super 8 films in junior high school. My first documentary I made while a student at the University of Michigan. **Rockin' Brunswick** was all about the thriving music scene in New Brunswick, New Jersey where I grew up. I distributed it on public access cable TV up and down the East Coast.

So I learned how to video edit and found that skill was more useful getting work than my English Lit degree. I traveled in Europe and Asia for a year and a half and found my first editing job in Hong Kong. Later I was a runner at the Seoul Olympics. I can trace back to there, all my network sports jobs, which include NBC Olympics, CBS Tour de France, and ABC World Cup Soccer. I've won five Emmys doing this work.

When I moved to New York, I started doing independent projects again. The first was a short fiction feature called **The Eyes of St. Anthony**. That didn't generate another fiction project, so I gravitated back to documentary because they were not so labor- and money-intensive up front. I could work on documentaries gradually, do them myself and keep making movies.

My documentaries **SlamNation** and **Power Trip** were made on very small budgets because I did much of the work myself. They were self-financed, so in essence, they were funded by my network sports editing work. I tried to get outside funding, - writing grants, pitching commissioning editors at the IFP Market, etc, but got nowhere. Maybe I'm not good at that. Or maybe my topics were just too difficult and had to be executed to be believed.

In any case, I had to make my money on the backend, which is a big gamble, of course. But once you get committed, the project has been started, and the money is not coming, you have this terrible choice: Drop it, or keep going by yourself. Even when the movie is successfully distributed, it's hard to break even.

Q: And now you are working on a film called **BLAST**. We want to talk about how you're approaching the funding based on the lessons you learned from before. But first of all, tell us a little more about the project.

BLAST follows the story of my brother, Mark Devlin, PhD. as he leads an international team of astrophysicists on a risky scientific adventure. Journeying from the Arctic to the Antarctic to launch a revolutionary new telescope on a NASA high altitude balloon, Mark and his team seek to unlock the mysteries of the origins of our Universe and answer humankind's most basic question, How did we get here? **BLAST** reveals the human side of scientific pursuit - the

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daily frustrations, the enormous sacrifices, the catastrophic failures and the transcendent triumphs.

Mark casually invited me to document the launch of his new telescope, **BLAST**, in Arctic Sweden. It was very short notice, so I agreed only if he could find a way to fund my travel and expenses. The Swedish Space Corporation flew me over so they could use the footage for promotional purposes. When I got there, the project was plagued by all sorts of technical and weather delays, creating lots of tension and drama. After the launch of the telescope, the scientists discovered that it was out of focus and they would have to do it all over again in Antarctica. I realized I had the story for a bigger project.

BLAST is in post-production. We've got a pretty strong cut that we've been submitting to festivals. The schedule for the final online edit will be determined by festival acceptances and how effectively we can raise additional revenue to cover those finishing costs.

The goal of **BLAST** is to tell a great story and reveal, from the inside, the fascinating lives of scientists. **BLAST** focuses primarily on drama and character and avoids the voice-of-god narrator, which is very rare with science-based material. The story is paramount, but we're also very excited by the science as well and hope that this approach makes it more accessible to a wide audience.

Q: You are also taking a different approach to fundraising, combining traditional methods with online outreach. Could you talk a little bit more about why you are doing this?

It's very rare to fund an independent film from just one source, so the more sources you can identify, the better. Traditional funding is becoming more difficult to attract. There are so many more filmmakers out there competing for diminishing resources.

Meanwhile, online outreach is creating exciting, unexplored new opportunities. Filmmakers are realizing they can reach core audiences themselves through the Internet more effectively than through traditional distribution. This takes more work but allows us to keep significantly more of the revenue we generate.

Q: More specifically, you are working with a website called [ArtistShare](#) which has traditionally been used by musicians to connect their fans to the creative process. What is ArtistShare exactly and how did you get involved with them as their first film project?

The ultimate goal of the ArtistShare model is to create a community of fans through online outreach. The successful development of this community eventually sustains the artist directly, from project to project, without intermediaries. This is an exciting possibility. Musicians have begun to execute the ArtistShare model successfully. It's time for filmmakers to follow their lead.

I was working on a short film about a musician. She was exploring the ArtistShare model for her next project and asked me to attend a meeting with ArtistShare to see how the film might enhance this project. That eventually inspired the idea that the ArtistShare model for music could also work for independent film.

My producer Claire Missanelli and I approached ArtistShare with **BLAST** and our proposal to partner with ArtistShare on it. There was a lot of back and forth with them to develop and personalize the project, and to adapt the ArtistShare model for a film. We ultimately created a [website](#) through them. They have been great to work with, very supportive.

It's a big experiment both for them and for us. It works for music; can it work for film? Let's hope so, because we've seen how the music industry has been basically devastated as new technology transformed it from a retail business into a service business. The movie industry will go through a similar transformation, which we should all be prepared for.

ArtistShare does not get involved in the content or distribution of the film. In return for a set up fee and a percentage of the funds raised, they provides a template and the structure for artists to do this kind of project. They provide the website, but it is up to the individual artist to generate the content for the participant offers.

Q: We'd like to explore these participant offers a bit more. One of the key components of the ArtistShare model is involving funders as "participants." What's in it for the participants?

The process of making a movie is very different from making a music CD, so it took a long time and some imagination to adapt the participant offers for a film.

Participants get to experience the process of creating the film through behind-the-scenes video production updates. These include inside views of pitching a project at the Toronto Documentary Forum, and meetings with BBC's Nick Fraser and independent consultant Robert Hawk. We just finished a fun one about our "Sundance Fever."

We have offers that focus on the science behind the movie and we have other offers that are tailored to budding filmmakers. Our participants are encouraged to interact with us through Q&A sessions and personal email. Depending on the level of participation, there are opportunities to contribute to the editing of the film, to be our VIP guest at the premiere of BLAST, to appear in the credits of the film, and even to be the Executive Producer of the film. We are trying to create a valuable experience that inspires participants to join us on future projects.

Q: So who are the typical participants and how have they come upon the project?

Our list of participants started out just being friends and family. But as we generated more publicity through the Internet, participants we didn't know personally started joining. When this happened we felt the concept could work. Now, it's just a matter of getting the word out to the right audience.

So far generating publicity has been a challenge, even after hiring a publicist. Traditional media outlets are less interested when they realize the film is not yet complete. So to drive traffic to the site, we have been trying many different online approaches including interviews on blogs and podcasts, emails and newsletters, and even outreach on MySpace and Facebook.

Developing an effective message has also been a challenge. The response from our newsletter list, which includes several thousand addresses, was often, "Wow what a cool innovative idea. Let us know if it works and maybe we'll try it." When we ask if they signed up, we get a confused look: "I didn't realize I was supposed to sign up." We have to explain that in order for it to work, you have to sign up.

So we're interested in ideas about how better to convey the ArtistShare message in a way that motivates participation. We're hoping the filmmaking community will become enthusiastic participants as well, because it's important for all of us to demonstrate the viability of these alternative funding models.

Q: It's interesting that you mention alternative funding models. While ArtistShare seems like an interesting model, what are they able to offer you that you would not have been able to do on your own from your own website, especially given the fact that you already have a track record and presumably loyal fans?

ArtistShare provides everything needed to host the project - from the

media player, to the website layout, to working out the legal issues of the participant model. Not having to build this from scratch allows us to focus on creating a good experience for our participants rather than worrying about the technical issues.

The subjects of my films are so diverse - ranging from slam poetry to the energy crisis in Tbilisi, Georgia and now astrophysics - fans of one of my films may not necessarily be interested in the others. So although we have gotten a lot of support from loyal fans, we have had to reach out in new ways to develop an audience base that is interested in my work as a filmmaker generally, rather than just in a specific project. ArtistShare provides a structure in which to do that.

Q: Do you see something like ArtistShare as a replacement for traditional methods of fundraising (getting a fiscal sponsor, trying for grants, government funding, foreign television, commissions, etc.) or an enhancement?

It has worked for music artists. ArtistShare has developed many music CD projects, completely funded by participants. Some of these have gone on to win Grammys!

But films are much harder to make and are more costly. It remains to be seen if this model will work at all for film, let alone finance the entire project.

With **BLAST**, we have still had to use traditional methods of funding. Nick Fraser, commissioning editor of BBC's *Storyville* liked my film **Power Trip** so much that he funded **BLAST** early. This eventually attracted commissions from Discovery Canada, Swedish TV and Finnish TV. **BLAST** also received my first grant ever, from the New York State Council of the Arts.

Will any of these be in a position to fund my next film or the film after that? Who knows? BBC, for example, has experienced drastic cuts and *Storyville* may no longer be commissioning films. Developing a loyal fan base through direct outreach may eventually prove to be the most secure way for artists to fund their projects.

ArtistShare still has to prove that it can work for film. If we can use this model to develop an ever-growing consistent fan-base willing to fund projects they like, then I think we will have demonstrated that the model can be adapted effectively for anyone willing to devote the time and energy to make it happen.

Q: Many first time filmmakers worry that it is difficult to break in to the funding circuit because there is a limited amount of funding

out there and will usually go to more established filmmakers. Some more established filmmakers say this is a myth and it is not much easier for them to raise funds when funding sources are drying up. What do you think of each of these statements?

All filmmakers are “first-time” at some point. Funding is hard for everyone, even the most established filmmakers. Eventually first-timers who stick with it will have track records as well, but tenacity and hard work will still be required to raise funds, no matter what the source.

The Internet provides many opportunities for people who may not have exposure or experience through traditional outlets. The only real requirement is that you be creative enough to come up with a new approach, and dedicated enough to see it through.

Q: Do you have any additional advice for first-time filmmakers seeking funding, especially seed funding? How can filmmakers think outside the box to get their films made?

Shamelessness helps - a willingness to ask for money. Museums do it, politicians do it, why shouldn't we? Developing good sales skills helps as well. There's so much shameless private wealth out there waiting for the right project. I'm still working on how to tap into that myself. I'm not sure that I have the personality to organize fundraising events and parties as I've seen other filmmakers do. ArtistShare is my first serious effort to tap private financing.

But if you have that personality, I recommend [Morrie Warshawski's books](#), *Shaking the Money Tree* and *The Fundraising Houseparty*.

There's not much that substitutes for a great idea, great access, or a great film. If you have these and refuse to give up, then you'll find a way to get your project done and get it out there.

Q: What do you see as the future outlook for documentary?

I see the further blurring of the boundaries between fiction and nonfiction in “documentaries,” as filmmakers broaden the boundaries of storytelling using nonfictional material.

Editing a documentary is similar in many ways to writing a screenplay. For both, drama, character and story are paramount and must always take a back seat to accuracy. Filmmaking is art, not journalism. Films that place accuracy over story are much less likely to find an audience, especially in this outrageously competitive environment. Eventually audiences and critics will have to accept

this and realize what we filmmakers already know: documentaries are essentially fictional.

But that does not mean they are not truthful. Werner Herzog has coined the phrase “ecstatic truth” to describe the fundamental truth that the filmmaker discovers beyond facts or chronology.

Because of this, documentaries are becoming The News of the World, despite the fact that they are not journalism. In a media environment where journalism has become so utterly compromised, a documentary that confesses its fictional elements can still provide enormously more in-depth coverage and insightful consideration of the complex issues that we’re facing all over the planet.

So it’s important to keep fighting to get our work made and seen. As veteran documentarian Robert Richter told me recently, documentary filmmaking is not a profession, nor a hobby; it’s a calling.

To learn more about BLAST, including an update on screenings of the finished film, visit its website at www.blastthemovie.com. Its ArtistShare site is at www.blastshare.com

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SUNDAY, DECEMBER 30, 2007

A New Year, a New Organization

Those of you who are regular readers of this blog may know that Docs Interactive is a program of [Docs in Progress](#), an organization based in Greater Washington DC which focuses on empowering independent documentary filmmakers to create and cultivate their projects.

2007 was a whirlwind year for Docs in Progress. We organized and moderated nine work-in-progress screening workshops in Washington DC and Maryland, sponsored two all-day seminars with "Documentary Doctor" Fernanda Rossi, provided private consultations to numerous film projects, and maintained our quarterly e-newsletter and this