

## NEW FUNDING: SLOW-BUDGET

### **Survival Kit for the Brave**

Slow-budget filmmaking is long, hard work, but gives independence and opportunities in return. It relies on recouping investments from the distribution of the finished film. Two filmmakers present a survival kit for the brave.

By Peter Haas and Silvia Holzinger

The concept of 'slow-budget' first of all means there is a budget! We estimate that we invested around EUR 35,000 privately in \*Weizenbaum. Rebel at Work. Our film is recouping the investment mainly from showings at universities, but above all through DVD sales. The 'slow-budget' approach offers various advantages, such as complete independence from production companies and institutions, particularly from TV and its commissioning editors, and from distributors and public funding. The concept has allowed us to find our way into cinemas and lecture halls. We received no public support or funding, but we didn't give away any rights either. That's an enormous advantage in a landscape where mainly technically-driven paradigm shifts offer new opportunities. Digital projection has enabled the number of competing film formats to rise. New opportunities are popping up for filmmakers capable of converting content themselves. We are in the midst of a rapidly changing landscape. Traditional biospheres such as public TV and public film funding are under enormous pressure. Publicly subsidised TV may disappear completely and will be reorganised dramatically. Competing channels will diversify as transmission and delivery formats become more complex at the same time. Uncertain times and rapidly-changing general conditions are good for risk-takers!

The suggested concept of 'slow-budget filmmaking' does not offer a roadmap. It is a merely a preliminary survival kit for risk-takers and the brave at heart. In other words the concept is not guaranteed to apply to your particular project!

### **Success**

We consider the completion of a film to be a success. Our DVD licence sales grew to almost 1,000 DVDs (shipped). To make a living from our first feature-length film is quite a success, even though we have cultivated a fairly modest way of life. In January 2007, we licensed the film to a German documentary channel. Our film was also invited to festivals, such as transmediale07 (Berlin), the European Media Art Festival (Osnabrück) and Digital Art Weeks (Zurich). We've won the Kempelen Award on the history of computer science. Universities and institutions have invited us to present the film. We've reached 2,500 viewers on our film tour. Libraries have acquired the DVD, and teachers and media centres are using the film for educational purposes. Our investment is now repaid, but it took a long time: it was a 'slow budget'.

## **Website**

Regard a film's website and the film itself as one and the same project! To achieve this, create your website yourself and don't give it away to specialists after finishing your film. A growing project website offers various advantages and is best suited for presenting an unfinished work to others. But also, in our case, it attracted a highly supportive community early on and helped to shape the communication strategy necessary for promoting the project. A good film website is not an appendix to the film!

## **Distribution List**

In the beginning we received two or three DVD orders for every 100 e-mails we sent out. So far we've collected more than 13,000 individual e-mail addresses. Depending on the issue, we can send out our news regionally. A distribution list is a cheap and effective direct-communication tool for reaching your target group, and it is absolutely indispensable for creating and maintaining a community. The newsletters we've issued generated suspense many months in advance of the premiere. If your news and PR tell a good 'meta' story, people will probably start to listen and think about the film, thus creating what feeds us all: curiosity.

## **Internet**

The extensive use of royalty-free material from various Internet sites was essential for our documentary. Use the Internet archive.org, ourmedia.org to get free archival material. Try connecting your website to popular sites that fit. We uploaded material to the Internet Archive, to ourmedia, YouTube, Google Video, flickr, Yahoo, delicio.us and others. You might even edit Wikipedia articles and add external links pointing to your project site. Wikipedia and Google drive a lot of traffic to our website. Every external link helps to enhance the site's ranking at Google or other search engines. The better the ranking, the more likely the site will be found and visited. Our site has reached 5,000 to 8,000 user sessions per month.

## **Blogs and Multipliers**

We contacted suitable weblogs and suggested they take a closer look at our project site. A decent weblog article is an excellent multiplier! We also contacted almost everyone who had ever conducted an event involving Joe Weizenbaum. Try getting multipliers that spread your news regularly. It enhances credibility, enlarges the reach of your distribution list and the visibility of your project, and above all, doesn't cost anything, except time. We wrote many letters to editors whenever something on the "Weizenbaum topic" was published. Use Google alerts for certain keywords to be notified automatically.

## **PR**

We waited until an appropriate occasion arose so we had \*real news to tell. And then, again, the story we told within our press release was connected to the overall story of the project; it referred to what had happened before, and it was always designed to make the reader even more curious about what was going to

happen next. We regarded our press communication, the website and the documentary film as belonging to a single two-year communication project. Use services – such as OpenPR, businessportal24, PresseBox or news4press – as common (and mostly free) multipliers. We preferred joint press releases with more than one party involved. As universities usually have a PR department, a joint press release with a university makes sense.

### **Film on Tour**

The positive responses to our newsletter encouraged us to organise a film tour. We had several invitations, mostly from universities, and we started to formalise the process. We wrote a short contract, equipped a computer with a freshly rendered version of the film that offered far better quality than a DVD and called university decision-makers directly to negotiate an agreement. It turned out to be advantageous to present the film in a lecture auditorium. Cooperation with local cinemas worked out only once. Cinemas and programme coordinators were very 35-mm oriented and proved inflexible. The lecture halls were all equipped with digital projectors, large beamers and a large canvas screen. Technical advisors from the university helped to master a technical rehearsal. Local promoters edited and printed our film poster. We created happenings that were more than just a film projection. We had Q&As with the audience after the film and sometimes a panel of specialists debated the issues. Often Joe Weizenbaum joined us. The audience acknowledged that we attended each presentation of the film personally.

It is a good idea to identify suitable presentation locations early on and to be flexible about integrating the presentation of the film into existing events. We recognised that audiences like fresh new ways of digital cinema with hands-on, accessible directors and protagonists. Sometimes the success was overwhelming as we once filled a lecture hall with more than 350 viewers. Digital cinema does not have to take place in cinemas. Digital cinema is wherever you present your film!

### **Dedication and Risk**

Most of the time during the Weizenbaum project, none of us worked on another project or had a side job. We devoted almost all of our time and energy to the project. We think that this is necessary, and an important film project deserves it. Time is the most valuable resource, and the fact that we stayed in Berlin about fourteen weeks was crucial for our success. Any compromise would have been a failure. There are no short questions and short answers with Joe Weizenbaum. Also, working with an 85-year-old protagonist for so many months took lots of patience and dedication. Being pressured for time would have been fatal. In our case the fact that our financial resources were limited did not prevent us from investing our time relentlessly. The loans were easy to pay back once the film was finished. Therefore, it is important to consider risk not only in terms of financial risks. Take risks, avoid compromises. Taking time is often a huge advantage over 'industrialised' documentary production.

### **Open Research**

The creation of our film was research. And since we are publishing much of the results, we are making our research open, comparable to an open-source model in software development. We believe that this approach raises lots of interesting questions and that staying open during the creation of a documentary film ultimately leads to more complex and interesting stories.

### **Conclusion**

The slow pace of our film resembles the 'slow food' movement. The 'slow-budget filmmaking' concept makes sense on the condition that there is a politically and socially relevant topic that justifies the effort and the struggle. If this is the case, we suggest regarding any documentary-film project as the seed crystal of a highly supportive community that looks forward to seeing the film.

Peter Haas is a German filmmaker and co-director of \*Weizenbaum. Rebel at Work.

Silvia Holzinger is an Austrian filmmaker and co-director of \*Weizenbaum. Rebel at Work.

Together they run the informal cooperation Il mare film.

<http://www.ilmarefilm.org>

<http://www.edn.dk>

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