

## NEW FUNDING: SLOW-BUDGET

### **Twelve Roadblocks – a case study**

Filmmakers are increasingly looking for new ways of funding to break free from their deep dependence on TV. Two filmmakers share their own tale which has a happy ending, but involves a lot of fighting on the way.

By Peter Haas and Silvia Holzinger

We wish to describe the production history of our documentary film \*Weizenbaum. Rebel at Work, a personal film portrait of Professor Joseph Weizenbaum, a legendary computer pioneer and technology critic. We disclose the obstacles, the 'roadblocks', and the tremendous difficulties we had to overcome and will explain how our model of 'slow-budget filmmaking' evolved during the two-year project.

Ultimately, it leads to a blueprint business plan for digital-cinema filmmaking detached from public funding and public television, a new, truly independent form of Digital Cinema that does not rely on subsidised ecosystems.

#### **Background**

In 2005, we started to work on \*Grandfather Nerds, a documentary film about computer pioneers. We soon met the legendary and charismatic storyteller Joseph Weizenbaum who became the main character of our feature-length documentary film.

Without funding and without the support of a production company, we started shooting in Berlin. During the project, we encountered what we've dubbed the 'twelve roadblocks', but ultimately the film was completed, shipped on DVD, premiered on TV, presented at festivals and completed a highly successful film tour.

We want to reveal all the obstacles, pitfalls and setbacks (even though it may make us look stupid) because we want to share our experience with fellow filmmakers. Our film had a tough time getting finished and an even harder time getting presented. Our aim is to encourage others to invent new ways of independent documentary film production and to shape the digital cinema yet to come. This article is derived from our lecture at Digital Art Weeks in Zurich, in July 2007.

#### **Roadblocks**

The metaphor of a massive rock blocking a narrow road is tempting. On the left, a precipitous rock formation, on the right a line of cliffs dropping off to an inaccessible coastline below, with a narrow, winding, one-lane road in

between. Talking in terms of 'roadblocks' conveys a feeling of the hopelessness we experienced during the film project. In rare cases, we climbed around the block, but usually we decided to take another road. Only once we were able to remove the obstacle and, in some instances, we figured out that there was no roadblock at all.

### **Roadblock #1: Get Funded**

To make a long story short, we did not get any public film funding in Vienna, although we had hoped to get financial support since our first film had been presented at various film festivals. But it succeeded nonetheless, without the support and experience of a well-known production company, even though not being backed by a notable production company made others regard us as novices.

### **#2: November Shooting**

The battle for funding took almost half a year. We received no any answer to our application and so we waited. When we actually started shooting it was already October in Berlin and we soon faced increasingly challenging lighting conditions in November.

### **#3: US Locations**

Joseph Weizenbaum was born in Berlin in 1923 and immigrated to the US in 1936. For more than a decade now he has been living in Berlin again, close to where he was raised back then, but he lived in the US for almost 60 years. Of course, we decided to shoot in the US and we wanted to take the ship from Bremerhaven to New York, the same route across the Atlantic that he and his family had taken. But our private funding precluded flying and sailing to the US. We needed financial support and still had hope.

### **4: TV Co-production**

While shooting, we contacted German public television to acquire co-production partners. We actually contacted almost every public-TV channel in Germany. To attract their attention, we prepared an informative film website that presented the film's story, stills and trailer. Then we sent an e-mail to the commissioning editor and called.

It became clear that our biggest mistake was to make a documentary film about a computer scientist as nobody liked the idea. A commissioning editor at ARTE admitted that although he had never heard of Weizenbaum, the story of his emigration and contributions to the early days of computer science might fit well into a documentary. On the other hand, however, it would have been better if Weizenbaum was French, since the French reps have two-thirds of the voting rights and if they don't like the idea of a German-US computer pioneer, a French one would probably do.

Yet another contact said that given the topic of the Jewish family background, emigration and "that sort of thing", it was impossible to consider our film for co-production or for acquisition because his channel had most recently acquired a batch of first-class WWII documentaries, perhaps a

dozen, undoubtedly high quality, so he had more than enough of this "colour".

### **#5: Bookshelf**

At the end of our first of seven weeks of shooting in Berlin, we discovered that we had thirty-some hours of wonderful discussions on tape but also many hours of Weizenbaum sitting in front of his bookshelf, telling stories, sometimes very long ones. We had few excursions and mainly one setup: Joe Weizenbaum sitting in front of his bookshelf. We were already in big trouble, aesthetically....

### **#6: Competitor**

In the middle of another phase, best characterised as desperate when it was so difficult to stay tuned, we received a phone call from a young man in Germany who claimed that he had known Weizenbaum far longer than we did and that he already had received support from German television for \*his film on Weizenbaum. It turned out that he was a successful documentary filmmaker with deep pockets. We felt more desperate than ever.

### **#7: No Money**

We were economically conservative and only spent money when it was absolutely necessary. We erased our first film to get disk space and later slashed the back-up disks and our film collection as well. But now, for the first time, we had to decide whether to give up or ... what?

We decided to take out a bank loan to complete the film, one way or the other.

### **#8: Sponsors**

To finance another shooting in Berlin we tried to get a sponsor. Weizenbaum had taken some pictures of us with his wonderful all mechanical LEICA camera, so we asked LEICA to sponsor the film. We even made expensive phone calls to somebody at Glenfiddich, in Scotland, only to find out that it was very difficult for us to understand they were saying. We contacted eight companies and all we got was a piece of shareware from a software developer – but no money.

### **#9: Conflict**

After fourteen weeks of shooting we returned to Vienna with 35 hours of footage. We had always aimed for a feature-length film that could be presented in cinemas. When we thought we had the first 88-minute version finished we got in real trouble with Weizenbaum for the first time. He disliked lots of the details, the film's length, the extensive use of archival material and many other things. We had a difficult time, all three of us, but stayed in contact via Skype and discussed possible solutions.

### **#10: Distribution Lock-Up**

Once the film was finished, we spread the good news looking for distribution and cinema release. Five companies answered: some wanted to resell the

DVD, while one was considering the film for a limited cinema release in Germany.

Distributors were only moderately interested and they pointed us in the direction of public resources to get the cinema release subsidised, a common practice. Later, this became a precondition of a contract that would not have allowed us to sell our DVD directly. Instead the distributor would have been given the exclusive right to do so. Our online DVD sales were steadily growing (we received EUR 23 for each DVD), and here we were being offered nothing for the first 1,000 DVDs and astonishingly little for the next. We did not sign the contract.

### **#11: Subsidised Cinema**

We received an oral preliminary estimate that we had good chances of getting a small subsidy for cinema release and that a film about Weizenbaum deserved to be presented in cinemas. We were delighted and proud! But we still had to decide on a distributor. Without a well-known distributor we couldn't get funding. Not the first time we felt trapped on a one-way street.

### **#12: Digital Monopoly**

We contacted the leading German digital cinema network, which programmes hundreds of digital cinemas, all equipped with digital projectors and cinema servers. The project is subsidised by the EU and a jury selects the content. They offered to convert the film into a proprietary format. This digital master would have been less expensive than a 35mm film copy, yet as we didn't get the required specification we couldn't manage the conversion by ourselves, thus, it was too expensive for us.

Finally we found a digital-cinema server vendor that needed content – our first sponsor who also equipped the lecture auditorium at the University of Jena for our premiere in November 2006.

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> This article was published in DOX Magazine, Issue #76, May 2008