Webisodes: Examining the Making of an Emergent Internet Medium

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For decades, film, video, and television have been entertaining a global audience and delivering important information or news. However, in recent years the Internet added a novel distribution channel for film, bypassing established routes like TV broadcasts and thus, changing the way TV and film are consumed. These scripted episodic and sometimes experimental videos for the web are often labeled as *webisodes*. While the distribution of *webisodes* is mainly characterized by on-demand online streaming the act of creating this novel format is highly diverse, highly cooperative and draws heavily on information technology. This work in progress paper is a first step to better understand this community. To this end, we recruited and interviewed eight persons, four producers of traditional films and four producers of *webisodes*. From our data we derived a set of observations and claims that we use for discussion and future research.

Webisode; Internet; IPTV; Video Platform; Video on Demand; Media Production.

1. INTRODUCTION

The rapid growth of the Internet within the last two decades has led to a global entertainment culture, making the Internet a place of entertainment rather than being primarily a resource for information (Ha, L. & Ganahl, R. 2013).

During this time video streaming has become a mainstream technology and is available for stationary and mobile devices (Cisco Corporation 2013). Lately, television companies have taken advantage of this trend and host their broadcast program on Internet media libraries for free (Peirce, L. M. & Tang, T. 2012). In addition to these freely available services, fee-based on-demand streaming arose such as *Amazon Prime* and *Netflix*.

As these advances in technology allow the audience immediate access to video content according to their (niche) interests and needs, a shift towards more Internet usage rather than watching pre-scheduled television can be observed (Liebowitz, S. J. & Zentner, A. 2012). TV set manufacturers respond to this trend by integrating Internet streaming capabilities into their devices.

In 2011 *Netflix* began producing high quality series especially for the web (*webisodes*). Being a huge success, three of them were nominated for the *Primetime Emmy Awards*, making them the first web series ever to be nominated for a major

television award (Russel, J. 2013). In addition to these business-driven approaches, independent amateurs started producing short and inexpensive videos (i.e., *webisodes*) and hosted them on online video-sharing websites such as *Vimeo* and *YouTube*.

Besides professionals and amateurs, semi-professionals caught the attention of the online video audience. In the context of *webisodes*, semi-professionals can be described as independent producers, who await some income from their artistic investment. This expectation is often justified by the level of quality semi-professionals are able to accomplish. However, the transition between amateurs on the one side and professionals on the other side is fluent without fixed or predetermined boundaries.

In the context of this paper, we investigate *webisodes* as a novel media channel, produced by (semi)-professionals who employ and tweak existing tools and film making strategies. To be able to better support this user group we need to understand which challenges this community faces and how it handles them.

2. BACKGROUND

New technical developments and formats not only alter and expand the definition of television and the

reception practices of the audience (Telotte, J. P. 2008), they often also lower the cost for non-professionals to create and distribute their own content. The rise of *Web 2.0* and the installation of fast Internet infrastructures facilitated video sharing platforms as a feasible and convenient distribution service.

YouTube and *Vimeo*, both began as venture-funded start-ups and grew into major providers for user generated web based video content. As these platforms grew the hosted video content multiplied and matured. At the same time, new communities dedicated to online video production originated and helped to establish new varieties of video genres such as video logs and *webisodes.*

Webisodes have evolved into a successful part of the online entertainment industry as they often cover niche subjects for a local or global audience. This success is supported and accelerated by *webisodes'* relatively low costs in production. Nevertheless, a successful online video - or *webisode* - can be the first step that gets a career started and open up to audiences (Deveau, D. J. 2010; Ryan, M. D. & Hearn, G. 2010).

Audiences can be attracted by a deliberate distinction from other film makers by expressing one's very personal daily live and identity (Bogdan, C. & Bowers, J. 2007; Roibás, A. C. & Sala, R. 2007). Additionally, amateurs often utilise a casual and informal approach leading to new and creative ways for producers of audio and video to interact with their audience (Benford, S., et. Al 2012).

Hence, producers and their audience form online communities whose members interact with each other by means of electronic devices. An important task for a vital online community is to motivate people to join and contribute over a long period of time. This also makes an online community more interesting for non-members and lowers the bar to passively follow and finally to join it (Markey, P. M. 2000).

Complex artefacts like film or video rely on the work and knowledge of a group of specialists. While some group members (e.g., actor or director of photography) have to be on the film set, other group members join the process of video making exclusively before or after the shooting. This includes writers, cutters or special effect artists. In this way, the process of video making involves collaboration between a group of people that is temporally and physically distributed (Olson, G. M. & Olson, J. S. 2000).

This distributed group of specialists has to determine effective modes of communication to set up a mutual understanding of the subtasks (Olson, G. M. & Olson, J. S. 2000). Even though, spatial and temporal distributed communication is not specific to video online communities the way

various communication channels are incorporated can be different to other, less media affine communities and therefore be worth having a closer look at.

Besides community work and highly specialised tasks, film making is a demanding, multifaceted and complex process. Formally, the process of film making can be divided into several stages, such as pre-production (at the beginning), production and post-production (at the end) (Kirk, D. et.al 2007). Every stage features specialised work phases and work packages.

3. STUDY

In our research, we investigate the following research questions:

- (1) Who produces *webisodes*?
- (2) Why do people work in *webisodes* and what is their motivation?
- (3) What tools are in use and how are they used?

As a first step to address our research questions we conducted semi-structured interviews with eight persons in the film/webisodes business; four participants were involved in general film productions and four participants were engaged in *webisodes* productions. From the *webisodes* producers, three persons consider their work as a hobby while one person produces content on a professional basis.

The participants were recruited through snowball sampling and direct calls to production companies. Recruitment criteria were designed to include people involved across a range of projects, which varied in terms of film genre, maturity of the project and their organizational structure.

The semi-structured interviews lasted between 60-90 minutes and took place at a location of the participant's choice. When conducting the interviews, we carefully allowed the participants to speak without interruptions about whatever they thought relevant. During the interviews, we made audio recordings and transcribed them later.

To create a rich description of the transcriptions we utilised thematic analysis (Braun, V. & Clarke, V. 2006), a research tool that can be employed in a broadly explorative fashion without upfront detailed theoretical foundations.

4. FINDINGS

Our findings from the eight interviews paint a picture of a highly diverse group of people with varied motivations and goals. They utilize information technology to master both,

organizational workload and creative challenges. We go on to detail the preliminary findings related to our initial research questions as well as two additional themes that we identified during the data analysis.

4.1 Who produces webisodes?

Professional broadcasters compete for market share, and to minimize risk on investment they tend to stick to established formats. In contrast, *webisode* producers use their artistic freedom to try out novel, maybe controversial film formats. Hence, it is of little surprise that *webisodes* attract people with diverse backgrounds. Still, all *webisode* producers we interviewed were already connected to the film business. They either already work in the film business themselves, study film/media, or know someone who works in the film business.

4.2 Why do people engage in webisodes?

We identified two factors relevant for *webisodes* engagement. First, some participants were already working in the professional film industry and were not satisfied with the projects they were working on. For these people the genre of *webisodes* provided an opportunity for working on a project with a more rewarding outcome. Second, participants were interested in the film industry and tried to attract attention through a well-made *webisode*. It was also evident that the personal background of the founder(s) can have a huge impact when assembling a team of volunteers to set up a fully functional film production crew.

Motivation and engagement also relates to monetary aspects and funding. As a plenitude of high quality video content on the Internet is made with virtually no budget, it is hard to imagine money being the primary motivation for such projects. However, the prospect of future monetary compensation can be motivating and so can be sociological reasons. Social aspects include membership in a group, influence in a group, fulfilment of personal needs, and emotional connection to people who share the same interests.

4.3 What tools and requirements do exist?

During the interviews, it became apparent that *webisodes* already spawn from grassroots projects to projects similar to professional production companies in size and effort. Whatever size or structure, the process is always highly cooperative and heavily relies on digital tools.

Professional TV producer deliver their final product to broadcasters, and therefore, their product must fulfil a set of defined technical specifications such as colour range or bitrates. In comparison, *webisode* producers do not face technical minimum standards as the business model of video sharing platforms is normally based on accumulating as much as possible video content to increase data traffic and consequently advertising revenue. However, *webisode* producers often voluntarily fulfil television standards to show off their production skills and the chance to sell their *webisodes* to a professional broadcast company eventually.

To organize their workflow *webisode* producers often adopt existing web tools. However, as a *webisodes* production team usually split up after a project, it does not seem worth the effort to customize existing applications or implement new ones from scratch. In contrast, most professional TV producers do use tailor made software.

Even though the distribution of *webisodes* is out-sourced to on-demand online streaming services, promoting and advertising the final product is still a reasonable part of the overall work load, which also calls for specific tools or support strategies.

4.4 Meeting places and time management

In addition to the findings referring to our research questions we identified *Meeting Places* and *Time Management* as two recurring themes. Meeting places are physical spaces or locations where people engaged in a *webisodes* project can gather and exchange ideas, thoughts, and material. Time management refers to the handling of milestones and deadlines.

5. DISCUSSION

This work in progress paper provides first insight into the work practices of a creative, however, diverse community of film producers. Drawing and reflecting on the findings presented above, we suggest and discuss a set of opportunities that might be promising approaches when supporting webisode making.

1) Collaboration Finder: A *webisode* team is usually formed around a single person or a small core-team (cf. above). At times a small piece of work can't be done by the founder(s) due to a lack of experience or knowledge. Therefore, it is crucial for the founder(s) to find volunteers with that missing skill. Here, technology could be beneficial to find further collaborators. Equally important to a volunteer's skill is the willingness to work for little or no money, and this fact should also be considered in identifying collaborators.

2) Meta Space: While in traditional film production the team members are obliged to use specific tools (for communication, etc.), it is much harder for *webisode* producers to find a common ground for electronic communication and exchange of information and content. Often, team members are registered on different, incompatible collaboration

platforms. In contrast to professional film production companies it is hardly possible to compel team members to use a specific platform. Thus, we see a demand for a meta platform which connects existing platforms of different providers. "... allowing us to concentrate on the content and not on technical communication issues" (Participant5).

3) Funding and Dissemination: According to the interviewees *webisodes* are often still perceived as "videos of cats made with the mobile phone" (Participant6). This misconception can complicate the process of acquiring funding and dissemination work. The interviewees called for platforms to help raising awareness for the novel and inspiring format of *webisodes*.

4) Tools for Managing Deadlines: In our interviews we have learnt that most professional productions start with a predefined deadline. This makes planning easier in the respect that all persons know from the beginning when the final product has to be delivered. In contrast, non-professional productions often rely on voluntary work of friends and acquaintances and therefore, deadlines are often hard to meet. This existing problem might constitute a fruitful opportunity for collaboration and organisation driven interaction design.

6. CONCLUSION

In this work in progress paper we took a first step in investigating *webisodes*. This included observations and descriptions of professional and semi-professional practices in shooting films for both professional broadcasters and Internet video sharing platforms. The preliminary results are captured by a set of issues *webisode*-filmmaker have to face and which should be considered when designing collaborative digital technologies for this target group. However, additional research is needed to describe the process more comprehensively, identify further stakeholders and depict design implications for *webisode* production tools.

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