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Digital Disruption and its Implications in Generating 'Impact' through Film and Television Practice-as-Research

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Abstract

Both research funding bodies and the Research Excellence Framework (REF) are increasingly looking at 'impact' as an important measure of project success. For those involved in film or television practice-as-research, demonstrating impact beyond the academy and measuring 'reach' has often been considered through the public visibility of their projects. Yet, even for industry professionals it is becoming more difficult to reach target audiences due to the disruption caused by the emergence of on-demand distribution. This has resulted in reduced access to theatrical and broadcast exhibition and led to new challenges in gaining visibility in an increasingly crowded market space that affects commercial and academic projects alike. This paper considers issues faced by professional independent producers in this disrupted environment and examines strategies that have been developed to succeed within it. We argue that lessons learned by independent producers can be adapted by academics involved in film or television practice-as-research to enhance visibility of their own projects and demonstrate 'impact'.

Keywords: practice-as-research, research impact, digital disruption, independent film production, independent television production, research excellence framework

Introduction

The landscape of academic research is changing. In many countries, reforms to research council structures have resulted in new expectations for researchers to show 'impact' in their work to justify the value of public expenditure. 'Commercial potential' and 'societal relevance' are increasingly being emphasised to more closely link universities, industry and government (the 'Triple Helix' first discussed by Etzkowitz & Leydesdorff 1995 and developed by Benner & Sandström 2000). Models of research methods more directly relevant to industry, including different types of consideration of practice such as Research-in-Practice, Research-by-Practice, Practice-based-Research and Practice-as-Research (PaR), have grown and developed in response to these new demands.

The creative industries, including film and television, are widely recognised as significant contributors to many national economies – UK Business Secretary Greg Clark noted that the sector "currently contributes £92 billion a year" to the British economy alone (GOV.UK, 2018). Moreover, the demand for screen-based content has never been greater with commercial film production increasing by nearly 50% since 2010 (Statista, n.d.) and the rapid growth of on-line services expanding the availability of both new and back catalogue television product (Wilson, 2018).

New digital technologies, most notably Video-on-Demand (VoD), are changing the ways in which content is accessed by viewers and monetized by producers. Tryon (2013) provides a detailed account of this 'digital disruption' including emerging changes to delivery mechanisms and the resulting impact on consumption patterns. The

transformation of the business of film and television has affected the independent production sector significantly. Reaching audiences and generating revenue has become increasingly difficult due to the growing amount of product available and the impact of new distribution practices by both Hollywood Studios and international digital content distributors (e.g., Netflix and Amazon) – Kehoe & Mateer (2015) examine this for the UK market. Independent producers have consequently had to develop new ways to compete and succeed in this highly competitive environment. Since academics involved in Practice-as-Research also need to reach audience to maximise and demonstrate impact, we argue lessons can be learned from examining these strategies.

In this paper, we consider various ways that independents have sought to increase audience size and enhance revenue generation. Through interviews with film and television practitioners, we have identified new marketing and exhibition methods that have enabled them to compete in this 'disrupted' marketplace. Many of the techniques discussed can be adapted by academics undertaking PaR to enhance audience reach and thus demonstrate 'impact' and 'benefit' to research councils and other institutional stakeholders. Thus, lessons can be learned from industry that can enhance academic research.

Measures of Success and Impact

In the UK, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) is viewed as the main indicator of the value of research at both institutional level, rating the universities themselves, and at national level, by providing "accountability for public investment in research and […] evidence of the benefits of this investment" (REF 2021, n.d.). A key component of this is the formal assessment of research outputs as well as their 'impact' beyond the

academy[1]. For an academic conducting Practice-as-Research, there is normally an additional requirement that a project be clearly situated among other research works and contextualised to show novelty and a contribution to the greater body of knowledge. Unless there is an aspect that is overtly unique (e.g., an experimental technique used in production, a new form of narrative, etc.), meeting these requirements can be challenging, particularly for more commercially-oriented or 'mainstream' outputs where the novelty or significance may not be visible on screen. Without the creation of additional traditional academic publications that detail how the work meets these requirements, it is questionable whether such outputs will be considered as legitimate research[2]. On the other hand, demonstrating 'impact' is arguably more straightforward for commercially-focused PaR as the REF considers this through the evaluation of 'impact case studies' using measures similar to those often used in industry.

For REF 2021, panel criteria include indicators such as 'engagement', 'independent citations in the media', 'employment' and 'financial figures' in assessments of case study submissions, (ibid). There is an increased emphasis on the use of quantifiable data – including 'numbers', 'percentages and rates', 'measures of change', 'time periods' and 'currency' – to better enable clearer like-for-like comparisons between case studies. These criteria seem to match well against metrics often used to assess the success of commercial film or television works:

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[1] The third component of the REF, assessment of the research environment, is not directly relevant to this paper and thus is not considered here.

[2] There has long been a divide between research in classical arts subjects (e.g., visual arts and music) and those that are performance-driven (e.g., theatre, film and television). The latter have often been seen as 'inferior' given a seemingly vocational focus and an emphasis on practice that many scholars feel lacks academic rigour (see Nelson 2013).

- *Reach*: screening attendance, number of viewers, audience size
- *Significance*: published reviews, feature articles, audience focus group data
- *Economic Benefits*: jobs or placements created, box office revenue, ancillary revenue generated
- *Societal Benefits*: changes in policies or laws, actions taken by viewers, awareness raised

Chapter 4 of Barrie's (2000) seminal book on media research methods provides a useful overview of specific techniques designed to evaluate the exposure of media content. Jensen (2013) and Bertrand & Hughes (2018) both expand on his work, discussing a range of tools to evaluate media in a variety of contexts.

The Importance of Visibility

Central to generating impact is 'visibility,' which is essential for any film or TV programme, irrespective of whether the work is for research or commercial consumption. In the past, the options for exhibition of independent content were limited to traditional theatrical release, terrestrial broadcast, festival screenings and/or physical media (e.g., DVD or tape). Simply obtaining public release in some form suggested a base level of importance and impact. Indeed, prior to the advent of digital production technologies, the cost of production was sufficiently significant to limit the amount of product made.

Knight & Thomas (2011) provide a useful analysis of distribution approaches and marketing practices for independent and 'art' films starting in the 1970s. These often involved a 'do-it-yourself' approach to distribution and exhibition in order to reach their target audiences directly, bypassing the traditional 'gatekeepers' who controlled access to theatrical or broadcast venues. Although the period their work

covers ends just as Video-on-Demand was gaining significant public take-up, they noted that "… although operating online offers a potential global reach, given the abundance of material on the internet, establishing a presence and identity is still crucial." (ibid, p269)

Today, the advent of new types of media-capable platforms including phones and tablets as well as the reach of VoD and other more flexible means for consumers to access product, would suggest that the potential for independent producers (and those involved in PaR) to gain visibility for their work is greater than ever before. However, lower production costs facilitated by new and more accessible technologies has led to record levels of content of all types being produced. Even smartphone cameras have evolved to the point where they can be used for commercial projects – Erbland (2018) provides an overview of feature films shot on phones including Sean Baker's *Tangerine* (2015) and Steven Soderbergh's *Unsane* (2018). This has resulted in an extremely crowded content marketplace in which it is increasingly difficult for independent work to be found and therefore seen.

The State of the UK Marketplace

Although cinema attendance in the UK has remained essentially stable for the period 2007-2017, at roughly 170 million admissions per year, the number of films released has notably increased to an average of 15 each week (BFI 2018). Of the 760 films released in this country in 2017, 64% screened at fewer than 50 sites with 34% at fewer than 10 (ibid). This, coupled with the fact that typically only around 7% of UK cinemas show non-mainstream features (BFI 2017), confirms that theatrical exhibition is now very difficult for the majority of independents to secure.

During the same period, Video-on-Demand has taken off. Netflix has seen its subscriber base increase by nearly 800% since 2012, to nearly 160 million members

(Richter, 2018), and Amazon has shown roughly similar growth, surpassing 100 million subscribers to their Prime service earlier this year (Spangler, 2018a). More films are now consumed on VoD than theatrically but interestingly this has not encouraged audiences to consume a wider range of material (i.e., there is no greater diversity in audience tastes nor a demonstrable willingness to try new types of product despite easier access to it). Coupled with the widely held view that "the marketplace is over-saturated" (Ryder in Distributing Films Online, 2017), this underlines the significance of the challenges independent producers face in reaching their target audiences.

The Myth of Self-Distribution

Given the power of online media and the possibility for direct control of revenue streams, self-distribution would appear to offer a desirable and logical approach for both independent producers and those involved in practice-as-research. Knight & Thomas (2011) suggest that it should be possible to adapt methods used previously to best exploit the current landscape. However, examples of successful self-distribution by filmmakers have nearly always involved relatively large cash injections (or even 'buy outs') from established industry third parties. Veteran independent producer and Raindance founder Elliot Grove describes a typical case:

> One of my favourite self-distribution stories is Lee DeMarbre's 2001 classic *Jesus Christ Vampire Hunter*. He followed up a successful string of festival appearances with a tour of the Northeastern States where he booked the film into a string of late-night cinema screenings. Following that, he managed to get the film distributed by Lloyd Kaufman's Troma label, and most recently it is showing on a string of Internet aggregators like Netflix. Lee has managed to create a revenue stream for his film over a decade-plus span. (Grove, 2018)

Thus while DeMarbre did devise and execute an exhibition strategy that circumvented some aspects of traditional gatekeeping, negotiating access to little-used late night slots

in key theatres, it was the acquisition by a recognised distributor that enabled much broader visibility and facilitated easier audience access to his film. Considering this in terms of Practice-as-Research, the film's 'impact' was ultimately reliant on conventional dissemination. It might be asked why producers do not opt to self-distribute their films to retain ownership and control over their product. In part, this is because distribution and marketing are significantly different tasks to production, requiring specialist skills that producers lack. Involving an established company to do this work is highly attractive, even if potential revenue is reduced. For those involved in PaR, the idea of involving a third party to assist in exhibition may seem unrealistic but the prospective benefits suggest that it could be highly beneficial and thus worthy of exploration.

Examples of film projects that have achieved significant levels of revenue or visibility solely through self-distribution, without any outside assistance, are scarce. Likewise, industry often (unfairly) views self-distribution as an indication that a work is not of sufficient professional quality to merit public release. Tom Kerevan, producer of the independent horror film *Tear Me Apart* (2015), noted that self-released films "are not considered proper movies" by industry because they do not have a more traditional release pattern (interview, October 22, 2018). Indeed, many films of quality (as demonstrated by prestigious festival presence and awards) fail to secure distribution deals, often due to market forces. Acquisition executives will pass on a film if it is not directly aligned with their company sales or marketing objectives, even if they admire it. Self-distribution may be widely seen as a last resort, but when all traditional channels have been exhausted, it can become a necessity. The effort involved in making any film is significant (not to mention the investment of money and time) so the prospect of not having any substantial visibility is unacceptable.

The rise of VoD outlets suggests that the possibilities for distributing television or film projects are widening beyond traditional broadcast or classical theatrical exhibition models. However, to get a work on a high-profile platform such as Netflix or Amazon, or even non-subscription platforms such as iTunes, still requires the platform to select the work. Indeed, access to these platforms by independent producers typically requires the involvement of an 'Aggregator'[3], such as The Movie Partnership, Distribber or Quiver, which adds yet another layer of gatekeeping.

But platforms do exist for truly independent self-distribution. Companies such as Ooayala and Deluxe provide customisable online systems that can enable individuals or organisations to create their own VoD platform with full control of viewer access, content and monetisation. However, the cost of these is prohibitively high for most independents, and they do nothing to promote visibility. Marketing falls wholly to the producer and, as the difficulties of niche VoD services such as Afrostream (Briel, 2017), DramaFever (Spangler, 2018b) and FilmStruck (Spangler, 2018c) demonstrate, securing audience to cover costs can be difficult, even for highly resourced organisations. The challenges in self-distribution are substantial for independent filmmakers and are arguably even greater for those involve in PaR, where project resources are typically more limited and skewed toward production rather than distribution.

Considerations for Gaining Visibility and Generating Impact

Despite the challenges, independent producers have developed creative ways to

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[3] Aggregators are companies that, for a fee, will arrange exhibition on VoD platforms that would not normally deal directly with individuals or small companies. They are effectively film 'sales agents' but solely for online distribution.

generate initial interest in their projects then leverage this to gain larger exposure that ultimately can build audience. Although specific approaches vary, they usually involve a mix of innovative forms of screenings followed by more traditional release mechanisms once a certain level of visibility has been achieved.

Jack Tarling, producer at Shudder Films, has simple advice – "make the best film that you can" (interview, June 1, 2018), a reminder that the quality of a project has a significant – but not absolute – impact on potential visibility and strategies needed to generate impact. Tarling always targets cinema-based distribution. "If the film is strong enough to go theatrical, it will. Good theatrical means that the rest (VoD, TV and other platforms) fall into place." (ibid) He argues that the "big streaming giants look at theatrical as 'free publicity'" and that high profile VoD represents the main source of audience (and revenue) for independents.

Tarling and Manon Ardisson produced the feature *God's Own Country* (2017), one of the most successful British independent films of 2017 having grossed over £2.5M theatrically (IMDB Pro, n.d. a). Developed as part of BFI's iFeature programme and with support from Creative England, the project ultimately followed a conventional release strategy that relied heavily on the strength and topicality of the story (a young homosexual farmer's world is changed when he falls in love with a Romanian migrant worker). It premiered at the 2017 Sundance Film Festival, where it was nominated for the Grand Jury Prize for World Cinema (Dramatic) and Director Francis Lee won the Directing Award. It also won the Männer Jury Award as Best Film at the Berlin International Film Festival (IMDB n.d.). These successes led to it being picked up by major distributors Samuel Goldwyn Films and Orion Pictures for US theatrical release (Tartaglione 2017) and Picturehouse for the UK (Grater 2017). Keen to extend the film's visibility to maximise the theatrical run, the filmmakers targeted numerous other

international festivals, including those with LGBT themes. In total, *God's Own Country* was nominated for 33 awards, including a BAFTA, with an impressive 29 wins (IMDB n.d.). Tarling noted that positive press and reviews "made distributors confident in theatrical." Indeed, sustained high box office averages resulted in a longer UK theatrical run than had been planned, which "gave VoD (providers) confidence that there was demand." (interview, June 1, 2018) The film first appeared on Amazon as transactional VoD before being picked up by Netflix (as subscription-based VoD) after a 90-day window. Tarling noted that "there was no need to do bespoke marketing" because of the volume of positive press exposure. All that was required was to promote the film's success as widely as possible and social media, particularly 'superfans' active on Twitter, played a vital part in this (ibid).

Tarling attributes the success of *God's Own Country* to the quality of the film itself, the universality of love stories and the timeliness of the topic. But he is also aware that such a hit is rare and that independent projects typically require much more effort to gain visibility:

> You need to motivate the audience. Is your film going to motivate people to go to the theatre? Films can still have value without much theatrical (exposure) but there must be (an attractive) element be it topicality, timeliness or a well-known event. (ibid)

Even though *God's Own Country* received immediate critical and festival success (which is much more the exception than the norm in independent film), the producers still needed to exploit and promote the publicity generated. Their approach was strategic and sought to build visibility using a variety of vehicles based on their understanding of both their film and their target audience. For those engaged in Practice-as-Research, the approach is directly transferable. Understanding the potential appeal of the work, identifying and targeting audience for it, generating initial visibility

and then strongly promoting any exposure received to leverage wider visibility, can maximise its reach and impact.

Tom Kerevan and his colleagues at Cannibal Films had three aims for their first project, *Tear Me Apart* (2015), a £60K micro-budget feature film:

> "a) make as much money back for our investors as possible […], b) get the attention of the industry, make people take note (of us as emerging filmmakers) […] and c) get it out to as many people as possible outside the industry." (Kerevan in Distributing Films Online, 2017)

The filmmakers prioritised paying off investors first. They developed a VoD-focused strategy involving Amazon and using social media to raise awareness. Over a six-month period, they developed a focused PR campaign including creating a companion website for the film and purchasing advertising on Facebook, both of which linked directly to Amazon where users could rent or purchase the film. While the approach generated traffic, the revenue created through Amazon only covered the cost of the Facebook advertising. But when the film moved to Amazon Prime, the algorithms promoted it to a point where it "took off", creating a small but steady revenue stream that would eventually repay investors. Cannibal Films had approached independent distributors worldwide but there was little interest as the film had received no theatrical visibility. They rejected an offer from a US Sales Agent and decided to live with the 'long tail' of income from Amazon even though it meant repayment would take longer than hoped (Kerevan, interview, October 22, 2018).

Kerevan notes the imperative of having a clear understanding of objectives for any project before starting – "Why are you making this movie and why are you making this now?" (ibid). Those involved in Practice-as-Research need to ask similar questions, particularly given the growing requirements to demonstrate impact and the

value of the investment by research funding bodies. Considering impact strategies during project development can help fulfil project aims more effectively and efficiently.

Independent filmmakers often regard theatrical release as the 'holy grail'. However, competition for commercial screen space is fierce. As Samm Haillay, producer at Third Films notes, "distributors seem to be getting more conservative" (Haillay in Distributing Films Online, 2017) with traditional 'pick-up' significantly less common for independents. Yet, as Andee Ryder, producer at Misfits Entertainment indicates, theatrical exposure continues to play a vital role in visibility:

> Theatrical campaigns help drive traffic to on-demand and home entertainment but is expensive and requires sufficient (print and advertising) investment to make it worthwhile otherwise it is wasted money. (ibid)

To get around the traditional 'gatekeepers' that control theatrical access, particularly in the absence of an adequate marketing budget, many producers are turning to a 'road show' model. Here, the producer identifies key locations of target audience members and then develops a 'tour' of the film with a limited number of screenings at each 'stop' – we suggest that this type of approach is readily applicable to Practice-as-Research projects as well. On-demand cinema providers such as Ourscreen, which secures cinema screen space once a specific number of tickets are pre-sold, and independent-friendly schemes such as Picturehouse 'Discover Tuesdays' involving the City Screen chain, which are comparatively easy for producers to secure, give projects access to commercial venues albeit for limited periods. Revenue generated is usually split between the venue and the filmmakers but often "the goal is not about money, it is about visibility", explains Haillay (interview, May 21, 2018). "The trick is to raise awareness and word of mouth" that can ultimately drive traffic to VoD or, ideally, enable full distributor pick-up. However, it is vital to "be aware of the release schedules

of the studios to avoid competing with high-profile mainstream and 'tentpole' films" (ibid).

Approaches to road shows vary. For *Edie* (2017), the filmmakers 'four walled'[4], heavily publicising the project to their target audience of senior groups and old age pensioners. They were able to generate several sell-out shows from which they secured distribution by Arrow Films (Grove, interview, October 16, 2018) with the film generating nearly $1M in box office revenue (IMDB Pro, n.d. b). The documentary *A Plastic Ocean* (2016) employed a different type of road show model. Although backed by Netflix, the film was created in support of a non-profit organisation (Plastic Oceans, 2018). To raise awareness of both the film and the environmental problem it examines, publicity gained through its premiere at the Raindance Film Festival in London was leveraged to secure a screening at the United Nations. This led to screenings to government officials in numerous countries. More relevant to independent producers and those involved in PaR, the filmmakers also actively supported the creation of regional websites to target local environmentalists and grass roots organisations. Groups could register interest in obtaining a screening copy of the film and once a critical number was reached (typically 50), the filmmakers would send a DVD or DCP copy for local screenings for a small fee (Grove, interview, October 16, 2018). Effectively the road show was facilitated by the niche audience itself, which in turn generated further word-of-mouth thus driving further take-up.

For a film 'road show', the producer must fulfil the role of a distributor, including hiring a theatrical booker (or booking directly), aiming screenings appropriately, developing meaningful partnerships that can directly support the project,

[4] 'Four Walling' refers to hiring a cinema for a limited period of time effectively purchasing tickets for all seats and then reselling them directly to audiences (Wasser 1995)

personalising audience outreach to create film 'experiences', and extending engagement with viewers beyond simple screenings. There is no reason why these methods cannot also be used in support of Practice-as-Research. But the approach does necessitate careful consideration of where a project is situated within the marketplace – is it 'activism', 'art' or 'commerce'? The distinction is crucial to positioning the work in a way to maximise public understanding and engagement (and ultimately impact). 'Activism' in this context centres on raising awareness for a cause. In that instance, identifying and targeting stakeholders to generate and grow awareness is paramount and can help for the audience itself to promote the film. If the work is 'art' then the distribution route should mimic gallery methods with the project travelling in smaller, more considered ways with a 'launch' followed by a 'tour' showcasing the work in arts-focused venues effectively developing a 'slow burn' increase in visibility. This is an established model used extensively for PaR. However, if a work is framed as 'commerce' then the approach needs to be more aggressive as the success of mainstream films is largely dependent on creating 'buzz' and expanding it as quickly as possible. Unlike art, commercial projects usually have a limited period in which to create impact. In PaR approaches are typically more reactive than proactive and festival success is often seen as the only significant factor in the level of impact possible. While time demands on academics and researchers might dissuade them from taking on distribution tasks, if PaR is truly going to be of value and generate impact, they are essential.

In order to give their projects visibility in an overcrowded marketplace, some independent producers have devised creative approaches to marketing that are distinctive yet cost-effective. Third Films' feature drama *Blood Cells* (2014) co-directed by Joseph Bull and Luke Seomore, who is also an established musician and

composer of the film's score, uses music prominently in the story. As part of their road show, Haillay decided to trial two screenings featuring a live orchestra followed by Q&A with Seomore. Both quickly sold out, netting about £1,700 each, which more than covered the cost of the musicians. Haillay subsequently looked to expand this approach for another project with Seomore, *Heaven is Dark* (in pre-production as of this writing). Here the plan is to tour the film to three UK cities per week during a four-week period. Each screening will feature live orchestral accompaniment as well as Q&A with the filmmakers. The tour will conclude with one high-profile 'gala' screening based on a Picturehouse 'Discovery Tuesday.' The goal is to generate 'buzz' to drive traffic to VoD, the main source of potential revenue.

Although the film has not yet started production, Haillay chose to pitch the strategy to a high profile specialist Video-on-Demand platform[5], citing the success of the screenings for *Blood Cells*. He projected that, depending on the venues, sell-out events could net between £2,000 and £2,500 each, generating up to £30K for the tour. Offering a 50:50 split of the tour revenue, Haillay secured financial support for the theatrical road show as well as a guarantee for promotion and distribution through the VoD service (ibid). The deal has allowed him to obtain the remaining production funding required. This example shows that identifying and understanding the unique aspects of a project during development can not only help in the design of an effective strategy to generate impact after completion, it also can strengthen the producer's ability to get the project made.

However adding value needs to be done in a manner that directly complements the work, otherwise the effort can be misplaced. To promote their zombie action film

[5] The name of the company is being withheld due to commercial sensitivities as of the time of writing.

Redcon-1 (2018), Intense Productions arranged a road show of over 30 screenings featuring Q&A with the filmmakers, including 22 dates in Vue cinemas across the UK. The company also contacted colleges and universities offering to run a masterclass titled, 'How to Make a Micro-budget Film & Sell It', seeking to leverage the saleability of their team, Carlos Gallardo (producer of the celebrated 1992 micro-budget feature *El Mariachi*) in particular. The goal was to raise awareness of the film directly with their key target audience (16-24 year olds) and generate additional funds to enable further promotion (Grove, interview, October 16, 2018). It is hard to assess the overall effectiveness of this approach, particularly the take-up of the masterclasses, but box office figures of under $25K worldwide (at the time of writing, IMDB Pro, n.d. c) and lukewarm critical reception suggest it has not been particularly successful.

Strategies to add value hinge on fully understanding how that value can be exploited. For example, Cannibal Films used different types of online presence to entice visitors to rent or purchase *Tear Me Apart* through Amazon. But the filmmakers also sought to strengthen this by developing a series of similarly-themed Kindle-based short stories. Kerevan (interview, October 22, 2018) noted that the idea was to link the e-book sites to Amazon Prime to enable easy click-through to the film but after committing to the approach they learned that no such linking provision exists. Compounding problems, although a URL was included at the bottom of the description for each item with seemingly unmissable text, they did not realise that Amazon's system hides this unless a 'Read More' link is clicked. Even when the text is revealed, the user must copy and paste the link manually into a browser. As a result, even though there was a good level of take-up in the e-book stories, Kerevan speculates that little of that translated to actual film views. This meant the effort to add value was ultimately ineffective as it had not been sufficiently thought-through (ibid).

Being able to reach target audiences is important, but to generate maximum impact, producers need to secure advocacy as well. Increasingly 'superfans' and 'social media influencers' are seen as an essential part of marketing campaigns. Haroun Hickman, an online 'community building' specialist, explains that next-generation marketing companies such as Zyper use sophisticated approaches to generating awareness of product and promoting purchase (interview, May 31, 2018). These start with the creation of a profile of a 'persona' indicative of a member of the target audience, considering lifestyle patterns and behaviours at a deeper level than conventional demographic analysis. From this, the marketing company contacts members of their own 'community' who fit the core profile and incentivise them to promote the brand through their own personal networks. These networks typically are small enough for the selected community members to be seen to be providing personal recommendations about the product authentically yet are large enough to propagate leads effectively[6]. These marketing companies charge clients per 'fan' with the success of the promotions being assessed by cost-per-engagement metrics considering 'likes', 're-tweets', 'shares', 'comment levels' and other evidence of audience activity on social media (ibid). While it is likely beyond the means of those involved in Practice-as-Research to engage this type of commercial service, the general approach used is still germane if the subject of the work has associated communities or networks. The success of both *God's Own Country* and *A Plastic Ocean* was due in large part to audience members actively spreading positive word-of-mouth and promoting the works themselves organically. While the producers did not hire influencers, the basic approach is the same – create a multi-platform social media presence, actively promote

[6] Hickman reports that these networks typically have a follower base of 1,000 to 3,000 people.

the project, identify followers and supporters, and nurture their ability to act as advocates on the project's behalf. By fully understanding who the core audience is for a work, it should be possible for any producer, PaR or otherwise, to develop awareness and organic advocacy in the same way if project 'champions' can be found. Likewise, research impact can be demonstrated by the same metrics used by marketing companies in assessing the efficacy of the online campaigns.

Maximising Impact for Practice-as-Research

In order to maximise impact for PaR, academics need to keep traditional research questions in mind alongside the considerations outlined above, specifically:

- What is novel or unique about the project that has relevance to research?
- What is the problem or area being addressed and how is knowledge being advanced through the practice?
- How does this project relate to prior works and related research? What is the context?
- What is the potential for impact? Who are the beneficiaries?

It is important that these be considered as early in the project as possible.

David Hickman is a veteran television and film producer as well as an academic at the University of York. He produced and directed three episodes of the highly acclaimed 2011 television series *Slavery: a 21st Century Evil* (Al Jazeera, n.d.). The project highlighted continuing practices and policies that effectively support slavery in a number of countries, with Hickman's episodes considering Haiti, India and Pakistan. The project was selected as a finalist in the 'Best Limited Series' category at the 2012 International Documentary Association awards and also chosen by his department as an 'impact case study' for REF 2014 as Practice-as-Research. The impact of the project

was significant – over 35 million people viewed the series across Al Jazeera's terrestrial, cable and online channels; at least four people were known to have been freed from bonded slavery; and $3M was secured for the creation of a shelter for bonded labourers in Lahore – and this was acknowledged by the REF panel (Hickman, interview, May 31, 2018). However, Hickman noted that it was "hard to detail the research behind filmmaking in conventional academic terms" after a project has been completed. "The activities involved in pre-production (were) directly related to academic research – sourcing subjects, developing means of enquiry, contextualising discoveries, etc. – but my methods were seen as 'non-standard'" even though they were wholly consistent with professional documentary production. This illustrates the importance of considering academic research requirements as early as possible in the PaR process. As Hickman noted:

> If I had known the project would be submitted to the REF, I would have planned it with impact in mind from the start. I would have kept a clear contact list to be able to get back in touch with (participants and other stakeholders) after the project finished to (better chronicle impact). […] I would also make sure to publicise the work being done through all stages of the project by creating a (running) 'making of' website. (ibid).

His experience highlights the need for academics undertaking PaR to define the types of impact they feel the project can generate and consider ways to gather evidence before the project starts. These should be rooted directly in the novelty of the research outcomes. Hickman also stressed the importance of "evaluating and communicating (research) findings through the whole process", logging benefits and linking them directly to stakeholders (ibid).

As Hickman acknowledges, "the nature of impact and what it means (to PaR) is better understood now. The (review) criteria for REF 2021 are clearer and fairer"

(ibid). However, some fundamental issues remain with regard to institutional consideration of media-focused work, which need to be considered by those involved in PaR. In the UK, the academy has a narrow definition of 'authorship' that is overly restrictive when considering film and television production work. Presently only the director (or in certain instances the writer) is considered to be the actual 'author'. Yet, this does not recognise the nature of film production and excludes producers, who arguably have at least as much influence on the development and realisation of a project as the recognised authors, and arguably have more influence on the ultimate impact a project can generate given their involvement in marketing and distribution. As it currently stands, academics with producing roles in PaR projects can only be considered for inclusion in REF if they have created additional research outputs examining the work. The actual media artefact, no matter how significant, cannot be submitted on its own due to the current definition of authorship.

Conclusions

In this paper we have considered Practice-as-Research for film and television in light of the changed media landscape caused by 'digital disruption'. We argue lessons can be learned from the experiences of independent practitioners in trying to have their work seen in this disrupted environment and that these can be adapted to help those involved in PaR generate and demonstrate research impact.

As the links between research, industry and government policy become more pronounced – as exemplified by the Arts and Humanities Research Council's Creative Economy Programme (AHRC 2018) – there is an increasing need for the academy to recognise and embrace industry activities and practices to further the objectives of both areas. We are hopeful that other researchers will begin to explore the synergistic links between them and expand on our comparatively limited work.

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