

CONSTANT COMPANION: EXTENDING YOUR FILM'S AUDIENCE THROUGH A WEB SITE

By Dan Sonnett

You've done it. You've run the funding gauntlet, overcome colossal obstacles in pre-production and tackled the challenges of production. As you rest comfortably in the black leather chair in the editor's suite, trying to enjoy the full measure of your accomplishments, you become dimly aware that you might have forgotten something. Something important. Clearances? All done and filed away. You have the footage you need. Music and narration, check, check. Thinking hard, you close your eyes. The nagging fear swells to a throbbing panic behind your eyes, completely eclipsing your hard-won bliss. Then it hits you. The website. You still have to make a website for your film.

"It's a task I put off as long as I can," says Margaret Koval, writer and director for *The Roman Empire in the First Century* and *Peter and Paul*. "It's a distraction, a possible bull in the china shop." Cassian Harrison, documentary filmmaker and new media producer of *The Greeks: Crucible of Civilization* and *Martin Luther*, agrees. "Ninety-eight percent of what you do in post-production is about the program," says Harrison. "But this is also the time you should think about the website."

Companion websites for documentary films are a vital link between you and your audience. A well-conceived website can help you carve out a corner of cyberspace where you can expand on the information presented in your film,



Rob Mikuriya's innovative *Face to Face* website, produced for ITVS, was featured in the Sundance Online Film Festival. Courtesy of Independent Television Service

provide educational and outreach materials to teachers and community groups and build a community that shares your passion for your subject. But companion websites need not just be a bulletin board, encyclopedia on your topic or concession prize to interviewees that didn't make the cut. They offer a unique opportunity to explore your subject in a new medium, giving you the chance to reach out to your audience in new ways, generate further interest in your film and ensure the story you are telling in your film reaches the greatest number of people.

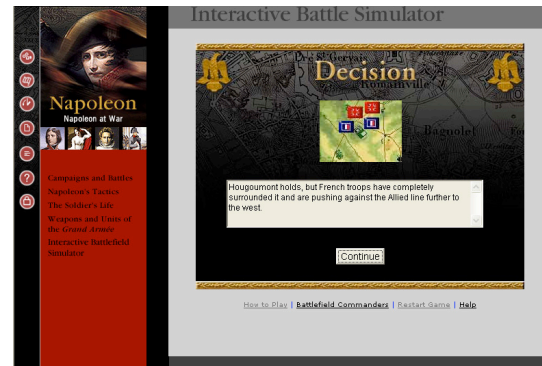
Translating your linear storyline to the merry-go-around of the World Wide Web requires a sometimes painful adaptation. "As a filmmaker, you are shaping, not merely supplying, information," says veteran filmmaker David Grubin. "The web gives you choices, other paths to information, additional material, but far less control over the selection of information needed

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to tell a story.” Over the past three years, companion website for Grubin’s films, including *Napoleon*, *Abraham and Mary Lincoln: A House Divided*, *Young Dr. Freud*, *The Secret Life of the Brain* and *Kofi Annan: Center of the Storm*, have been produced by PBS, Devillier Donegan Enterprises, WGBH and WNET. Grubin has embraced companion websites as a great educational resource, but remains skeptical that visitors to the site would have the same level of experience as watching the film. He’s not alone.

As a documentary producer, you’ve worked hard to craft a meaningful story on film. You’ve labored over cuts, lines of narration, music cues and countless other critical decisions to insure that your audience perceives the story you are presenting in precisely the way you intended. You know the Internet and you’ve used the web to research your subject, book trips, email contacts and to download a few songs that help keep your spirits up through the rough days. But you’ve also experienced the chaotic, fractured nature of the web. People jump in, jump out, sign in, sign off with alarming frequency. Who can help you translate your vision and create a lasting impression that is true to your original vision?

“You have to find a soul mate that can share their web expertise,” says Senior Editor Amanda Hirsch of PBS Interactive. PBS recommends filmmaker team up with a web production group that consists of a producer/project



The companion website for David Grubin’s *Napoleon* featured an “interactive battlefield simulator” for the battle of Waterloo. Courtesy of Sonnett Media Group, LLC

manager, a writer/editor, a copy editor/fact checker, a designer, an HTML developer and a technologist. Few documentary producers have the background to perform more than one of these tasks, so most rely on web development firms to guide them through the process. Engage your web team in the vision of the film and let them help you shape it in a new medium.

“You need to find someone who you trust will always have the film’s best interests in mind,” say Rob Mikuriya, producer of *Face to Face*, an online documentary project produced for ITVS and recently featured in the Sundance Online Film Festival. “It’s very important to find someone who has a similar viewpoint as you. Find someone who understands design, interactivity and technology as well as storytelling.”

“When a project is working well, each team member is valued for their ideas,”

says Jennifer Lawson, a former head of PBS programming and an independent

producer and media specialist. “There are wonderful moments of common visualizations in considering the structure of the site, the depth and quality of content, the tone and sounds of it. Once that’s settled, its time for those with expertise to work their magic.”

Once production begins on your companion website, quality control on content, assessing rights clearances, maintaining a consistent look and feel between the website and the program can further tax a harried producer. It’s critical that you appoint someone from your staff to oversee the day-to-day development of your companion website so you can concentrate on finishing your film, checking the website only during key phases of development. Also, an associate producer or researcher will have infinitely more experience with your subject than any web producer.

Cassian Harrison recommends budgeting additional time for researchers after the film has wrapped to help with the companion website. “They are up to speed on the content and assets,” says Harrison, “they can easily transition to working on the website after the program.” Margaret Koval points out that the added advantage to this is information presented in the film, which is highly combed by experts, is maintained when ported to the web. Otherwise, “the opportunity for error is too great,” she says “when resources and time are limited.”

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POV's *Two Towns of Jasper* companion website for visited over 500,000 times in a two week period during an intensive publicity campaign. Courtesy of POV

on what you want to achieve with it. What is its mission?

Many companion websites focus on promoting the film and furthering the experiences of the film through value-added features, such as additional interviews, discussion boards where your audience can interact with you and each other, and lists of additional resources on your subject.

For HBO, companion websites for documentary films are a venue for extending the experience of their viewers. In planning the website for *In Memoriam 9/11*, web producer Dan Sacher recognized that “the online experience allows viewers to interact and become part of an ongoing dialogue.” Companion websites are another way for HBO to extend their audience’s interaction with the subject presented in their documentaries. “Providing premium content online extends the viewing experience, and in that way, provides avid viewers with a more fulfilling experience,” says Sacher. “Ideally, that translates into a more faithful HBO viewer.”

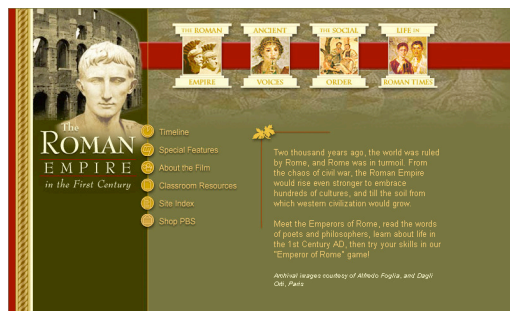
Producers of companion websites are evolving new ways of telling stories and providing resources to your audience that extends the life of your film.

For public television, providing resources for educators is a top priority. “Around twenty-five percent of PBS.org’s audience describe themselves as educators,” say Amanda Hirsch. How about presenting educators with custom lesson plans that uses your film as a key resource?

Companion websites can also be key to delivering materials to support a community-based outreach program based on your film. Debbie Rubenstein, Director of Special Projects for Public Affairs Television and was the executive producer of the companion websites for *On Our Own Terms*, *Earth on Edge*, *Trade Secrets* and *Becoming American*, says “websites are a key tool to getting the word out about our programs and creating a local resource. They offer cost-effective distribution of information to the public.” Companion websites can be a powerful tool for promotion and outreach, with the ability to easily reach communities across the globe. “Bill Moyers has said that ‘the websites and our community action campaigns are as important as the program itself’,” says Rubenstein.

But where is the money coming from for these sites? A typical website for public television in the US cost about \$30,000. The budget for some companion websites can reach well into six figures. Does this money come out of your production budget?

“It is a false impression that websites take away funding for films,” says Cara Mertes of POV, who has recently funded



Companion website for *Roman Empire in the First Century* designed and produced by the Sonnett Media Group, LLC. Courtesy of Sonnett Media Group, LLC



Public Affairs Television’s *On Our Own Terms* companion website was a key component of their extensive outreach campaign for the project. Courtesy of Public Affairs Television, Inc.

and produced the web-only documentary series *Borders*. POV and other funders see websites as a way to add to the impact of their programs, but not at the expense of programs themselves. The

key is to recognize the roll a website can play as part of the overall project, not just how it can support your film, during the fundraising. “Foundations are often more interested in websites and other outreach materials because they offer more universal access,” says Jennifer Lawson. “Its essential to plan the companion website at the proposal stage. This early thinking saves you time and money.”

Lesley Norman, Vice President of David Grubin Productions, emphasizes the need to plan your companion website early in pre-production. “We are very aware of getting stills, clearances and other resources for the website from the beginning,” says Norman. She states that the best way to insure the vision you presented in your film is translated to the web is to “prepare upfront and maintain good communications with your web designers throughout production.”

In the end, how useful is a companion website in reaching your audience? Consider POV’s recent success with *Two Towns of Jasper*. The companion website provided detailed information about the program for over 500,000 visitors in a two-week period in February 2003. Public Affairs Television’s *On Our Own Terms* website helped provide outreach materials to over 81 million people nation-wide, without having to pay postage.

Producers of companion websites are evolving new ways of telling stories and providing resources to your audience that extends the life of your film. You worked hard to be able to tell your story. Let your companion website carry your voice to your audience in a new ways so they can share in or even expand the unique experience encapsulated in your film.

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