
FANS
FRIENDS &
FOLLOWERS
BUILDING AN AUDIENCE
AND A CREATIVE CAREER
IN THE DIGITAL AGE
SCOTT KIRSNER

Preview Edition / Excerpt

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10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Contents

[This is the table of contents for the full book, not this preview edition.]

Understanding the New Rules: Building an Audience and a Creative Career in the Digital Age

Ernest Hemingway had Scribner's, his dependable publishing house.

Paul Cezanne had Ambroise Vollard to sell his paintings, and Georgia O'Keeffe had Alfred Stieglitz.

Francis Ford Coppola had Paramount Pictures.

Stevie Wonder had Motown, and the The Who had Warner Bros.

For the past century or two, artists have relied upon others to advance their careers: publishers, art dealers, movie studios, and record labels.

These businesses discovered new talent, and often had a hand in shaping its creative output. They cultivated an audience for the work, and they sold it – all while passing on some of the profits to the creator (in the best-case scenario, at least), so she could record another album or paint another landscape.

That system worked wonderfully for some artists. They could focus on their art without being distracted by business concerns. As they became more famous, they attained more creative control, and their work sold in large enough quantities that they tended not to worry much about the split – the share of revenue that their studio or publisher was taking from the price of every ticket or paperback sold.

Besides, there was no alternative: to have a really significant career, and reach a really wide audience, artists needed the system.

But now, its engine is wheezing and the gears are jamming. The machine just doesn't work the way it once did.

Record labels and movie studios don't dedicate the energy they once did to discovering and developing new talent – the next Beatles or Spielberg. (And when they do introduce a new band or filmmaker, they often abandon them after the inevitable first flop.) Their deep pockets don't give them an insurmountable marketing advantage in a world where blogs, YouTube videos, and Facebook can be incredibly effective in building a fan base, virtually for free. Finally, they no longer control the terrain where purchases take place, like the shelves of the local record store, video store, or bookstore. Consumers increasingly seem to be gravitating towards online retailers like Amazon.com, Etsy, Amie Street, and iTunes, which are open to independent creators in ways that the aisles of Blockbuster or Borders never were.

We've entered into what I call the era of digital creativity. In this era, artists have the tools to make anything they can envision, inexpensively. (I use the term "artist" to encompass everyone involved in a creative

endeavor, from cartoonists to comedians to filmmakers to prestidigitators.) They can build teams and collaborate across great distances, bridging divides of language and culture. They can cultivate an audience and communicate with it regularly, carrying it (or at least a segment of it) with them from one project to another. And they can take control over the transaction, whether it is selling a work of art on eBay, a book through Amazon, or a ticket to a live performance via Brown Paper Tickets.

If you are a glass-half-full type, you've already realized that the era of digital creativity presents incredible opportunities. You can do what you love, reach an audience, and earn some money. What starts off as a small fan base can quite suddenly go global, enabling you to quit your day job and earn a solid living.

The flip side is that there has never been a noisier, more competitive time to try to make art, entertain people, and tell stories. Everyone is doing it, and so there is an incredible surplus of content in every art form.

In 2000, 973 full-length films were submitted to the Sundance Film Festival, generally considered the best platform for launching a new indie movie. By 2008, that number had risen to 3,624. (Just 121 were accepted.)

Think about a band trying to build a reputation in Los Angeles, a city with about 50 FM radio stations – and perhaps just three or four that matter in any particular genre (like Latino music, hip hop, or rock.) Now think about trying to build a reputation online. A link to the band's MySpace page from any one of several hundred well-regarded music blogs might result in a sold-out show. A song included in any of the thousands of podcasts that are distributed through iTunes might catch fire.

"There has never been a noisier, more competitive time to try to make art, entertain people, and tell stories."

Breaking out, somehow, is both more of a possibility than it has ever been – and harder than it has ever been.

The attention of an individual audience member anywhere in the world is simultaneously easier to snare (a multi-million-dollar marketing campaign is no longer required) – and harder than ever to snare.

I wanted to write this book to share some of the ways that artists are grappling with those paradoxes.

In conversations over the past three years, I've been asking questions about how artists are attracting audiences and building careers in the online world.

I've found that many artists just want to keep doing things the old way: schmoozing and entering competitions and hanging out at Schwab's Drug Store, hoping to get discovered. Getting discovered, of course, will lead directly to the big deal with the big advance and the worldwide promotional tour.

It'll still happen, occasionally. But I think the odds are getting longer by the minute.

A small cadre of artists is taking a different tack. They've become convinced that the old power players – studios, record labels, publishers and the like – can no longer create and sustain individuals' careers the way they once did. So they're taking responsibility for building their reputation, telling their story, and assembling a fan base that can support them financially. They are experimenting with new ways to finance their work, promote it, and sell it. They're creating new connections between themselves and their

audience. They're exploring new genres in which to work, and releasing their work in new ways and at different tempos. (Why should fans wait eighteen months between albums, or three years between novels?)

Yes, it's a lot of work to build a career in the era of digital creativity. But there are huge benefits. You no longer need to sell an editor or A&R rep on your artistic vision before you can start writing or recording. Your publisher can't drop you, and you won't sink into a depression when your label goes under. The on-going conversation with your audience can be a source of inspiration, motivation, and ideas.

It's this powerful new link with the audience that the old power players don't understand. They still live in a world of press releases, flashy billboards in Times Square, and expensive-but-never-changing Web sites.

And many established artists with a few successes on their résumé are happy to have other people worry about dealing with the audience. "Let the publicity department schedule my press tour, and the marketing department handle those billboard buys," they think. "I'm going to focus on my creative process." That approach can be effective. It's expensive, of course – but who cares, if someone else is footing the bill? The danger is that it's too easy for artists to lose touch with the audience if they don't have any sort of on-going connection with the people supporting their work.

In this new era, artists like the musician Jill Sobule, the animator M dot Strange, the cartoonist Tracy White, the YouTube personality Michael Buckley, and the comedian Eugene Mirman have been among the pioneers in understanding the power of a new kind of relationship with the audience. This new digital audience wants to participate and collaborate; get a glimpse of your creative process and learn from you; vote and comment; and help spread the word about your latest project. They may even be willing to help fund your next endeavor.

But a word of warning: unlike pretending to be fond of your Uncle Larry at Thanksgiving dinner, this relationship with your audience cannot be faked.

The very term "audience" may be on its way to obsolescence. Some artists prefer to think of themselves as cultivating a "community," attracting "supporters," or organizing and motivating a "street team." Some like the term "fan base," while others may choose to use the terms "collaborators" or "co-conspirators." That's up to you. But what seems to be emerging as a constant in this new era is that a large chunk of the audience will remain passive consumers of the work you create – people who buy tickets or DVDs or merchandise, and that's it. A much smaller percentage (perhaps five or ten percent, or, if you're lucky, twenty) will want to be more engaged, helping spread the gospel to others or participating in the creative process, for instance. Many of the forward-thinking artists I've interviewed have spent a lot of time brainstorming about how to get that more active segment of their audience involved, or simply *listening* to them explain how *they* would like to be involved.

"The very term 'audience' may be on its way to obsolescence."

Understanding this new relationship, I think, is going to be crucial to success in the era of digital creativity. It is the foundation upon which careers will be built.

The people I sought out for this book are all at working at the vanguard of these changes. They've been among the first to start to understand how to bring together a community in this new era ... how to maintain a tight relationship with that community ... and how to leverage that community's support to produce new kinds of work and make a living at it.

For the most part, they're artists who've launched their careers online – rather than people who started out with the backing of a movie studio or publisher, and then began to discover the merits of communicating with their fans on the Internet. They represent the full gamut of technological literacy, from people who can write their own software (like the musician Jonathan Coulton, who once worked as a programmer) to people who rely on friends or fans or hired hands to set up and maintain their Web sites.

Over the course of dozens of conversations (many of which are included or excerpted here), a set of successful strategies and tactics started to emerge – things that were particularly effective in attracting an audience and contributing to an artist's economic self-sufficiency. These are by no means the only strategies that will work. People are pioneering new approaches daily, and you may well discover something that works for you that no one has thought to try before.

> Be Remarkable, and Make Remarkable Stuff

In the crowded and noisy party that is the Internet, why would you want to wear what everyone else is wearing?

Be different. Create work only you can create. Since there are no gatekeepers, there's no one to tell you that your art or music or video is unmarketable, too weird, too challenging. There's no one to demand that you follow a proven formula, or conduct a focus group to see whether people like the way your movie ends.

Sometimes, being remarkable can mean being topical and timely, like the jaunty political satires and year-in-review animations produced by JibJab Media. The Internet loves to talk about what's happening *now*. Sometimes, being remarkable entails being provocative: saying something that no one else is saying.

Being remarkable can be about doing something you're not supposed to do. Improv Everywhere stages unusual and humorous "missions" in public places – like riding the subway without pants, or shopping at a Home Depot in slow-motion – and then posts the resulting videos online. (They've so far released three DVDs that capture their 80-plus missions, along with bonus material.)

Sometimes, being remarkable involves giving people something to talk about, a handle, a reason to share or blog about what you're doing. One of the things that helped make Bon Iver's debut album, "For Emma, Forever Ago," a success was the back-story that came with it. After breaking up with his girlfriend (and the band he'd been part of), songwriter Justin Vernon went to a remote hunting cabin in northern Wisconsin to record a new album. He posted the songs to his MySpace page, burned 500 CDs, and sent a few to music bloggers in the hopes of getting some reviews. Before long, blogs like Pitchfork were buzzing about the songs, and Vernon was appearing on "Letterman," signing with a record label, and playing sold-out shows. "A big part of Mr. Vernon's success...was crafting a compelling story to help fans connect to the music even more," the Wall Street *Journal* explained. "Bon Iver's MySpace page, Web site and CD all include the same story: a paragraph telling how Mr. Vernon wrote the songs while hibernating in the remote cabin in the woods."

One of the secrets to succeeding in the era of digital creativity is doing something different, and then finding ways to share it with people who might appreciate it. At first, you may feel as though you're connecting only with tiny, disparate, niche audiences, but if enough niche audiences discover and support your work, you'll soon have something truly substantial.

> Create Opportunities for Participation

Online, a significant segment of the audience no longer wants to just consume. They want to collaborate. That collaboration can take many forms, from voting on their favorite book cover design to sending in their own photos to be used as part of a giant photo mural.

The documentary filmmaker Robert Greenwald has both asked supporters to make small donations so that he could complete a film about Iraq (he wound up raising more than $200,000) and also relied on some of his more active collaborators for help with research and even shooting interviews. Jonathan Coulton, the Brooklyn-based musician, held a competition on his blog to find the best fan-submitted solo to fill a break he'd left in a song called "Shop Vac."

Part of this desire to participate is driven by the fact that everyone on the Internet craves recognition and connection. Part of it is driven by the fact that many of your followers are trying to establish their own careers as writers, artists, filmmakers.

Sometimes, the audience will explain to you how they'd like to be involved. When the band OK Go made a hit YouTube video that featured the four members doing an elaborately-choreographed dance routine in a backyard, fans started sending in videos of themselves aping the routine. The band started posting them on its Web site, and then created a formal contest with trophies and a grand prize to keep the momentum going. (The winners were flown to an OK Go concert to dance onstage with the band, and many of the entrants were shown on various TV shows, including "The Colbert Report.")

> "Sometimes, the audience will explain to you how they'd like to be involved."

Some new-era creators choose to serve as ringleaders, and let their community take on much of the creative heavy-lifting. Timo Vuorensola, the Finnish director of *Star Wreck* and the forthcoming *Iron Sky*, has solicited comments on scripts from the Internet community; found actors online; enlisted the help of volunteer special effects experts; sought musicians to write the score; and received help translating the film into roughly 30 different languages. "*Star Wreck* was made by a core crew of five people," he says, "and over 300 people are credited in the end credits, and a community of 3000 people were more or less involved in making it."

Filmmakers like Richard Linklater and Brett Gaylor have given their followers footage to play with. In Linklater's case, he invited people to create their own version of a promotional trailer for his movie *A Scanner Darkly*. Gaylor asked visitors to OpenSourceCinema.org to contribute photos and videos related to Girltalk, the musician who is the subject of his documentary "RiP: A Remix Manifesto." Gaylor also encouraged site visitors to remix the raw footage he'd shot. (Worth watching is the animated remix created by students at Concordia University, at http://www.opensourcecinema.org/node/2178.) In both cases, this strategy ensured that many different versions or fragments of the film spread around the Internet, helping to increase awareness.

As an artist, you may have a bit of reflexive hostility toward the idea of letting your fans elbow their way into your creative process. But it's worth trying at least a small experiment to see how it changes your relationship with your fans, and their relationship with you. Perhaps the experiment will involve helping select the rough demo you'll turn into a finished single, or inviting fans to suggest locations where you might shoot the first-date scene in your screenplay. Often, your community will jump at the chance to help you solve logistical problems; when cartoonist Dave Kellett has traveled the country on book tours, his readers have occasionally offered to accept shipments of his latest book, and transport them to the site of an event.

Whatever they do, be sure thank them publicly on your site, or credit them in the finished work.

The more opportunities you create for fans to participate in your process, the more engaged and loyal you'll find they become. They'll step up to be a financier, PR agent, tour coordinator, copy editor, Web site designer, or second-unit cameraman. Managing all these collaborators can get complex. But their investment of time and energy will free you up to do more of the work you want to do, and they'll help spread the gospel in a way you can hardly imagine.

> Understand the Power of the Link

Chasing coverage in traditional media can be exhausting, with or without a full-time PR person on the payroll. Imagine all the work that goes into securing an author appearance on "Fresh Air with Terry Gross," or trying to get your band booked on "Saturday Night Live."

Even if you succeed, think about what happens in the audience member's mind. They may enjoy your music. They may even remember the name of the band. The next time they're perusing the iTunes Store, or shopping at the mall, they need to remember that they liked your stuff, recall your name, and make the purchase. That initial spark of interest needs to be rekindled – days, weeks, or months later. A tiny percentage of the audience that saw your performance on TV will ever actually consummate a purchase.

While you should certainly grab national media exposure if and when you can get it, there's incredible power in online media coverage, specifically because the blog reader or podcast listener who gets exposed to your work is much closer to actually buying something. They're on their computer already. The blog may link directly to an online storefront like Amazon or iTunes; even if it links to your site, you have a prominent "Buy" button awaiting visitors (don't you?)

If a site writes about you but doesn't include a link, by all means you should get in touch and request one. Most online publishers will happily comply – but you will be surprised how stubborn the Web sites of many traditional magazines and newspapers can be about including one little link.

It's also worth monitoring the way people wind up at your site. If you run your own Web site or blog, you can easily get statistics software from your hosting company, or from a free service like SiteMeter, that will show you where visitors are coming from. Google Analytics, a free service, is another great option for gathering this data. Looking at this "referral data" – a long list of sites that referred or pointed people to you – will show you which online coverage is actually paying off with additional traffic. (With social networks like MySpace and Facebook, this kind of visitor tracking is just about impossible.) If your commerce vendor supports it, you may also offer certain sites a special discount code ("10 percent off if you enter the code XYZ.") That allows you to see which sites are actually driving the most purchases, based on how often a given code is used.

> "All links are powerful, but some are more powerful than others."

All links are powerful, but some are more powerful than others. The tech culture blog Boing Boing is famous for sending so much traffic to sites it covers that many of them temporarily collapse under the weight of all those unexpected visitors. When you discover a particular site or blogger that generates a lot of traffic and purchase activity for you, put them at the top of your media outreach list. Offer them exclusive photos from your next movie shoot, or an outtake from your forthcoming album, or an exclusive excerpt from your next book. Give them reasons to keep covering you – and linking to you.

The most powerful link of all, by most people's measures, is the link to your site from Google. When people type in your name, or the title of your latest project, your official site ought to show up as the first result, or at least on the first page. You can certainly find much better advice about "search engine marketing" than mine, but there are a few key tenets. (Search engine marketing is an entire field focused on helping sites ensure that they appear prominently in lists of search engine results.)

First is that you want people who have Web sites that are more popular than yours, and who've been running them for a while, to link to you. That gives you cred, in the eye's of Google's software algorithm. Second, if your site is composed entirely of graphics, video, and nifty Flash animations, but light on text, there won't be much to help Google understand who you are. A bio, a list of all your books (or albums, or movies), and a description of the genres/forms you work in are all helpful to have on your site. Third, the longer your site has been up, and the more frequently you update it, the more likely it is to be regarded highly by Google. (See the Reading List at the end of the book for two links related to improving your Google ranking.)

One free tool that can be helpful in figuring out how well-designed your site is, from the perspective of enticing search engines to link to it, is Website Grader (http://website.grader.com).

Accumulating links from lots of little online communities that most people have never heard of is not quite as glamorous as landing a spot on "The Today Show." But the traffic and purchases you'll get from those direct links can add up to impressive levels.

And if you do wind up on "The Today Show," be sure you take a moment to mention your Web site, or MySpace profile, or Facebook presence. It can't hurt – even if most people won't remember it.

> Don't Be Reluctant to Ask for a Review or Rating

One sure-fire way to expand your audience is through positive reviews, ratings, and other endorsements of your work. These can range from a four-star rating of your latest album on iTunes, a two-line review of your book on Amazon, or a rave about last night's performance on a blog dedicated to stand-up comedy.

Sometimes, reviews will just pop up organically, the result of fans checking out your latest work and taking matters in their own hands.

But often, a little nudge is necessary to trigger an avalanche of positive write-ups – especially early in your career. Many of YouTube's top personalities figured this out, and began openly requesting that their viewers rate a video, post a comment, or subscribe to their channel, all of which helped expand their audience.

"Often, a little nudge is necessary to trigger an avalanche of positive write-ups."

If you're releasing an important new project, send advance copies to mentors, influential bloggers, and people whose opinion you respect. (Some people will be OK if you send along a digital copy or point them to a URL where they can download the work, but others will prefer receiving a physical copy in the old-fashioned US mail.) Include a note that mentions the release date, and requests a review on the recipient's blog, or a "blurb"/endorsement that you can use on your site.

When I was preparing to release my last book, *Inventing the Movies*, I sent out about 20 advance copies in the mail. They went to people who'd helped me with the project, people who might review it, and well-

known people in the entertainment and media businesses who I thought would be willing to provide a blurb that would lend the book credibility. About 15 went to people I knew, and five went to newspaper book review sections or people I had no real connection to. Once people had a couple weeks to read (or skim) the book, I e-mailed to follow up. With some people, I asked them for a blurb that I'd use on the book's Web site. With others, I waited until the book showed up on Amazon.com, and asked them to post a review there.

I also made sure to include my e-mail address in the book, and on the book's Web site. Whenever a reader e-mailed me a positive comment, I thanked them – and asked nicely to see whether they'd mind also posting their comments on Amazon.

My campaign was far from perfect, but it generated about a dozen blurbs for my site, a dozen reviews on Amazon, and a five-star rating on that site. (I tried to contain my anger toward one friend and one random book buyer who doled out just four stars.)

The objective should be that wherever your work is sold, there are at least a handful of good reviews and ratings. I don't recommend trying to game the system (by posting your own pseudonymous reviews, for instance), but you should encourage friends and fans to make their opinions heard all over the Internet. Those first few reviews will make others feel more inclined to post their own thoughts. And reading kind words about your work will help persuade that new fan to make a purchase.

[This is an excerpt from the book's opening essay,
which covers 21 strategies and tacties in total.]

Table: Defining the Terms

The two big challenges this book aims to address are: how do you build a fan base online, and how can that fan base support your career? Here are some of the terms I use in thinking about those challenges.

The artist	That's you.
The work	What you choose to make.
The audience	The people who support your career – and may participate in your creative process in some way. You may prefer to think of them as your "community," your "collaborators," your supporters, your benefactors, etc. A big part of your audience will be passive, but some will want to be more engaged or active.
The platform(s)	Where can people find you online? Where do you connect and communicate with your audience? One platform might be your own Web site; another might be YouTube or a blog.
The conduit(s)	A conduit is a direct connection to your audience – like an e-mail list or RSS feed – that allows you to communicate with them when you'd like, rather than waiting for them to return to your Web site.
The partners	People or groups that help you expand your audience. A partner could be a blog that writes a review of your latest project, or a non-profit group that offers to promote you to their mailing list.
The distribution channels and marketplaces	These are the places where your work is sold. You might choose only to sell through your own site, or you might use various distribution channels and marketplaces like iTunes, Amazon, Etsy, etc.
The business model	The mix of revenue streams that support your career: speaking fees, CD/DVD sales, merchandise, etc.

Introduction to the Interviews

I've excerpted here thirty of the most interesting (and hopefully, helpful) interviews I conducted while researching this book. All of them took place in 2008 and 2009.

I think that whatever field you're in, you will be able to glean some ideas and inspiration from most of the people here. A novelist may have tried something that'll be useful to you as a musician. A cartoonist may be able to learn something from what *didn't* work for a filmmaker. I'd strongly suggest that you check out each artist's Web site to get a taste for their work, and see exactly how they're building an audience around it and generating revenue.

How did I decide whom to interview? Of course, I asked the readers of my blog CinemaTech to make suggestions. But I also tried to identify people who have built up a substantial audience online, are collaborating with that audience in new ways, and are making some decent money – even if a few of them still haven't yet quit their day jobs.

I steered clear of including too many artists who are doing cool stuff in the digital realm, but who relied on traditional media players (like publishers, record labels, and movie studios) to build up their fan base in the first place. I wanted to focus more on people who've developed innovative and effective strategies that can work without an assist from The Man.

Michael Buckley
Creator of "What the Buck"

When I spoke with Michael Buckley in May 2008, he'd already figured out how to build a big audience on YouTube and earn more money from the site's "Partner Program" (which shares ad revenue with content creators) than he was earning at his day job. On his three-times-a-week "What the Buck" show, Buckley became the Internet's cattiest, cleverest pop culture commentator, with more than 300,000 people subscribing to his YouTube channel.

Buckley told me he liked the balance of working a regular desk job during the day and producing his show in his spare time. But he also alluded to a development deal that was in the works. By September 2008, HBO Labs announced that it had signed up Buckley to come up with new concepts for TV and the Web. In December, he inked a deal with Sony Pictures Television to produce a monthly online show, "Minisode Maniac," for the Minisode Network, which presents condensed versions of classic TV shows.

Though he kept on producing videos for his YouTube audience, he decided to quit his day job.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

I was doing a weekly cable access television show, "Table for Two," in the summer of 2006, with a female co-host. I had ambitions of something happening. I knew that I probably wouldn't get cast in things as an unknown, and that I needed some sort of demo footage. It was a one-hour live show, and in every episode, I did a five-minute celebrity rant called "What the Buck."

I didn't know what YouTube was. But my cousin posted one of the "What the Buck" videos there. I didn't even think about it. It was embedded on my MySpace page, and people started leaving comments, like "you should do this more." I felt encouraged. My cousin was posting the segments once a week. Then I started doing them four or five times a week, and I started posting them on YouTube myself.

Building an audience. I'd get eight comments on a video, and I'd be thrilled. The first time I had a video with 1000 views, I was out of my mind. I always enjoyed the progress of getting more views, and more subscribers. When I got 100,000 views for a video, I really thought, "That's it."

With "Table for Two," who knew how many were watching in the part of Connecticut where you could see it? People in the grocery store said they enjoyed it.

Then, in spring of 2007, when I started covering "American Idol," my videos started getting a lot of press, and YouTube notice. At that point, I knew that "What the Buck" was something separate and large. I got on the front page of the Hartford *Courant*.

I still had my day job, the same admin job I'd had for the last six years, a 10-to-6 office job. They were very flexible, but they didn't know the extent to which I was working on the YouTube stuff.

One thing that seemed to work was saying shocking things. On YouTube, people don't want to just hear the news, like "Entertainment Tonight." You have to have some sort of edge, or an ability to make it humorous. I couldn't just say, "Britney Spears got arrested today." It was more about me making it silly.

My first video that really took off was "Beyoncé Threatens to Kill Jennifer Hudson for Winning Oscar." People were searching on the movie *Dreamgirls* because it had been leaked to YouTube, and they found me. I got so many e-mails – lots of them hate mail – and I know Jennifer Hudson saw it.

Ask for the rewiew. Back in the early days, I was definitely actively promoting the videos – posting comments on other people's videos and MySpace pages, saying, "Hey, check out my videos." For months I was actively doing that, and I had five seconds of opening credits to my videos, where I said, "Rate it even if you hate it," and "Please subscribe." In the video, I might say, "Hey guys, do me a favor – give this video five stars and leave a comment."

My videos started showing up on YouTube's top-rated page, even before I had 10,000 subscribers to my YouTube Channel.

You might say, "Oh, you're begging." I don't care. Most people who were watching didn't know they were supposed to rate it or leave a comment. Now, everybody does that – they say, please rate my video and subscribe to my channel.

Traditional media exposure. Even when I've been in national magazines or newspapers, or had stories about me on the CW or Fox, I get one or two e-mails. Any traditional press I've ever gotten doesn't really affect my YouTube audience. It's totally Internet-based. You can be in traditional media, and it's not getting people to go to your YouTube page. And when you go on TV, it's just not as much fun. On the Internet, you have real interaction with people.

"Any traditional press I've ever gotten doesn't really affect my YouTube audience. It's totally Internet-based."

I started doing some live broadcasting, too, on Blog.tv, twice a week, at 10 PM Eastern. That started in 2008. I broadcast from my webcam, and people ask me questions. I sing, I dance, I do crazy stuff. The first hour is more planned out. I'll play music, and give advice. The last half hour is for people who just want to stay. There are typically about 5,000 people watching, but only 150 people can get in the chat room to interact with me.

I also started a personal vlog channel on YouTube, under the user name peron75. That was my original YouTube account. People can see me as myself. I'm more laid back, not that judgmental or bitchy. Hopefully, people think, "Oh, this guy is O.K." I talk about my life, and the show. I ask viewers questions, and address their video responses, and ask them to respond to me.

Doing the correct things. If I were to pick my key moments on doing the correct things, in terms of getting lots of subscribers, one is that I'm present in the YouTube community. You can't just throw a video up there and hope that people will watch it. When people leave me comments, I reply to them, and they see that I'm there.

I post three videos a week. You have to continue with your content.

Now, I get over 100 e-mails a day. There's no way I can reply to all of them. I try to write back, or address things on the live show. You can't just be some TV show, some guy with a green screen in his house.

Good money. I do make good money on YouTube, from the YouTube partners program. [By the end of 2008, Buckley was earning more than $100,000 from the site, according to the New York *Times*.] I generally make more on YouTube than I do at my day job. But at my job, I have five weeks paid vacation, and YouTube doesn't offer that. I'm socking the money into a 401k – I'm no fool. I think part of the appeal is, he has got a real job. I like the security, and it keeps it all balanced.

I love doing this. I love Internet video. As long as my audience continues, I see doing this as long as I possibly can. When I take the weekend off, I miss it.

I would never have gotten that kind of satisfaction if I were just the host of some TV show. There's something about reaching this global audience. If I had a TV show on cable, at 10 PM on the Oxygen channel, no one's going to watch it. But I'm on the Internet every single day, and there's something cool about that.

Mike Chapman
Animator and Writer, "Homestar Runner"

The Brothers Chaps, as Mike and Matt Chapman are known, are the creative forces behind the wildly-successful Web property Homestar Runner, which features a new cartoon every week, online games, and a merchandise shop that supports the venture. (The Brothers Chaps are very much anti-advertising.) Their characters, especially Strong Bad, The Cheat, and Homestar, have become Web celebs. They've collaborated with the band They Might Be Giants and recently released their first videogame with Telltale Games. The Brothers Chaps are based in Atlanta. I spoke with Mike (he's on the left in the photo), the older of the two.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

We have very much been of the mindset that if you concentrate on the product, and if the product is good, things will happen.

For the first several years of "Homestar Runner," we had other jobs. That gave it time to grow naturally, by word-of-mouth.

Origins. The characters and the whole world were created in 1996 by me and Craig Zobel. We were working at the Atlanta Olympics, for the Australian Sports Network, and we were bored. Together, we made a children's book. Everything in it was done with a Sharpie marker. We didn't have a scanner, and I didn't have a computer of my own, so we really just cut-and-pasted it all together. We made ten or twelve black-and-white copies at Kinko's, with a color cover, and we gave them to friends.

In late 1999, Matt and I were learning Flash and Illustrator, wanting to become graphic designers. We used "Homestar" as the subject matter while we were learning Flash. At the time, I was trying to freelance, doing litigation graphics for courtrooms. I worked on a lot of mesothelioma cases. I drew a lot of lungs.

In January of 2000, HomestarRunner.com went live. We had maybe two or three games there, and some short cartoons. It was on my personal MindSpring page for a while, and then we actually bought the domain. We put it up, and e-mailed our friends.

Then, Shockwave chose it as their Site of the Day, which was huge. It spiked our traffic. But a week later, we were back down to nine people visiting. We got mentioned in some British Internet magazine. I remember when somebody we didn't know would e-mail us about the site. That was awesome. Or we'd find people who had linked to our site, and we didn't even know them. It was kind of a steady, natural growth.

Avoiding advertising. We had nothing for sale, though – no way to make money. Even at that point, we didn't like ads. Pretty early on, there were Flash cartoons that would force you to watch an ad before the cartoon, or they'd say "Sponsored by this company." If there was a way to keep going without resorting to that, we were all for it.

We did the cartoons for two years before we started making any shirts. We just loved doing it. There were lots of times where I'd rather sit home and make cartoons than do anything else. Flash and the Internet were so exciting to us. We definitely liked hearing from people in e-mails. But even if we hadn't gotten feedback, I think we would've kept doing what we were doing.

When we first did t-shirts, people would send us a check, and our dad would go to the post office and put five or ten shirts into the mail at a time. Over 2001 and 2002, those numbers started to grow. Then, Matt quit his day job in mid-2002. I was still doing freelance, but I'd only take a freelance client if it was really fun. We did a music video for They Might Be Giants, after they contacted us and said they were fans. We've continued to work with them.

With the music videos we've animated, we got paid for most of them. Not to the point where it was making us tons of money, but it was also something we wanted to do.

In early 2002, we started doing a cartoon every Monday – a weekly update. Before that, it was more random. A few weeks or a month or two might go by in between updates.

"When we first did t-shirts, people would send us a check, and our dad would go to the post office and put five or ten shirts into the mail at a time."

Most of our income has been from t-shirts and DVDs, and whatever other merchandise we sell in the store. Our multi-DVD sets do well, as does the Trogdor shirt. Starting in 2003, we got a fulfillment company [Fulfillment Strategies International] to handle all the orders, rather than doing it out of our parents' basement. Our sister deals with the fulfillment house and the t-shirt printers. Matt and I, the less we see of that, the better.

We put a button on our site to let people know when we have a new product. We just try to sell stuff that we would want to buy if we were fans – not a pillow or a sleeping bag just because we can. I think most people understand that that's how we make our living.

But we don't advertise the store at the end of our videos or anything. We could've made more money if we pushed the store more, but I wouldn't have felt good about it.

DVD releases. Our first DVD came out in Christmas of 2004. We hired a friend of ours who had done DVD authoring, and conversion of stuff from Flash files to uncompressed AVIs. We taught ourselves about how to make the Flash stuff look good on TV.

That was after we'd done a hundred of the Strong Bad E-mails. [Strong Bad is a gruff and sardonic character who answers readers' inquiries.] Now, every 30 or 40 e-mails, we put out another one.

I've never really been on Facebook or MySpace, though there are some fan-created pages on MySpace. We've put up a few things on YouTube. We're doing a videogame for the [Nintendo] Wii, and we did a teaser cartoon for that and put it on YouTube. That went up a week or two before we announced the game, "Strong Bad's Cool Game for Attractive People."

Here's how the game happened. Telltale Games in San Francisco contacted us. We were fans of their "Sam & Max" games. We wanted to make sure there was a good fit. It's a five-episode project, and we were very involved, which is cool. They listen to us when we have ideas – it's not just like they licensed the characters. There's talking, so Matt has done a lot of the audio.

I don't look at discussion forums and comments about the show, because one negative comment can negate fifty good comments. You run into people who say that we jumped the shark five years ago.

Moving fast. We always make the cartoons on Sundays and put them up right when they're done. There's an immediacy to it. Normally, something you watch on TV has been finished weeks and months before you ever see it. We write and record everything within the day before you're watching it. It gives a freshness to the content. It hasn't been over-written and over-thought by twenty different people.

"We always make the cartoons on Sundays and put them up right when they're done. There's an immediacy to it."

How do we evaluate proposals about new projects, or collaborations? We learned how to politely say no to things that were going to affect our lives negatively. If it's going to be fun, if we're going to enjoy doing it, and if the end project is going to be something we want to have happen, we say "yes."

Jonathan Coulton
Singer-Songwriter

In August 2005, when Jonathan Coulton quit his job as a software developer, he posted an entry on his blog titled "Don't Quit Your Day Job." "Part of me is sure this is exactly the right thing to do, while the rest of me is screaming that this is probably the dumbest thing I've ever done," he wrote.

Shortly after that, the Brooklyn-based singer-songwriter started a project to record and post one new song every week – a mix of originals and a few covers. He dubbed it "Thing a Week." In Week #4, he invited his fans to submit their own eight-bar solo for a song called "Shop Vac," and let the community decide which one they liked best for inclusion in the final version. In Week #5, his searching and introspective cover of Sir Mix-a-Lot's "Baby Got Back" took off like Internet wildfire.

Coulton has experimented with free downloads, karaoke versions of his songs, ringtones, and a system called "Demand It" that allows fans in various cities to request that he play shows there. He has also had fans produce books, animations, and videos based on his work. In 2009, he told me he was earning as much from his musical career as he'd ever earned at his old day job.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

I played drums in school, in the marching band and jazz band. But then I picked up the guitar because it was cool, it was portable, and it was better for getting girls. I wrote angst-ridden songs about being a teenager, of course, and also some goofball songs – like a song about the lunch lady at school. At Yale, I was a music major, and I sang in the Whiffenpoofs, an *a capella* group that goes back a hundred years.

I moved to New York after school to be a musician. I was an assistant to an A&R guy in a division of EMI. I did a lot of temping. I was a beta tester for Ensoniq keyboards, playing them and reporting on bugs. I worked at an espresso bar on the Upper East Side, dealing with people who hadn't had their coffee yet. Then, after Ensoniq laid me off, I got a job with a software company that was owned by a friend of a friend. I was hired to answer phones, but eventually moved into programming.

A series of little breaks. A friend of mine from Yale, [the writer] John Hodgman, started a series of shows called the Little Gray Book Lectures in Brooklyn. Each one had a theme, like "Secrets of the Secret Agents," or "How to Gamble and Win." I'd write a song for each one, like "Gambler's Prayer." It helped me find my songwriting style, this combination of funny and sad. I put out my first CD of songs from the Little Gray Books series, recorded at home on my PC, and mastered by a friend. Being part of the series also got me invited to PopTech, this technology conference up in Maine. I got a standing ovation there, during my song "Mandelbrot Set." That's when I felt I had really found something – found my audience.

Literally, the minute I got off the stage, I realized what an idiot I was. I had just pressed some CDs, but I had no Web site. Well, I had the domain, but the only thing there was a picture of my goatee. I went backstage at PopTech and used some laptop in the green room and put on some links to my songs, and a message: "Soon you'll be able to buy my CD." At the next PopTech, the following year, I brought my five-song CD and I had a Web site that was more real.

I got asked to write some songs for a special issue of the magazine *Popular Science*. I'd done some podcasts for them, and they gave me five weeks to write five songs. And then a producer for MTV asked me to write a theme song for a show called "Social History."

I was starting to remember that I'd come to New York to be a musician, and I felt myself slipping into a career as a software developer. It was a good job – upper five figures. It was really comfortable in some ways. It took me a long time to reverse the trend.

Ditching the day job. Everything in the music business told me that I needed to play more shows, be fifteen years younger, and not have glasses. I needed to be a young, dedicated, good-looking artist with a known quantity of reachable fans.

But I left my job in September of 2005. I started "Thing a Week" shortly after that – writing and recording and posting one song every week, which made me feel like I had some kind of structure to my weeks. I did that for a year, through September of 2006.

At the start, it wasn't clear to me that I was going to be able to make money. I thought I might have to go back and get a day job. Initially, I tried things like putting a tip jar on the site, or selling a $1 per week voluntary "subscription" to Thing a Week.

> "My goal was really just to make a living by making music and putting it on the Internet."

Over the course of that first year, I had many ups and downs. It felt great, and it felt like it wasn't going to work. My goal was really just to make a living by making music and putting it on the Internet. By 2007, I was making about 40 percent of my income from selling MP3s, and the rest of it is split pretty evenly between ticket sales at shows, and sales of physical things like CDs and t-shirts.

Audience-driven booking. "Demand It" on the site Eventful was incredibly useful when I was first starting. You can put something on your site that says, "Sign up here and tell me where you live, if you want me to perform in your city." I can log in and see all of the cities where people are demanding me.

I was on tour with [author and "Daily Show" performer] John Hodgman in Seattle. We had an event on Friday. I sent a message out to all the people in Seattle who'd demanded me, and posted on my blog saying, "I'm going to be in Seattle, and I'd be happy to do a show on Saturday night if I can find a venue." This was maybe a week-and-a-half before the date. Within 24 hours, I got five or six responses from people, some who'd actually called up venues to find out who the booker was. One guy owned a coffee shop, and he offered that as a venue. The one that looked like the best option was the Jewelbox Theater at the Rendezvous. It held about 75 people, and there were 75 people there. That's when it all clicked for me.

Before that, I'd called up a booking agent and asked him how you get shows lined up. He said, "Well, you play in your city first, because that doesn't cost anything. You build up a following. Then, if you have a car, you can drive to nearby cities, and you start doing these ever-widening concentric circles to make your following bigger and bigger."

But after that Seattle event, he called me up and said, "Forget everything I said. What you just did is a whole new thing."

From that point on, he decided to be my booking agent. He and I would look at the numbers on Demand It. We'd had 45 demands in Seattle, and that turned in to a 75-person audience. Then, we tried San Francisco. For me, it holds true that the audience size will be larger than the number of people who've made demands. Demand It has helped my agent sell me to venues who've never heard of me. He can say, "Look, we just did a show in San Francisco, and the demands were at this level, and this many people showed up."

We've tried doing cities where the Demand It numbers just weren't there, because they were between two other cities where I was playing, and it hasn't worked.

With Demand It, while I don't have direct access to peoples' e-mail addresses, they do have a dashboard where you can say, "Show me how many people are demanding me within 75 miles of Atlanta," and then send a message to that group if you are performing there.

The 'Portal' theme. A fan of mine was the head of a development team at a videogame company, and she asked me if I'd write a song for the game "Portal." It wasn't really lucrative, but it was a huge amount of exposure. The song is called "Still Alive," and a character in the game sings it at the end of the game. I got to play the game and talk to all the writers while it was in development. The game was fantasic, and people really loved the song. That was by far the hugest exposure spike of my career. [On YouTube, several amateur musicians have posted videos of their own covers of "Still Alive."]

I have such direct access to my fans that advertising a show in traditional ways is mostly not necessary. But most venues do advertise anyway, just 'cause they're used to doing that. My shows sort of sell themselves. I have the blog, with maybe 6,000 active subscribers. I have a mailing list of about 8,000 people. I have 14,000 or 15,000 people following me on Twitter. And I publish my performances through all of those channels.

> "I sell more through CD Baby than I do through my own Web site, but I make more money through my own site."

One really big thing for me is the derivative works that people have created, using my music. Everything I do is under a Creative Commons license. [Creative Commons allows more re-use and remixing than a traditional copyright.] People have made videos using "World of Warcraft" characters and put them on YouTube. Some of the videos have been seen millions of times. I don't know how you could even buy that kind of exposure, and I got it for free.

I have a live concert DVD that will be coming out soon, and I'm trying an experiment – I've hooked up with a distributor who will put it into retail stores. We'll see how that works.

Digital distribution. I do two different kinds of downloads. One is the downloads on my own Web site, where I use E-Junkie, which works with PayPal. I signed up with PayPal micropayments, which has a different commission structure if items are under $12, so if someone buys a single song, it's not the usual commission of like 30 cents plus some percentage for them. I'm not sure how well they publicize that micropayments offering. [Sellers pay five percent of the transaction, plus five cents.]

The other kind of download is digital distribution through CD Baby. They sell through iTunes, Emusic, Amazon MP3, and Rhapsody, and the split there is generally 70 percent to me, 30 percent to them. I sell

more through CD Baby than I do through my own Web site, but I make more money through my own Web site.

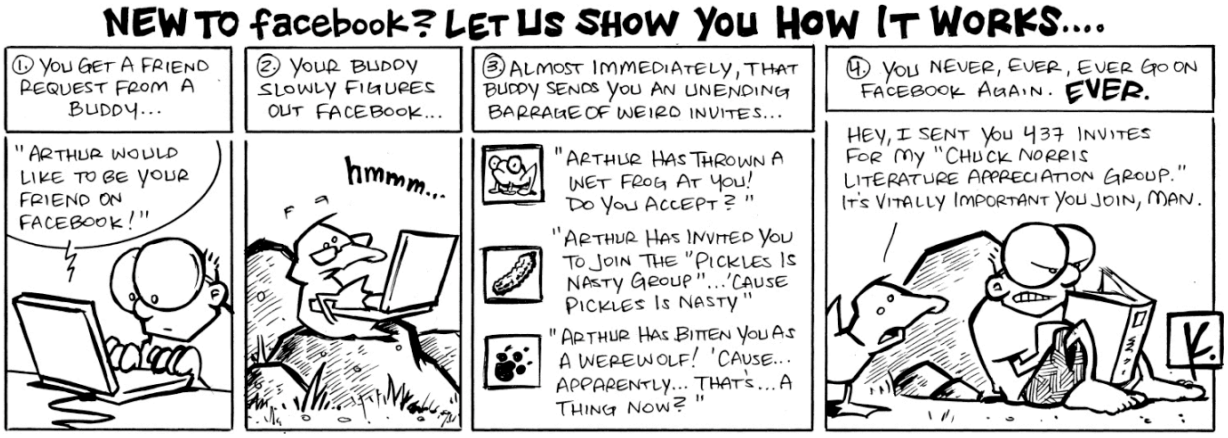
I'm fully subsisting off being a 100 percent, full-time musician. I've been making enough money the last couple years that I'm not ashamed – I'm a contributing member of my family, even if I'm not becoming incredibly wealthy. But I'm doing about as well as I'd be doing if I had stayed at the software company where I used to work.

But I would not be making a good living if I were in a band with three other guys. And that's a real limitation of this method.

Dave Kellett
Comics Artist

After dreaming of a career in the funny pages, Dave Kellett discovered that the pay wasn't so great. He eventually moved his daily strip "Sheldon" entirely online, supporting the venture with a collection of books, posters, buttons, and t-shirts for sale.

"Sheldon"'s title character is a ten-year old boy who has made billions starting and selling a software company. Kellett launched the strip while in graduate school, and kept it going for several years before it became his sole source of income.



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"Sheldon" started in 1997 or 1998, online. I was in grad school in England, and I wanted to share it with friends. It went from 25 people seeing the installments to 75 people, and then it was 500 people. You start to realize that it's spreading on its own, and you're not doing any work to make that happen.

My career goal was always to get into newspapers. For a cartoonist, that was always the mecca. In 2000, I got my strip picked up by United Media Syndicate.

Two things came out of that. One, I realized that the money in newspapers, even back in 2000 or 2001, was so small as to really kill my hopes of a newspaper career. I had this idea that everyone would be making Charles Schultz or Mort Walker money.

But I also figured out that there might be money online. Maybe not enough for a traditional business with a brick-and-mortar office and a receptionist and an executive editor, like the syndicates had, but money just the same.

Escaping the contract. I asked to be let out of my contract with United Media, and decided to go solo, around 2001. They had a terrible business model online. They'd give away the most recent thirty days of the strip, trying to entice people to buy a subscription, but the only business that has been able to make that work online is the Wall Street *Journal*.

I figured that the way to do it is to give out your complete archives for free, which increases the viral nature of the site, and it turns casual fans into die-hard fans, and even evangelists for your art online. It can take

years of relationship-building before someone considers themselves a fan, and is willing to plunk down money. The United Media Web approach was the wrong approach.

Spread the strip. So in 2001, I went independent, and encouraged people to share the strip with others by e-mail, or sending electronic postcards, or taking the images and putting them wherever they wanted. Sure enough, the readership spiked noticeably.

I've never spent a dime on marketing, PR, or advertising. I found that if you make it easy for people to share the stuff, and put out good work, the very nature of the Web is such that your work will be shared. That's especially true with humor.

When I was with United Media, and a few years after that, I was working as a senior toy designer for Mattel. In January of 2006, I left that job. A year or two before that, the income was enough to leave, but I'm conservative enough that I wanted to save up two years' worth of living expenses.

Diversified income. I have three or four different income streams. One is advertising. That brings in between 10 percent and 20 percent of my income. Another is merchandise, like books and t-shirts. That's probably 40 percent of my income, while selling original art is about 20 percent. The third is speaking engagements and comics conventions, which is about 10 percent, and then I guess another 10 percent or so is miscellaneous stuff.

You need to maintain a few different income sources, so if one dries up, it's just a punch in the ribs, and not a knock-out blow. I used to use Adsdaq for advertising, and that was generating $10,000 a year at one point. But it's now drying up, and so I use three or four different ad systems.

The money involved and the quality of items produced with print-on-demand is terrible. I like to go high-quality with the t-shirts and books I produce. So I keep that all in-house. Print-on-demand is going the easy route, but I think you'll still have to have a second job.

Super-fans. Some of my fans are really kind of super-fans. They're say, "If you ship the books to me in Miami, I can bring them to the signing for you." Or they'll give you a ride to the airport in Seattle.

I think that those 20 percent of your fans, the super-fans, produce 80 percent of the kerfluffle around your strip. They produce the most blog posts, they support it financially, and they go out of their way to see how they can help, both in the physical world and online.

"I think that those 20 percent of your fans, the super-fans, produce 80 percent of the kerfluffle around your strip."

With incoming e-mails, I try to respond to every e-mail I get, though I don't necessarily get to every blog post or forum post or Twitter message. But I think that pays itself back in terms of the bond that people feel to the artist and the strip, and eventually the books. It has a concrete business result.

There's very much a stigma on self-publishing, and I think it's going to be a little hard to shake. Virtually since Gutenberg invented the press, someone else has fronted the money to publish books. That second-party validation was a kind of seal of approval for readers. But every cartoonist I know who has a deal with Harcourt or Random House or King Features or United – they're all desperately worried about their future, and I have no worries about my future.

If I'm a new author or artist, I have to first please my editor, who has to please the publisher, who has to please the buyer for Barnes & Noble, who has to in turn entice all the readers. I bypass all those intermediary steps, and just have to entice the readers. My business is reliant on 20,000 or 30,000 bosses, rather than five bosses.

Oh, and if your editor gets fired, or your publisher goes bankrupt, or Borders goes bankrupt, you're screwed.

Selling direct. I've intentionally avoided selling through Amazon and bookstores. I already have the reader on my site. Why send them to Amazon? Why send them to a second party who will take a cut? Amazon only works when you can't reach your own audience.

"I've intentionally avoided selling through Amazon and bookstores. I already have the reader on my site."

From the perspective of someone who has a mortgage in LA and a new baby, I understand why people don't want to put in the time it takes to develop an audience and a business, or who don't think they can make it work. It's definitely an investment of time – maybe close to a decade – but most careers take a decade or so of investment before something really happens. Think about a doctor. The careers worth having are worth working for over years and years.

I schedule my books to come out around two big events. One is put out in late November for Christmas shopping, and the other comes out in mid-summer in time Comic-Con.

My traffic is between 1.5 million to two million page views a month. About 6,000 people read the comic by RSS, and 3,500 get it by e-mail. Every day, about 18,000 or 20,000 people read the comic on the site. It's quantitatively not that many people, yet I'm making a very comfortable living.

As an artist, you have to do it because you love it. If you're doing it for that reason first, you'll find you're producing better work, which attracts an audience. They can tell when you're enjoying it. That carries you through what are going to be lean years. There were years when the strip made only $15,000 or $20,000.

The Web is such an evolving thing. You have to ask, "What should I be doing in the future? What am I doing now that isn't working anymore?" You need to constantly be researching and writing online. How are people making money? You have to have an almost voracious appetite to follow what people are doing, and what's working, and be able to adapt and change.

Sarah Mlynowski
Novelist

Sarah Mlynowski began her writing career while working in the marketing department of Toronto-based Harlequin Books, the legendary purveyor of paperback romances. Her first novel, *Milkrun*, focused on the travails of a suddenly-single twenty-something in Boston. It was published by Red Dress Ink, a newly-created division of Harlequin. Since then, Mlynowski has published six novels for adults, and five for teens (the latter set published by a division of Random House) – and has actively experimented with new ways of connecting with her readership, from Facebook advertising to events held in the virtual realm There.com.

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

I used to work in the marketing department at Harlequin Books in Toronto. My first novel, *Milkrun*, came out in December 2001. I definitely didn't have a Web site then.

After that first book came out, I had a two-book contract for *Fishbowl* and *As Seen on TV*, and my husband was moving to New York. Everything happened at the same time. So I left my job and started writing full-time.

I think I created my Web site right before my third book came out, around 2003. I paid for it on my own. Since I'd been in marketing, I was definitely focused on how to get the word out. I put a contact page on there right away. Some writers don't like to be contacted, but I love reader mail. The form on the site goes right to my inbox. I also started asking readers for their e-mail address and where they live. Now, that's on every page of the site, but originally you had to kind of hunt for it. My Web designer puts all that info into an Excel spreadsheet, so that if I'm doing an event in a specific city, I can just e-mail the people who live in Toronto or San Francisco. I think the list is now about 7,000 people globally. I've sold most of my books overseas. If I ever do tour in Brazil, I'm ready to promote those events.

Initially, I sent out e-mail newsletters manually, doing twenty at a time. But then I joined Constant Contact, which is great for managing e-mail lists. Maybe I send out four or five newsletters a year, around a book's publication or a big event.

Colonizing MySpace. I started with MySpace and found that there weren't that many writers there. I searched MySpace to see who had listed any of my books as favorites there, and I friended them. Quickly, the friends started to add up. I have about 5,000 now. With a few other teen writers, we started a group called Teen Lit on MySpace. We put up covers of new books, and readers join because their favorite writers are involved. That group has more than 15,000 members.

These days, there seems to be less growth on MySpace, but Facebook seems to really be taking off. Most of my communications with readers are through Facebook. I joined it, and quickly discovered it was a great place to market books, because teens were really starting to flock to it. When I started, Facebook hadn't yet

established fan pages. But in 2008, I started a "Magic in Manhattan" fan page for that series of my teen books.

Facebook ads. I've also done some advertising on Facebook. I created a little ad with the cover of my book *Spells and Sleeping Bags*. It had just been a "hot pick" in *Cosmo Girl*. The ad said, "*Spells and Sleeping Bags* is now in paperback. Visit the 'Magic in Manhattan' fan page for book info and to find the perfect spell." I targeted the ad to age 16 and younger, and to girls who said they liked Hannah Montana. I think I set a daily budget of $10, and did it for a few weeks just to see. Traffic to the fan page really went up. And whenever someone joins, the news goes out to all their friends. It says, "Julie is now a fan of 'Magic in Manhattan.'"

When people become a fan, I also friend them from my personal Facebook profile. Why? I'm ultimately looking to build my career. This series is probably going to end after four books, so I want people to be aware of the next books I write. And when they're friends with me directly, and not just the fan page, I feel like the relationship is a little more intimate.

When you are published with someone like Random House, unfortunately you can't really tell whether something like my Facebook ads has a real impact on sales. We don't have access to BookScan [which tracks week-to-week sales of individual titles], like the publishers do.

> "These days, there seems to be less growth on MySpace, but Facebook seems to really be taking off. Most of my communications with readers are through Facebook."

Virtual vs. in-person events. I love interacting with readers at bookstore events – talking to real people. Even if eight people show up, the store still has 100 copies of your book in stock, and they'll be pushing those copies. Plus, you get to meet the booksellers. They also do in-store displays, which are good advertising. When I'm at events and I ask girls how they knew about the event or the book, some say they saw it on my Web site or they got my e-mail, and half of them say they saw the poster in the store.

Combining those in-person events with virtual stuff is probably the ultimate. But if you're footing the bill yourself, I think online promotion can work. A four-week or six-week book tour costs a fortune.

I was doing a speech at a conference about teen girls and their fantasies. I posted on Facebook and asked my readers what their ideal fantasy is, in terms of romance – what do they want in a male hero. Do you want the best friend, or the rebel? I got twenty ideas immediately.

Relationship with Random House. I think it's a huge mistake just to hand things over to the publisher. I'm a firm believer that part of my advance should be used to promote my books. A few years ago, I hired a company to create these fun posters, and put them up in six cities, in teen clothing stores.

But they are a big help. With the Facebook fan page, I had questions, because I really didn't know code, or how to post images. So I spoke to a new media person at Random House, and she became an administrator on the fan page.

Random House also organized some events in the virtual world There.com. There were tons of fans there, all dressed up like characters from the books. We did a bunch of different events over a couple hours, in different areas of There. In each event, about 60 percent of the people were readers, but the rest were just people hanging out. I got lots of e-mail afterward from people who'd been there.

And we've worked together on things. Random House sponsors a book trailer competition, where they choose a couple of books and invite people to make book trailers. This student, Ben Cox, created an adorable book trailer for *Parties and Potions*, and I thought it would be amazing if I could put that on television. My husband had gone to school with someone who puts ads on the air in very specific markets, and so we talked about how much it would cost, and how we could do this. Random House said it was OK to use the trailer, and Ben cut it down to thirty seconds. Random House helped me focus on the right markets. We ran it in a few markets on ABC Family, for two weeks. It cost about $10,000. I thought in terms of books: if I can sell an extra 6,000 copies of the book, then it's worth it for me.

Analyzing what works. I use Google Analytics to see where the links to my Web site are coming from, what's producing the most traffic. We did a campaign recently, with Random House's support, where I did interviews on a lot of blogs. I said, "Do we also want to reach out to other teen authors, and have them ask me questions?" I have them a list of friends that I've met over the years. It turned out that I got the most traffic from those other authors' Web sites. When someone like Ally Carter, a best-selling author who has a similar audience, put me on her blog, that worked really well. And that's something that authors could do on their own, without a publisher's involvement.

Connecting to readers is so important. You can't be afraid of new technology. You have to embrace it and see if it works. If it's not working, don't waste your time. I feel like I've joined a hundred different social networks, trying to see what works. If there's a pull on the line, I stick with it. I'm still trying to figure out Twitter. I have friends who love it. But most of the teens I've spoken to aren't on Twitter.

Exploring the New Business Models

In the past, the tried-and-true business model for artists – the way they reliably made money – was to get an advance from a record label or publisher, and then produce something. If the product was a hit, the royalties would stream in (minus any marketing or promotional spending done on your behalf). If the product flopped, the next advance shrank considerably, or wasn't offered at all.

That model isn't exactly facing extinction, but new models are emerging, some of which will work much better for some artists. Many of these models eliminate layers of middlemen who each shave off their own slice of the profits.

This isn't a comprehensive list of every revenue model that can support your career; rather, it's intended to get you thinking. You may discover something that works better for you.

> Merchandise

Most artists I spoke with for this book earn most of their income from selling physical stuff, whether it's books, DVDs, CDs, or prints or originals of their artwork. Some add a small premium to the price of this stuff when they autograph it, or sell limited-edition merchandise.

There are three ways to sell physical goods. The first, and least profitable, is to have a service like CreateSpace or CafePress make it for your customers on an "on demand" basis. That means there is no up-front investment for you, and you don't have to guess how many copies of your new CD people will want to purchase. Every time someone buys your CD, CreateSpace cranks out a new one and ships it out for you. If you sell a $20 CD directly from your CreateSpace e-store (linking the buyer there from your Web site, for instance), you keep about $12. But if you sell a $20 CD through Amazon.com (CreateSpace's parent company), you keep just $4.

The second way, slightly more profitable, is to make your own merchandise in batches, and have a fulfillment house handle orders for you. You might make 500 DVDs, for instance, and then send them to Film Baby or Neoflix. At Neoflix, after paying a one-time set-up charge ($238) and a monthly fee ($35), the company takes just 12 percent of every sale. So a $20 DVD would net you $17.60. The danger, of course, is that you may over-produce your merchandise and be left with unsold stuff.

The third and most profitable approach is to make your own merchandise in batches and fulfill it yourself (or pay a part-time employee or intern to handle fulfillment.) You might collect orders through your site, and package up your outgoing shipments once or twice a week and taking them to the post office. The only overhead costs here are postage and packaging materials – and, of course, your time. There's still the danger of over-producing, and the slightly higher hassle factor of handling returns and customer service yourself.

> Digital Downloads

You'll almost definitely want to sell digital versions of your work, whether it's in MP3, MP4, MOV, WMV, or PDF form. Most artists price the digital version at a lower level than the physical product.

Some, like the band Radiohead and the documentary filmmaker Hunter Weeks, have experimented with letting purchasers set their own price for the digital download. Radiohead said its fans paid about as much as their album, "In Rainbows," cost at retail. (But a study by the research firm comScore found that only 38 percent of customers paid for the album, with the rest downloading it for free. That study found the average price paid by those who did open their wallets was $6.) Weeks tried his experiment after several months selling fixed-price downloads at $7.99, and said people paid between $3 and $4 when they were able to name their own price.

An important choice is whether you want your digital files to be copy-protected, or enclosed in a DRM (digital rights management) wrapper, which makes them tougher for people to trade with one another, but can also make them harder for one person to use on multiple PCs or devices. iTunes, for instance, seems to be moving away from DRM-protected music files and toward more flexible MP3 files, though the videos it sells are still packaged with DRM. Amazon's digital downloads are similar: music is sold without DRM, but video includes Windows Media copy protection. Books can be sold as plain old PDFs, which have no DRM, or copy-protected PDFs. Other formats, like the books sold for Amazon's Kindle e-book reader, also have copy-protection built in. But the Kindle is also able to display regular, non-copy-protected PDFs.

Downloads can be sold two ways. The first is through a marketplace like iTunes, Amazon, or YouTube (which in 2009 began testing a paid download service with some content partners.) Typically, the creator will get about 70 percent of the revenue from those arrangements. The upside is that these marketplaces attract lots of traffic, so there's a good chance that people who may not know about your work will discover it there.

A more profitable way to sell downloads is directly through your own site, using a service like E-Junkie. E-Junkie charges a low monthly fee, starting at $5 per month, to enable digital downloads of any kind of file: a PDF e-book, a QuickTime movie, or an MP3 song. PayLoadz, a similar service, permits up to $100 worth of transactions for free, after which monthly fees start at $15. But the only people who will find your work this way are people who've already arrived at your site.

In addition to downloads, which the user owns upon purchase, services like Rhapsody and Imeem effectively "rent" music to listeners by streaming it, and iTunes, Amazon, and Jaman can offer time-limited digital rentals of videos.

> Speaking, Workshops and Seminars

Many artists who've developed expertise around new approaches to production, distribution, and marketing find that others want to tap into that expertise. They're invited to speak at conferences, to college classes, or at meetings of industry networking groups.

Some view these invitations simply as an opportunity to meet new people, share what they know, and build up their brand. And that's OK.

Others may choose to develop presentations or workshops that offer insight into their creative process, the tools they use, or the new ways they interact with their audience – and charge a speaker's fee for delivering them (or at least have their travel expenses covered, giving them a chance to visit exotic locales).

In cultivating this sort of income, it helps to have a page on your Web site that lists the presentations you give (and perhaps also includes audio, video, and quotes from people who've seen you in action.) You may opt to be represented by a speaker's bureau or agent who will help market you in exchange for a percentage of your fees, or you may want to book engagements yourself. (Sometimes, speaker's bureaus will turn down offers that are "too small" – IE, not a big enough commission for them – that you might want to accept.) Filmmaker Sandi DuBowski and video artist Ze Frank are both represented by speaker's bureaus; Frank, artist Tracy White, and videoblogger Steve Garfield are among those who've also dabbled in teaching college courses related to their work.

A worthy area of exploration is doing presentations or workshops via videoconference, using a tool like Skype or iChat. That eliminates the costs of travel, which lets you charge a smaller fee and spend your time more effectively.

About the Author

Scott Kirsner is a journalist and blogger who writes about new ideas and their impact on the world. He edits the blog CinemaTech (http://cinematech.blogspot.com), which explores the way technology is changing the entertainment industry. He is the author of *Inventing the Movies*, a technological history of Hollywood published in 2008, and *The Future of Web Video: New Opportunities for Producers, Entrepreneurs, Media Companies and Advertisers*, first published in 2006.

He writes regularly for *Variety* and the Boston *Globe*. Scott's writing has also appeared in the New York *Times*, *The Hollywood Reporter*, *Wired*, *Fast Company*, the Los Angeles *Times*, the San Francisco *Chronicle*, *BusinessWeek*, and *Newsweek*, among other publications.

Scott is one of the founders of the Nantucket Conference on Entrepreneurship and Innovation, held each May. He also speaks and moderates regularly at entertainment industry events, including the Sundance Film Festival, the Toronto International Film Festival, and the South by Southwest Film Festival.

Scott is a graduate of Boston University's College of Communications and the New World School of the Arts, in Miami. He can be reached at kirsner@pobox.com.

Purchasing the book

Thank you for reading this preview edition. The complete version of *Fans, Friends & Followers*, which features thirty interviews with musicians, filmmakers, writers, comedians, and other artists, is available in both e-book (PDF) and paperback form, at:

http://www.scottkirsner.com/fff