Research Overview

Collaboration-led Research

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Projecting forward

From the outset I wasn’t sure if we were actually making a documentary film. In fact, as our three-year Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) funded research-creation grant rolled into its second year, I proactively insisted on referring to our project as an experiment and not a film per se. This of course irritated my filmmaking colleague to no end. “We are making a film … right???” was his refrain during our team meetings, and in the minutes that preceded one of our joint conference presentations.

While I admittedly enjoyed winding up an old friend and long-time collaborator, the truth of the matter was that in many respects there could be no film; or, put another way, SSHRC required it to be a means to an end, an integral product of the research process. In other words, we would not be able to answer our research questions without engaging in the art of documentary filmmaking. The terms of the grant, or even SSHRC’s acceptance of our initial proposal was thus contingent upon a certain ethics of experimentation. Our proposal fully embraced such perspectives, calling into question the very possibility of making media, and seeking to determine the possibilities and limits of the so-called participatory means of production for open source, collaborative, web-based documentary video.

The project team initially consisted of Ken Werbin (then a post-doctoral scholar), Steven James May (research/production assistant and PhD candidate), Andy Opel (the aforementioned documentary film professor), and Brett Gaylor (then a not-for-profit Montreal-based filmmaker and web-video platform developer). As with most team-based projects, much of the first year consisted of reminding or asking each other what we had in fact proposed, and again how we were going to undertake the research and production. The proposal was a particularly tight document, a roadmap for developing techniques for soliciting video clips, remixes, and other media objects to contribute to a broader—initially—web-based documentary video that sought to further themes developed in Andy and my (2008) co-authored book, Preempting Dissent. Gaylor, director of the well-received open source documentary RIP!: A Remix Manifesto (2008) offered the open source cinema web-based remix platform for our project.

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We/they collaborate?
In addition to checking all of SSHRC’s research-creation required boxes, the project also seemingly responded to broader trends in research funding. To use the vernacular, on the surface the project proffered commercializable research, a nimble, iterative form of prototyping, novel forms of research dissemination, and collaboration with non-university partners. While we lacked a private sector partner—a requirement now for many other provincial and federal research grants, particularly those that contribute infrastructure funds—, our project nonetheless succumbed to many of the challenges posed by multi-sector collaborations.

In addition to pushing the limits of media making, of telling stories through an experimental documentary form, our project also initially sought to question the nature of online collaboration; in short, who would participate in the making of a documentary film? How could we reach and seek participation from media makers and social media activists worldwide through the Internet?

The process of soliciting participation was a sensitive one for us in no small measure because we insisted on producing an open source documentary whose contents would be made freely available to anyone online (to share, download, remix, etc.). We therefore explicitly sought to differentiate ourselves from proponents of “crowdsourcing”, a term more commonly associated with recruiting people online to work on a defined project.

_Wired_ magazine was even more blunt in their assessment of the “Rise of Crowdsourcing”:

> Remember outsourcing? Sending jobs to India and China is so 2003. The new pool of cheap labour: everyday people using their spare cycles to create content, solve problems, even do corporate R&D. (Howe, 2006)

By displacing notions of authorial and editorial control, however, our team sought to frame the project as both an online archive and media making space—individuals could not only contribute to, remix, comment, or refute our own collaboratively directed production, they could also download any content and create their own “stand alone” productions, hosted on the open source cinema platform or elsewhere. That was the idea anyway.

The user-unfriendliness of the open source cinema platform, (Open Source Cinema) however, soon ground our collaborative aspirations to a halt. It was, in short, too much work to maneuver through the site. Simple functions like uploading, downloading, and even establishing an account often crashed or took far too long to complete. Thus, at this crucial stage of the project, our interest in understanding the dynamics of technology-enabled collaboration expanded to include the project team itself, particularly as manifest by our work on and through the opensourcecinema.org web-based platform. In our collective efforts to improve the functionality of the web-based platform, we concluded that the team was working on conflicting notions of collaboration, with the university-based researchers looking to make both the means of collaboration (the open cinema site) and the process of filmmaking an open one. In other words, the open source cinema website and tools were not open source at all; rather, only the content created on the platform was made free to share, download, modify, or remix as anyone saw fit. The platform was designed to crowd-source for
open source video projects in the first instance, and only later for individual participants. Henceforth there would be no remixing of the means of remixing.\footnote{Even more debilitating for our project, however, was the departure of Brett Gaylor from open source cinema for the Mozilla foundation. The platform was consequently left to flounder, along with our collaborative video project page, video clip archive, and user accounts—untold hours of work. Our offer to assume responsibility for the platform was rejected. We were told that we would not be able to afford to buy the site. The platform subsequently went dark, a classic example of what the open source framework was designed to avoid.}

Elsewhere there would be no remixing of the means of remixing.\footnote{Even more debilitating for our project, however, was the departure of Brett Gaylor from open source cinema for the Mozilla foundation. The platform was consequently left to flounder, along with our collaborative video project page, video clip archive, and user accounts—untold hours of work. Our offer to assume responsibility for the platform was rejected. We were told that we would not be able to afford to buy the site. The platform subsequently went dark, a classic example of what the open source framework was designed to avoid.}

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**Distinction**

My goal here is not to offer a critique of the open source model of ownership, collaboration, or media making; rather, this conflicting view of collaboration in our project is offered for much broader professional reasons, as exemplifying more general trends in Canadian research culture and in the university sector as a whole. Conflicting conceptions of research collaboration, and the role of collaborators in particular, raise important questions for university researchers involved in research initiatives and projects with government, the not-for-profit sector, and private enterprise.

In recent years government and university leaders have intensified calls for their faculty to participate in “industry-led” research and innovation, partnerships that from the outset call into question the nature of university research contributions. Or more to the point, those that call into question the distinctiveness of the university sector. What is it that universities, their faculty, graduate students, and research support staff offer to such research partnerships and consortia? What is distinct about universities contributions? Moreover, are such contributions always secondary at best? Must they always follow imperatives defined by other sectors, namely the private sector?

**Research and development**

The figure of the research student squirreled away in the university library or dorm room, isolated and alone, writing their single-authored theses and dissertations has always stood in stark contrast to the intensely social nature of academic life, either among faculty or in a teaching and mentorship setting. Yet, such individual work is always judged on its originality, its contribution to existing knowledge. Such a process continues to serve academia well, as it reminds us that even such individual form of research assumes an implicit form of collaboration—it recognizes the contributions of others, and seeks to build upon them. The distinctiveness of university research, of academic work, however, can unfortunately no longer take for granted the value of this scholarly form of collaboration, this exchange of ideas encoded into canons, and across, within, and among disciplines. Rather, the value of such collaborative knowledge (shall we call it the arts, humanities, ethics, aesthetics?), seemingly no longer stands on its own merits. Instead, the value of university-based research is increasingly being asked to follow—or otherwise facilitate—narrower short-term economic or commercial imperatives. In such an environment, however, university researchers should not shy away from collaborative forms of research; but instead the university—its leaders, faculty, staff and student—should use such opportunities to demonstrate the dis-
tinctiveness of the post-secondary education sector, a space that neither exclusively leads nor follows, but works as a distinct partner in the search for solutions and insights on the range of social, political, cultural, and economic problems that our society faces. Rejecting mandates to follow the needs of any one sector of society would reinvigorate a collaborative research agenda, and would demonstrate to government, business, parents, and students the uniqueness of the university sector—a sector in dire need of support across society. As partners in research, such a form of collaboration would move beyond the rhetoric of innovation, entrepreneurship, and creativity to enable participation from newly committed researchers, both individuals and teams of researchers, that are duly recognized and integrated into research collaborations before, during, and after the project. A collaboration-led research culture would consequently emphasize the need to both identify distinct skill sets and knowledge in an experimental process; in short, one that would, like SSHRC’s research-creation program, encourage the coupling of, and the interplay between, research and development.

Note
1. The move from open source as a structural, economic issue to one largely defined as one of artistic (textual) creativity is clearly evident in the work of Lawrence Lessig (1999; 2008), which initially focused on questions of law, code, and ownership in the context of the capacities to produce, but more recently on remix culture, remixed media objects, and Wikipedia (one of most renowned crowdsourcing platforms of the Web).

References
Open source cinema. URL: http://www.opensourcecinema.org [September 2011].