

In times of economic downturn, the prevailing idea is that jobs are in crisis, our finances are in peril and the time has come for extreme caution and conservatism in the way we run our lives. But what of those who already work outside traditional employment? How do filmmakers keep afloat during the tough times?

Keeping Afloat as a Filmmaker

by Monica Davidson

The global financial crisis began in 2007 when US investors lost confidence in the value of secured mortgages, and various major banks and financial institutions worldwide became involved.¹ In late 2008 stock markets worldwide crashed and a number of countries declared recession, including the United States. Although Australia is not yet officially in recession², unemployment is on the rise and pundits predict our economy will suffer further in the upcoming year.



Andrew Mula

Ironically filmmakers are both affected by, and insulated from, market forces. This is due in large part to the varied ways in which productions are financed. Most professional filmmakers, regardless of their occupation, will spread their employment across a variety of productions in any given year. Those productions could be wholly government financed, a corporate video, a commercial, a show aimed squarely at the entertainment markets of cinema and television, or even an independent feature. Where their work comes from tends to dictate how well filmmakers will survive in a recession.

Some areas of film and video production have been immediately affected by the current economic climate. Although there are no precise figures to back the claim, many filmmakers have noticed a marked downturn in the amount television commercial production.

Feature film production has been dually effected by the economy. Federal government funding was slashed by \$9.5 million in the most recent Budget³, but the introduction of the Producer's Offset initiative means producers can now get a rebate of up to 40 per cent on

Australian production spending. Tax rebates are also helping to attract foreign investment in local production, and some areas such as documentary are remaining strong.⁴

Andrew Mula is a classic example of a filmmaker who has worked in a number of occupations across all the various levels of film and video production in his twelve year career. As an independent freelancer, he has moved from features to television to creating web videos. His work has, quite literally, shrunk.

Andrew started working in features as a runner and camera assistant at Warner Bros, and then moved to television. After moving to the UK in the early part of the decade, he was a camera operator and editor on documentaries for the BBC and CNN. When he returned to Australia several years ago, he immediately saw the potential for internet video. "I could see bandwidth expanding, reaching so many consumers. The time was ripe to tap into a commercial market, so I moved to the smaller screen. "

Andrew's primary work now is as a field producer and director for a number of clients including non-government organisations, councils, and corporate clients such as Pacific Publishing. His combination of a diverse range of clients across a niche area of the production spectrum means he has not yet suffered from the economic downturn. "I'm fairly insulated from it, because dealing predominantly in internet video it's a very monetised, measured result for clients. They're able to see more specifically the results than they would in traditional forms of media like print or TV."

However, not all have been so fortunate. Andrew says, ""In the last 12 months, I've had a little bit more work. At the same time, I have peers that are really struggling. They're not in as much of a niche area, they're technicians in film and TV, who have really seen a shrinking of the sector."

Jamie Platt has worked as an assistant director in film and television since the early 1990s. His credits include Home and Away, two of the Matrix movies, and Priscilla Queen of the Desert. Jamie's employment has been typical of many filmmakers, in that he has moved steadily from one employment position to another. "I always worked for different companies, and I worked on different projects whether it was a film or a commercial. It could be one day, three weeks, three months, whatever. At the end of that you're unemployed and you have to keep generating work."

Jamie has also been insulated from the shaky economy. "I've been fortunate in that I've been through a time in the Australia film and television industry where there was an abundance of work for those who were skilled. During that, and after, I realised it's also a young person's game so you have to bank for your future, and work out where you're going to go next."

Amy Le Brocq is a writer and emerging filmmaker who recently decided to stop full time work and concentrate on her creative career. In that time she has completed her Certificate IV in Screen and Media, and her short film *The Shot* placed second at the Wollombi Film Festival in 2008. She produced and directed her first hour length documentary *The Naked Truth* about Aussie Blokes, which will be released later this year.

The global financial crisis, while important, was not a factor in her decision. "Everyone needs a motivation to spur them into action. If my life was to be about money, then I can find ways to maximise that, but would I be happy? I've been writing for years, it's been my fantasy world, my escape. Now it's my reality and I'm bringing it to audiences. I'm making it real."

She has given herself two years to become a self-sustaining writer and filmmaker, and while she still needs help from her partner to pay the rent, she is already fielding calls from directors about her work, and producing her own projects.

Even though Andrew, Jamie and Amy work in diverse professions and are hired in different ways within a complicated industry, all three have devised some basic and practical measures to counteract the possibility of reduced work opportunities. The first is to maintain and manage their cash flow.

Money Comes In, Money Comes Out

In any kind of employment in the film and television industry, understanding the flow of money is crucial. Jamie says "You have to ride on your success but you also have to set yourself up for any future failures. You don't want it, but you also know you have to keep eating. It's just a matter of safe guarding for the future, and it's whatever works for you."

Andrew says the secret to successful freelancing is anticipation, including appreciating the famine and feast of working the film industry. In his twelve year career he has experienced a number of lean times, and while inevitable, they are still daunting. "I can remember times when there have been 6 or 8 weeks when I haven't heard from anyone."

Andrew recommends planning for slow times when the cash is still flowing in. "It's really important to manage your money effectively. We freelancers earn in lumps of cash, so knowing how to spend it and where takes time. When to do that, and how much to spend, takes patience." He goes on, "I know freelancers who don't know how to manage their cash, they spend those lumps as quickly as possible and struggle to make ends meet for the next month. We have to learn how to drip feed our finances to cover us in the lean months."

Although raised to believe in working to put food on the table, Amy's writing and filmmaker are not yet at a point where she can provide too much bread and butter. She is, however, committed to her choice. "It's not about dollar value, it's about life value. Money you can budget, you can look at how much you've got and despite the amount, you can make it

work to what you need. There are things I'm going without, but which I'm happy to. I've had them before, and I'll have them again. Right now my currency is story telling."

Putting the Word Out

Effective marketing is the second measure to protect against economic downturn. While many filmmakers only focus on their marketing when they are already between jobs, all three interviewees believe that their regular and consistent marketing has made the difference in cushioning them against the worst of the downturn.

Andrew likes to know where his work will take him around three to six months in advance. However, regardless of how much work he already has, he spends a regular amount of time each month investing in his marketing. "Ring old clients, ring new ones, work out who you can better supply to existing clients, and let them know how." Andrew is also a dedicated networker and spends regular time attending networking events, conferences, courses, any occasion where he might meet potential clients or interesting peers.



Jamie Platt

Unpaid work that switches his trajectory or challenges him in different areas is another of Andrew's strategies in down times. "I think it's really important to do work that you may not get paid for, but that will add a feather to your bow." He has recently shot and directed a music video for upcoming hip hop act Choose Mics, and worked for free. "I knew that there were a few production companies out there that were looking for music video directors, and it was timely because I was able to make this video. It's a great time to help them develop a brand and an image for the group, and for me too."

Just starting out, Amy is keen to spread the word out about her work and spends a great deal of time researching, emailing and calling potentials.

"I subscribe to different industry newsletters, if a project jumps out at me, I'll enquire about it to see if it's the right fit as far as collaboration goes." She continues, "Today I responded for an advertisement for a producer on an independent documentary. If there's an opportunity that speaks to me, I'll make the phone call and pursue it." She has also been known to spruik her filmmaking and writing abilities to anyone from major film directors to her mechanic.

Jamie has been a successful assistant director for so long that his work speaks for itself. "I treat every production, and every person involved, with my best. In terms of reputation, it goes from there. I earn respect, and I think that carries me forward to the next job." He continues, "If you do consistent good work, and you don't renege on it, then fortune should follow."

Jamie's recent challenge has been to move away from assisting other people's productions and start creating his own. The potential recession has not swayed him from his ultimate goal, his own business. "Platt Productions is something that I've wanted to do all my life. I've purposely set out to gather as much experience as I can, to learn as much as I can, to push it to the next boundary. It's scary, but I want to go to that next boundary."

The Future

Amy and Andrew are similarly confident and hopeful about the future, despite economic doom and gloom. Like Jamie, Amy has started her own business called Plot2Post, which will take productions literally from beginning to end. "I've been spending a lot of time researching my image and positioning in the market place. Yellow is the colour that keeps coming to mind, it's fun, it's vibrant but also powerful. Will I be a crazy artist or a corporate suit? I'm also developing two documentaries and shopping out feature scripts. At the moment I still need to be in the corporate world to a certain extent, but I only work on projects I believe in. The product needs to have a worthwhile purpose."

None of the three have been tempted to discard their film and television work for more traditional employment. Andrew feels empowered in his freelance business, and enjoys the productive communication he has with his clients. "You have to learn very quickly how to communicate with someone you've just met, or when working really intensely with them for a week, or a couple of hours. I thrive on that, and for me when storms have come and I've had to ride out the storm I've thought of that aspect."

Having only just left traditional employment, Amy is committed to her new life. "You've only got to walk down the street in peak hour and see all those empty, blank, unhappy people driving to work." She laughs, "If that's not enough to send you back to your computer and get you through writer's block, then go and join the queue."

Jamie is realistic about his place in his profession. "I have twenty-four years of film and television industry experience, and if I had spent that in any other occupation I would certainly be the CEO. In comparison to where I am, and where I should be, it's a game of passion and always will be." With the smile of a truly contented man, he says, "I have no regret for any breath I've taken, or any choice I've made to be in film and television. I've thoroughly enjoyed it, I have a wealth of experience and a great history that makes me the person I am today. I love the position I'm in, and I've never regretted anything."

When asked to contribute a final piece of advice to any filmmakers struggling with the economic client, Andrew says, "Anticipation is your greatest ally. If you can learn to anticipate when work is coming to an end, and what your clients' needs are, even in the smallest degree, you'll stay that little bit ahead."

Ultimately, choosing a career in film and television is not a safe, traditional decision. Whether starting out, a long term employee or resolutely freelance, passion is the driving force behind the choice. Still in her first year in the industry, Amy already understands the key. "If you fall down at the sight of the first hurdle, you need to meditate on how passionate you really are in your pursuit of this goal. If you want it bad enough, you have to close the back doors, and leave yourself only one direction to move in."

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- Interview with Jamie Platt conducted Thursday 23rd July 2009
- Interview with Amy Le Brocq conducted Thursday 30th July 2009