

Exploring New Avenues for Content Distribution: Lessons from Broadcasters

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After a planetarium show has its final performance, its components are removed from the theater to make way for the next feature. Slides are packaged in boxes and placed back on the shelf, the soundtrack finds its home in the CD rack, laserdiscs and DVDs return to their cases, and the script, production notes,

cast network on its cable properties, such as ABC Family, and SoapNet. Segments from NBC News programs are often seen on various airlines as in-flight entertainment and CNN now allows users to pay a small fee to download television segments via the Internet.

Faced with rising production costs over the past several years broadcasters have been forced to find new ways of making money from their programming. Some of these same principles can be applied to the planetarium industry to help maximize returns on production investment.

and research are filed away. The investment of time, money, and resources put into creating a feature-length planetarium show has for now served its purpose and the show has been archived. But what if that purpose was extended? What if those same materials could be used to reach yet more people on a wider scale or through different venues, thereby increasing the return on that same investment of time, money, and resources?

The idea of changing and adapting content to fit new and dynamic business models is quickly becoming the norm in the broadcasting industry. Faced with rising production costs, producers were forced to find and take advantage of new revenue opportunities – new ways of making money from the same content – in order to maximize their return on investment. This idea was further supported by changes in media industry structure, as massive firms like Disney and Viacom became vertically integrated, owning both content production businesses (studios) with the distributors (television and cable networks, film distributors, etc.). ABC, for example, reuses programs from its broad-

A 1998 article in *The Economist* quoted financial analyst Chris Dixon as saying “[media companies] no longer make films or books, they make brands.” The article goes on to explain the idea: “The brand is a lump of content ... a wheel, with the brand at the hub and each of the spokes a means of exploiting it.” Even legendary cartoonist Charles Schulz, creator of the Peanuts cartoon characters, recognized this model of media franchising. He notes in a 1999 interview: “I regard the comic strip as the center of the wheel, and all the spokes that go out are the various projects that take place.” Thus, if we consider a

planetarium show in a similar context – as a brand or franchise, as opposed to simply a production for a domed theater – we can begin to identify and explore various non-traditional distribution mechanisms.

While a planetarium show can arguably only be shown effectively in a planetarium, there are a number of ways in which the idea of content repurposing can be used by show producers to get extra mileage out of their existing content and hard work. For the planetarium, the goals of repurposing are twofold: to increase revenue streams to improve the viability of production projects and to expand the reach of the planetarium’s offerings beyond the planetarium itself, in keeping with the educational mission that most planetariums subscribe to.

Within the planetarium industry there

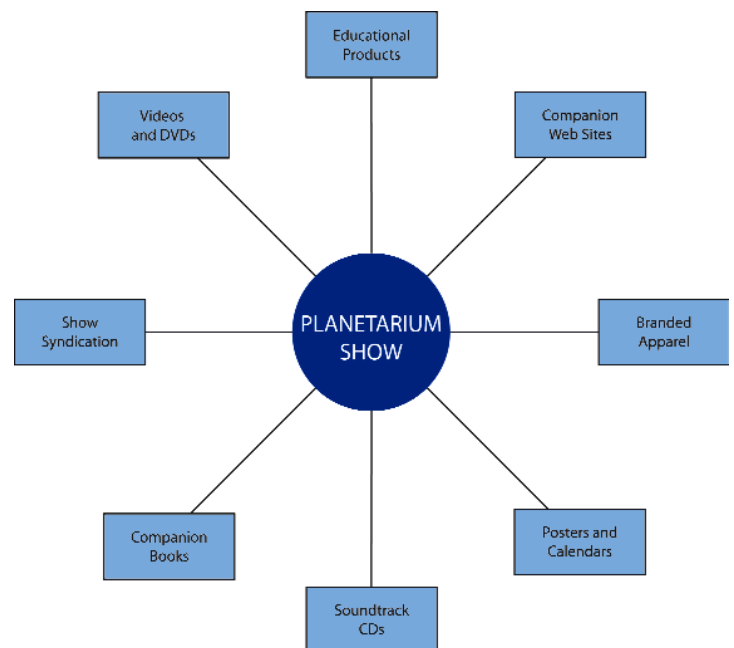


Figure 1: Examples of repurposing projects as spokes extending from a planetarium show hub.

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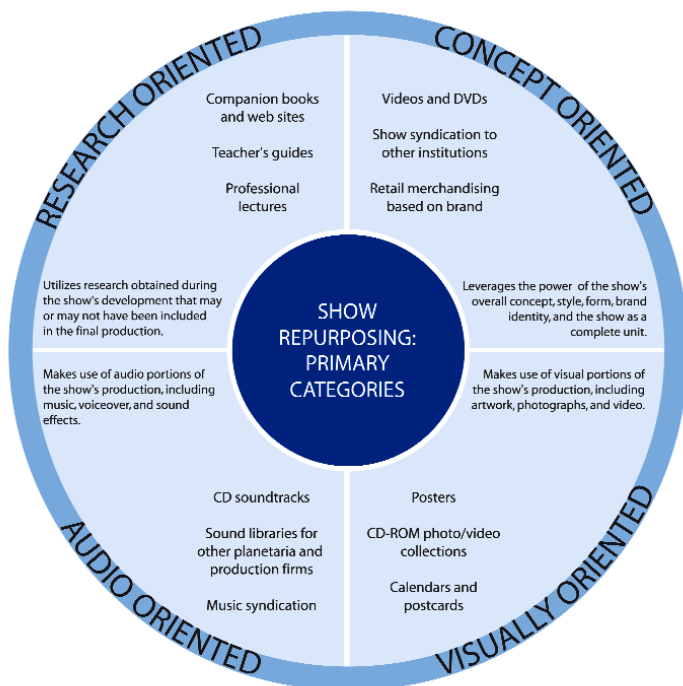


Figure 2: Four primary categories of planetarium show repurposing.

exist four broad categories of repurposing opportunities - in the parlance of *The Economist*, four primary spokes on the planetarium show hub from which various projects offshoot. They are shown in Figure 2.

Research oriented repurposing involves using the vast quantities of research and information acquired during the show's development process. Because only a fraction of the available information ever makes it into a finished production, additional material can often be used to create products which extend the informational reach of the show.

Concept oriented projects take the show as a whole, along with its brand identity, and create spin-offs. Examples might include videos or DVDs of the show or distributing the show to other institutions. Merchandising based on the show's logo, brand, or overall concept would be included in this category.

Audio oriented and **visually oriented** repurposing involves taking certain visual or audio material from a presentation and formatting it. This might include soundtracks, posters, and the like.

What follows is a series of more specific suggestions for ways that a program producer might consider leveraging materials created for a particular program beyond the show production. They are, however, just that - ideas. This list is by no means exhaustive and is meant to serve only as a starting point for brainstorming and developing other innovative ideas.

Show-specific artwork can be used on a variety of media to create saleable merchandise that leverage both the show's content and brand. At the right resolutions, certain dazzling scenes can be used on posters, prints, tee-shirts, mugs, mouse pads, and virtually anything that might typically carry a logo or piece of art. Thanks to advances in technology, one no longer needs to commit to large-scale production runs when buying these types of products, as web sites like Zazzle (www.zazzle.com) and Cafe Press (www.cafepress.com) allow users to

generate creative products and produce as many or as few as desired.

Companion web sites may not generate revenue, per se, but help to expand the reach of a given show and allow visitors to delve deeper into some of the show's content.

Public broadcasters have been using this model for a number of years, creating complex and dynamic web sites that use pieces of the broadcast as a framework for delivering more in-depth material. These sites can also operate as a launch pad to an e-commerce site that sells other show-related materials that are discussed in this article. For examples of how these can be put together, check out the web site of the popular PBS science program *Nova* (www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova) or for the Minnesota Public Radio documentary series *American RadioWorks*.

Show syndication is a fairly traditional method by which show producers have sought to recoup some of their investment. By packaging and distributing a program to other facilities, planetarians not only establish a new revenue stream but a reputation as a content producer, analogous to flagship PBS producers, like WNET in New York or WGBH in Boston. With the transition to digital production techniques, the packaging and distribution process becomes easier and less expensive.

Videos and DVDs have been employed for some time by various broadcast entities to extend the life of their programming and generate new revenue. Most of the major television news operations sell videotapes of their magazine programs via mail order, PBS, the Discovery Channel, A&E, and other documentary-driven programming sources sell videos via mail order and through retail out-

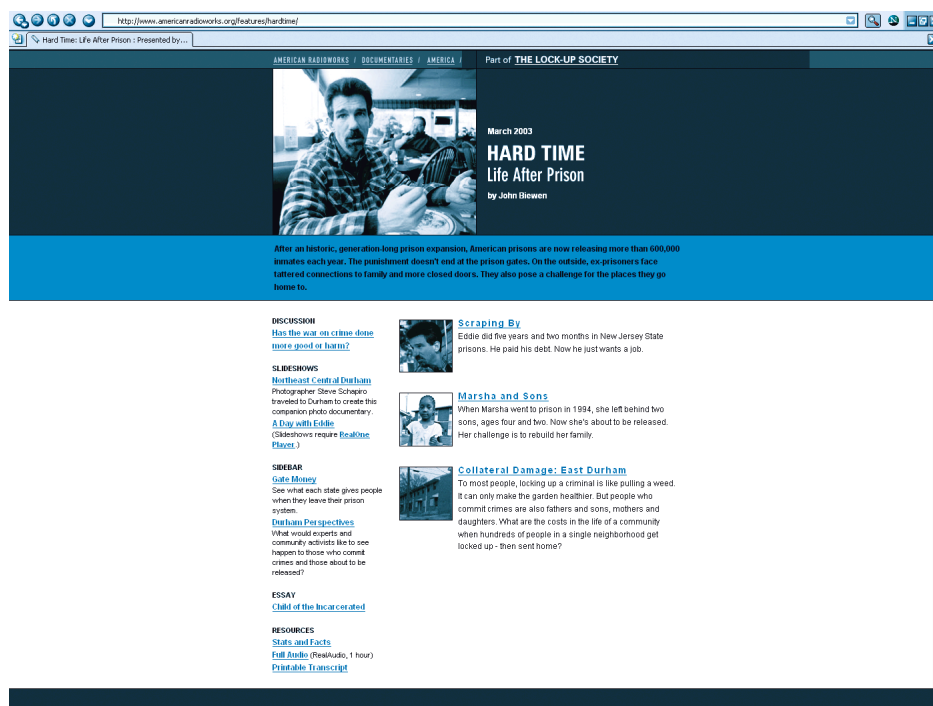


Figure 3: American Radioworks screen shot. Copyright 2003, Minnesota Public Radio. Reproduced with permission of Minnesota Public Radio. American RadioWorks is the documentary unit of Minnesota Public Radio. The American RadioWorks web site is <http://www.americanradioworks.org>.

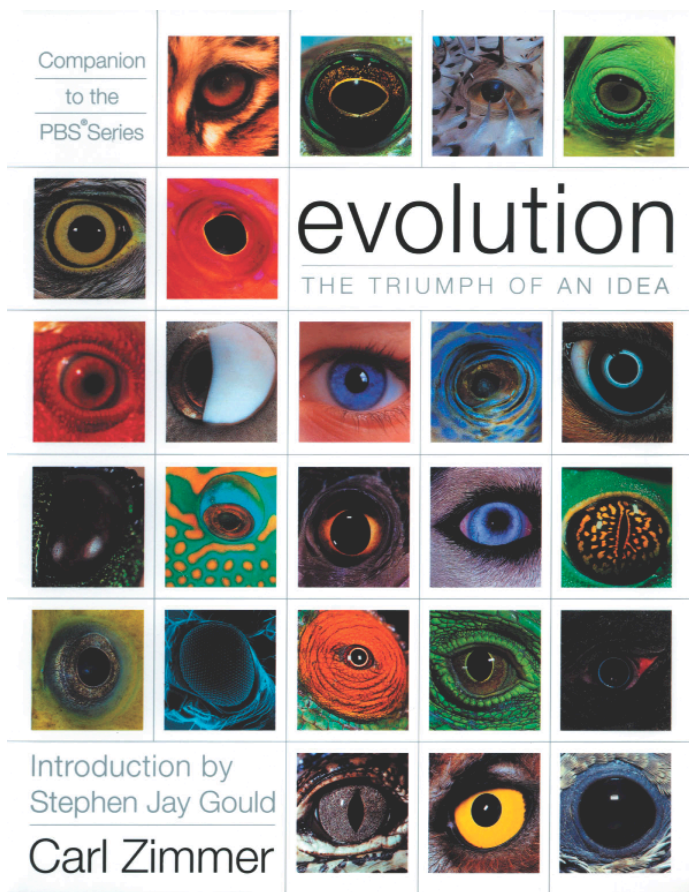


Figure 4 *Evolution: The Triumph of an Idea* by Carl Zimmer, published as a companion to the PBS series of the same title. Courtesy Harper Collins.

lets. Other informal education venues have exploited this opportunity as well; many popular large-format films are available on video and DVD. As more and more planetarium production involves video, and production techniques start to embrace the digital domain, re-developing show content for this kind of mass distribution becomes more feasible. Moreover, as DVDs become more commonplace, and standards become more universal, the cost of authoring and duplication will almost certainly go down.

Companion books allow producers to showcase both the artistic and creative components of their programming while simultaneously delivering more in-depth informational content. These books can feature artwork and graphics from the program for visual appeal interspersed with content from the show as well as more detailed material culled from the research done while developing the script. Full four-color printing can be expensive, but sponsorship can often be obtained to help fund the project in exchange for a logo placement on the book. Companion books might take the form of a program sold at a sporting event or Broadway show, or a full coffee-table-style reference book like *Evolution: The Triumph of an*

Idea published to coincide with the broadcast of the PBS series *Evolution*. The CafePress web site, mentioned earlier, claims it will offer short-run custom publishing in the near future, though at the time of this writing, no details were available.

While the prospects for generating additional revenue from existing show content are strong, a few cautionary notes are in order. First and foremost, it is critical to remember that any component of the show that may have been created by a third-party is protected under various copyright laws. Although a discussion of the specific legal issues is beyond the scope of this article, suffice it to say that almost certainly the rights granted to a

planetarium to include creative content in a show for public performance are different than the rights needed to package and distribute that content. Anything created in-house by planetarium staff members is most likely owned by the planetarium as a work-made-for-hire, and thus can be used freely. The presence of these issues, however, makes it imperative that before any new content repurposing venture is launched careful consideration of the legal issues that may arise from the re-use of certain material.

Should copyrighted content be used, agreements with the creators often call for ongoing royalty payments which require impeccable recordkeeping on the number of units sold, making the periodic payments and issuing reports to the rights holders, and generally just administering the licensing. In many content-driven organizations this amounts to a full-time job, if not a whole department. Issuing regular royalty payments also has tax implications that must be understood by both parties such that the appropriate filings can be made, not the type of work for which many non-profit accounting departments are familiar with.

Finally, the time and energy needed to re-work show material into different forms

may sometimes seem fairly daunting. Programming created for the planetarium environment is extremely unique and may often require significant rework to tailor it for different media platforms. Despite this time commitment, the benefits and rewards from offering creative content through a variety of media often outweigh the small added costs of further molding it into new forms. A number of planetarians consulted while writing this article cited lack of institutional support as the primary reason why repurposing projects have not yet been pursued. Such support deficits may very well prove to be the hardest part of launching a content repurposing endeavor.

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If done consistently and correctly, repurposing content can be an excellent way of continuing to generate revenue and exposure for a planetarium show long after the last ticket is sold. It is fulfilling both for the institution that stands to increase its revenues and for the production staff who are able to see their content last much longer than expected. Broadcasters realized some years ago that in their programming vaults existed stacks and stacks of potential revenue just waiting to be developed. Most planetarium operations are in a similar position, and with a little cultivation, existing content can become a fountain of new opportunity, expanding the reach of the planetarium far beyond the dome.

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