



Guild of Location Managers

Spotlight on Col Needham at Edinburgh Film Festival  
2.30 Sunday 19 June 2011 Teviot Debating Hall, Bristol Square

Col Needham was introduced by James Mullighan, the Director of Edinburgh Film Festival, and was in conversation with Jonathan Melville who is a film critic and journalist.

He announced that IMDb was 20 years old this year since the database started to publish its information. Then he showed the latest "sizzle reel" which is the latest Amazon promotion for IMDb:

<http://www.imdb.com/video/imdb/vi2954665241/>

Or type "IMDb Sizzle Reel" into Google ... or your search engine

Various quotes from celebs from the sizzle:

"Who are you really ?"

"IMDb is the Encyclopaedia of Film. A Great Tool." - Uma Thurman

The world's largest cast and crew database.

IMDb is the most used Film Internet reference tool by a factor of 1.5.

Many snippets with celebs who talked about how often they referred to the website.

After the sizzle Col Needham spoke about how the whole thing started:

Before he was 5 years old he won a colouring competition in the under 5s category and went to see the re-release of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. As he had won the competition he was collected from home and taken by limo to the cinema given a great seat with his parents and treated like a star. This was his first experience of film.

In 1972 he went to see Jaws as an 8 / 9 yr old and he was totally hooked. (Whoops). He couldn't go swimming, even in a swimming pool for weeks.

As he was growing up in the 1970's the cinemas were going through a strong period, cues around the block to get into cinemas, people sitting in the aisles to get to see the latest film.

Around this time he became obsessed with the job of Foley Supervisor.

In 1979 - age 12 - he was given a homemade computer kit - costing about £150.00 - with a memory of 128 bites.

This was also the time of the VHS revolution - VHS was available to hire anywhere and everywhere - grocery stores, garages - and you could hire them for a week or more. In 1981 he watched Alien 14 times in 14 days on a 2 week hire.

About this time he decided to make a paper diary of the films he had seen - because it is so easy to forget what you have seen and what you still want to see. The paper diary lasted two weeks.

He put the information into a database on his computer - and logged the director, writer, main cast and key crew. He also included a plot summary and critique. Most of the list was about film, though he did include some TV.

By 1990 he had logged 1100 films despite holding down a full time job completely unrelated to the Film Industry - for Hewlett Packard.

Col had had an email address since 1985 and had taken part in an email discussion group about film with individuals around the world. This was early days of Internet communication. The text-based messages took half a day to reach their destinations. Film information was only available in published books - (eg Halliwell's Companion which became Halliwell's Film Guide and stopped publication in 2008 JS). It was only possible to look up the Producer, Director, screenplay writer, DOP, Designer and a very few key cast.

The group started to share information: one of them decided to pinpoint who was the most attractive actress and what other films had she been in, or were in the pipe line. So Col was able to share his database, and the guy with an interest in actresses could manage that file.



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Col then launched a file of actors and then dead actors and actresses. And there was a kind of celebration as living artists were transferred to the other database.

All of this was happening by email, there was, by the end of 1990, a file of actors, a file of actresses, a file of directors, a file of dead actresses and dead actors - and all of this had been created by fans, for a select few other fans.

In September 1990 the discussion group were discussing creating a database - Col admitted to having been creating one all this time and on 17th October 1990 published the first version of the Internet Movie Database. It had 1100 entries - almost exactly half the number of entries in the standard Film Reference book - but with more categories.

A week after the first publication a big fan of writers offered up his information from the US; a fan of composers appeared from Switzerland; Colin from Edinburgh provided plot summaries.

Between 1990 and 1993 the information continued to be accumulated, then late summer 1993, Rod Harker, who had been a contributor and was a PhD student at Cardiff University, emailed Col to ask if he had heard of the World Wide Web - he thought it was going to be quite big.

The group members were still scattered around the globe, communicating by email, and had never met! But they decided to launch their database, using spare capacity on the Cardiff University Server. Within an hour the new web site had received 60 hits. They gleaned spare server capacity around the globe: Germany, Italy, Australia, Mississippi, and others.

At this stage the World Wide Web the rules forbade the use of the web for commercial purposes, but anyone could read it.

Throughout the world volunteers would email in credits; a Hungarian in LA typed in masses of Hungarian film credits - earning the database the thanks from the Hungarian equivalent of our BFI, so there were pockets of critical interest around the world. The information continued to grow: in 1990 the average number of entries in a printed guide would be in the region of 20,000 films and IMDb were about half way to reaching them with 10,000. In 2002 there were 202,000 entries on IMDb - and no printed guide would be able to reach that number.

People started to ask for biographies of people. Col wrote the first one - of Alfred Hitchcock, and then Mark from Bath wrote a biography of Linda Hamilton - and the snowball rolled on as other biographies were submitted.

All this time the various contributors were still working full time, doing this work in their spare time, on Saturday mornings etc

Early in 1995 the www took off:  
Dot net companies started  
BBC ran a series  
Traffic doubled every 2 weeks exponentially

The need for space on the servers around the world grew and the definitive moment came when Col got home from work and his wife (she must be a very patient woman. JS) told him that the New York Times wanted to talk to him.

Col decided that IMDb couldn't continue to run on a volunteer basis - so after agonising they decided to incorporate as a business, a UK Limited company with about 20 others around the world.

Col had not met any of the contributors in the flesh until Col from Bristol, Mark from Bath, Rod from Cardiff and Alan from west of London met at the lawyers in London.

They bought a server on a credit card - a 4 gigabyte disc - put the information onto it, gave it to a courier and sent it off to a destination in America.

The database went live and within 2 weeks Col had sold advertising to 20th Century Fox that enabled him to pay off the credit card before interest was due.



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IMDb was probably the world's first profitable website company !

So much so that Col was able to give up the day job, and gradually those contributors who had been doing the work as a hobby, and that wanted to, also started to work for IMDb full time.

Early in 1998 Jeff Bezos from Amazon contacted Col. Amazon had been regular advertisers on IMDb, they began selling VHS tapes as well as books, and were embarking on selling DVDs. They were looking for a site to partner with and it became a match made in heaven.

IMDb is a wholly owned subsidiary of amazon.com. IMDb operates as a separate entity - using Amazon servers and expertise.

There are offices in Bristol, Seattle, Los Angeles, New York and Germany.

By 2000 - 2001 it became clear that there were 2 distinct audiences: the film industry and the fans - including academics.

Decided to provide IMDb Pro for the industry users, started Movie Meter for crew and Movie Star Meter which have been very successful. Their audience overall is about 100 million people.

The Movie Star Meter has been used to figure out who is the most popular rising star eg. Rob Pattinson in the case of the Twilight Films.

Jonathan Melville Question: Who is responsible for accuracy?

Crew and cast, or their agents, as well as members of the public can all submit updates to information on IMDb

All information is submitted to an expert. There is a central system that checks the reliability of submissions, reliability is accumulated. Submissions from a source that is reliable is treated as a Trusted Contributor - or on the other hand a non-trusted contributor. With a world-wide audience several hundred people submit data.

Jonathan Melville Question: What happens when a film is announced?

A network of well-informed people will let IMDb know what is happening

IMDb is committed to provide accurate information.

When an agent tried to get a date of birth taken off an actor's CV on IMDb on the grounds that it might impede job opportunities if producers, casting directors etc thought the actor was too old. "We never remove factually correct information" As the date of birth was correct it was not taken off the database.

Jonathan Melville Question: Is there an increased prominence of Video content?

Recently launched IMDb video with a play button, provide streaming service, providing more access.

In 2008 IMDb acquired Withoutabox.com which is the market place between filmmakers and film festivals. IMDb have created an online submission system, each film has its own page created which can be updated as it received festival screenings, distribution deals, DVD releases etc.

10s of 1000s on line

More and more initiatives being developed to feed people's passion in film.

The success of IMDb is due to a lot of hard work and luck. And learning from mistakes. In December 97 they oversold the website advertising.

The decision to sell to Amazon had to be taken very quickly in 1998 - Col had to get in touch with all 40 shareholders who were scattered all over the world, and some addresses were 2 years out of date. He managed to talk to everyone - watching the dateline all day.

IMDb is adapting all the time, recommendations are built in.



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Variety of questions from Audience:

Do you still see lots of movies ?

Try to average 1 new film a day - fewer since 1993 (birth of child) Festivals good opportunity to catch up

What is your favourite film and who would direct and who would play you in a film based on your life?

Favourite films: Vertigo, Inception, North by North West, Double Indemnity, Bringing up Baby

David Fincher - direct, Ewan McGregor play him.

Have there been any howlers - any bad mistakes?

Howlers usually corrected within minutes - no example to give

Info from New York Post website that Ed Norton was to play Jack. IMDb was able to correct the error before the paper was distributed the next morning.

Will you make your own films?

Purely a fan - becoming a member of the Film Industry would remove the objectivity.

What do you think of the new Technology? As far as film making is concerned

Cheaper technology creates more films, providing expanded viewer choice. Seen a film with monsters and effects created purely on standard technology on Apple platform.

Increase in the pace of new titles. All Good.

How many films in your collection? What format and how is the collection arranged ?

Over 8,000 DVDs and Blue ray discs. It's an obsession! The collection is on shelves all around the home cinema room. The discs are in last watched order - and Col knows where everything is within the room.

What is the balance between income from Advertising and Income from IMDb Pro?

Can't answer that

Are you PC or Mac?

Mobile is Mac, office is PC

Direct one to one (or two or three) meeting: Col Needham, Christian (?) from LA and Jane Soans

After the meeting there was a queue of people keen to talk to him, and after about 10 minutes we were all shepherded out of the Debating Hall - and I had a 5 minute meeting with him and his colleague Christian from the LA office.

Col started by saying he knew what the meeting was about.

So I agreed and said that we are very keen to see our role represented by its own heading on the IMDb crew lists. I explained that I had recently met members of the Board of the Location Managers Guild of America and together with the members of the Guild of Location Managers (UK) we all felt strongly that our role was of vital importance to film-makers; and in fact two producers at the Producers Guild of America / AFCA conference had said in particular they could not have achieved what they set out to achieve without the excellent Location Managers they had worked with.

Col promised that Location Managers are next on the list for this to happen. He also said that - if I could possibly find the right place to look - that there is one listing under location managers.

(I have tried but not sure where to look. If anyone can find it, please let me know).

I then asked if there was anything we could do to help hasten the process - eg. lists of Location Managers, money to help the progress of the computer programmers?

The answer was firmly "no".

I asked if there was a timeline for this to happen?



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Again “no”.

I then said that we all felt that the definition of the role of Location Manager did not really cover what we do. Could we provide a better definition? (find your name or the name of a location manager, go to the title Location manager and click. You arrive at the definition of Location Manager).

Col agreed that we could do that - and when I suggested providing this via his PA who had arranged the meeting - he thought that would be entirely appropriate. We need to come up with a snappy definition that properly represents what we do in all the various different guises!

Belle Doyle from Creative Scotland - who had given up her weekend to come to Edinburgh, partly to come to Col's presentation is keen to update the locations on Films that had shot in Scotland. This is always possible so if you want to update the locations on a film that you have been involved with, you can do it in the same way that you can update your own credits.

I do feel optimistic that we will get our role recognized.

Jane Soans

Chair  
Guild of Location Managers  
June 2011