

Session 2: Crystal-Balling the next wave - Trendspotting Content

**Please note that the following are replies to the questions asked during the NYFA online Conference event.*

*Panelists have answered the questions in the context of the conference from their own opinions, inferences and perspectives. These responses **may not** directly represent any other entities or organisations unless otherwise stated.*

1. How do you think we can reach out to a global audience with a Singaporean-based story? How can we bridge the gap between local vs global audience so that everyone can relate to it?

Kenny Tan: Singapore and Southeast Asia in general have authentic local stories and perspectives that the world needs to see more of - from our cultures, idiosyncrasies to our folklores. And you would be surprised to see that many of these stories can actually break cultural as well as language barriers and be enjoyed by many people outside of local audiences simply because of the universal values that the stories bring with them that are easily understood by foreign audiences despite the difference in culture or geography.

Values like empathy, sacrifice, triumph over evil. That's where filmmakers can put on a hyperlocal lens to tell a glocal story (glocal content = Think Global, Act Local). We just need to dig deeper and find the confidence in us to tell more of these stories that are unique to us.

Kenneth Goh: I have always believed in SE-Asian stories for the Global audience. Think of what universal themes or stories that under girdles any culture, love, filial piety, family ties, but work it into a story that of a different genre. Why can't family ties and piety be set within a context of a crime story? Aside to language & cultural sensitivities, there is no reason why Singapore stories cannot travel. Perhaps, do not look at Singapore story in isolation but explore similarities with our SE-Asian partners & friends.

Doreen Neo: SEA (and Singapore) looks very different to the world, we are a collection of rich colours and culture/heritage. Yet beneath this is a universal theme of Asian values and lifestyle - love, family ties, respect for the elder, work ethics, non-reliance on the state, etc. So we can build very unique canvas or backdrops for our stories. However, the story that will attract a global audience needs to be more than just a colourful, rich backdrop. A good compelling story would be the sum of a great backdrop + how each character is developed as an individual + the relationships between all the characters. And how all these work together as a seamless visual to the audience. Think Money Heist - many of their global fans would probably not be very familiar

with the Spanish backdrop. But audiences have all fallen in love with the band of thieves and have their own favourite characters.

Juan Foo: I mention this when teaching writing. It may be too simplistic but here goes: The Filling should be Cultural; the Feeling should be Universal.

It is a challenge no doubt. Creators need to find that sweet spot of taste-making of their own stories compared to what is already consumed by the audience. Many practitioners will also say that it is production scale and quality. That is also a challenge in the ecosystem of how resources are raised to make these standards realised.

For me, it is the grooming of creative producers who can shape and develop a cultural commodity that hopefully sustains long enough to be successful.

2. The constant narrative about Singapore (that there are not enough good local stories) has led to local audiences turning away from the content. How can we change this narrative as content producers? Are audiences watching more local content in the midst of international streaming war?

Kenny Tan: It is true that our local market is relatively smaller. Therefore the output and budgets may not be as high as compared to other countries.

However, there are still many good local stories and content being created, the issue might lie with audience appetite and consumption patterns. The silver lining is that with multiple distribution points due to high speed internet connectivity, local content is a lot more searchable and accessible, but content producers will still need to keep creating and find their own audiences.

Youtubers are great at that, especially in building consistency and loyal audiences who consume their content diligently.

The other factor that we all need to work on is to keep creating relevant content to slowly influence local audience perception and consumption habits. It will take longer to happen, but we all have to start somewhere. The circuit breaker is a good time to introduce some of these local content to audiences that are now stuck at home looking for entertainment. At the moment, Viddsee is actively using this opportunity to reach out to more local audiences by

introducing relatable and accessible short films and short series to them that are made by local content creators.

Also, it may seem like a long shot and doesn't happen very often in our local context but I believe development is crucial to the output. Spending resources and time on the development of the story before actual production may result in a higher quality and well thought content that can rival international ones, it may even be placed on an international streaming platform. We've seen that happen before.

Doreen Neo: Many of the shows that are doing well globally and in Singapore - are mostly high budget productions that provides for scale and wow factor. In comparison, local content producers/production companies work on fractions of those budgets. We have to admit that market size and therefore production budget is important, Not the only or most important, but budgets do matter. Mediacorp believes in local content and the digital developments and the numerous partnerships are helping us to deliver content to more and new audiences. The narrative that Singaporeans are not tuning in to local content is not entirely true. Perhaps it's true if you think TV only but we need to stop thinking TV and think of all the other platforms. Mediacorp delivers our content on TV, on digital, on social, on YouTube - so eyeballs have actually increased, not dropped. We will not have Berlin, Moscow, Professor, Tokyo but we have our Phua Chu Kang, JoJo Joget, Aunty Lucy, Lobang King who will always tell our own Singapore stories and tell it well. So it all depends, are we building stories for Singapore or are we building stories for a global audiences. Or a local story that will appeal to the global audience. All 3 can take place - but they need to be constructed differently, with different skill sets and obviously different budgets

Juan Foo: Content producers here have to brace themselves for global competition even on local channels. There is a lot of strategic thinking and derring-do to produce and I think this is dependent on research and development.

Content development is key and so crucial yet the toughest to justify and account for in terms of time and money. Good local stories first have to be mined, discovered, and evolved. Only those who have the patience and sustenance will be able to look at how more stories can be made and appreciated. Content producers have to spend more resources on development of content that is quality, and in that same vein, have the resources to make them.

In the international streaming 'war', I think local content is buried away by the algorithms of audience preferences towards more polished content. The only way to avert or resist this is to keep supporting locals.

3. What is one show and one film you're excited about now? Do you think replicating it is possible in Singapore - what are the helping factors and obstacles?

Josiah Ng: I remember seeing this question during the session and the one title that came to mind immediately was *What we do in the shadows* by Taika Waititi (Jojo Rabbit, Thor Ragnarok) who helmed the series and the second season was just released.

When the mockumentary was first released, I remembered asking myself why mockumentaries weren't done as much in Singapore? Do we not have an appreciation for such humour? And then NSFTV came up with *The Average Guys* (catch it if you haven't, I think it's super underrated), and that blew me away personally. It's been three years since and I've been excited and hopeful that such a genre will do well in the region!

In terms of obstacles, or why we haven't been able to create similar shows with broad appeal - I suspect it has to do with impatience from either the commissioning client's side or the 'studio'. We typically go from concept to release within a few months but if you study the shows that have done well, it's a marathon, not a sprint.

We need to invest in writers (when was the last time we had a solid writers' room?) and our producers need to give them the appropriate amount of time to develop that seed of thought.

Juan Foo: I look forward to every Singapore feature film that is coming out, be it festival or commercial cinema release. There's something to be said about making and completing any film and each one, no matter good or bad (because this is subjective) shapes the national zeitgeist on screen.

We are accumulating culture, memories, emotions and beliefs. These make impressions to viewers and ourselves. Replicating is a form of learning, but we must also be well-informed of other factors of market, resources and scope. It is the producers who have to sustain this headache.

Many things are possible, it is a matter of resources and obstacles. These, I would say are specific to the films attempted to be 'replicated', and factors could be talent, raw materials, and funding. Dependent on the film, these could also be the obstacles.

4. What are your thoughts on the trends of content post-COVID 19?

Kenny Tan: I think in the near future, filmmakers will have to think of ways to tell stories that can be executed with a lean crew and light weight equipment. "Lo-fi" along with all its permutations and aesthetics may be accepted into the norm by audiences.

We may also see less of large ensemble cast and crowd scenes in certain productions, the use of CGI and animation may become more popular and prolific.

Kenneth Goh: Short time wise, there will be more calls for short-forms as broadcasters and content publishers need to inject fresh content instead of constant repeats. The scale will be smaller and more controlled. I do foresee more prep before shoot as there is need to get it right the first time. (lesser NGs?) Also there is been some good desktop productions, as Juan puts it that deals with Covid but these stories can be replicated. There will be increasing collaborations on a global scale with other indies & producers on similar stories that can be executed over a quick shoot period and using less expensive equipment but quality stories

Josiah Ng: Ironically, COVID-19 is forcing content creators / filmmakers to go 'lo-fi' and think of quick and cheaper ways to continuously create.

From an agency's point of view, the creators that are still sustainable are the animators, illustrators, motion graphics artists - roles that can be done independently while being socially distanced.

In fact, many production houses that we've worked with, no doubt capable and have created quality pieces, are now at a loss because they can't react to creating in a minimalist sense. This virus is training us to communicate more while doing less, and we're realising that animators, illustrators, motion graphics do that well when given limitations. Of course this is not to say that the production houses / high budget quality content will be obsolete, but for a period, we'll likely see clients asking for lower budget stuff that still reach the highest potential for their KPIs. I do think though, that it'll take a quick spark, a few months after COVID-19 recovery, for consumers to start appreciating quality and high-concept content again. Beauty is always irresistible and creators need to always remember that.

Doreen Neo: In the midst of COVID19 - Mediacorp launched several new shows, not short form, but full length shows to provide more entertainment options for all of us stuck at home. The shows are simple formats requiring a much leaner crew & lesser time at post prod. We are re-thinking the usual ways to produce a show - we needed content to be produced faster while

retaining a certain quality. We launched several fitness/info-ed shows in 1-2 weeks, we produced In the Living Room with PCK and Jojo Joget with less than 1 week of prep, we are launching 2 shows in May - a 1 hour LIVE music show using Cloudcast and a 1/2 hour cooking show using mobile phones only. These are ways we would not have considered usually but the Covid situation has pushed our content creation team to discard usual way of producing a show. They have to think out of the box and do it fast. The silver lining is that when we return post-Covid, these learnings are invaluable and must not be given up. I think it needs to be integrated back into our content pipeline and methods. Post-Covid, audiences will want their glittery, properly produced content. But I think there is a space in there to continue producing content that requires lesser investment as part of the entire content mix.

Juan Foo: Agree with other panelists - that we will see a shift towards 'desktop' productions and a downsizing of production scale for production scale's sake.

It is highly likely that short content will be the order of the day from brands and commissioners, but the thing we must take note is short content may not imply lower costs as the value of manpower is unlikely to be fairly scaleable in that proportion.

There will be a reduction of physical production equipment and producers will need to work around using smaller affordable gear. We will need to also expect 'combined' roles in terms of work scopes, which implies creators will need to double or triple that where possible.

5. How would you pitch lower production value content and still fetch a high price from clients? The higher budget used to be attributed to high-end equipment and big teams required for high production value ads/content.

Josiah Ng: Answer is, no. I think, start questioning how you get the same amount of cash from your clients in different ways vs. how to get the same amount at one go. For example, go for scale and bulk.

It used to be \$300k for one production, now it's seeing how we can pitch ten pieces of content for 30k each. It's not one size fits all but most clients these days prefer a long-term arrangement as opposed to *one-night--stands*.

Juan Foo: Clients should be educated to know what are the paying for and the resultant quality.

Being nimble is a virtue that most of us take for granted but looks like now it could be the norm.

The impression of production quality is honed from the pitch and the expected delivery. So the first state of affairs is to pitch and prep your decks well. And perspective is needed to be adjusted too. As the producer, you cannot go into a deal by saying it looks one way but it can be done lower. Some clients know you are adding frills to the deal just to puff up the budget and the implied production quality. Maybe I am naive but I think it is time to be honest both ways.

6. Why is Korean content of such high quality? Do they have a different funding model that we could learn from? Or a talent development programme? How do they pay for it?

Kenny Tan: A huge market cap that goes beyond their own domestic markets. A supportive government mandate and people that work really hard for years and provide a whole lot of resources with a clear vision to turn Korean culture and entertainment into a reputable soft power on the world stage.

They are reaping the rewards of what they have sowed many years before. Realistically, it will be hard for us to get to that level in the short term due to market cap and several other factors.

However, there are valuable lessons that we can learn and apply from their processes and modify it for our own unique industry.

Josiah Ng: It's scary to have this recorded on written text, but let's just say that there is very strong public and government support for local content (e.g. limiting the number of overseas content to hit a certain ratio for local content to have the same exposure).

But I do recognise that it's easier said than done from a commercial and cultural perspective. That said, content creators and filmmakers need to band together and continuously ask themselves, "how can we collectively create a regional audience that can develop a shared identity in regional cinema?"

Yes, regional because local is too small a market and that is another point to consider.

Doreen Neo: 1) Huge market & Strong Funding model. When Korean dramas was launched in late 1990s, they started to create and produce a huge volume. In 2011, the 3 broadcasters aired more than 100 dramas (in 1 year!) 2) Despite high production costs, back then estimated US\$250K per episode, many titles were licensed at low/zero costs. Objective was to give the world Korean dramas. Never mind about covering production costs, let alone make some money 2) Draconian way of training artistes and controlling their lives - what to wear, what to say, no private life, years of training before they can be casted 3) Control of external content into their market - so Koreans support K-content 4) Continuous investments - production budgets get higher with each title. E.g. Descendants of the Sun - estimated US\$1mil per ep 5) Talent pool is 'homogenous' - think, speak, write, act in one language

Juan Foo: I think the Korean success model in media and film is their homogeneity, national pride, large domestic market, government vision and support as well as community activism.

It is a good sustained mix with a good ecosystem in place. Singapore has to find its own way and the challenge is whether we have the stamina for it, which is why activities and events such as NYFA must be supported to evolve and sustain. No one will help us except ourselves.

7. Scenario: Utopian Singapore. We have an average of 20 feature films a year coming out in theatres and about half of them are making profit. Audiences are enjoying MeWatch content a lot more, and some of our shows are even being picked up by streaming giants. There is an overall greater appreciation for and consumption of Singapore Stories. How did we get here? Or what changes need to be made now and what do the youth need to do to work with people already in the industry to get there, and go further?

Kenny Tan: I think it is a great ideal to have and I believe it is possible.

The fight to get there is made easier via digital distribution where local content can be a lot more accessible, thus discoverable.

Of course in a Utopian Singapore, everything needs to come together, from the support of the government to the support of local audiences and the tenacity of local content creators. This will take time, but I would say for young creators, to keep that ideal as the ultimate goal and a goal that keeps them motivated to continue learning and creating. But also to not forget to celebrate the little wins and be proud of what we have achieved along the way to get to that Utopia.

Josiah Ng: There isn't an easy answer or a formula, unfortunately, because we're living in a season where there are so many moving parts. This is not to say that utopia is impossible though, but I'd like to challenge that utopia might take on a very different form and definition in the next few years.

It doesn't have to be the release of 20 films per year or that audiences are enjoying meWatch / streaming giants are picking local content. What about co-productions? What about Viddsee overtaking Netflix? As times change, I do think that our definition of success has to evolve too.

Juan Foo: To get there is to start now with having the vision, commitment and the energy to sustain.

A key idea is to acknowledge this is a long-term goal and it is shaped by a group of like-minded filmmakers.

Another idea is that we must be broad-minded enough to understand that the film, media and content business is very fluid and there is a need to constantly understand it, so the learning cannot stop. A third is to be part of the community as well, to interact and mutually inspire these goals. Changes to be made? -- mindset. Attributes to have? - positivity. Attitudes to possess? - finding opportunities

8. Do you think the local indie segment could benefit from better incentives for private investors such as tax breaks? (Hint: I do - I find most of the grants extremely restrictive to the content, personally)

Josiah Ng: Of course indie films could benefit from better incentives for private investors, but I'd like to play devil's advocate and throw back another question to challenge what else can an indie filmmaker do to secure funds?

There are countless examples of other regions having limited resources and support, but still managing to produce great award-winning work. This obligates me to question if incentives are the only way to go. In terms of your comment about grants being restrictive, I want to challenge you to explore another perspective - that we are always beholden to whoever gives us these resources and that no one owes us anything (if I may be so bold to say so). So, of course it's going to be restrictive (did you really think getting resources was going to be easy?).

Who determines public interests? Who decides how much to give and to whom? These are factors to consider and appreciate. In fact, the day that grants are given freely and without much conditions is the day I worry about where my taxes are going.

I do understand the root of this question though and appreciate that you are perhaps a passionate content creator that just needs resources to get your film / content going and that these administrative procedures are exactly what's stifling the nation's imagination. I get it.

While I've tried to ask harder questions, I urge that you keep asking these questions, but also actively seek answers and find your own answers too, so that you one day can be in a position to provide solutions around parameters we at times cannot change in the world.

Kenneth Goh: I think that it will be good to have private investors taking a stake into our content, and of course tax breaks help and this is something that the industry needs to engage with MoF, etc. But as Producers, you need to ask yourself, if these private equity partners take a stake into your film, are you prepared to get them involved in editorial. If everything is left to you whilst they take a significant stake, yet wanting tax breaks, then think Jo Low! But seriously, editorial & creative control vs cold hard cash.....

Juan Foo: Incentives probably will need to be improved according to how the film and media world evolves. But therein lies the chicken and egg problem - perhaps there is no incentive to incentivise because there is not enough successful case studies to justify these incentives? I believe tax breaks have been largely avoided and some examples from Europe may have shown it may not work. Tough as it may be, it should not stop any producer from finding a way.

9. What do you think of algorithm-based content curation playing a part in the future? Will Singapore be riding the wave as well?

Josiah Ng: From an ad perspective, it should have been started a while back, but there hasn't been an agency that has unlocked this.

At DDB, we do have 'neurotrend' experiments - we put random members of the public through some market research questions and then hook them up with physiological sensors to determine if an ad / piece of content works.

I'm not in the position to comment if Singapore would ride the wave but I personally we will. But the question is to what extent?

Juan Foo: I believe it is already in practice.

Data-driven results are highly relied upon in media stakeholders and practitioners.

One thing we have to be aware of, and learn, is to interpret these data and shape our own strategies to our own content promotions. With data comes patterns and numbers, and perhaps a reliance on the norms or the pre-determined patterns of other markets. Can we be astute enough to redefine them for and from our own tastes and ideologies?

10. If we have scripts / works we'd like to pitch to production houses like HBO Asia or Mediacorp, how do we go about it?

Kimberly James: It's generally best if you have a simple deck and a producer/production house backing you before you seek funding.

Creatives and the story are central, but if you don't have a production powerhouse backing you, you still can't deliver.

There are so many great production houses in Singapore. Look out for your favourite shows or shows in your genre and watch the credits. It's not too hard to find people when you look.

Doreen Neo: Happy to collaborate - we have produced many dramas where the script is outsourced. However in all these examples the story idea that we have is always not properly fleshed out, there is a huge difference between a story and a script. In our collaborations we have always had to put in our own team so that it can be executed into a series or show.

11. Do you think influencer marketing will continue to play a part in talent grooming in efforts of increasing production quality?

Josiah Ng: From an ad perspective, we are seeing a rise in 'micro-influencers'.

Quality thought-leaders that have equally quality followers who are well targeted.

Their followings might not seem huge but quality trumps quantity in this setting. Advertisers / brands will start to see that numbers don't matter.

With regards to production quality, I always hold the belief that beauty is irresistible. So, increasing production quality will be back on the rise once resources are available.

Doreen Neo: There is a difference between influencers and actors. An influencer is short term, an actor is long term (normally). An actor can be an influencer but an influencer is not readily an actor (or a star),. There is a different play book for each of these roles. Influencers with numbers is not the same as influencers with influence and credibility. It can be, but it needs to be built and earned over time

Juan Foo: Influencer marketing will likely remain an entry-level opportunity for talents to be exposed to the larger ecosystem of productions like long form.

They can be groomed to suit performance or production roles. But in the end, production quality requires much wider perspectives and processes which influencer talents need to grow into.

Influencer talents need to acknowledge that there is a gap between online videos and cinematic 'scale' films. Every detail of physical production is magnified, managed and executed with more considerations. Production quality is not only in the product but also the process.

12. For independent filmmakers, how can we join as production houses like Mediacorp and HBO to learn hands-on experiences?

Kimberly James: Send your CV to hr@hboasia.com.

Include in your email that you are interested in work in the OP Department or on our shows.

13. There's a growing number of growing indie filmmakers where they take up several roles at once. Do you think they should join a production company to gain experience first? Or continue by themselves to do indie productions?

Kimberly James: Both. When you're new, it's good to have mentors.

Much of production is learned from making mistakes. Many who've been in the industry a long time have probably made most or all of them.

Learning from them will get you years ahead. Plus, you get great templates and workflows for your own projects. But never stop creating on the side.

No one else has your voice and it will likely take years of practice for you to hone it. Hustle.

Kenneth Goh: As an AIPRO rep, of course join a production company. Get ready to be thrown into the deep end, learn and swim. It's at this place you get to be exposed to what is involved almost at all levels as you develop, prep, get into production and on post. You get to be mentored not just by EPs but by fellow team members, and it's where you realised it takes all to make a smooth shoot. Having said that, if you have that entrepreneurial spark, pls go out there and get yourselves involved and build up the industry. God knows we need infusing fresh blood always.

Kenny Tan: For indie filmmakers, don't forget to explore, learn and gain knowledge. Also, experience in content marketing and distribution while working in a production house or on your own indie productions.

That will be a useful skill set to have along with the know-hows of film producing and production.

Josiah Ng: JOIN A PRODUCTION COMPANY.

Learn the ropes. Learn from those who have experience, but the responsibility is yours to challenge what is still relevant. You need to constantly ask yourself "How can I help to evolve certain skill sets?"

Also, NEVER FORGET YOUR IDENTITY AND YOUR INDIE PASSION. Don't just do things for commercial sake. Make money to make films. Don't make films to make money.

Doreen Neo: Join a production company. Learn the ropes from ABC. Your fundamentals need to be strong but develop your own style/tone/voice over time

Juan Foo: Singapore media schools train hyphenates, so we are used to people who are supposed to know how to write-produce-direct-design-shoot-edit-deliver.

Join a production company to gain experience and to get the lay of the land. There is an adage that goes - don't find a job, find a boss that can mentor you. Perhaps never truer in media than any other profession where skills are a mix of art and craft.

Production companies are legacies especially if you look at them as IP ownership, so setting up and sustaining one really needs some serious considerations. However, if you and your team are committed for the long run and have the drive to sustain it, there's also that leap of faith.

14. If "Authenticity" fails at "how can this happen?", does it mean the story cannot really break the convention (going by mainstream standards)?

Josiah Ng: Authenticity will fail at 'how can this happen' WITHOUT ANY REASONABLE REVELATION AND EXPLORATION.

So it's okay to break the convention, but you need to substantiate. If you are able to do so charmingly, you have a great film on hand.

Doreen Neo: Authenticity is not how can this happen only, you need to make it believable, if your story offers a hook for me to believe then it is authentic. Example: My Love from The Star. Romantic K drama about an alien stranded on planet earth for 400 years. How can this happen - in normal circumstances? But the story offers a plausible reason and a strong storyline, so it is Authentic - because Love is authentic. Like what Josiah mentioned, build your story and make it believable.

15. Why do you think Singaporean filmmakers do not get as much exposure and opportunity of coverage in a local context compared to an overseas market?

Josiah Ng: We need to understand that we are, after all, very diverse and our people have very different tastes and sensibilities as a young nation.

Despite this, do we not get enough exposure? The fact that local filmmakers like Anthony Chen, Boo Jun Feng, Siew Hua's films are appreciated on international platforms should be cause for us to spur on.

We do have exposure and in recent years, overseas critics and consumers are building appreciation for SEA films. So the question is not why we don't get exposure, but rather, what can we do, both individually and as a nation.

Kenneth Goh: In short - Singaporeans are too shy or too modest. And we don't pitch enough. In my experience as a distributor, I have had clients who just don't care and come and talk to you from nowhere and talk about their films or about themselves. For us, we are slow to warm up. If you are interested to promote about yourself, get prepared to know what the correct pitching forums & festivals are out there, and start to get to know the people. There are so many SEA festivals out there, but I hardly see a Singapore story. Why? I am not saying that you should blow your trumpets to the point of over-promising but it takes that sense of guts and courage, and it's even more so if one is calling oneself a Producer or Director.

Juan Foo: I see it as the Singapore audience pool not patronising Singapore content well enough for even stakeholders to prioritise exposure and coverage in the local context.