

THEATRICAL LAUNCH

PAUL DEVLIN CHRONICLES THE CHALLENGING JOURNEY OF HIS FILM *BLAST!* TO THE BIG SCREEN.

A big theatrical premiere. Showing your film before an appreciative audience. Reviews, press, interviews, people standing in line to see your movie. Box office. These have been considered the big payoffs for filmmakers. Today however, as long-standing paradigms collapse, the conventional wisdom of a theatrical run for an independent film, and especially for a documentary, is very much in question.

I discovered there's no shortage of conflicting opinions and emotions when it comes to whether or not a non-fiction feature filmmaker should try a theatrical release these days. I heard both "You're crazy. It's a big mistake. The model doesn't work anymore. Don't do it!" and "You can't stop now, before you've crossed the finish line. You have no choice. You must do it!"

I wanted my latest movie, *BLAST!*, to have its moment in the spotlight with a theatrical run. But I have to admit that some of my most difficult days as a filmmaker have been when premiering my movies *SlamNation* and *Power Trip* theatrically in New York. Did I really want to go through that again, especially when everyone was telling me how much harder it had become?

We hype *BLAST!* as "*Astrophysics — Indiana Jones style!*" I follow my astrophysicist brother, Mark Devlin, PhD, as he journeys to five continents from the Arctic to the Antarctic to launch a revolutionary telescope on a NASA high-altitude balloon in order to reveal a hidden universe.

Although I did not pursue a science education myself, I grew up in a science family. My access to this story through my brother gave me an extraordinary opportunity to present the real life of scientists, which I knew had not been seen before. I wanted to make science not just accessible, but fun and exciting, the way I had experienced it growing up.

I believe I succeeded. *BLAST!* has been very well received internationally, with many presales, broadcasts and prestigious screenings as an Official Project of the UNESCO-sponsored International Year of Astronomy, 2009.

However early on the movie had trouble in the U.S., perhaps because the science content was a tough sell in a mainstream culture that seems to have developed an anti-intellectual streak in recent years. Or maybe it was because we had broken many of the conventions

of traditional science content by, for example, examining scientists' private lives and their spiritual beliefs.

Then again, maybe I was fooling myself and *BLAST!* really wasn't that good after all. But how then to account for all the sales overseas?

BLAST! was rejected by all the big festivals and broadcasters in the U.S., even seemingly natural fits like Silverdocs, with its proximity to NASA and association with Discovery Channel. National Geographic, NOVA and many others passed as well. Beginning with that kind of response, a theatrical release seemed unlikely.

On the other hand, I was confident of the strength of the movie. It seemed unfair to give up and let *BLAST!* fade into obscurity in my home country. As the rejections kept coming, I realized that the only way to gain attention for *BLAST!* in the U.S. might be a do-it-yourself theatrical run.

The Strategy

New York City is the natural place to premiere a documentary theatrically. There is a sympathetic, potentially enthusiastic audience. Documentaries in theaters are not so rare in New York — a quick look at *Time Out New York* reveals several docs opening almost every week in search of that all-important *New York Times* review. Some weeks it seems there are more non-fiction than fiction films.

New York has the added advantage of being my hometown — I have a built-in community and know the terrain. But *BLAST!* had no distributor and had already been turned down by Film Forum, where two of my previous films, *SlamNation* and *Power Trip*, had played. Could I take this movie out on my own and do it in a way that was not just a vanity project, wasting my time and money?

A plan began to materialize: The World Science Festival (WSF) was coming to New York City in June 2009. The festival was founded in 2008 by physicist Brian Greene, best-selling science author and *NOVA* television personality, along with his wife Tracy Day, formerly of ABC News and very media-connected.

The festival's first year had been an outrageous success, with a total audience of 120,000 over several days. There were sold-out shows and lines around the block for doz-

ens of popular celebrity-style events. They had lots of money and used it effectively to identify and attract an enthusiastic market for science content.

Perhaps *BLAST!* could somehow tap into that interest to fuel a theatrical opening in New York? It was time to outline a strategy:

- **Convince the World Science Festival to program *BLAST!* as part of a premiere event before a week run at the IFC Center.**
- **Convince the IFC Center that programming *BLAST!* and becoming an official venue of the World Science Festival would bring a substantial audience to the theater.**
- **Convince the big-money science funder, The John Templeton Foundation, to pay for the whole thing.**

That was a lot of convincing. The entire plan was a house of cards. But it was worth a shot.

The World Science Festival

The World Science Festival seemed the best place to start. Science, right? Should be a perfect fit. No-brainer. But they said, "Thank you for your recent note about *BLAST!* I watched it and enjoyed it very much. However, we feel it is unfortunately not right for a World Science Festival program in 2009. We are committed to screening, wherever possible, U.S. premieres...."

I almost fell off my seat. Where have I heard that before? Really, "premiere-itis" — even in the science world? The movie had played months before at The Imagine Film Festival, which was also in New York. Was that the problem? They didn't specify in their reply: "I know it's a disappointment, but I'm afraid the World Science Festival will not be screening your film as part of the Festival in 2009..."

I also want to reiterate in the clearest way possible that you must refrain from implying or otherwise stating that you are affiliated with WSF to the IFC Center or anyone else." Wow, that hurt. It seemed that my house of cards had already crumbled....

Okay, new plan. We were not part of the World Science Festival, but we would still program during the same dates. The WSF would have more than 40 events at venues across the city for five days and our strategy

would be to hand out promotional material at every one of them. It was our best opportunity to draw in a big science audience. Now we would have to convince IFC Center and the Templeton Foundation that it could work.

The John Templeton Foundation

The John Templeton Foundation provides substantial financial support for science outreach programs that address humanity's "Big Questions." One of the foundation's main missions is to encourage dialogue that reconciles religious beliefs and scientific pursuit.

A primary character in *BLAST!* is not only a brilliant astrophysicist but also a devout Christian. Barth Netterfield is vocal about his interest in confirming his belief in God by understanding the universe better.

We figured this element in *BLAST!* should be of great interest to Templeton. We had already engaged the foundation for months, hoping that a successful grant proposal would help fund our ambitious national outreach strategy.

They were not eager to fund such an extensive plan. However, they were enthusiastic about the film and indicated they might support a more focused outreach effort. We were invited to submit a full proposal that sought "money to bring in panelists to lead a discussion...(after [a] viewing [of] the film) at a key strategic venue."

That strategic venue could be the IFC Center. So we got to work on a more modest but very carefully constructed proposal that asked for \$64,000 to fund a premiere screening followed by a panel discussion of prominent authors and scientists on the intersection of religious faith and scientific pursuit.

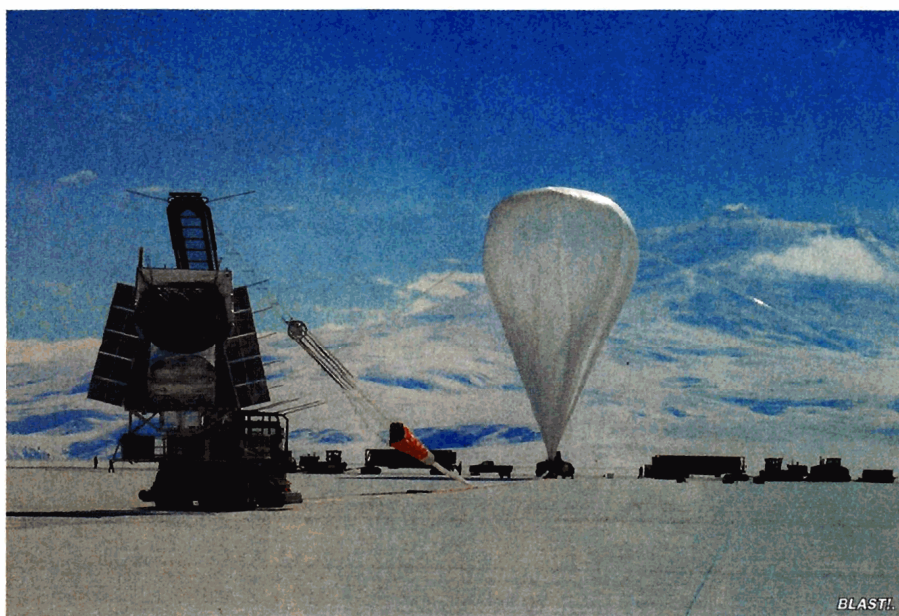
Of course, the proposal would also cover the cost of hiring a publicist and other expenses associated with the weeklong run necessary to guarantee reviews in the print media.

A big problem was that their funding cycle went beyond the World Science Festival dates. We would have to submit as early as possible. So we stepped up the pace and made a huge investment of time and effort on that document.

We already had to remove the World Science Festival from our proposal, but what about the IFC Center?

The IFC Center

John Vanco, who programs the IFC Center, seemed intrigued by the opportunity presented by the World Science Festival dates. But the screener DVD of *BLAST!* had been in his possession for weeks with no word. No doubt



he was very busy. I started to despair of ever getting an answer from him.

After a couple months of patience and gentle persistence, the answer came: "hi, paul. sorry i haven't gotten back to you sooner. i think we'd like to do the june 11 screening with you, although we wouldn't have room for a one-week run. should we move forward on this? John" Finally some good news! Or was it? One night does not cut it in New York. You need at least a weeklong engagement to qualify for reviews. Without that we did not have a theatrical run.

Okay, new plan yet again. We had to find another theater to run *BLAST!* for a full week after the IFC Center premiere event. Quickly — it was getting to be short notice.

Our first choice was Cinema Village, a venerable movie house with a remarkable history of showcasing indies. Cinema Village is one of the few theaters left that runs films by independent filmmakers who are self-distributing and literally walk in the door with a DVD. They were perfectly located, straddling the East and West Villages, in the midst of NYU and within walking distance of many World Science Festival venues.

They were also available on the dates we wanted. Would they program it? "I have discussed *BLAST!* with our film booker and we can offer you Theater #1 for a fee. One week run at 5 shows a day. Theater 2 is booked through the summer."

Well, at least they didn't reject the movie. But they wouldn't exactly program it either. They would allow us to rent the theater for a hefty price. We would have to four-wall *BLAST!*

So, my original plan emerged tattered but

still standing: We could take advantage of the World Science Festival dates, but would not have the benefit of being officially endorsed. We would have the prestige of an IFC Center premiere event, but would have to four-wall the full week at Cinema Village. We had created the conditions that we had promised Templeton in our proposal, but the funding had not yet materialized.

Which meant I would have to find the money elsewhere to confirm commitments for the theater and a publicist and to cover material costs. No guarantee that the Templeton Foundation would come through to reimburse these costs. Should I go for it, or back out while I still had the chance?

The Decision

My strategy to construct a theatrical run of my movie *BLAST!* had been achieved, sort of. Proceeding with the release in New York made a lot of sense, if someone else paid for it. If not, I would have to come up with serious funds to pay for the expensive theater rental, an experienced publicist, and then ads, materials, postcards, posters, etc. Better count on \$25,000 bare bones. Was it worth it?

I started seeking advice, and found there was plenty of it: "Theatrical doesn't work the way it used to, especially for documentaries...."

Thom Powers, documentary programmer at the Toronto Film Festival and curator of the Stranger Than Fiction documentary series at the IFC Center, was happy to hear that we had finalized the IFC Center date. But he discouraged four-walling a theater for a full-week run. His view was representative



of many industry people I spoke to: "It's a big expense that won't return. You can't expect much box office for this kind of film. The *New York Times* will give you a marginalized, three-paragraph review, and there's no guarantee it will be a good one. The risk is not worth it since those print reviews don't necessarily translate into ancillary market sales anymore. Much better instead to invest your resources in an online, Internet outreach campaign that can actually tap into your core audience and make some sales."

I could not argue with that point of view. The conventional wisdom seemed to have changed since my previous film, *Power Trip*, opened theatrically in 2003.

For one thing, print media is being eclipsed by the Internet. A publicist I spoke to crystallized the transitional zeitgeist: "One of our filmmakers was disappointed that his article appeared on the *Time* magazine Web site but not in the print version of the magazine. Until I pointed out that the print version has 4 million subscribers, but the Web site gets 7 million visitors."

Maybe low-budget theatrical release was becoming irrelevant along with print. Perhaps instead I should take Thom's advice and focus on the still-to-be charted territory of online publicity. However, almost all the filmmakers I spoke to saw it very differently: "You've invested four years of your life in this project! It's your baby! If you have the chance, how can you not do it? If you don't, you'll regret it." Those were some powerful sentiments.

Others pointed out the success stories, those niche films that seemed unlikely to generate much box office but in fact drew huge crowds. Gary Hustwit's *Helvetica* is about a *font*, of all things. Who would have guessed that it would be one of IFC Center's most successful films, held over for months? *Examined Life* by Astra Taylor is a talking-head movie about philosophers philosophizing. She tapped into the philosophy niche in a big way, selling out many shows of her nine-day run at IFC Center.

Maybe *BLAST!* could be that kind of successful niche film. Nobody had yet tapped into the science crowd the way we planned to.

Doug Block, however, was one fellow New York filmmaker who echoed Powers's advice. Even though his movie *51 Birch Street* had been a remarkable success in theaters, he was ambivalent toward theatrical runs for small films: "There is nothing more depressing than a film screening for an empty theater. My film *Home Page* received good reviews across the board, including from the *Times*, and still nobody showed up. For some films it's just too hard to fill the seats to make it worth it."

That resonated with me and my producer Claire Missanelli. We had experienced much angst when the box office for *Power Trip* dropped off. Imagining going through that sort of exposure and potential humiliation again made my face turn red. Maybe I should just make my life simple and skip it.

Soon, however, the irony crept in. *BLAST!* was a brutal film to make. I traveled the world

for it, shooting ~~with~~ ⁱⁿ ~~the~~ ^{the} elements. The journey began with getting stranded in Arctic Sweden, being delayed four weeks and culminating in a 38-hour shoot to capture the chronically-postponed telescope-balloon launch and subsequent disaster. After more grueling shoots in desolate locations, getting to Antarctica to finish the movie took four months of bureaucratic hell. ~~The~~ ^{The} ~~entire~~ ^{entire} seemed doomed, especially with all the catastrophic failures that continually plagued the experiment.

Moreover the complicated postproduction required deciphering 200 hours of science footage. It was the toughest edit of my career and took more than a year.

Now, after all these hardships and obstacles, the one thing that was going to stop *BLAST!* dead in its tracks was... my fear of an empty theater?

Then there was some wonderful news. My brother Mark finally published the science results from *BLAST* in *Nature*, the most prestigious science journal in the world. It turns out they made a major astronomical discovery, verifying where half the light in the universe comes from. As *Nature* put it, Mark's telescope had revealed a "hidden universe." The results generated worldwide press attention — and we had the movie that documented the entire process. How could we not release it now, especially when there was still a chance that the Templeton Foundation would come through and fund the whole thing? How lame would we feel if that happened *after* we had jumped ship?

Taking advantage of the momentum, my brother found some financing from the University of Pennsylvania, which was starting to recognize the promotional value of the movie. Then we worked out a family loan and the balance was going to be on me. Thankfully I have a decent-paying day job at CBS Sports and few personal expenses.

So it was going to be a little less risky anyway. We contacted Cinema Village and confirmed the dates for the week run. We would be scraping ~~by~~ ^{by the time} we were going ahead.

The Outreach

I decided to ignore the seemingly sage advice from many of my colleagues that I should stick to a *new millennium* style (and less costly) online campaign to get the word out. The fact is the *New York Times* and *Variety* are not going to cover your online campaign, but if you do it right, they will cover your New York theatrical premiere.

That's how **BLAST!** was going to make its

mark in the U.S: Leap over the timid traditional gatekeepers in our home country and go straight to the more adventuresome press with an independent New York theatrical premiere.

The Publicist

Once we had committed to a theater, the next step was to hire a publicist. This was an essential element of the outreach effort. John Murphy of Murphy PR had an excellent reputation among our colleagues. In addition to higher-profile films such as *Milk*, he and his firm had worked on smaller documentaries including *Sputnik Mania*, which also had science elements.

In our first sit-down, we met with Murphy, Greg Sullivan and Heter Myers, who would become our point of contact. We filled them in on the history of the film, the problems we were experiencing gaining traction in America, the movie's strengths and weaknesses and our goals for a theatrical run that would generate worthwhile press attention.

I explained that in its festival run *BLAST!* had received consistently excellent reviews (I could not have dreamed up better pull quotes) but they were from science-friendly online sources. Overseas we also had great notices in mainstream print, especially in England from the BBC broadcast on the *Storyville* strand. (It was the highest-rated episode of the season.)

In fact *BLAST!* had not generated a single negative review until the first time we hit mainstream print in the U.S. At the Florida Film Festival *BLAST!* received its absolute best review from the *Orlando Weekly*: "The science documentary may be at the precipice of a golden age... Delicious drama that builds to an edge-of-your-seat climax." And its absolute worst review from the *Orlando Sentinel*: "Devlin's movie can't make the mildly dramatic setbacks into high drama."

Like any filmmaker, I am confounded by utterly contradictory reviews, and this initial mainstream exposure in the States made me nervous. New York critics can be brutal. For the first time I worried that *BLAST!* might not inspire the positive reviews in New York that we needed to make this effort a success.

Murphy PR was reassuring that they could generate the reviews, but of course they could not guarantee positive ones. We started to make dates for press screenings, one of which would take place at the fancy, exclusive Soho House, where I had connections.

We were taking a huge gamble that national exposure through press attention would give *BLAST!* a positive identity in the United

States. But we also needed to fill the seats locally in New York, and that would require some serious grassroots Internet effort as well.

Grassroots

We recruited several interns and started focusing on core audiences. We gathered contact information for every person from all the organizations in the New York area that might have interest in *BLAST!*. These included university science departments (Columbia, NYU and Hunter College among others), New York Academy of Sciences, astronomy clubs, planetariums, museums, etc.

We were in touch with hundreds of people over several weeks by phone and e-mail. Soon the upcoming *BLAST!* screenings were being announced on Web sites and in newsletters, our flyers and postcards were plastered all over university science departments, and it became rare to find anyone in this community who was not already well aware of the movie.

We added these new contacts to Constant Contact, the e-newsletter service we used to notify our various constituencies about screenings, press and, of course, the theatrical run. We have collected close to 10,000 contacts over the years, across several projects. Normally we send out the e-newsletter semi-monthly. As our premiere drew near, however, we sent it out three times within a week. This may have been one too many, because the third announcement resulted in twice as many "opt-outs" — people who dropped their subscription — as normal.

We also updated the *BLAST!* MySpace page, signed up for a Twitter account, and added a Facebook event to my personal account as well as a *BLAST!* fan page.

Of course a Web site for a film is essential to any outreach effort. Ours included regular announcements about the theatrical run on our home page and updates on press and reviews that came in. We also set up a Guest Blog that any visitor could contribute to. This included more informal announcements in an effort to engage our fan base, with the filmmakers and scientists in an ongoing dialogue.

We discovered that there are a surprising number of science-related events happening all over New York City. New York Academy of Sciences has lectures, Columbia has science cafe gatherings, City University of New York has a regular series of shows, and then there are even hipster private events such as Nerd Nite and the Secret Science Club that draw hundreds of enthusiasts to an evening of science in a bar.

We started populating our calendar with these events and assigning our people to attend them to pass out cards and promote the premiere. If hundreds of people were coming out for these science lectures, surely there was an audience for *BLAST!*, right?

The final outreach element was personal: I opened up my address book and started with the letter A. I was utterly unabashed about contacting everyone I knew in the New York area (preferably by phone) and urging them to come to the premiere. This resulted in some great catch-up conversations with people I had not been in touch with in ages. It also took several days.

We certainly felt as if we had made strong contact with our core audiences. And we were looking forward to reaching out to thousands of more attending the World Science Festival during our run.

Advertising

How should we advertise *BLAST!*? Is there a way to make science attractive and attention grabbing?

My previous films had also presented serious marketing challenges. Long before slam poets had visited the White House and HBO's *Def Poetry* hit the air, *SlamNation* was trying to sell slam poetry as dynamic and exciting. But the perception of poetry as dry and dull was hard to beat. So we dropped the word. It wasn't "poetry," it was "competitive spoken word." They weren't "poets," they were "cut-throat performers."

We developed a similar strategy for *Power Trip*. It wasn't about "an electricity crisis in Tblisi, Georgia," it was about "corruption, assassination, street rioting, and absurdist culture clash."

Should we do the same for *BLAST!*? We came up with some good alternative copy that avoided the word science: "A spectacular and suspenseful story of space exploration." But ultimately I decided it was not practical to hide the science. I was not comfortable trying to either. Instead I decided to embrace the nerdish nature of the project. The message would be "Science Is Cool!" We stole a great tagline from the Sheffield Film Festival blurb of the movie and put a science word right up front: "Astrophysics — *Indiana Jones* style."

We had to be very careful how we spent our money; we barely had a budget for any advertising. Instead we would be counting on our publicist to generate free advertising through reviews and press.

The Cinema Village would place their

standard directory ads in the *New York Times* and the *Village Voice*. Beyond that we decided not to take out any print ads at all. We could only afford very small ones, which would not have had much impact.

Instead I decided to focus on radio. I am a regular listener of the public radio station WNYC. Their short promotional spots made me aware of many independent films, so I knew they were effective. I figured their audience would be receptive to *BLAST!* and would make a focused target market. Also, with radio you can be sure that everyone listening to that particular show hears your announcement; with print you can't be sure that everyone reading that newspaper or magazine actually sees your ad.

I took out six promotional spots on WNYC leading up to our weeklong run at Cinema Village. The sales rep promised that the last ad would appear on National Public Radio's *Science Friday*, a perfect placement for us. That got me thinking. I asked the sales rep if she had any inside information on how to book *Science Friday*. We also took out a banner ad in the New York Academy of Sciences weekly newsletter. With such limited resources we needed to target our advertising efforts as narrowly as possible.

Our one extravagance was posting flyers in Manhattan. We had found our freelance IT consultant through flyers posted in the neighborhood. He had told us that in fact, of all his efforts, these flyers had generated the most clients. So he got us in touch with Martin "The Flyer Man." Martin lives in New Jersey but has been in this business for years and seems to know every (legal) spot in Manhattan to post flyers and drop postcards.

We targeted Manhattan neighborhoods. Was it effective? Hard to gauge. Our evidence was anecdotal: Sitting outdoors at a Brooklyn cafe after promoting at one of the hipster science events, a slam poet who I knew from my *SlamNation* days passed by. After a little catch-up, of course I passed him a *BLAST!* postcard. "Hey, I know about this!" he said. "I wondered if this was you." How did he know? A flyer in the West Village. Later a colleague of my brother contacted him to say, "Your face is plastered all over New York City."

Materials

I must say that generating and ordering materials was a thorn in our side the entire time. We had to design and redesign flyers, postcards, posters, banner ads, Web site pages, etc. This was all done in-house because

we could not afford to hire someone outside. The task fell on Amber Yoder, our associate producer, who did a remarkable job.

A big problem was figuring out how many of each item to order. The number of postcards proved too difficult to estimate. We reordered them twice (which is very cost-ineffective) and wound up with 5,000 too many in the closet.

One of our interns came up with a genius promotional idea: Balloons! Of course! *BLAST!* is about a telescope that gets launched via a massive NASA helium balloon. We could use balloons to promote the movie. We ordered hundreds of white balloons with the *BLAST!* logo on them, as well as some helium tanks. When the run started, this would prove to be our most fun and perhaps most effective promotional item.

Now with most of our outreach in place, it was time to put *BLAST!* to the real test and screen it for the press. Unfortunately, the press screenings resulted in one of the biggest blunders of my career.

Press Screenings

The first press screening for *BLAST!* in New York City was set up by Murphy PR at Magno Sound. It was expensive: \$550. Only four people showed up. They were writing for Web sites I was unfamiliar with, and two of them were from the same one.

Murphy PR was reassuring. The first press screening was just a reason to start getting in touch with people. A shot over the bow. Be patient.

The second press screening was planned for Soho House, which has one of the most plush, comfortable screening rooms in the city. A founding member of this trendy club had loved my movie *Power Trip* and helped me get membership.

A screening at Soho House has some glitz value that worked in our favor. Murphy PR was able to develop it into a special event by attracting the *New York Times* science reporter Dennis Overbye to conduct the Q&A with myself, my brother Mark and his colleague Barth Netterfield, whom we flew down from Toronto. This time *Variety*, *Village Voice*, *Hollywood Reporter*, and other heavy hitters would be in attendance.

Very exciting evening. At the club John and Heter from Murphy PR introduced us to Overbye. Netterfield joined us from the airport and we all sat down to dinner at the club's restaurant. When the conversation turned to hard-core science I excused myself to go downstairs to the screening room.

I had wanted to check the tape and make sure everything looked and sounded okay. But I was a little late for that; people were already in their seats and I was assured that the image was gorgeous HD and the sound quality was excellent. So I decided to accept this assessment and went back upstairs to finish dinner. Not checking the tape myself turned out to be a big mistake.

The screening seemed to go very well. It was well attended and the Q&A was fantastic. Overbye was the perfect moderator, clear and insightful, and Barth, my brother and myself were really on. The members of the press were clearly engaged from the questions they were asking and the conversation even turned philosophical as Barth and Mark ruminated on the spiritual value of science. We had participated in many Q&As during our festival run, but this was my favorite so far.

The second half of the evening started while we were shaking hands and answering questions. I decided finally to take a quick look at the image before heading upstairs. After a minute or so in the theater I made a terrible discovery: We were screening a *Textless Master!* This version was meant for international subtitles to be added. On this master, there were NO TITLES — no super-sized IDs, no location markers, no descriptions, no written explanations at all.

I walked out of the theater devastated and explained the situation to my colleagues. Oh my God, the *Village Voice* is in there, *Hollywood Reporter* is there. This is a disaster!

What to do? Should we stop the movie? The press in the first screening, *Variety* and many others, had already seen it this way. If there was damage, it had already been done.

I must have pulled the wrong master from the shelf. We had dozens of masters because of all the versioning. We not only had to make different length versions of the movie for different markets, but then we needed to make different versions of all the versions: NTSC vs. PAL, textured vs. textless, anamorphic vs. letterboxed, etc. I had been stretched thin by all the running around, was not careful and had screwed up.

No excuse. I was inconsolable. There were many fewer people in the second screening, but unlike the first, the questions in the second Q&A indicated that some in the audience had been confused by the movie, most likely a result of no titles. Why did this not seem to be the case in the first screening? I explained the mix-up in master tapes this time and we did as much damage control as possible.

Mark and Barth tried to reassure me at the bar later on. People still seemed to like the movie. Maybe the titles are not as important as you think. Still, I couldn't believe that after all I had invested, all we had been through to get this movie made and seen, I may have ruined everything simply by picking up the wrong tape.

To make matters worse, the premiere was fast approaching and we still had not heard from the John Templeton Foundation about funding. I contacted them and the news was not good. Templeton was very complimentary about our proposal and said that in previous years they certainly would have funded it. However because of the downturn in the economy this year they had lost 30 percent of their endowment and were passing. Another pillar of my initial house of cards had collapsed.

The third and final press screening was to be at Cinema Village. The *New York Times* and *Time Out New York* would be there. Of course, I checked the screen well beforehand to make sure we had the right version. As far as press was concerned, there was nothing more I could do except wait for the reviews.

The Run

Our first press break (in publicist parlance) for the *BLAST!* theatrical run came from my local neighborhood newspaper, *Town and Village*. The piece featured a front-page picture of me and a lengthy, sympathetic article on the background of making *BLAST!*. Very nice. But not a review.

The next write-up came the Monday before the Thursday premiere at IFC Center. Not really a review, but a short listing in *New York Magazine*: "...plays like a physicist's vanity piece, neither cinematic nor engaging, and the graphics are surprisingly dated." Uh-oh. Was I in trouble? Shake it off and move on.

The next day, the review in *Variety* came out. This one really worried me because that writer had been at Soho House, the scene of the Textless Master Disaster. It read: "This adventuresome spin on breakthrough science should wow 'em... Devlin captures the essence of hands-on scientific research..."

Who needs text! It was a great review! Thank God! Perhaps this theatrical run would not be a fiasco after all. At least my reputation was intact within the industry press. *Variety* also wrote that *BLAST!* was "...illustrated with spectacular, NASA-generated mock-ups of deep space." Take that *New York Magazine*! (Still confounded by those contradictions.)

Wednesday night was the beginning of the World Science Festival. We were prepared.



(LEFT-RIGHT) MARK DEVLIN, CLAIRE MISSANELLI AND PAUL DEVLIN AT CINEMA VILLAGE.

Amber Yoder, our associate producer, is an organizer for the New York City Film Collective and used those connections to help us hire many young filmmakers to do outreach. We strategically mapped out all the events on the World Science Festival calendar and assigned outreach people to pass out cards at just about every one of them.

The Gala Opening Concert of the World Science Festival was the night before our premiere at IFC Center. It would be a swanky affair with Alan Alda, Glenn Close, Yo-Yo Ma and other luminaries performing for more than 1,000 people in celebration of science generally and in honor of naturalist E.O. Wilson in particular.

The gala was at Lincoln Center's Alice Tully Hall, which turned out to be a perfect spot for our guerrilla campaign. The theater entrance was slightly below street level but funneled out to the street via four short stairways. We could concentrate our contact with impunity because we were already on the street.

We had two people at each stairway with hundreds of postcards. Our team included a professional clown (sans makeup) with balloon experience. She was armed with hundreds of white *BLAST!* balloons and two helium tanks.

Claire, Amber and I settled into our \$100 seats. We were in the absolute last row. Some of the best seats cost thousands, which included a ticket to the reception afterward. Fortune was smiling on us because someone had mistakenly included two tickets to the reception with our show-only cheap tickets.

The production was impressive. The two-hour performance was clever, innovative and entertaining: show tunes were adapted to science content, Yo-Yo Ma performed while children dancing as ants paid tribute to E.O. Wilson's field work, and an orchestra interpreted a powerful Philip Glass composition set to a dynamic montage of Earth and nature images.

Afterward, out the huge windows, we could see dozens of dazzling *BLAST!* balloons.



Gaining entrance with the serendipitous invite, I worked the reception inside, meeting and greeting people like Alda, Brian Greene and Neil deGrasse Tyson, another *NOVA* on-air personality and head of the Hayden Planetarium in New York City.

Outside, our team made sure that just about every one of the 1,000 science enthusiasts attending the gala knew about the *BLAST!* premiere the next day (not to mention all the people passing by on the street).

The balloons were eye catching, very popular and lots of people wanted to take them. Our first encounter with the World Science Festival was an exhilarating success!

Over the next four days, we did so much outreach at WSF events that it became difficult to give anyone a postcard who had not already received one. We were told that even celebrities like Cameron Diaz said they would check out the movie and the founder of the festival, Brian Greene, complimented us on our guerrilla marketing efforts. Surely we would be putting butts in the seats.

The day of the gala, more reviews came in: *The Onion* gave us a positive review and put *BLAST!* in the context of my previous work, which I appreciated. *Time Out New York* gave a mixed review — not bad, just lackluster.

But the *Village Voice* and a few online reviews shot us down. They complained that *BLAST!* felt like a TV doc, as if it did not belong in a theater. If only they knew the irony — so far it had been impossible to get *BLAST!* on TV in the U.S. The only place I could get it seen was in a theater; the press was not going to be easy on us.

Thursday: Premiere day! I was very nervous

that we were going to embarrass ourselves. We had promised the IFC Center we could fill the place and I wanted to come through. The guys from Murphy PR were at the theater when I arrived and seemed to have things under control. They had invited a lot of on-line press and were making sure everything ran smoothly.

Then I checked with the box office. More than 100 advance tickets had already been sold for the 210-seat theater. We were going to be okay! I relaxed enough to join some friends and family for dinner across the street.

When I returned the *BLAST!* balloons were flying and many people I knew were showing up. From there it became a whirlwind of meet and greet, handshakes and cheek kisses.

Inside was buzzing. We almost filled the main theater at IFC Center — not completely sold out, but close enough. My entire family was there, and I probably knew half the people in the theater. I felt a bit like my buddies in bands who would get gigs because they promised the club they have lots of friends who will come. But hell, it was my hometown. They had better show up!

I decided to stay and watch the movie. Several times I looked around the theater and thought how unlikely this moment had seemed several months ago and took a deep, savoring breath.

The journalist Rob Levin of the free daily newspaper *amNew York* led the Q&A afterward. By this time my brother Mark and I had become entertainers. Often the audience broke out laughing, especially when the good-natured brotherly rivalry emerged. For example, when I made the mistake of trying

to answer one of the science questions, Mark preceded his correction with, "You don't know enough to know how little you know."

The after party was a thrill, and when we got home an e-mail from Hector of Murphy PR was waiting. The *New York Times* review had come out, and it was positive.

The reviewer was a bit tongue-in-cheek, using words like "nerd" and "thingamajig" but also "brilliant astrophysicists" and "absorbing documentary... that leads to some unexpected twists and turns and comedic hand-wringing." A perfect caper to a wonderful day! And a huge relief. Now we had two great reviews in national publications. Those would be the two most influential reviews of any we would receive. The back-to-back positive pull quotes from these could be the boost to ancillary markets we were hoping for.

First part of the mission accomplished; now it remained to be seen if we would pull in good box office at Cinema Village. Friday started with a hunkill. The rest of the reviews coming in were mixed, and some of them were brutal: one star from the *New York Post*, which accused me of nepotism. *Movief* said *BLAST!* had charm, but only "if you're an egghead like the Devlins." Wow, this is getting personal. Just have to brush it off again, because it was time for my brother and I to do some radio.

WNYC's *The Leonard Lopate Show* is one of the most prestigious culture and arts programs in New York. I listen to it all the time, and for me it was an honor to be invited back (*SlamNation* had also attracted his attention).

Leonard is a true master — spectacularly well prepared and totally in control, directing the pace of an interview with eye contact and body language. His listeners were the target audience we wanted to reach. Not only to encourage them to see the movie but as a reputation enhancer for both my brother and myself in this elite community.

At one point, Leonard asked Mark a question about the science results, and he hesitated, "My brother doesn't like it when I go into too much detail on the science." Leonard glared at me. "But our audience is very intelligent." Yes they are, and here's a chance to do more of our brother strick. "Go for it, Mark! Go into detail," I replied. How refreshing not to have to dumb down the presentation. For Leonard's audience, rather than be ashamed, we can revel in being "eggheads." I often find it hard to remember afterward what I've said in a radio interview. But from the reactions we received almost immediately and through the rest of the week, it was an impressive segment. Mark

and I were back on top of this ride again.

Next was an interview with Mike Sargent of WBAI radio, a non-commercial progressive station. The session was looser and more laid-back, and at one point Mike asked the question, "In doing this movie, what did you ultimately learn about yourself?"

That was one of those rare questions I hadn't heard before. It has to be answered immediately, and I fogged with a discussion of my tenacity. But over the next few days, I thought a lot about what the real answer was.

The premiere that night at Cinema Village was a disappointment. We did not sell out the house; we did not have big crowds; we did not have lines around the block. My brother and I did Q&As at the 7 p.m. and 9 p.m. shows and there were maybe 25 to 30 people at each show. The theater looked sparse. The rest of the weekend was similar. And the weekdays after were even slower.

So I was facing my worst fear. This is what Doug Block and many others had warned me about: an empty, four-walled theater. Initially there was an impending sense of red-faced humiliation.

However, as I continued to do the Q&As, I became buoyed by how much the audience who did show up LOVED the movie. They were so enthusiastic, so blown away by what we had accomplished, both the science and the filmmaking, so thankful that we had finished it. They really GOT the movie, and the genuine appreciation was nourishing.

Also, young people and entire families were showing up. The youngsters were participating in the Q&As — clearly supersmart kids whose parents were cultivating their interests. Could it be that *BLAST!* was a family movie?

So it turned out that the theatrical run was serving a small but elite group. Despite all our outreach efforts *BLAST!* was not going to draw big crowds. However, just because it was not a large audience did not mean that our audience did not deserve to see their kind of movie. I took comfort in this even when the nightly box office numbers disappointed.

Sunday was the final day of the World Science Festival and our last big day of outreach. The festival had organized a huge extravaganza for kids, taking over Washington Square Park with theater events, demonstrations, interactive games and all sorts of opportunities to learn about and have fun with science.

We showed up with all our guerrilla outreach troops, a big poster, thousands of postcards, two tall helium tanks and hundreds of *BLAST!* balloons.

The kids absolutely loved us. We were the only group doing balloons and we couldn't blow them up fast enough. I have never felt so popular. The parents were very interested in the movie, and as I looked out across the park, a sea of *BLAST!* balloons over the heads of the crowd greeted my gaze. That was a wonderful climax to our outreach effort — making lots of kids happy on a gorgeous, sunny day in the park.

But when Thursday came around and we received the last box office report, I have to admit I was relieved the run was over. We were not quite finished yet, however. My query with the WNYC radio sales rep had resulted in a series of developing contacts with *Science Friday*. Eventually these paid off in a booking on a segment about Summer Science Movies. The following week, my brother and I were scheduled to appear on National Public Radio.

Although it was too late to help the New York run, this would be the biggest exposure ever for *BLAST!* — the *Science Friday* broadcast reaches up to two million people across America, and even more from its podcast.

The interview with Ira Flatow went very well. It covered much the same ground as the Leonard Lopate Show, but this time it was national. We emphasized that the New York run had launched *BLAST!* and that we were now starting to book the movie around the country. We encouraged the audience to help us identify venues and help book screenings. And the response was huge. Overwhelming even. Our Web site went from an average of 50 or so hits a day to about 4,000 on the day of the interview and stayed at around 500 a day for more than a week after. The e-mail requests started coming in before the show was over and friends and colleagues all over the country contacted us with congratulations.

Several weeks later we were still managing the screening requests: hundreds from individuals and dozens from theaters, museums, planetariums, schools and libraries across America. As of this writing we have booked Facets Cinemateque for a week run in Chicago, the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston, Rio Theater in Vancouver, Coca-Cola Space Science Center in Georgia, among many others confirmed or in the works. (A complete listing of *BLAST!* screenings are available at blastthemovie.com/screenings.html.) That was a powerful interview; NPR has impressive reach.

Conclusions

Looking back at the theatrical run of *BLAST!*, I believe I have gained a lot of insight and can better assess the value of this effort. Did I make the right decision? I can't say that we didn't lose money as predicted. And I can't say the box office wasn't dismal as predicted. Everyone was right about that.

Not all our reviews were great, either. Many reviewers were unwilling to attend our press screenings, so Murphy PR sent them DVD screeners. There seems to be a correlation between negative reviews and the reviewers who received DVD screeners. My guess is that some of those DVD reviewers did not even watch the entire movie — just got enough of a sense of it to meet a deadline.

Because of its epic nature of sweeping vistas in the Arctic and Antarctic, NASA outer space simulations, etc., *BLAST!* has much greater impact on the big screen. This in spite of the criticism that it is a TV piece, a conclusion much more likely from a DVD screening. Next time, I might skip the DVD screeners and go for no review rather than a bad review.

I agree that it has certainly become more difficult to make a theatrical run a success, especially for a small film. A deluge of product competes for attention from an increasingly indifferent media to help attract a shrinking, saturated audience.

However online, Internet publicity has not emerged as an adequate alternative to a theatrical opening. There is no way we could have attracted the kind of attention we received for *BLAST!* from an online campaign. Without the event value of a theatrical premiere, it would have required constant effort and energy to maintain momentum, inevitably losing steam down the line.

I cannot say that a theatrical run is right for every film and that it does not have a strong possibility of failure. For *BLAST!*, however, I believe it was the right decision.

The positive national reviews, especially from *Variety* and the *New York Times* and the NPR *Science Friday* segment were priceless exposure. And it turns out that one of the listeners of NPR's *Science Friday* that afternoon was Stephen Colbert. And guess what? My brother Mark appeared on national television sparring with Stephen Colbert on his show. The result of all this publicity has been a consistent lineup of theatrical and "alt-theatrical" screenings across the country that we could not have generated otherwise.

The jury is still out on how the theatrical

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THEATRICAL LAUNCH

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will impact other ancillary markets such as DVD and electronic sales. However, after a year and a half of no response, Japan's NHK finally decided to license *BLAST!* for broadcast soon after I sent them the reviews from New York. Coincidence? Or can I count this as an ancillary sale resulting directly from the theatrical release? If so, this plus the box office receipts bring the New York theatrical run close to break even.

We have also received offers from enthusiastic distributors to help us manage the volume of interest and take *BLAST!* even further. However, the offers are not attractive enough for us to hand over the payoff that finally seems within reach.

Distributors are expensive and unfortunately their interests are not always aligned with those of filmmakers. Considering the extensive outreach groundwork we have already laid it makes sense for us to book screenings and distribute the educational DVD ourselves, or at least hire someone in-house to do this for us. We have experience successfully self-distributing *Power Trip* and today this seems an even more common route for many filmmakers.

If we had not climaxed our effort with a theatrical run in the United States, four years worth of work and all the money already invested making the movie would have fizzled. *BLAST!* most likely would have faded into obscurity in the U.S. In that case, reviews of my next movie may have started with, "Devlin's previous film *Power Trip*..." and completely overlooked *BLAST!*. Instead *BLAST!* takes its proper place alongside the rest of my

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work. It now has its own identity.

But there are some questions I still need to answer. First, why did our grassroots effort not produce box office success at Cinema Village? Thousands of science-friendly attendees of the World Science Festival knew about the movie. So did all the university people with whom we made personal contact. And what about all those nerds packing events like the Secret Science Club? Why did they not show up? Just because we weren't serving beer? Were they turned off by the bad review in the *Post*? More likely they would have been excited by the positive review in the *Times*.

If films like *Helvetica* and *Examined Life* were able to tap into their niche, core audiences, why was *BLAST!* not able to tap into the science crowd, despite the exhaustive grassroots outreach strategy? I've heard lots of possible reasons, from the "it's a TV show, not a theatrical movie" complaint, to "the universities were out of session so you lost the students," to

"the title is not descriptive enough." Maybe we simply did not take out enough ads?

However, after a recent discussion with Astra Taylor, who made *Examined Life*, I think I may have found a more illuminating explanation. It's simple and cliché. The missing element may be celebrities.

I'm not talking about household-name celebrities. I'm talking niche celebrities for niche audiences. *Helvetica* interviewed very prominent graphic artists, many of whom had rarely been seen. *Examined Life* featured famous philosophers, some from opposing camps of philosophical thought. These personalities are heroes to target audiences, making the films "must-see" for their niche.

Unfortunately *BLAST!* did not feature any celebrities. Astrophysics does not really have its own celebrities. Perhaps Neil deGrasse Tyson? Maybe we should have had him narrate? Or found a way to insert a red herring Stephen Hawking interview into the movie? In any case, it's possible that even niche movies may require niche star power to achieve box office success.

The other question comes from the WBAI radio interview: "What did you learn about yourself...?" I've discovered that I and many of my non-fiction filmmaking colleagues are philanthropists. Our filmmaking is philanthropy because we believe what we are doing is essential despite the fact that it is very unlikely we will profit financially from our films.

The concept of losing money only applies if we identify our filmmaking as a business. In fact, what we do is more accurately described as a calling. Our calling must be assessed on the value of intangible assets rather than a profit and loss statement. For example, *SlamNation* inspired an entire generation of artists — talented writers and performers who would sometimes seek me out at their shows to say, "I'm a poet because of your movie." *Power Trip* had immeasurable impact on privatization policy, with screenings at the World Bank, the U.S. State Department, the Council on Foreign Relations, USAID, etc. These often led to soul-searching discussions. We hope *BLAST!* will excite young people (especially in the United States) to pursue scientific careers.

These were all made utterly independently, on a shoestring, from my apartment. There's power in that. What dollar value can we put on this kind of success for our films?

Because of my seasonal day job at CBS Sports I am in a financial position to do this work. But like many filmmakers, I am also

uniquely qualified to apply talent and skill to this form of philanthropy, telling stories that only we are in a position to tell.

Moreover, despite my ambivalence toward nonfiction filmmaking as de-facto activism, I have learned that I may also be an activist after all. My journey with *BLAST!* has turned me into an unapologetic advocate of an open-minded view of science and science education.

In contrast to the positive attitudes in Europe, I encountered two patterns of intolerance in the U.S. toward what *BLAST!* represents: On the one hand, the mere mention of the word science seemed to agitate some people, allowing them to write off the movie immediately. We dubbed this attitude "hostile indifference." Mainstream programmers reinforced this attitude, insisting that their audiences would not be interested in content that might be intellectually challenging.

On the other hand there were scientists who were deeply offended that we allowed one of our characters to express his spiritual views in the context of scientific pursuit. They felt that mentioning God and a discussion of religion had no business in *BLAST!*

Although the religious group is a minority, they are emotional, vocal and perhaps influential. Their utter intolerance for alternative points of view carries more weight than normally associate with religious fundamentalism.

Even a colleague of my brother confessed that he "hated" the movie because it was half about religion (in fact there are only about four to five minutes that address spiritual beliefs throughout the 74-minute movie). Another said that, although the movie had some merit, because of the religious elements she could not support *BLAST!* being screened in a "pedagogical" setting. In other words, no students would use *BLAST!* in classrooms if she had anything to say about it. The severe intolerance actually seemed unscientific to me. We dubbed this attitude "scientific fundamentalism."

I realized that it was my growing awareness of these attitudes that ignited my dormant activist tendencies and made me ever more convinced that *BLAST!* should reach its audience. It was this sense of activism that gave me the stamina to stick with the theatrical run through all of its difficulties. In the end, this obscure indie specialty film that many dismissed may be exposed to more people in America than any of my other independent work, even without a U.S. broadcast. I knew the audience was out there, despite the hostile indifference, and it was the New York theatric-

cal run that pushed *BLAST!* past the tipping point in the United States.

Now our audience has found us. Perhaps years from now, someone will come up to me and say, "I'm a scientist because of your movie."▼

CULTURE HACKER

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requests, screenings and audience attendance to be open. This is simply because the more applications that are built to utilize that data, the more attention a film gets, and the more the audience for that film grows. Whether it's an iPhone app that tells you where you can find the nearest screening or a number-crunching Web app for market-research purposes, it's all of value to the filmmaker and the audience."

The same data that Masterton describes can be used to power social interactions that recommend films and connect film lovers. In an age where filmmakers are struggling to understand the digital "attention economy," the old adage that content is king doesn't apply. In a world where devices and people are connected like never before conversation is now king.

We Feel Fine

But the data surrounding conversations can also tell stories, as demonstrated by Jonathan Harris and Sep Kamvar's project "We Feel Fine." Started as an attempt to show what type of humanity could be found within the data that travels daily across the Web, Harris and Kamvar wrote a program that crawls blogs and Twitter every few minutes for sentences that contain the words "I feel" or "I am feeling." By 2008 the project had captured more than 12 million emotions in a database, along with information about location, gender and age of the people feeling those emotions.

This winter they released a beautiful book entitled *We Feel Fine: An Almanac of Human Emotions* that further visualizes the data they collected. In looking through the book and having spent time on the site wefeelfine.org, I'm struck by the emotional power and the sense of mystery the project has. I had a chance to ask Sep Kamvar some questions about the project and in particular what type of role he sees for data and storytelling in the future. He said, "*We Feel Fine* is a story authored by millions of people who don't know each other. The result is a coherent, authentic story. And this is not the only story that can be told this way — the story of love, the story of hurt, the story of helplessness. There are thousands of stories waiting to be told collaboratively by millions of people who don't know each other. When we talk about this

kind of scale, the most appropriate way to tell these stories is by building tools — tools that allow individuals to tell their personal stories in a meaningful way, and tools that collect, curate, recombine and edit these stories to form the stories of the collective. Most data analysis has focused on the macro level — statistics, trends, clusters, etc. These give important contextual information and meaningful insights, but rarely do they provoke a visceral, emotional reaction. On the other hand, many individual stories provoke an emotional reaction or social connection but lack the context that data analysis brings. For us, it's important not only to present the high-level data analysis, but also to present the individual stories behind the statistics and allow for the user to seamlessly shift between the two."

The Emergence Of New Models

If we take a moment to look at current trends within other industries, it's not hard to see that creative uses of data and data filtering are at the center of emerging models. But data is sometimes seen as a foreign element to the creative process of storytelling. Therefore finding ways to apply it will benefit from experimentation.

The following are some suggestions to help get you started. If you get up and running make sure to let me know @lanceweiler.

Twitter Lists

Create a Twitter List. Ted Hope recently created a Twitter List to capture the production process from various members of the team during the production of his latest film *SUPER* (twitter.com/tedhope/super). Side note: Ted also discovered the script for *SUPER* via Twitter.

Try Out A Streamreader

Streamreaders are applications that you can use to manage your various social accounts like Facebook and Twitter. TweetDeck is a popular streamreader. In fact TweetDeck recently released a special *Sherlock Holmes* version of their streamreader. The special version serves as a companion to an experience that was designed by AKQA and Hide & Seek entitled 221B. The two-person game was released as a promotion for *Sherlock Holmes* and leads players right up to the first scene of the actual film. Those playing can monitor player and character interactions within a special *Sherlock Holmes* edition of TweetDeck. Try tweetdeck.com.

Create Your Own Lifestream

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