

Scottish  
Documentary  
Institute  
Portable Fundraiser



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Ben Kempas

**The Scottish Documentary Institute (SDI) developed the Portable Fundraiser with its technology partner, Distrify. The fundraiser is a crowdfunding device that is embeddable anywhere on the internet as part of a video player.**

It allows people to pay to watch the institute’s films, but also has a number of other functions, enabling community screenings worldwide, and allowing people to “gift” films to others. Since the Digital R&D project ended, the SDI has continued to develop the fundraiser for new projects, and the device is now being used by other organisations in the film industry.

*“Filmmakers these days rely heavily on video players that get embedded on the web, and they also rely heavily on fundraising,” says Ben Kempas, SDI’s producer of marketing and distribution.*

*“But no one has ever combined those two functions, and taken the opportunity to fund a project wherever people come across it on the internet.”*

The Portable Fundraiser was used to crowdfund for *I am Breathing*, the SDI’s award-winning documentary by Emma Davie and Morag McKinnon, which documents the last months of Neil Platt, who died of Motor Neurone Disease (MND). Initially, the film’s crowdfunding was done in more traditional ways.

Whenever someone saw the trailer online, they could then buy the film, either as a DVD or to watch online immediately.

*“We wanted to take that further,” Kempas says. “Wherever somebody came across the film, we wanted to have the opportunity to raise funds right there in the form of donations, community screenings or other ways of crowdfunding.”*

## **For *I am Breathing*, this was used successfully on its Global Screening Day on June 21, 2013, which was selected to coincide with Global Awareness Day of MND.**

**Screenings of the film were organised across the world — the SDI used the extra publicity surrounding the awareness day to market and publicise the film, and used the Portable Fundraiser to organise the community screenings.**

It calculated what the host of each screening should pay, based on information such as where the screening would be held, how many people were likely to attend and if the audience would be paying.

*“Anybody who’s ever released a film via these so-called community screenings knows that it’s a lot of work in terms of finding the people to hold them, getting them organised, getting them the materials they need and collecting payment from them,” says Kempas.*

*“That’s where the Portable Fundraiser came in really useful — it took over a lot of that extra work. All of that enabled us to have more than 300 screenings of the film around the world in more than 45 countries. Half of those screenings were on that single day alone.”*

The community screenings enabled the film to reach a much broader range of people, rather than the more selective audience who may have otherwise seen the documentary at film festivals.

***“When you think of the awareness potential – both to get the film out and to let people know about this terminal, devastating disease – we had to reach people on a broader scale, and that also helped tremendously in terms of media coverage. The idea that you’d have so many community screenings around that one day helped getting the attention of mainstream press. That word-of-mouth effect is incredibly precious. You couldn’t achieve it through traditional film marketing.”***



**The SDI also worked with other partners, including the D-Word, an online community of documentary professionals, who helped to raise awareness and distribute the film globally, resulting in screenings as far afield as Rwanda and the Philippines. For *I am Breathing*, the SDI also worked with the Motor Neurone Disease Association (MNDA). This resulted in an exchange of resources that added strength to the film's distribution.**

**“The MNDA was instrumental in getting a lot of screenings in the UK. They are organised in regional branches – that’s the sort of existing structure you can utilise. They encouraged all their members to hold screenings as well, and that’s the reason we had many more screenings of *I am Breathing* in the UK than elsewhere. The MNDA also donated advertising space in the Tube in London and across Network Rail in England and Wales. So all of a sudden, for this small documentary film we had these huge billboards all over the London Underground.”**

As well as allowing users to buy the film or organise and pay for a community screening, the Portable Fundraiser also has a facility with which people can add a top-up donation.

A simple “slider” device allows people to choose an amount to donate, and they are given information on what their money may go towards. This may be helping to distribute the film, or specific funding programmes for the MNDA.

*“It helps us to get the film out further, and also helps the MNDA do their important work around motor neurone disease research, care and general awareness.”*

The SDI has also developed a further use for the device, which is now being used for *I am Breathing*, but was developed originally for another documentary – *Future My Love* – a film by Maja Borg that explores the idea of a resource-based economy in a world without money. In keeping with the theme of the film, the SDI decided to use the Portable Fundraiser to create a gift economy, allowing people to watch the film, and then “pay it forward” to other people using the same sliding scale of donations.



**“We can’t just live by the principles of the film and release it for free, but we wanted to find some sort of step in the right direction and came up with the pay-it-forward concept.”**

*“This concept had already been used in places such as coffee shops, Kempas explains, and has been taken up by others in the film industry. People would buy a couple of coffees for the people who come in after them, then those people return the favour to others. But it’s a concept that hadn’t been applied to film production – we were the first to do that in the film world.”*

**“It’s really nice to see that it’s already catching on — the Oscar-nominated documentary *The Square*, about the unrest in Egypt, were looking for a way to give the film to people in Egypt who weren’t in a position to watch the film otherwise. So they approached us to see if they could use the pay-it-forward concept that we had just launched with *Future My Love*. We were very happy to agree to that and to see it used by others in the film world.”**

The SDI learnt a lot about technological development during the project, says Kempas, and what they might change if they were to do another, similar project.

*“The biggest challenge was staying within the timeframe, because there are all sorts of factors that you didn’t plan for – such as something in the tech development not going quite as fast as it should.”*

Communication was vital to the relationship with Distrify.

*“The most important thing is to keep the dialogue going at all times. As soon as the tech company is left on their own for too long and certain decisions are made there — for very good reasons — that we as an arts organisation aren’t aware of, then there’s potential disagreement, or things might not be delivered in the way we expected them to be. It’s the same the other way round — we do a lot of discussing around the film campaigns and we*

*need to constantly tell the tech company about that and not keep them on their toes either. Never let it rest for too long – keep that dialogue going all the time.”*

One further positive aspect of the project for the SDI was unexpected, Kempas says, and that was the way the Portable Fundraiser has continued to grow.

*“The project officially finished in October, but here we are in March developing the toolset even further, and rolling it out for new projects,” Kempas adds. “It’s also nice to see that people we hired for the outreach campaign are still doing work for us, and that there’s this knock-on effect.”*



***“Whenever you make a film and it’s about something important, you end up in a conflict between commercial interests and the fundamental interests of the film. You’re not encouraged to act morally in terms of the monetary system — you’re not rewarded financially for following your morals. You’re even economically punished for buying FairTrade products, for example.”***

***“If you do a project that is about a very important issue, it very often isn’t compatible with commercial interests, so as an artist you’re negotiating that all the time. You have to be able to find a way to survive within the system.”***

*“Luckily the two co-producers of **Future My Love** and I agreed early on that it was fine that the film wouldn’t make any of us money. But when it came to the distribution, it wasn’t just our decision. You need to get the film out there, and that costs money. So that’s when we started to think - what if there was something that was sustainable in monetary terms, so it could perpetuate itself and fund itself, but also keep spreading to more people. That’s when we spoke about the pay-it-forward model.*

*“It’s worked for the film, because when people see the film, if they identify with it they often want to do something directly. To be able to give the film forward seems to be something that is satisfying for some of the audience, and it also seems to be the sort of film where people identify other specific people who may want to see it. We wouldn’t know how to target those people - but people know their own friends and colleagues, so it’s reached people who will be specifically interested in it.*

*“It shouldn’t be an excuse to think that independent films should fund themselves, but new tools, and social media and the idea of word of mouth, are really useful and exciting.”*



***“I am Breathing has been extraordinarily helpful to us. We’ve had awareness campaigns for the past few years, but last year’s, because we could use the film, was so much more successful. It made a massive difference to us – not just the film itself, which was wonderful, but the fact that Neil Platt’s wife Louise was able to share her story in the press and television. She did such a good job – and we felt hugely grateful to the Scottish Documentary Institute and to the Platt family.”***

***“Many of our 89 branches showed the film locally, and some tried to get influential people along to watch it; we also used it as a fundraising opportunity, to get media exposure; and we took it to the House of Lords and had a viewing for MPs and peers. We used it as an opportunity to bring MND to the attention of as many people as possible. We also used the free Tube and Network Rail advertising we were given as well as social media to put the message across to our followers.”***

*“When many of us donate we always like to know where the money is going, and for many people it’s important to connect their money to something tangible, so seeing [on the Portable Fundraiser’s slider] that they can connect it to something that means something to them and that they can see the benefit of, for some people that’s important. Though others will be happy just to support the charity itself and let us decide the priorities, being able to make the connection between your money and the impact that will have is very important.”*

