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Interviews

Travel narrative-digital experiment: Q&A with Fortylove TV

Adwomen talked to May Yee and Adrianna Tan the travelers behind fortylove.tv. Part travelogue, part blog, part vlog, this is not only a great example of innovative content creation from two regular gals who simply decided to see the world and tell their stories, but also about new ways of looking at travel, content and peer-to-peer consumption.

- **Who and what is fortylove.tv, how did it all begin?**

Fortylove.tv is May Yee and Adrianna Tan travelling around the world, hanging out with cool people, doing strange things, and sharing it with everyone through the amateur travel videos we make. We're two friends from Malaysia and Singapore respectively, and we both travel... well, a lot. Some time in October 2008 we both made the decision to move to completely different places — May to London, and Adrianna to Dubai — for work, at about the same time and for the same length of time. So we decided to make use of this rare opportunity to start fortylove.tv.

Before we met each other we'd already been travelling extensively on our own. Adrianna mostly in Asia, and May mostly around Europe. We were both adventurous travellers who loved our gadgets and the Internet. We decided to team up, and fortylove.tv was born. You can call it a travel show, a travel video podcast, or two girls and their amateur travel videos all around the world. May posts videos on the UK, Holland, Belgium, Italy, France, Spain, the USA. Adrianna checks in from the United Arab Emirates, India, Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, and more. Each episode features a great story about each place:

- **How would you describe your project – is it a travelogue, an experiment?**

It's a bit of both. It's a travelogue in the sense that we've brought our video cameras around with us to every single place we went to, in the course of our time in London and Dubai and their respective regions. It's an experiment in the sense that podcasts and video podcasts have been around for a long time (in the Internet's sense of time), but they're not really as developed or well-embraced by the mainstream.

But all that's changing because we're starting to consume media very differently. We — and all our friends — don't own TVs, don't watch TV, don't care for anything we can't download and watch. We want to buy TV shows and watch them on our iPhones — and we do. Why should travel shows be different? We're just two girls travelling, like any other traveller out there; we just wanted to experiment with the idea that we could maybe make a compelling travel program without any producers, directors, researchers, or TV slots.. and mix great storytelling into YouTube-style experiments with video. It's a travelogue for the curious, the people who look beyond tourist sights when they travel. It's about untold stories in the cities we know and love.

Kyle Cassidy

Fortylove TV

- **What sparked Fortylove.tv for you?**

Adrianna was travelling around India, Bangladesh and Southeast Asia for years, first as a student, then as a professional photojournalist. It was one particular trip to India in 2006 that made her think of doing something like Fortylove.tv. She was in Mumbai one week travelling in the local (packed) suburban trains when she witnessed vegetable sellers walking up and down the ladies' carriage, and women passengers actually bought them, and set about chopping their vegetables for dinner... on the train, on their laps, with each other.

Then she was in Orissa the next week taking part in the world's oldest street festival, the one million strong Rath Yatra where massive chariots are pulled through the streets like juggernauts (the very word came from this festival when the British saw worshippers trampled to death under the chariots). Then she was in Cherrapunjee the next week, the world's wettest place then, in the midst of the monsoon, listening to a local tribal rock and roll band. All these things made her wish she had a video camera with her so she could interview them all and then tell stories about her travels in little video snippets. The idea fomented in her head, materialized in various forms but never took off properly. Then she met May, and May also had a similar idea through all her travels around Italy, Brazil, South Africa, the like. Fortylove.tv and this creative partnership was born.

- **How did you go about producing the project? Is it collaborative?**

Very collaborative — in ways beyond the both of us. In terms of content, we sort of sat down before filming anything to brainstorm ideas over Skype. It was May saying, "Aren't you going to India again at some point? Why don't you check out the crazy rickshaw challenge we heard about?" And it was Adrianna saying to May, "You should think about meeting my friend in London, Mickael Perron the rockstar bartender, he'd be able to do something cool for you when you film your episodes in London." And we constantly run ideas by each other, "what do you think of this, and that? if i went to Yemen and featured something about local dress, what would be an interesting angle?" Then we go about shooting our own footage and putting them together into what eventually becomes fortylove.tv episodes.

Even at the editing stage we're collaborating on lots of other things: "my video is too long, what should be cut? what music do you reckon i should use for this part of the show? do you think i got the right tone with what i'm trying to achieve in this video or should i change the angle to focus on something else?" We also met quite regularly as our paths crossed somewhat while we travelled, and we did sit together to brainstorm, edit, and write together.

Beyond the both of us collaborating and working together, we've also been collaborating with other people we know. In the Chennai episodes about rickshaw pimping and racing, for example, Adrianna knew the organizers and made sure to collaborate closely with them and that was how she gained access to some cool stuff, like tagging along to the pimp shed, and riding in the rickshaws with the contestants. Even the music is partly a collaborative effort. We feature some local bands (by local I mean local to us, i.e. Singapore and Malaysia), some of them our friends, and they let us use their music in the videos.

- **What's the response you've drawn for fortylove.tv? Do you have fans?**

Pretty good! Fortylove.tv seems to have struck a chord with the people who enjoy travelling off the beaten track. We've drawn a great international audience over a short period of time and we have had lots of encouragement. A prominent Hollywood personality saw the videos and left words of encouragement; the chief researcher of National Geographic also did the same. We've had interviews with media, online and traditional, across the world. We're glad most people seem to enjoy them.

It could be that fortylove.tv is the rare travel show that's not about the gloss and sheen of exotic travel, but about the stories behind these places, especially the unlikely ones. For example, when you say Dubai most travellers think: oh, expensive hotels, the Burj, and... more hotels and skyscrapers. Adrianna tried to show that there was a lighter side to Dubai, with her episode about the Indian/Pakistani wrestling matches in Deira (now banned). May went about seeking out the great stuff in London even many Londoners didn't know about, and ended up with episodes like the one where she went to a roller derby match to watch women skating aggressively in skirts crashing into each other.. in mohawks. People watched all that stuff, and were intrigued. That means our job is done: we wanted to do this to make people want to come to see these things for themselves, or at least think about travelling beyond the packaged tours and guidebooks, to seek out experiences for themselves.

- **How do you see digital technology changing how people live their lives and communicate?**

In too many ways! As children of the digital generation, we both grew up with digital technology — it's part and parcel of our lives. When we wake up we no longer read the papers; we read the news from our RSS readers, or from the New York Times'.. on our iPhones. We find out about breaking news from Twitter and find traditional media too slow to report on.. just about everything. We're all intimately connected, for the better or for the worse.

In the digital world as we know it networking and maintaining relationships might well be carried out online, in even greater amounts than we ever anticipated. The world is shrinking. Borders are becoming irrelevant.

For example, while building fortylove.tv we found our webdesigner online, on a blog; made contact with him with Google Talk, planned and built the site together, all three of us, out of Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Pittsburgh, London, Dubai, Istanbul.. our designer was also travelling; he lived out of a campervan and criss-crossed America while he worked for us and completed the site. May and I were holding meetings and discussions out of so many cities our frequent flyer miles felt the impact. When we launched we only announced it on our blogs, Twitter and Facebook... and traditional media came calling immediately. Within a day, I think, they picked it up that we were doing this fun thing online and wanted to hear our thoughts about... digital technology changing people's lives.

We're optimistic about digital technology being by and large a force for good. Rather than subtracting from human relationships, the human touch, the urgency of a phone call, and all those things (that detractors and

Luddites frequently cite), digital technology's helped us connect with friends, family, business contacts, with greater frequency — and quality — than ever before. We can see our families' faces on Skype while we're away. We can send video messages to each other. We can fly halfway around the world in a matter of a few hours, because we can now book airtickets online and on our mobile phones. We can travel without guidebooks because important information can be stored in our digital devices. We can stay in touch with the random, wonderful people we meet on our travels — either on a mountain somewhere, or in a hotel, or somewhere in a train. We're all closer than ever before, it's just what you make of it.

- **What are your thoughts on the rise of the super-user and social media? Can people become brands in the digital era?**

Long before social media became such a popular word, there were blogs. Before that, there were bulletin boards and Usenet. In every incarnation of "the next big thing", a few things have been important: sea change is happening, and things are greater than ever before. Consumers, not corporations, have power. It only gets more efficient each time.

We love the immediacy of information. The urgent connections with each other. The breaking down of physical barriers. All that is great. But what remains important are things like credibility and trust. Just as we learn to trust bloggers who are experts on certain things: fashion, tech, food, etc, and let their opinions influence the way we consume these things... it's the same in social media.

If you're a brand on Twitter trying to sell something, and talk over everyone's heads, instead of using twitter as a medium to engage or share... you're quite unlikely to succeed. People judge and make decisions very quickly online in ways that deviate far from traditional marketing. People are becoming brands.. or already are! Celebrity bloggers. People who are only famous on the internet. People who got famous on the internet then got famous in real life. People whose names are synonymous with certain things: Perez Hilton, bitchy gay man unparalleled for top form gossip. Seth Godin, marketing genius. John Gruber, Mac guy. Buffalax, YouTube legend who sets stomach-splitting English subtitles to Indian movies. Anything can become a brand in the digital era. Lolcatz, the genre that is cats in funny situations speaking a made up language? One of the best brands, ever.

- **What's your take on user generated content? Do you think great content from users could go commercial?**

Mostly not great, but there are gems. Look at the millions of tracks of user generated music. Most of it will never be commercially viable, but commerciable viability was never a good measure of how good something is. Some of it will never be commercial because it's too left-field. There's a lot of stuff that's great in the online medium, but not so much off it. Rocketboom was a wonderful daily podcast that had a quirky take on the news. The host left for commercial media and didn't fare as well.

Zefrank. mrbrown.com (Singaporean online legend). All that stuff is phenomenal, but you can hardly call them 'user generated'. They execute and produce their brilliant content in pretty much the same way a director, comedian, or musician might produce their content the regular way.

The 'user generated' aspect of online media like YouTube simply lets already talented people set up shop much more easily than ever before.

- **What's next after fortylove.tv? What's been great about the project and what's been a learning?**

If you haven't already guessed, fortylove.tv takes its name from the fact that there will be forty videos in all. We're at the halfway mark and already planning our next project. Fortylove.tv will remain in its entirety online, free to watch, free to download to your computer or iPod. Forever.

We have a new project that we're preparing at the moment that we can't reveal much of at the moment. But fortylove.tv will continue to showcase our travel stories from time to time, just far less frequently. It will also serve as a site to visit for fresh picks of the best of travel user-generated content that we've found online.

The project's been our first together, and it was great working together and learning this stuff from scratch. We did this as we will be working together in a number of projects to do with media, the web and travel now that we've moved back to Malaysia, so fortylove.tv was a great start and a wonderful addition to our joint portfolio.

It's also given us the opportunity to meet cool people everywhere we went, and to do rather... odd things, like visit fortune tellers, drive rickshaws, mix cocktails at Buckingham Place, eat lots of street food, stay with local families in Yemen, among other things.

May Yee and Adrianna Tan can be reached at www.fortylove.tv