

Are you a content producer in Africa? Here is how to earn some cash

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If you are a content producer in Africa, you don't have to be in Hollywood or Bollywood for your work to be viewed in the United States. Carole Kimutai speaks to Victor Mallet, a Ghanaian who is making this a reality through the website, ReelAfrican.com, that hosts African films, TV series and documentaries.



■ **Why was Reel African founded? How old is it?**

Victor Mallet: ReelAfrican.com was founded in order to become the number one destination for high-quality pan-African film and TV entertainment.

ReelAfrican.com was launched in September 2011 and offers films, TV series and documentaries for free via our site. Since we launched, we have seen viewership grow from 5 000 views per month to over 50 000 views as at June 2012. We attribute this to our strategic partnerships with Hulu.com, the largest and popular free, ad-supported site for mainstream content, (and its Hulu Plus subscription site), and with SNAG Films, the leading US site for independent films and documentaries.

■ **Who is/are the other founders of Reel African?**

Mallet: The founders are young enthusiasts of film who grew up in Ghana. We then spent our young adult years in the US and while there saw the giant need for access to really high quality African cinema and TV productions.

■ **Why are you targeting the diaspora viewers specifically the US?**

Mallet: ReelAfrican is currently targeting viewers in the US because that market has been desperately searching for a destination to watch great films, TV shows and documentaries from Africa. Not to say African continent doesn't make it to the States, because you can definitely find thousands of Nigerian DVDs where the plots focus on juju or poorly told love stories. But there was simply a huge lack of access to really great African or Caribbean films and shows.

We wanted to see African stories portrayed by Africans in a high quality production. That is what has been missing to put African cinema on the map and that is what we are trying to provide via ReelAfrican. We are looking at the African market carefully to try and understand what it takes to succeed there. It would be great to find a way to serve that market that brings maximum benefit to the content providers, while side-stepping the issues of fragmentation and piracy.

■ **What is the quality of productions that you are getting from Africa?**

Mallet: The quality of films we are getting is very high. But we also have a stringent process of selecting the content for the

site. At the end of the day, ReelAfrican.com aims to create a great entry point for African content makers into the United States market - we are talking at least five million people from the African diaspora, as well as millions of mainstream US aficionados of international cinema - so we want to make sure we are only exposing the very best that Africa has to offer.

You have to understand that the venues for African film-makers to get their content to the US market have traditionally been quite limited - mainly a matter of dealing with questionably legitimate DVD distributors based in the Bronx or Harlem, or worse, seeing their content pirated and streamed on YouTube and other such sites. ReelAfrican however presents a legitimate and reliably revenue-generating alternative for filmmakers to get access to the huge US market.

As a result of this model, we are fortunate enough to be able to distribute the works of top African directors and producers like Ghana's Shirley Frimpong-Manso, South African producers Amariam Pictures, Underdog Productions, Uhuru Productions, and Kenya's Buni Media, to name a few.

■ ***You are currently providing free of charge content to viewers. So how do you make your money?***

Mallet: Yes ReelAfrican.com's content is *free* to all viewers in the US currently. Our model is advertisement-based - that is, our content is supported by video ads that play within the content. These are carefully timed and kept at a minimum to ensure the viewing experience remains seamless and enjoyable.

■ ***How do content providers earn their money?***

Mallet: ReelAfrican.com does revenue-sharing with all content owners - any revenue we earn on a title is split 50-50 with the owner. You can imagine that this is incredibly attractive for African content providers because in addition to a brand new and very large market, they now also have a "long-tail" of earnings on their movies that extends far beyond just the sales of their DVDs or their TV deals.

■ ***Do you plan to charge for content in the future?***

Mallet: Currently we have no plans to charge our audiences in the US for viewing content. As we roll out the service in other countries, we'd have to evaluate which model would work best in each different place.

■ ***What kind of genres are the most viewed?***

Mallet: Great question! We are seeing a lot of interest and demand for romantic dramas. Films like *Perfect Picture* and Shirley Frimpong-Manso's *Adams Apples* as well as South African *The Mating Game* are quite popular. However we also have series such as *Shuga* and *Tribes* - which are more edgy, graphic lifestyle dramas that do quite well.

■ ***You mentioned that you are also getting hits from African countries like Kenya, Ghana and South Africa. What are these viewers interested in?***

Mallet: In general, these viewers are interested in quite the same type of content as mentioned in the previous question.

■ How do you guard the copyright of the content owners from abuse?

Mallet: Removing the piracy element is one of our chief goals. We have invested in some of the most advanced DRM (digital rights management) streaming technology in the business used by leading sites such as Discovery Channel, Showtime, British Sky Broadcasting and many other blue-chip firms. We're therefore happy to report that we've so far had no problems with copyright abuse - content providers have trusted us with the security of their content and we have not disappointed them.

For more about ReelAfrican, go to www.reelafrican.com.

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Carole Kimutai is a writer and editor based in Nairobi, Kenya. She is currently an MA student in New Media at the University of Leicester, UK. Follow her on Twitter at @CaroleKimutai.

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