



## New Media and Film Festivals in the Middle East

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### Abstract

This paper is about two things. On the one hand it tries to observe some of the changes after the digital revolution, changes that had an impact on film festivals. The digital projection and acceptance of digital films to film festivals have been achieved. Yet an aspect of this digitization is under attack. The film submissions through digital portals. The second aspect is often neglected and an under the other topic: short film festivals, especially for and by the young.

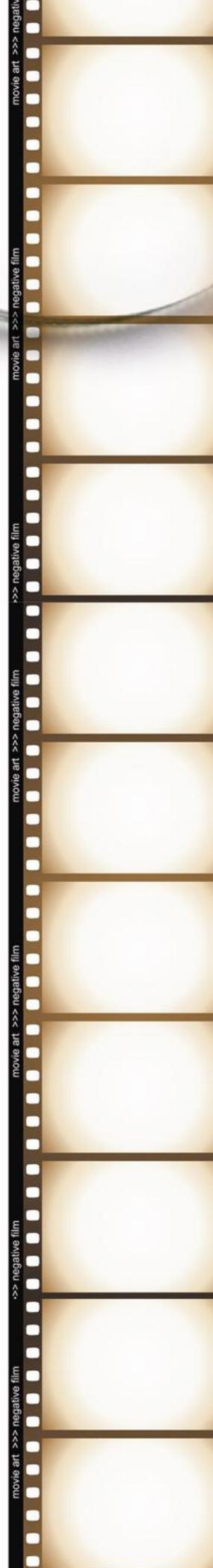
**Keywords:** new media, online film festivals, middle east



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## New Media and Film Festivals in the Middle East

Murat Akser

This paper is about two things. On one hand it tries to observe some of the changes after the digital revolution, changes that had an impact on film festivals. The digital projection and acceptance of digital films to film festivals have been achieved. Yet an aspect of this digitization is under attack. The film submissions through digital portals. The second aspect is often neglected and an under the other topic: short film festivals, especially for and by the young.

The Middle East part of this observation comes from my experience as a juror for a variety of short film festivals for the last five years in Turkey. The Middle East part of this observation comes from my experience as a juror for a variety of short film festivals for the last five years. I have seen a change towards digitization in these years in the submission, projection and finally evaluation of short films. Film festivals are using more digital platforms than ever. The cost effective and youth-friendly nature of new media help foster more of these short film festivals. We need to make a distinction between of course festivals and competitions. The competitions have exploded for variety of reasons due to national-local cultural-political reasons. Such explosion is due to the needs for identity (Kurdish, LGBT), politics (Islamic AKP overtones shorts on ethical subject matter), government-based (EU projects-environment and prevention of disease) and high school shorts. The competition ends with gigantic closing ceremonies, an event that tends to showcase their own political agendas where the winner film gets shown. There is a sudden surge in thematic film production because of these competitions. This surge leads to a flood in applications alter to short film festivals.

I will mention *Kar* and *TISFEST* film festivals that is done online. The submissions, jury process and screenings. If we define a film festival as a celebration of cinema, appealing to an audience then that event need not have a fixed physical space. The traditional film festivals had these spaces therefore operational costs. There are success stories like TIFF where a huge festival centre is erected for hundreds of millions of dollars. Yet the sheer requirement for money for these spaces either leads to cancellation of certain festivals or downsizing with a result of offloading the costs on the viewers and filmmakers.

Let me start with the changes of digitization and the usage of new media in film festivals. Film festivals have changed with the coming of online festivals. How much change is there and how much did not change?

## **I. How Online Presence Changed Film Festivals**

**Publicity:** Now film festivals have to run a Facebook and a twitter account on top of having a website detailing all films, programs, press-kits as well as having them physically in addition to the physical space of press/industry screenings and sales.

**Festival+:** Some of the activities are now added bonuses to film festivals. These include community participation films where city services and the foundations that organize film festivals help out train a group of participant citizens to make short films. There are usually screened online.

**Filmmakers:** Now do need to digitize their material and present it on YouTube, dailymotion or vimeo.

**Festival Crew:** For an online film festival the amount of print traffic, theatre management crew is now useless. There could be among closing ceremony where some crew may be needed but the amount of physical space used vanishes.

**Jurors:** jurors no need to be in the same room. They can view film online send their evaluation forms to the festival crew via e-mail. The festival crew then does a straight math adding and dividing the average vote of the jurors in deciding the top films. The jurors can also meet via skype and exchange views. This could be healthier considering everybody is on the same page.

### **KAR Film Festival: A Case Study**

<http://karfilm.atauni.edu.tr/>

International Snow Film Festival is organized by Atatürk University Faculty of Communication each year in March in Erzurum, Turkey and includes overseas students and academics with the participation held regularly: The films are evaluated online. The festival claims to be the only festival that has the feature.

Founded in 2004 the festival has seminars, workshops, and film screenings, and film competition, actor and director interviews. Staff from Faculty of Communication their graduates from the sector also participate. There are academia-sector sessions, cocktails, awards ceremony and gala night. The festival has short film competition organized under fiction, documentary, and animation, experimental and advertising 5 categories. The first,

second and third films are awarded. Kar has its own system to upload and for review for the jury.

## **TISFEST**

<http://www.tisfest.com/en/>

<http://vimeo.com/tisfest>

<https://www.facebook.com/tisfest>

International short from the world. Application by teenagers only. Evaluated online through vimeo. The festival attracts Turkish and international talent. It is a showcase for an underrepresented majority of teen filmmakers both in Turkey and the Middle East. One aspect of such festivals is that individual countries represent a bulk package of film submissions through their cultural affairs departments. A fine selection of film from Spain always find their way in to Turkish short film festivals as Spanish Ministry of Culture actively sponsors the distribution of recent Spanish film students films into world film festivals. Similar approaches are made with Turkish ministry of culture in the creation of diasporic Turkish film festivals abroad (LA, New York, Rome, Munich, Tokyo etc.). Yet one aspect of Turkish filmmakers remain the same. In Europe they can be excluded as Asian and in the Middle East and Asian film festivals they can be disqualified as being European. This is an aspect that has to be carefully studied for the future of Turkish independent cinema/

## **II. Online Submission and Threat to Independent Filmmaking:**

The development of VOD video on demand such as Amazon's Prime (lovefilm) and Netflix is well-known. There are issues related to such services but we will focus on the submission aspect of film festivals. The creation of one service called withoutabox.com changed the way films are submitted to festivals.

Previously films were either submitted as 35mm prints or HDcam format. Recently there has been a change towards using online services and DVD-Blu-ray copies. The disk copy still has problems as it could be scratched or not easily read by paltrers hence the possibility of disqualifying the submission.

Withoutabox.com is a portal, a dataset system which allows filmmakers to upload their films, the credits and submit to film festivals due to its speed and volume management the service has found supporters in film festivals today some film festivals only work with Withoutabox. Prior to WAB, filmmakers had to contend with physical entry forms, language barriers and the nightmare of trying to pay submission fees in different currencies. Withoutabox made the whole process of submitting films to festivals significantly easier.

Withoutabox (WAB) was set up in 2000 by David Straus, Joe Neulight and Charles Neulight. It was the first website to allow filmmakers to upload their details and apply to multiple film festivals from the same place. In 2008, eight years after it launched, Withoutabox was bought by IMDb for a \$3 million. IMDb started life in 1990 as a British non-profit community Usenet

board and was purchased by Amazon in 1998. People questioned the profitability of this buy but today nearly every festival requires filmmakers to submit via Withoutabox.

Internet-based film festival digital entry is a new model. It is a computerized system using a database system on a global network to administer film festivals. The system preferably handles multiple submissions to different festivals, processes applications, provides simultaneous judging of a competition, and schedules film play times at the festivals.

In 2007 the Withoutabox homepage included the following manifesto:

The Declaration of Independents. With this revolutionary suite of online tools, Withoutabox declares all members of the film community to be free from restrictive distribution channels. Withoutabox grants the power to simply and economically manage the entire process — from production to festivals to distribution to connecting with fans — and the inalienable right to enjoy all artistic and financial rewards to which one is entitled.

To understand this experience I have made a test of uploading a recent short film I made and experienced such handicaps:

**Monopolistic approach:** There is no other option no other site that provides a similar services. Filmmakers have to use it.

**Entry fees:** The subscription to the service is free but submission to film festivals is for a fee and without a box takes a commission from both the submitter and the festival management. Entry fees are increasing which makes life difficult of filmmakers

Withoutabox is not free for festivals. Festivals with submission fees are charged \$500 – \$1,500 to be listed on Withoutabox and up to 18% of the filmmaker submission fees. In addition, WAB forces all festivals to reduce their standard submission fee by 5 currency points, i.e. \$5 in USA, £5 in UK, €5 in Europe, etc. This means a festival with a £25 standard submission fee would actually only receive £16.40. It's worse for festivals which don't use submission fees, as Withoutabox charges \$2,000 just to be listed.

The company demands 18% of the entry fees that they get from the festivals. This demand pushes festivals to increase their prices to make up for this commission. There is loss of revenue to a third party by the festival.

Withoutabox also holds the festivals entry fees they receive for up to 45 days which allows them to earn interest on the fees before paying festivals their share.

They charge a mandatory set-up fee just for a festival ranges from \$500 to \$2000. This setup fee is also a reason why festivals raise entrance fees.

Profit above all else. For non-profit festivals that do not have entry fees, Withoutabox still charges this same \$2000 to be listed on their site.

## **Forced Marketing**

They force festivals to buy a “Marketing Package”, the cheapest of which starts at \$750 and goes all the way up to \$3,500 per month. Basically sending emails that they send out to an aging database of filmmakers. I have stated receiving such emails immediately after I submitted to my first film festival.

## **Redirecting Web Traffic**

Withoutabox forces film festivals to place a link on the festivals’ website as the festivals’ Call for Entries link. This way the web traffic is redirected to Withoutabox.

The company rules state: “A link to the Withoutabox submission form must be placed prominently on partner websites, call for entries materials, and any related email announcements. Placement of wabLINKs on partner websites must be as prominent as or more prominent than any in-house submission method options”

## **Exclusivity**

Once a filmmaker registers their film with Withoutabox they lose the right to submit the film to film festivals through other portal. Once such a submission is made Withoutabox sends a letter demanding that filmmaker to cease using any other portal or they will be kicked off their site.

“Withoutabox partnerships are exclusive so no other third-party submission sites may be utilized concurrently.”

Buried in their terms of Service, Withoutabox makes claim on the intellectual property rights of entrants. This forces festival organizers have to deal with the fallout of such hidden consequences of using Withoutabox.

From their Terms of Service: “You grant us a nonexclusive, royalty-free, worldwide, perpetual, irrevocable, and fully sub-licensable license right to use, copy, reproduce, transmit, modify, adapt, publish, translate, create derivative works from, distribute, and display any information, data, Work, or any other information associated with your Work (collectively the “Submitted Materials”) you submit to us via the Services in any media or format.”

### **Fake Discount Regime**

Under the guise of discounts to filmmakers Withoutabox forces festivals to give mandatory “discounts” to filmmakers that pay Withoutabox membership fees. This causes festivals to raise their entry fees to compensate, which is passed on directly to the filmmakers. This is an indirect cost to the filmmaker because the festival increases their submission, which is also done through Withoutabox.

### **Patent Sword**

Withoutabox patent Stephen Follows names a document called US6829612.

It’s a patent. In 2001 Withoutabox was granted the monopoly on using the Internet to administer film festival submissions. US patent US6829612 is described as such:

<https://www.google.com/patents/US6829612>

The sites which seem to come closest to offering an online film festival submission service (such as Short film Depot) don't list any US or Canadian festivals. Which may be a result of Amazon enforcing their US patent.

Some festivals are leaving WAB. Of the 304 festivals which Withoutabox credited as "founding festivals", only 134 have used the site to accept submissions in the last two years. In a recent survey by Stephen Fellows only 45% of festivals use Withoutabox, and of those they rate WAB 4.2 out of 10 for "value for money".

There is a recent attempt by more independent festivals to create new online submission outlets such as FilmFreeway, FestHome, reelport, Click and ShortFilmDepot. Considering festivals like Sundance both charge submission fees as high as 100USD and there are about 8000 short film submissions, the odds of a Middle Eastern film getting in is minimal. Even festivals like Cannes with around 3000 short film applications do not charge filmmakers and provide in house online submission systems. The future of online submission is currently monopolistic yet there is hope ahead.

## **Conclusion**

There is a move toward digitization and computer based management in film festivals in terms of submission. Such a move unchecked could lead to bad results for filmmakers and film festivals.

Second, film festivals in the Middle East and especially short film festivals freely make use of vimeo, YouTube dailymotion to upload films for screening and evaluation purposes. They also utilize Facebook and twitter a lot. The virtual jury process may have handicaps but seems to work. The costs may have increased as in addition to venues and crew the festivals will now have to accommodate a digital team to deal with the new online components of the film festivals. The potential benefit is the increase in the reach of festivals not hundreds or thousands but millions can potentially reach a film festival as audience.as a celebration of cinema of course this is a good thing.

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