

When an Online Community Hits the Big Time
Col Needham, CEO & Founder, IMDb
Mozilla London - 5 December 2017

Sole:

Say we should start on it ... Are we good? Okay. Hi. I don't know why I'm looking there. Well, thanks for coming here. It's exciting to have our second edition of the speaker series in London. I'm very excited that Col is here, because obviously this is one of the websites I use the most, because I like to prove people wrong, and this is the website that helps me validate my extreme, very good memory. So Col is the founder, and I don't know how many other roles he rolls in ... Hi, hi ... in IMDb, which is the Internet Movie Database, and it's possibly one of the most popular websites, at least that older people than me they say it, because many people like to prove their friends wrong.

It's very exciting to have him here, so he will explain everything from the beginning. And I think that we all like origin stories. There's nothing better than a good origin story for Christmas. So I'm very happy that these all two things are coming up together in the run-up for Christmas, and without further ado, because I just, I'm running out of jokes. So please, welcome Col Needham.

Col Needham:

Hello. Thank you, thank you, and welcome all around the world. So I'm Col Needham. I'm the founder and CEO of IMDb. And this is slightly unfair if you're watching remotely, because somebody once told me that the best way to engage an audience is to bribe them with an Amazon gift certificate. Other bribes are acceptable, but in my case, I'm going to bribe some lucky member of the London audience with a gift certificate. So, the way this is going to work: hands up only, no shouting out. I know this is going to be hard for some of you, so do not shout the answer. If you shout the answer out, it's ineligible. I would like to know what the following movies have in common. Okay, so the first movie I'm going to mention is The Amazing Spiderman. No one's going to take a blind guess on this, right? Okay, Zombieland. No, Debs, you don't ... you can't ... My executive assistant is not allowed to answer this question. Easy A. Crazy Stupid Love. All right. If it doesn't go on the next one, you're in serious trouble. You've put your hand up, so say.

Speaker 3:

Emma Stone.

Col Needham:

Emma Stone. Twenty five pounds of gift certificate goodness heading to you. There you go, all right.

My next movie was going to be La La Land, so if you didn't get that, that would be terrible. Before I give you a history of IMDb, it would be nice to know where we are today. And to find out where we are today, I have some celebrity friends on a marketing sizzle reel. If we could play our three minute sizzle reel, now.

When an Online Community Hits the Big Time
Col Needham, CEO & Founder, IMDb
Mozilla London - 5 December 2017

Olivia Wilde:	Funny thing is I used to be a casting assistant, so 90% of my day was spent on IMDb.
Zachary Quinto:	I use it every day, literally every day. My production company constantly looking stuff up, how to get in touch with people, where people are represented.
Chris H:	If I'm ever having a conversation about who's that guy in that film and who was it, and ... IMDb.
Emma Stone:	I check IMDb all the-
Viola Davis:	I'm addicted.
Emma Stone:	Time.
Viola Davis:	No, I'm addicted.
Emma Stone:	You're addicted?
Viola Davis:	I swear to you, twenty times a day.
Brie Larson:	I love IMDb.
Hugh Jackman:	People say, "Well, you met such and such." Who's such and such?
Jason Sudeikis:	Been like: what? What's it? But, you know the guy I'm talking about.
Hugh Jackman:	I have the app for IMDb. I'll look it up, so I'm like, "Yeah, I know what you mean." I'm like, "Oh, right, that person," you know.
Jodie Foster:	That's when you need IMDb.
Elizabeth Banks:	I actually am an IMDbPro user. That's right, Pro.
Jake Gyllenhaal:	I am an IMDbPro member.
Tom Hiddleston:	I'm a subscriber to IMDbPro. I read the news.
Octavia Spencer:	I like to see what's going on, and IMDb always lets you know what's going on in the film community.
Paul Rudd:	I use it a lot, and not just to check myself.

When an Online Community Hits the Big Time
Col Needham, CEO & Founder, IMDb
Mozilla London - 5 December 2017

Rosario Dawson: You can just look up anybody, and it's really remarkable.

Jon Favreau: I don't even remember how you would do that before IMDb. It's been so much part of the Hollywood culture for so long.

Russell Brand: It's an industry staple, isn't it, IMDb? How did we cope without it? Did we cope without it? Was there a time before IMDb? I don't know.

Col Needham: Hold on, hold on.

George Clooney: Or as we like to call it, I am da bomb.

Speaker 23: Are you turning red?

George Clooney: That's right.

Col Needham: Thank you, thank you, George Clooney. There you go. Who would have ever thought that one day I'd be able to say, "Thank you, George Clooney"? So, there you go. Because of the audience today, I thought I would focus a lot more on some of the earlier days of IMDb and those early pre-web days and things like that. We will go with that.

Russell Brand said there, "Was there a time before IMDb?" And there was a time before IMDb when little five year old me was staying at his grandmother's house one day. She said, "Would you like to enter a coloring competition? And you can win a prize." Now, I don't know if five year old me understood what a coloring competition was, but the aim of the game was it was the local newspaper. There was a scene from Walt Disney's Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. You had to color it all in, kind of thing, and the prize was two tickets to go and see Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. It was a re-release. I'm not quite that old. And I diligently did what my grandmother asked.

All right, okay, welcome there. Hey, this is a talk about the movie, so we should ... Yeah, that's great. I can do this. It's very reminiscent of my first time at the movies, in fact. There we go. The house lights went down at exactly the right moment. We rehearsed that, didn't we?

So, I enter this coloring competition and won! I remember going to the big city to go see Snow White, and I fell in love with cinema. And maybe I fell in love a little bit with Snow White. That kind of changed my life. Now, the rest of this talk will be in strictly chronological order, however, I'll just leap forward a few years just for a minute. Because about 15 years ago, I was talking to my grandmother about IMDb, and I said, "Well, it's all a result of the coloring competition that I

When an Online Community Hits the Big Time

Col Needham, CEO & Founder, IMDb

Mozilla London - 5 December 2017

won." And she looked at me, and she said, "I have a terrible confession." I'm like, "What? What? What? What?" She said, "Well, after you went to bed that night, I couldn't help but color in all the bits that you missed and go over the things that were in the wrong color."

For those of you that've seen the movie Fight Club, the bit where Ed Norton's character finds out what's going on, I've lived that moment in real life. Because everything, my love of film, my career, IMDb, everything that I do, the reason I'm even here today is all due to a fraudulent coloring competition entry by an overzealous grandmother couldn't help but ensure her grandson won the big trip to the cinema. So there you go. My love of cinema ... It's all based on a fraud, but there we go.

That was Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs, and I was the wrong age to be taken to see Jaws. I begged my mother to take me to see Jaws when I was nine years old. That showed me the power of film to get in your head and mess with your thinking, because I became scared of sharks. There were no sharks, as we know. People watching in California maybe slightly have to worry about sharks sometimes. You don't have to worry about sharks in the UK. You certainly don't have to worry about sharks in the local swimming pool, but every time I went swimming I would always like casually nope, there are no sharks in. It's okay to go swimming, so thank you Steven Spielberg for that one.

I'm the right age for the first Star Wars movie, and I bought all the merchandise. I even have the Darth Vader bubble bath ... great tub of bath with a Darth Vader bubble bath. So, growing up in the 70's obsessed with film. When, in 1979 as a 12-year old for Christmas, what an appropriate time ... Gosh, that's coming up on 40 years, isn't it in a couple years' time? I'm suddenly feeling extra old, so I'll only be doing this talk for two more years.

So I received, for a Christmas present, my first home computer at the beginning of the home computer revolution in the UK. This was a build-it-yourself kit, so came with the chips and circuit board, and you had to solder the chips onto the board. It had a calculator display and 128 bytes of memory, 128 bytes. That is not enough for a whole tweet, and now they've doubled the tweet size. It's an even smaller percentage of a tweet. This phone here has 256 gig of memory, and my first computer had 128 bytes of memory. But that began my interest in technology. There I am interested in film, interested in technology. The home video revolution was going on at the same time here. VHS tapes, remember those? VHS tapes absolutely everywhere, so I found myself seeing more films than I'd ever seen before. And I found myself starting to lose track of which films I had seen, and which ones I hadn't seen.

When an Online Community Hits the Big Time

Col Needham, CEO & Founder, IMDb

Mozilla London - 5 December 2017

The classic film geek thing to do is get a paper diary and start to write down the date you saw the film. I did that for two weeks, and then I thought I could create a database. So keyboard skills ... Oh, by now this was 1981, so my home computer had 48K of memory and a cassette interface, so you could save the data to a ... It's getting to the point where people go, "What's a cassette?" You know, but cassette entry saved the data, so I started to put my film diary in this little database. If I saw a film on VHS tape, I would rewind the tape and then I would press play again, and I would type in the director, the main cast, the producers, the main crew. And there it was all in this little home brew database that I'd written myself in Z80 Assembler language, for those of you who are technically minded.

There I was with this. You know I could do things like: I could run a report that said how many Alfred Hitchcock films have I seen that star Cary Grant. That four, by the way. Just for my own use, a little bit geeky, but it worked out all right in the end. As a 14-year old, my mother would sometimes come into my bedroom and she'd go, "Why don't you go outside and play?" I'd be like, "Oh, I'm just finishing. I'm just typing in some more credits or I'm just adding a new field or a new report to the database," and everything like that. It worked out okay. So 1981, kind of like '82, '83, '84 ... I got my first email address in 1985. So I have been online for 32 years, 32 years, and I then started to meet ... That's electronically interact with other film fans from around the world. And so there I was into late 1980's, and I found myself online in a Usenet. Usenet, anybody? Oh, eh! Oh great stuff, okay. Usenet is going to same way as cassettes by the way.

Usenet newsgroup, it's kind of like a text-based discussion group distributed around the world. You would post a message into ... Each group was themed on different things, and naturally I was in the film discussion group. You'd post a message, a question or a mini review or something like that, and two days later your message will have made it all the way around the world. And two days later someone would reply. It led to some of the worlds most interesting, time-shifted conversations ever. Because you always thought you were replying to somebody immediately, but there was a two day lag almost on everything. Crazy kind of early days. When late 1980's in this group, rec.arts.movies was the name of the Usenet group, and it's interesting because here are some facts. This is a fact-based section. Well, it's all fact-based actually, but this is a special ... I want to stress the factual nature of the following bit of the talk. Because it goes slightly weird for a bit, but bear with me and all will come back to land okay.

The facts are the people in this group were mostly US male college students. And what do US male college students like to discuss in a film discussion group, but who is the attractive actress and what films has she appeared in already?

When an Online Community Hits the Big Time

Col Needham, CEO & Founder, IMDb

Mozilla London - 5 December 2017

Slightly politically incorrect here for a minute, but bear with me because it will all turn out okay. One of the people in the group began a frequently asked questions list of actresses and the films in which they had appeared. I grabbed a copy of an early version of this list, and I thought, this has potential. I imported it into a separate table within my database, which had now got a little bit more sophisticated. I guess by 1988, '89, I was on Borland Paradox as a database. Oh, I see some embarrassed nods here. Yay! Yay for Borland Paradox!

What I could do was immediately give the maintainer of this frequently asked questions list all of the actresses in all of the films that I had seen. And then, from that point onwards, if ever I saw a film and there were any actresses in it, which usually there are, I didn't have to type their names in. I could pull them in from this or the table within my old database system. But there were two problems with this. One, it was ridiculously sexist and two, it was only useful for actress credits. I had a database with actors, cinematographers, directors, writers, producers, et cetera, et cetera. The reason I can tell this bit of the story, which is okay, is that in August of 1990, I launched the Actors List, which then redressed the political incorrectness of this whole thing and posted into rec.arts.movies the very first version of the Actors List. The scary thing is the interface to Usenet that people use most often these days is Google Groups, and you can go to Google Groups and I think you can find the very first version of the Actors List today.

It's a little bit scary, because people say, "Well young people today, their entire life will be online in the future." I am 50 years old. My entire life is already online going all the way back to when I was 21. Anyway, I posted a list of actors' credits and people started to mail me missing actors credits that I did not have. It was kind of like this was absolutely fabulous. This has worked way better than I thought it could work. A little bit of a problem, though, I'm a classic film fan, and a lot of my favorite actors, actresses are no longer with us. The actresses list was only for actresses who were alive, and I had kind of copied that for compatibility. I copied my actors file was only for actors who were still alive. I found myself having to launch the dead list. This was a list of dead people and all of their film credits, okay?

For a little while, it was a little bit sad. Because if an actor or actress passed away, their credits would have to move from one file to the next file in kind of a heavenly transition sort of thing. But there we go. So, we have actresses, we got actors and then we had dead people. When somebody mailed me and said, "Wow, these files are like really, really great, but you should publish a directors file, because I'm a big fan of directors and it'd be great if you managed a directors file." I was kind of busy with actors and dead, and the actresses guy was only ever interested in the actresses, to be honest. I mailed the person who mailed me back, and I said, "Well, why don't you join our little volunteer team

When an Online Community Hits the Big Time

Col Needham, CEO & Founder, IMDb

Mozilla London - 5 December 2017

and you could manage the directors file? I'll give you a list of all the directors of all the films I've seen. I'll give you some software to manage the incoming data, and then some software to publish a new version of the list out." He mailed back, and said, "Yes."

About a month later, September 1990, somebody in the group said, "Well, these files are really great, but what we could do with is a database so that we could search them." And I kind of thought: Ah. I could take a bit of the software I've got for my own use. I could take a bit of the software that I wrote to publish the files." By the way, this is a terrible description of the software development process, as any software engineers in the audience are probably going ... "I could stir it all together. Sprinkle some magic software dust into this." I came up with the very first version of the IMDb software. It was published to rec.arts.movies on the 17th of October 1990. A collection of Unix shell scripts, so ORC, sed, GRIP, all kind of bundled together into something that would allow you to download the files onto your own machine, have a command line interface and you could do very basic searches of who directed and who was in a set of movies.

We were live. There was no worldwide web. There was no commercial use of the internet. It's just a volunteer hobby project. A couple of weeks later, somebody mailed me and said, "I'm a big fan of writers." You can imagine how that conversation went, and we added a writers section. A few weeks later, somebody in Switzerland mailed me and said, "I'm a big fan of composers." You can imagine how that happened. The guy in Switzerland also had his own composers credits, because he collected soundtrack CD's, so he stood in his bit with the composers' credits. And so on and so on. At that point, by the end of 1990, we had 10,000 films in the database. We'd only been really running since October. Your average printed guidebook to film and television would have 20,000 titles in it, and it'd be about that fat.

The funny thing is every year when new films came out, they'd have to find about 300 films to throw out of the previous edition so that they could maintain the binding. Because it was about as fat as you could publish a mass-market paperback book. I remember saying to my wife, I said, "With 10,000 films, we're halfway there." You know, yay! Just another 10,000 and the database project will be complete. That was 1990.

Last year, 2016, IMDb added more than a third of a million titles to the database. My little idea of finishing all of this by Easter 1991 went a little bit out of the window. The scary thing is, even with a third of a million titles, I don't know if we're gaining on the number of titles that are produced and released each year. Because story telling ... You can make a film on an iPhone. You can edit it on an iPhone. You can upload it into the public internet and people can watch it. It can be picked for a film festival and shown to an audience or broadcast on any

When an Online Community Hits the Big Time

Col Needham, CEO & Founder, IMDb

Mozilla London - 5 December 2017

number of platforms. The rate at which storytellers can engage with their audience is only growing.

It's kind of fun that we added a third of a million titles last year. I've got an awful feeling we're going to have added more than a third of a million this year. I'm scared ... it's getting to the time where we need the numbers, isn't it? So anyway, 1990, 1991 ... Oh we got ... I'll do this, because this is more technical audience. We got our own FTP site in 1991, so that meant that you didn't have to wait for all of the piece of the database to be posted into the group. You could go to an FTP server and grab all of the database in one go, kind of thing. Really everything going along nicely. Every now and again somebody would pop up and go, "Oh, I love this database! It needs X," whatever X is. You know sometimes ... We soon exhausted the things that were in my database. I think we launched the genres list with two genres. We launched the quotes list with five movie quotes. We launched the biography list with two biographies.

As soon as we launched them, the community responded, started to contribute, and of course the days of it taking two days for people to respond were soon a thing of the past. The data was pouring in. Every now and again somebody would come up and say, "Oh, I've got access to this kind of computer or this kind of service. Let's add this as a way you can access the data." We've always been about collecting the largest amount of entertainment-related information that helps people make viewing decisions and then making it available on the largest number of platforms. These days, obviously, mobile devices ... One day the IMDb glasses app, maybe. Away we go, kind of thing. That's going to be my dream, certainly for wandering around film industry events when it can remind you who somebody is without you having to do the Hugh Jackman, kind of, "Oh, yeah, there you go ... well that person."

Adding all of these different interfaces, when one day, I guess in the beginning of the summer of 1993, I got an email from a PhD computer science student at Cardiff University in Wales. I live in Bristol, so 40 miles away. There we were, this worldwide effort. A guy called Rob Hartill mailed me, and Rob's email goes something like this, "Hi Col, just installed the movie database software. Think it's really good, but have you heard of this worldwide web thing, because I think it might be quite big? Would love to write a wrap-around the software and we could do like a website interface at Cardiff University. I've spoken to the professors, and they say that's okay. Basically we could use the spare capacity at Cardiff University." Now, given that the web was in its infancy, Mosaic was still in beta. I think that's right. I did have a copy of Mosaic, so thank you, ancestor of Firefox. I had heard of the worldwide web, though because in addition to having Mosaic, the person in the next office to me at work had written their own web browser. Written their own web browser.

When an Online Community Hits the Big Time

Col Needham, CEO & Founder, IMDb

Mozilla London - 5 December 2017

That's what you could do in those days. You could go for the Mosaic beta, you could go to a FTP server in Switzerland and download some other web browser or you could read the HTML spec, all eight tags. I'm making that up; it was probably more than eight, but you know. You could read the description of HTTP: Oh, that looks simple enough! Brew your own web browser in an afternoon. So I distinctly remember the first thing I ever saw on the web was a weather map of San Francisco Bay with the Golden Gate Bridge and shrouded in fog. It was taken four hours ago. A bunch of us all around this computer in this person's office, going, "Wow! So that's like only four hours ago. We can see the Golden Gate Bridge is covered in fog." I presume the Golden Gate Bridge is covered in fog right now. I mean that could have been a photo from weeks ago, but you know it was freshly taken four hours ago.

Anyway, a few weeks later Rob mails me back and he goes, "The website just launched an hour ago and we've had 60 hits." It was like 60 hits! Whoa! This is way, the big time has arrived kind of thing. Because it was the first time we got real-time feedback on the fact that people were using IMDb. That was fabulous. We also got listed on the NCSA's What's New on the Web page, which would list every website that went live the previous day, all four of them. We got a listing on there, and you know people would say to me ... They'd say, "So, are you on the web? Have you been on the web?" And I'd go, "Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. I've done the web," meaning I pretty much visited every website that existed, as long as you didn't count the theoretical physics websites. I had been on every website. We were kind of one of the first 100 websites to really launch, but spec by state Cardiff University.

Completely still volunteer, still university, on the university server. Filled up all the space there, so had to put a call on the bottom of the website going, "Would any other university like a copy of the" ... We weren't IMDb back in those days, but, "Would anybody like to host a copy of the database?" We got answers back from there, and so pretty soon we were in the US, Germany, South Korea, Japan, Italy, Australia and Iceland. I have no ... It's great! There can't have been more than 14 people online in Iceland in 1994, but they had their own copy of the IMDb database. There we were with that, and we got ... How's time? Oh gosh, oh right, okay. I need to speed this up, because I'm still in the 90's. Oh gosh.

There we were when we entered 1995, and the web seemed to really catch on for my UK audience here. The BBC started to do shows about getting online. There were magazines. You could go to a bookshop and buy a book, a printed guidebook to what was available on the web. We suddenly found that our traffic in a two week period doubled, and then two weeks after that it doubled again. And then two weeks after that it doubled again. Two weeks after that it doubled

When an Online Community Hits the Big Time

Col Needham, CEO & Founder, IMDb

Mozilla London - 5 December 2017

again. Now, luckily, it didn't double every two weeks since 1995, else we'd be bigger than the known universe by now. How about that for a goal?

But growing and growing and growing. Our volunteer hobby project was getting difficult to do as a volunteer hobby project. We thought, what can we do? It was just getting unmanageable. It's difficult to explain the context in 2017. Back at the height of the dot-com boom, if you'd been online for five minutes and hadn't incorporated and had an IPO and all that kind of thing, you were considered slow. But, you could count the number of websites that were ad-supported on two hands. You had no idea if anybody was actually making any money or not, and no idea if there was any kind of long term viable business model. So lots of services in 1995 closed down under the collapsing weight of volume. On the other hand, some of them went on, and we were one of those lucky ones. We struggled, thinking about: well, what will the community think about was incorporating? We remember Yahoo, which had been based at Stanford, had incorporated, and there was all of that kind of issues about what would people think.

We agonized about it, but we decided that we would incorporate. We figured out a way to divide the shares amongst the 20 volunteers spread throughout the world on a fair basis that worked on how long you'd been involved and how much work you were doing. Some people had been casually involved for many years. Some people had just joined, but were taking on as much as they possibly could. There's an MBA case study in this somewhere, because 20 people who'd never met agreed on a fair allocation of shares amongst the team which is like pretty crazy. I think, secretly, nobody thought the shares would be worth anything, so why even bother haggling over half a percent or whatever? In order to satisfy our minds a little bit, as well, we gave shares to our top 20 data contributors, as well.

When we incorporated, there were 40 people spread throughout the world. We incorporated in the UK with me as the Managing Director, CEO. Three others directors in the UK. The very first time that the four directors ever met was in our lawyer's office in Covent Garden to sign the incorporation papers. We met in reception, went upstairs, signed the paperwork, and IMDb, Internet Movie Database Limited was born.

We did the classic start-up thing. We bought our first web server on a credit card. One of our guys in Wisconsin, a guy called Ron, he went to his local internet service provider and asked them if they would host a copy of IMDb in their machine room in exchange for some free promotion on the home page. They agreed. Over in the UK, we got a four gigabyte hard disk. Remember, four gigabyte hard disk ... biggest thing you could buy I think in 1996. We put the operating system, the web server, Apache ... Was it Apache? Yeah ... anyway the

When an Online Community Hits the Big Time

Col Needham, CEO & Founder, IMDb

Mozilla London - 5 December 2017

web server ... Okay, well, I'm a bit hazy on that. Whatever the web server software was. All of the IMDb software and all of the IMDb data on a four gigabyte hard disk. We Fedexed it to Wisconsin, plugged it into the machine over there, made some DNS changes in the UK, and IMDb was launched a few weeks before the Oscars in 1996. A couple of weeks later, I was on the phone to our first ad client.

I had never sold any advertising before, and they had never bought any advertising before, so on the phone, it's kind of like, "Yeah, so how much is it for a month?" So I name an amount, and they go, "Yeah, yeah, we'll do that." I was kind of, "Whoa! Yep, yes, oh course. Yes, we can organize that straight away." Being, yay! It was enough to pay back the credit card, before it was due, because you've got four ... oop, there you go. That's my ... I'm going to bring this into London a few more minutes. Okay, so we paid off the credit card, before it was due and thus became the world's first profitable internet company.

Probably not strictly true, and actually right here is the wrong place to make that claim. But there you go. I've over-romanticized that bit of the past a little bit. Well, there we were. We were a profitable internet company. We immediately took the extra money to triple our server fleet, and so away we went. A couple of months later, we sold our first piece of advertising to a film studio to 20th Century Fox for Independence Day, the movie and Independence Day, the weekend. I got to meet Will Smith for the first time at Cannes in May and got to tell him a little bit of this story. It was kind of like, "So Will, you play the part in the founding of IMDb," because selling advertising to a studio was my cue to give up my day job. I became our first employee.

Then, from that point onwards, as the revenue run rate grew and we could afford another salary, I would ring one of the volunteer shareholders ... We were running a little list on who was crazy enough to quit next. I would ring someone up and say, "Okay, we've got enough money to hire you now, so you can give in your notice." They would join the team. That was going along very, very nicely. When, oh my goodness, 20 years ... Oh, this is the first time I've done this! Twenty years ago this month. Twenty years ago this month, I checked my mail one day, and there was an email from a guy called Alan Caplan. Alan's job title was General Counsel. The company for which he worked, was a small Seattle-based online book seller, called Amazon.com.

Alan's email went something like this: "Hi Col. Jeff Bezos and I were discussing movie websites the other day when naturally IMDb came up in the conversation. Jeff and I will be in the UK in January, and we would love to meet to discuss some business ideas." Now, I know when you got a small start-up company and you get an email like that today, you would be immediately, even before the meeting, you would be like cracking open the champagne. You would be down

When an Online Community Hits the Big Time

Col Needham, CEO & Founder, IMDb

Mozilla London - 5 December 2017

the nearest Tesla dealership. Whatever is your thing, you'd be doing that. But you have to remember this is December 1997. Amazon.com is an online bookseller. They've never purchased, never acquired a company before. They've only been a publicly traded company for seven months. We thought we were just having a business meeting about an ad deal. So I went along to this meeting with one of my co-directors, and Alan and Jeff were there. Not ridiculously far from here, actually. Jeff asked for a history of IMDb, and then gave me a little bit of a history of Amazon. Then he said, "So, I expect you want to know why we called this meeting."

I said, "Well, is it to talk about our advertising deal?" Jeff looked at Alan, and he went, "Are we advertising with these guys?" Then gave us a Jeff trademark laugh, and it's kind of like, "Oh, but, but, but ... This isn't about an ad deal then?" Jeff explained how Amazon.com would be going from selling books to music and then opening a video store selling VHS tapes and these shiny, new, round things called DVD's, and was looking for site to partner with. That partnership could be anything from a licensing deal all the way through to an acquisition. Jeff had such a clear picture of how IMDb could sit within the bigger Amazon.com family that we found ourselves agreeing in principle that we should take things to the next stage of the relationship. A couple of us went out to Seattle. We met the team there.

Lots of negotiations with lawyers over in the UK and whatever, and on the 24th of April 1998, IMDb became a wholly owned subsidiary of Amazon.com. We were the first company that Amazon acquired. They acquired three companies on the same day: a UK bookseller called Bookpages.co.uk, which became Amazon.co.uk, a German bookseller called Telebook.de, which became Amazon.de and IMDb.com, which remains IMDb.com. The media were kind of like, "Well, we get those two acquisitions, but what's Amazon doing with a movie database? This is so strange." Then, later in the year, the video store launched and people were like, "Oh, that makes a lot of sense." Then a few years later, Amazon launched downloadable digital movies before you could stream them in real time, and people went, "Oh! That makes a lot more sense." Then Amazon Video launched and they went, "Oh! That makes a lot more sense." Then Prime Video launched and then Amazon Studios launched. Then each one of these launches we've been able to build upon the things that Amazon has built, help make IMDb better.

We're on Kindle Fire tablets. We're on the Fire TV interface. We now help power some of the Alexa entertainment queries, if you ask for showtimes. If you have the new Amazon Show device, Echo Show device, when you ask it to play a trailer, it plays from IMDb and so on. So we've been growing and thriving within the Amazon environment ever since. Obviously they kept me on to run it. They hired all of our other volunteer shareholders. After 20 years, there are still five

When an Online Community Hits the Big Time

Col Needham, CEO & Founder, IMDb

Mozilla London - 5 December 2017

of us that are still left. In terms of longevity, we're employees 34 to 39 in the Amazon longevity list. Here I am today talking to you guys. It's grown and developed. Obviously we launched a mobile app several years ago. When are we? Tuesday. Yesterday, we launched IMDbPro's mobile app, so for the first time. Yeah, every day we're continuing to do better and better things and helping people access movie and TV information wherever they happen to be.

There you go. I'll leave it there, so we can go into question mode. So you don't get ... Scarily there's another 20 years of history there, isn't there between 1998 and 2018? Questions?

Speaker 1: Questions? I have a microphone for questions.

Col Needham: We don't have the catch box, because it ran out of juice.

Speaker 1: Yeah, it ran out of battery. We can't be-

Col Needham: See all of this technology that we have, and we're all prisoners of battery powered microphones. Oh, okay, go, go.

Speaker 24: Well. Sure. So why did IMDb never become Amazon Movie Database, like the other two, do you reckon?

Col Needham: It's funny, and thank you Jeff most of all. Thank you Jeff. Those words, I think them so many times each day. When we explained how IMDb worked, and there were 20 of us. We're in all of these different countries. Jeff said, "I've no idea how this works, but I can see that it does, because I see IMDb.com. I see what the website does and it's customer-focused and how you're bringing it, constantly making improvements to it. It feels very Amazonian for something that's not ours yet, so we are going to be fairly hands off." Jeff said he's literally scared of breaking it, because it seemed such a magical thing. In those early years, we gained trust. I got a tip. For those of you with a career path that might involve building a company and selling it onwards, one of the things that really, really helped us: One of our original people involved, who still works for IMDb to this very day, volunteered to move to Seattle and be an ambassador between IMDb and Amazon in those early days.

It was great, because they could see somebody that represented IMDb and they were like, "Can IMDb do this? Could we do this? How about doing this?" He would relay it back to the team, and we'd be like, "Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah." Sometimes it was yes and sometimes it was hell no, and equally he could represent IMDb to Amazon. Then we gradually ... Because of that trusting relationship in the early days, it was then like, "Well, okay, we trust you to get on with things."

When an Online Community Hits the Big Time

Col Needham, CEO & Founder, IMDb

Mozilla London - 5 December 2017

Although we work very closely with our fellow Amazonians and we're in Amazon offices, I'm still the head of the original company that we incorporated in January of 1996 still. It's so funny; I still have to have a board meeting every year to approve the ... Yeah, Debs, no. We see how you ... February, yeah our next board meeting's in February. It's worked well as a model. There are other Amazon acquisitions that have gone that way as well. Every now and again, I'll speak to a CEO or a board of a company that might be being acquired, and it's like reassuring, "Oh, you're still there!"

Although to be honest, I'll be there 20 years in April. Maybe people are like, "Oh, I'm not sure I want to be acquired and still be there in 20 years." But, it shows that you can be. Thank you.

Speaker 25: Hi.

Col Needham: Hi.

Speaker 25: What tips would you give to people who are thinking about setting up their own company?

Col Needham: Oh, what tips? Right. I know this ends up being a common thing, but it's so core and so fundamental. So to be passionate about what you do and why you're doing it. I've given you the lovely, romanticized, all the positive things. I haven't dwelled on some of the difficult times that we had along the way, but during those difficult times, the thing that keeps you going is that passion, that why am I doing this? You might cry out to yourself, like actually audibly. Then the little voice in the back of your head will go, "Because you care about this so much." And it's like, damn it, I do care about this so much. Okay, back to work again kind of thing. That is the thing for me that's true. I know other people say that; I genuinely mean that. After 27 years, hopefully I'm a walking demonstration of that more than perhaps someone who founded the company last week and said to be passionate about it.

Speaker 1: Okay, we have two interesting questions. The first one-

Col Needham: Oh, not that your question wasn't interesting. There you go!

Speaker 1: But two more. I'm so sorry. I meant two interesting questions in-

Col Needham: Two more-

Speaker 1: This time.

When an Online Community Hits the Big Time
Col Needham, CEO & Founder, IMDb
Mozilla London - 5 December 2017

Col Needham: Interesting questions. No where near as good as yours, but-

Speaker 1: No. I will, I mean-

Col Needham: Sorry.

Speaker 1: I'm pretty sorry. I'm apologizing.

Col Needham: We need to get to your questions from yeah, yeah, yeah, but-

Speaker 1: Is that another question?

Col Needham: There is, but let's balance them out.

Speaker 1: Let's have one of these. The question is you said you thought negotiations for shares went very smoothly, because nobody believed they would be worth anything. Do you think this kind of transition from community-run to commercial can still work today?

Col Needham: I think it can still work. It was easier back then, because really when we began there was no commercial use of the internet. I mean it was actually forbidden to use the internet for commercial purposes, so the people with whom you were working, you knew they weren't secretly waiting to pounce or do a secret deal or all of that kind of thing. So we built this trust up, so it was easier back then to do that. I'm a real believer in people are fundamentally the same throughout the world. I don't think anything's changed in anybody's DNA in 20 years that's turned us all into selfish people and whatever. So, if you find the right community and you're doing it for the right reasons then I absolutely think that it's possible today. In some ways, it's easier because of the things that you can still spin up massive websites and massive mobile apps and use amazing kinds of infrastructure. There are all kinds of companies providing that service. I know one. In some ways, that element of it is easier to test the waters when you begin. Yeah, it's different, easier, yet harder.

Speaker 1: The other question which was-

Col Needham: Ah ha, there we go, yeah Lexi.

Lexi: Thank you. Thank you very much for sharing your story.

Col Needham: Thank you.

When an Online Community Hits the Big Time

Col Needham, CEO & Founder, IMDb

Mozilla London - 5 December 2017

Lexi: Two questions. First of all, who are the major curators of the database now? Is it still based on community or-

Col Needham: Yes. Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yep, yep, yep. There is still an edit page button at the bottom of pretty much every page on the website. There are more links in the mobile app by the month. We're gradually ... We collect more and more of the data mobile, because we're finding when you're out and about, whatever, and watching things. Actually our contributor base is growing still. It's in the several hundreds of thousands of people send information to IMDb every year. We process just under a million updates per week. We're heading toward that magic million updates to the database a week.

That doesn't include things like the votes. These are actual new bits of information: director credits, catering credits, trivia points, reviews, whatever. That mix has a large number of people within the film and TV industry updating either their own credits, updating the credits of their clients or updating the credits of a film or TV show that they might be working on. So we do get a lot of the information direct from the source. But equally, there's still a great deal of that comes from people who kind of like, "Oh, I saw a show last night. I watched the show on the streaming service last night, and there's a credit missing on IMDb." Bing! Off it goes, and that comes through to our team in Bristol here in the UK. It's the team that manages all of that data coming in. So yeah, still built by the community.

Lexi: Sorry. Follow onto that first question.

Col Needham: Yeah, of course.

Lexi: For people who aren't in the film industry, what do you think incentivizes them to give you that content?

Col Needham: One of the wonderful things about film and television and the world of entertainment generally is you discover a wonderful short filmmaker and they've made a great short film and you love that short film. You kind of go, "Well, I want people to be able to find out information about that film." So they'll help fill in the gaps, so that it makes it then easier. There's that love and passion for sharing your knowledge. I know something that IMDb, even though it's very large, doesn't know, so I'm going to help the community of IMDb users access that data by contributing it myself.

I do this myself on all the services. It's that little thing that you never know whether ... that little restaurant review or that little correction to the opening times or the little shift of the address a couple of doors down so people can find

When an Online Community Hits the Big Time

Col Needham, CEO & Founder, IMDb

Mozilla London - 5 December 2017

the restaurant or whatever will enable someone to get something good out of a tiny change that you made. When you have hundreds of thousands of people doing that, adding up to nearly a million corrections or updates a week, it creates something that is truly ... I mean, it's genuinely magical. I often pinch myself. Am I in some dreamy alternate reality kind of thing? I may be in some dreamy alternate reality, but I'm enjoying my time in this alternate dreamy reality where people send us lovely bits of info, and it makes IMDb better every day.

Lexi: Really sorry, just a very quick last one.

Col Needham: Well-

Lexi: Sorry, if IMDb was to launch today, do you think it would still have launched along the same lines with a community just volunteering to give that information?

Col Needham: Yeah, yeah. I mean, it's kind of interesting. I think there's a need for film entertainment, the world of entertainment let's call it. It has some interesting characteristics in that almost everybody consumes it in some way. It's very rare you meet somebody who goes, "I never watch TV. I never watch film. I never engage." It's something that connects us all together, okay, but yeah, the people who work on these different films and shows, they arrive together for a production. They make it, and then they move on and then they meet. The space is full of people whose careers you can track and you can go, "Oh, wow! She's a great writer. I want to see more films she's written or more shows she's made." That unique characteristics.

If you look at the music industry, people are in bands or they're solo artists ... Well, obviously occasionally bands break into solo artists, but people kind of stick together more. You can just more follow a band through their career, but with TV and with film, you've got this massive network that you want to navigate. You never know where the next node on the network is going to lead to a great show that you're going to love or a great film that you're going to love. So that's part of the magic. I think if IMDb hadn't have started in 1990, somebody else would have created some kind of IMDb thing, and I wouldn't be in this great, magical virtual reality I may be in now. Thank you.

Speaker 1: Well, I think those were really great questions. The other offices have to work, unfortunately. So we have to cut you off-

Col Needham: Yeah, everyone here take the rest of the day off!

When an Online Community Hits the Big Time

Col Needham, CEO & Founder, IMDb

Mozilla London - 5 December 2017

Speaker 1: Yes. We can stay here very longer and ask questions and they might need to ask you what you asked them, so you need to share in [inaudible 00:59:54] or whatever. What did Col answer to your question? But thanks to whoever was watching. We saw you. Thanks for coming. It was really fun, and now we get to have the best questions. Thank you.

Col Needham: All right. Thank you, and thanks everybody.