

Letters to Creatives from Faiq Airudin – Online communities and networks

Hi, I am Faiq Airudin from Brunei Darussalam. I work with the creative and cultural sector in Brunei from contemporary arts to theatre and design, mostly working on social creative communities.

What inspired you to pursue this path of being a content producer/creator in the arts and cultural sector? Being in Brunei, do you think that influences the opportunities that you get in the international arts sector?

What drives me as a content producer is a genuine interest and connection with creative and cultural workers in Brunei. I have the enthusiasm to see the local community grow and progress.

Being based in Brunei has its challenges when it comes to being connected to regional developments, while connected online through our great internet infrastructure and also through social media networks. There are few institutional links or regional offices based in the country. Social media is a great tool to keep abreast of the situation, like internationally and of regional events. We also have good flight connectivity. So part of what inspired me to build my platform is to share information and knowledge with other creative workers in Brunei of the regional and international opportunities.

One important aspect of being a content producer/creator is being able to understand your audience. How do you get to know your audiences and those who do, could or would like to engage?

Social media analytics can get into the fine details of social media demographics. They can break down the age, location and what they consider as gender based on the users' social media following. All platforms provide this minute of detail once you convert the account to a business profile.

I think this is helpful, but what is more important is engaging the users or community through comments, interactive polls and other interactive elements. So you can use the account to comment on other profiles, or ask through questions in a meaningful way to understand the audience or who is following the page, and this gives a better overview rather than the raw analytics alone that you can get from a business profile.

Since demographics only breaks down an estimate, it is not a true picture. It is a guideline but not the be all and end all as a guiding principle of how you can build an engaged audience.

How would you describe the difference between an audience and a community?

An audience can be a bit more passive and static, while a community is more interactive and you grow together with a community. A community can evolve with your tastes and interests, and you can also curate and lead your community to make better and informed decisions. You are also making better and informed decisions based on the interaction with the community and also when you become a bit more of an expert level in your field.

While I think an audience can be less likely to stay loyal or follow, if you have a different direction in terms of what you want to post or how you want to share.

With algorithmic biases, increasing competition from other platforms and social media offering diminishing returns, how else can creatives build visibility and establish meaningful, long-term connections with audiences online?

I think for me, it is not to be over reliant on one particular platform, like Instagram or LinkedIn or X. One piece of advice I have taken to heart from a sports journalist, Carl Anka, was to make sure you have a website as an archive and portfolio of your work. Setting up websites now and domains with your professional name is a shorter and quicker process now, but you have to ensure that you have a long-term commitment since it reaps benefits later on. There is no immediate reward for it.

Having a website with your own domain and portfolio can directly help visibility. Google and even ChatGPT now has the ability to index your site for referencing as a source. Having your own site means you can also direct people towards your work on different social media platforms by sharing a link, and you also have better internet searchability this way. But more importantly, you have more control about what you are sharing online and how updated you want it to be.

What advice would you give to someone looking to build and nurture a loyal online community?

The way it works for me is that you have to kind of nurture these senses, so it is like well-being, solidarity, professional and emotional resonance.

The first one, well-being relates to the feeling of positivity, health, and happiness. To use a specific example, it could be within the community, you can find that it is a place where people can offer support or troubleshoot an issue. And the outcome of this would be among the community of users. And it would not be from the organisation or the administrators of the social page. So the questions might be like, 'How do I get this done? Where can I find this paid tool?'

Next is solidarity. It is the creation of a community with a purpose and shared interest. In other words, it is the idea of having a sense of purpose among each other, so sharing similar experiences and finding common ground. It could be that the questions can be along the lines of, 'Does anyone else experience this?' And do you notice how in this particular situation, things happen this way? And a person is left from the community thinking, 'I am experiencing this as well. Thank you for sharing.'

After that is professionalism, being legitimate and trustworthy and reliable. And one of the key ways is to create a point of entry. So this point of entry is for anybody who is just starting out and they have a feeling when they go to community that it is a place that I would recommend to friends and family who are also thinking about starting out.

And lastly is emotional resonance. So this is an idea of feeling empathetic and understanding of feelings between yourself and the community. So I think that one of the key reasons to create a community is to form a bond between individuals and the community. And this can be through emotional topics such as humour, sadness, or stories of resilience.

So I think nostalgia is an interesting way to bridge a sense of emotion and to recreate an emotional state from your childhood, or even from ten or five years ago. So it is like the idea of like, 'Wow, I remember, really remember this.' Or, 'Yes. This is a great thing they did before.' Again, this can be simplified into the ideas to nurture well-being, solidarity, professionalism, and emotional resonance to build a strong foundation to nurture a loyal online community.