Promise and Problems: Web Series and Independent Production in Periods of Change

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Borne out of an abusive relationship, *Chick*, an original scripted web series, narrates the story of a woman of color, played by creator Kai Soremekun, who, leaving a loser boyfriend, decides to become a superhero. RowdyOrbit, a site publishing web series by and about people of color, picked up the show, along with Koldcast, a curated site distributing original web shows that gives advertisers a page within the site for users to find more information about products placed in its shows. *Chick*, a personal story at first self-funded by its creator, does not have product placement, but a second season of spin-off may include this form of corporate sponsorship, a deal orchestrated by the independent online network. "I love how it allows you to be so closely connected with your audience," Soremekun, who is planning her own social networking site based off the series, said about the idea of a "web series." "I kind of equate the social networking site to a village."

Much has been written about how traditional television institutions are responding to digital distribution, but few have grappled with the dynamics described above: the making and marketing of original series solely for online consumption, operating mostly – but not entirely – outside of large corporations. Independent web series are a type of digital storytelling comprising a vast and diverse sea of televisual programs. Throngs of individuals, independent production companies and large corporations are producing hundreds of serials for the Internet, a recent flurry of activity in a long history of citizen and corporate innovation.

The paper seeks to: contextualize web series in a broader history of independent production, explain the challenges facing it within the web video market and narrate the possibilities of the form through interviews with independent producers and network executives. In the end, new media has opened the space for a sustainable market for web video made primarily outside major corporations, yet the realities of the market – saturated with content and still dependent on traditional advertisers – has made a truly flourishing market difficult to achieve.

“Web series” are mostly short-form video programming created for online and digital consumption. While the mainstream media, bloggers, producers and corporations have accepted the term, what a web series actually signifies is difficult to pin down. The term is a product of a particular time – now – and specific a technology – “the web” – seen as distinct from film, television and books.[1] Beyond the term, web shows cover a great number of genres, distributed on a variety of different websites and produced from a diversity of funding sources, representing a broad range of styles.[2] One major distinction within the form is between reality and fiction, or scripted, series. This paper will focus primarily on the latter. Reality series are equally if not more plentiful online, but the diversity within the category requires its own essay. Scripted series generally require more investment, in time and capital, and therefore offer richer material for how shows are producing and distributing their content.

[1] Whether the term will persist is up for debate, especially given the multiple ways in which these platforms are converging. Nonetheless producers – directors, filmmakers, or writers – are making shows solely for distribution on computer screens through the Internet, hence the term.
[2] For a good overview of the different categories of web series, a review of the nomenclature, along with a basic explanation of how the market works, see “What is a Web Series? A Guide and Introduction.” (Christian 2009a)

Why “series”? Viral videos and music videos are among the most popular forms of entertainment online. These are valid objects of study. But producing a series, usually comprised of at least thirty minutes of footage (with many over an hour) edited into at least six short episodes, requires a significant amount of forethought, investment, and reworking of ideas that suggests an acute awareness of audience, the need to please and to sell. When examining the production of culture, these emotional and financial investments become meaningful.

History and the Development of Media Forms

Producing an original online series is new, in the simplest sense, but how new is up for some debate. Certainly over the past years there has been a boom, owing to more venture capital in web video companies – from start-ups that construct the video players to sites that amalgamate content – and social networking sites that allow for greater information sharing. The surge in user production, especially in a post-YouTube era (around 2005, when the site started to take off), derives in part from cheaper technology; meanwhile rising viewership arises from faster bandwidths. Still, the first web series dates back to 1995 and a “show” called *The Spot*, created by Scott Zakarin. *The Spot* was mostly text-based but incorporated video and involved an interactive narrative about a few young people living in a peculiar beach house.

Yet the roots of user and independent production extend much deeper. In the early days of television, alongside in-house production efforts, independent producers, “cast-offs” of Hollywood started to produce for television and gain entry into the network, *I Love Lucy* being a classic example (Barnouw 1990, 133; Anderson 1994, 46-69; Mann

2008). Even still, during this time, the type of narrative experimentation we now see networks returning to, and which defines the production of web series, can be seen in the formative days of television production, with one chief example being the anthology dramas, whose storylines were often dark and inventive (Barnouw 1990, 163-166).

Amateur production has a lengthy history, much of which is still being exhumed by scholars. Historical work by Susan Douglas and Michele Hilmes underscore the importance of amateurs in the early days of radio, how amateurs both technologically and programmatically innovated what people heard and saw (Hilmes 1997; Douglas 2004). The ties between early radio and web series go beyond mere amateurism. Amateur radio operators share with web series producers the issue of control over distribution. Both web series producers and radio operators have and had the ability to spread their messages beyond private studios or homes, something lost with television's large economies of scale. Independent radio, in some form or another, thrived in content or infrastructure for quite some time, even after taking hits through Federal Communications Commission regulations. (Rothenbuhler & McCourt 2002; Keith 2002) Still, within the industrial era, citizens have always found ways to produce and distribute, dating back to the mid-nineteenth century and the amateur printers (West & Petrik 1992) to the more recent fan writing communities around popular television shows and books (Jenkins 1992; Jenkins 2006a; Jenkins 2006b; Bacon-Smith 2002; Radway 1991). At the same time, web series creators are very much entrepreneurs, straddling categories of artist and marketer.

The influence of corporations remains as large as ever. Throughout history the trajectory from independent to corporate dominance is consistently apparent (Wu 2010). From the role of industries in securing regulation to achieve market dominance, to the role of sponsors and advertisers in buying, distributing and controlling content, corporate influence has always been in close ideological contact with independents and amateurs. From the earliest days of the National Broadcasting Company, corporate control came with it the assurance of the "best programming," programming funded by sponsors who in many ways owned the airwaves: "The network, having 'sold' a period, seemed to regard it as sponsor property, to be used as he designated. Sponsors were, in effect, being encouraged to take charge of the air" (Barnow 1990, 57). As radio transitioned to television, the sponsor model remained, with advertisers branding large spectacles (Anderson 1994), and eventually shaping the form of the industry: they demanded upbeat mise-en-scene, attractive actors, and above all security: "…the series formula offered security…each program was a variation of an approved ritual." (Barnow 1990, 166). In essence, they demanded their programs be both internally but also industrially coherent, guiding the viewer to remain in their seats in a seamless practice of "watching television" (Williams 1974).

This history, cursorily described above, is key for understanding the way the web series market is developing. As of now, independent series creators can make and publish their own shows and get it seen by large numbers of people. Examples of success abound, but countless more examples exist of creators publishing shows that nobody, or few people, ever watch. Increasingly, the need for funding to obtain higher production values and, most importantly distribution, is vital. Though the Internet offers the potential for wider distribution than radio and lower barriers to entry than television, most enormously popular shows require the help of at least a small company. Even more, many industry watchers and executives agree the key to keeping this form of storytelling alive is the ability to "scale" the business. Sponsorship models – product placement or other brand integration deals – or network sites that distribute shows are still improvising the "formulas" that solidified television's success: episode length, narrative structure, visual techniques, release strategies (weekly, daily, or all at once), media distribution formats (online, but paid-for, as on iTunes, or streaming; mobile, DVD or web-to-TV deals are all being experimented with), and distribution sites (large sites like YouTube or Hulu, versus smaller networks). No formulas exist, but the search for formulas identify web series as a distinct attempt to rein in the diverse and unruly modes of viewing characteristic of online video viewership in this time in history (Green 2008, Jarrett 2007, Burgess and Green 2009, Rizzo 2007).

Media, now more than ever, do not develop in isolation. So fueling the zeal to create content for the web is greater anxieties and predictions about the fragmentation of audiences (Anderson 2008), the need for advertisers to reach more refined demographics (Turow 1997), the need for advertisers to cultivate stories and personalities for their brands (Turow 2006), and the convergence of media (Jenkins 2006b). The discourse around the death of the thirty-second spot is propelling sponsors to longer form content (Jaffe 2005). Michael Curtin (2009), in his essay "Matrix Media," details how the interplay between advertisers and networks, coupled with perceived competition on the Internet, has led to mass media conglomerates improvising strategies for content delivery and viewer engagement. Pivoting off Amanda Lotz's notion of the multichannel transition – the transformation of television starting with technological and regulatory developments in the 1980s – he attributes recent commercial developments to shifts in programming: "…executive during the multichannel transition began to pursue groups of viewers who were passionate about particular ideas, topics and interests" (Curtin 2009, 11). Web series are evidence of this new conception of programming. Programs so niche and specific, they are intended to connect with audiences with renewed vigor, a vigor as yet only occasionally tapped. Attempting to veer away from the "problem of knowing" identified by Todd Gitlin, networks, and simultaneously individuals, are seeking specific and determined groups (Gitlin 1983).

Within this industrial matrix, however, remain kernels of what distinguishes new media from old, the digital from the analog. The desire for outsiders to participate in media remains as old as media itself, and research on fan communities and audiences have reaped rich narratives on these realities (Radway 1991; Ang 1985; Jenkins 1992; Jenkins 2006a; Fiske 1992; Penley 1997; Dell 1998; Bacon-Smith 2002). Digital media have brought these relationships to the fore and begun to structure the ways in which producers and marketers talk about creating media. A discourse of intimacy has been with television since its beginnings, but the ways in which I heard entrepreneurs and executives discuss web series production bordered on earnest. It is different from a kind of "attention economy" (Goldhaber 1997), as in competing for views and time, not as ephemeral and more sustained as the viral (Christian 2011). It is akin to the notion that media must be spreadable (Jenkins 2009) and the idea the Internet has fostered greater connections between some people in ways that give the promise – but *not* the certainty – of greater social cohesion (Benkler 2007; Gauntlett 2009).

The Market for Web Video: Pressure on Independents

Web video and its distributors are similarly marked by a conflicted history, and much of its early woes, particularly of those sites I will describe, concern the pursuit of advertising. In the early aughts, digital technology had created anxiety in the halls of the nation's major media makers – Hollywood – and patrons – its advertisers (Donaton 2004). By the end of the decade, however, most advertisers had fully committed to advertising online, providing Internet content hubs (here, networks) access to sustained revenue streams. This too is far from unprecedented. In the late 1990s, Hollywood paired with the "geeks" of Silicon Valley to create several "networks" online and wooed big brands as advertisers; but those efforts quickly dismantled, for a variety of reasons (Geirland and Sonesh-Kedar 1999). By 2010, the market for web content – and even independent content – had matured enough to allow for functioning advertising networks and exchanges alongside direct conversations between brands, ad agencies, marketers and publishers about funding new content.

Yet the market still looks like an emerging one, and the place of the independents offers a prism as to why. The same problem faces both publishers and advertisers: how to reach an audience and effectively convey messages. Publishers and producers – the focus of this essay – must amass the largest audience possible and argue for its value to brands, which pay for advertising. Brands, the patrons of most independent video, need ways to reach audiences and want assurances their advertisements are making it through. Having satisfied patrons (advertisers, mostly) remains of utmost importance for publishers.

Does the market support independent online video? Yes and no. Networks can make money online through ads, but not enough to promise the kind of sustainable independence from advertiser control traditional networks can enjoy.[3] Instead, the market is flooded with conflicting reports about the viability of a scaled advertising market – in other words, the possibility for ads served on websites that appropriately value and measure the audience and content without requiring extensive negotiation between the publisher and brand, as is necessary with brand integration. Some studies have shown that video ads shown during TV shows online are more effective than advertisements on television (MediaBuyerPlanner 2010), yet the revenue from ad networks have been slow to lift even the largest video sites to profitability – the most notable case being YouTube. Audiences for online video in early 2010 are still an early adopter audience (Lawler 2010a), and yet growing rapidly (Madden 2009). Early reports of web video were decidedly optimistic, exhibiting enthusiasm for (mostly independent) web series as a potential competitor to traditional television (Elliott 2007) who could subsist on ad dollars (Whitney 2007) and showing user-generated networks as beating old media in audience share (Rubens 2008), but those reports have been tempered by a steely sense of realism about the limits of content produced outside the mainstream media.

Advertising networks, still the lifeblood of many video sites, have amplified anxieties, pressuring various players into an almost dizzying array of business models. Ad networks sell placement on websites by aggregating content and delivering it to advertisers; publishers often complain the networks do not significantly value their

[3] The question of product placement is, of course, critical, and will be explored. While declining revenue and audiences on television, particularly broadcast television, has necessitated product integration and has for decades, the amount of revenue they enjoy for 30-second spots allow them to operate – commissioning pilots, hiring stars, broad storylines – relatively independent of any *one* particular brand. This is coupled with television's alternative forms of revenue – licensing, retransmission and carriage fees, DVD sales, international distribution, etc. – to be discussed. Turow has remarked how marketers were always skeptical about how much product placement could ever replace the more efficient ad delivery system (Turow 2006, 102).

audiences and are content-agnostic.[4] The digital arms of traditional media outlets like MTV and Sony have responded to the low rates (CPMs) from the ad networks by essentially becoming branded entertainment production houses, making content tailor-made for specific advertisers, with some success, following larger trends with the advertising market (Kroll 2010; Christian 2009a; Turow 2006). Some video aggregators have made similar shifts, as when Sony restructured Grouper, an amateur/user-generated site, into Crackle, a site for independent and Hollywood production companies to create (often) branded content: “We realized user-generated video is something everybody likes to watch but it’s not a great business. It’s too difficult to make money,” said Grouper founder Josh Felsher about the shift (Kramer 2007). Other video hubs, understanding the markets dependence on flawed ad networks, conceded the status quo, as when Adconion bought out Joost and literally made it a video ad network, with some apparent success (Lawler 2010b). Meanwhile, the economics of producing content online has led to growing concerns over “content farms,” in which topical content is published *en masse* solely to garner ad-friendly audiences and amass revenue from low CPMs (MacManus 2009; Shields 2010). Even YouTube, the site with the highest volume of video content and viewers, has spent years enticing and cutting deals with the largest media conglomerates, a move exposing the same rifts between “user-generated” and corporate this paper explores (Jarrett 2008). Some in the marketplace place hope for a more controlled marketplace in ad exchanges. Exchanges allow for a real-time auction-based

[4] Reports abound, and the debate has been ongoing for years. In 2008, *AdAge* wrote: “On average, the cost-per-thousand rates for network-sold inventory are less than a 10th the CPMs publishers were able to charge when selling it themselves. Because of this price differential, some publishers complain that ad networks drive down prices” (Klaassen 2008). A handful of mainstream media outlets have dropped networks for their online content, which they are able to do because they have the staff to sell ads themselves. (Kafka 2009).

marketplace between sellers (publishers, who know their audiences) and buyers (brands, ad agencies, who want to reach specific groups).[5] Such efficiency – a kind of "mass customization" (Turow 2006) – could presumably raise the rates for publishers while providing better targeting to advertisers and allay many of the problems facing the video networks discussed in this essay.

What this complicated cultural and business terrain demonstrates is how much emerging media distributors depend on factors outside of their control. The early years of new media are delicate, and the websites and web series to be described are trying to carve a sustainable market for independent production in an industry that demands scale and efficiency, the bailiwick of large industries.

Production: Independent Production and Personal Passion

Often unable to market their content for lack of capital and corporate dollars, web series creators often self-publish using sites like YouTube, blip and Vimeo, hoping their content will connect with an audience, and, in doing so, lead to deals with corporate backers (brands, advertisers) or independent web series networks, both to be discussed later in the paper. Here, the "series" is paramount, and similar to larger trends in television (Mittell 2006, Creeber 2004): serialized narratives, according to these producers, create stronger bonds between users than viral videos. Series create marketable, emotionally invested audiences specifically invested in the personal vision of one or a small group of writers and filmmakers. Independent production gains access to the kind of loyalty typically reserved for corporate content.

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[5] Providing a useful analogy, DoubleClick's David Rosenblatt in 2007 compared the exchange marketplace to eBay (Story 2007). For a guide to ad networks versus ad exchanges, see *AdAge*'s guide. http://adage.com/adnetworkexchangeguide.

For most independent producers, personal passions motivate production, passions they hope will inspire viewers and sponsors. *The Guild* remains the classic example, as one of the most popular web series ever distributed (O'Connor 2009). *The Guild* tells the story of Codex, played by series creator Felicia Day (known also as Penny from *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog*, a Joss Whedon three-part web series inspired, in part, by *The Guild*), a young woman addicted to an unnamed online role-playing game commonly understood to be Blizzard Entertainment's *World of Warcraft*. Codex is part of a "guild," a group of players who play together and converse online but who sometimes do not know each other's names. Creator and star Felicia Day's idea for *The Guild* grew out of her own addiction to online role-playing games (which, poetically, grew out of her lack of work as an actress in Hollywood), according to news accounts and Jenni Powell, who works as Day's assistant and in production on the show. The networks were not biting on the concept, so Day made the series herself and posted it online. Cheap to make, the first season was shot "with bagels," i.e. without funding, and it became a hit among a community of online gamers, whose fandom literally funded the second season until Microsoft and Sprint sponsored the show with an infusion of cash for the third season.

What *The Guild* – along with a semi-large coterie of series from *After Judgment Anyone But Me*, *Red v. Blue*, *Fred*, *Happy Tree Friends*, among dozens of others – is that serialized narrative or short-form comedy can inspire millions of fans who invest in the success of your projects. In certain cases fans will literally invest money into the continuation of the show, as has happened with RPG series *Gold* and lesbian series *Anyone But* and *Venice*.

These kinds of investments are significant, particularly for marginalized groups. Tatyana Ali (*Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*) executive produced the web series, *Buppies*, created by filmmaker Julian Breece, in part because she was not getting much work as an black actress, but also because she related to the story and, in an almost political move, she wanted to create new representations of black people: “I think people tell the stories that are closest to them that they relate to the most. So I don't think it was ever, ‘oh, we'll do this black web series and it'll be amazing.’ It was more like, ‘let's tell this story with these incredible characters.’ I've never seen any characters like them treated in this particular way.” In fact, a small but committed group of black producers are spending large amounts of time and sometimes money creating narratives both personal and implicitly political. Dane Joseph, whose *DramaQueenz*, about three black, gay men trying to make in New York, is at least partially a response to a lack of representations in the mainstream: “There is a serious lack of African American faces on TV right now…On network TV there is nothing.” The three women producers of *Kindred*, about three professional black women dealing with life, were responding to the colorblind casting on shows like *Grey’s Anatomy* and *Private Practice*: “they’re not focused on the lives of people of color,” said Ella Turenne, a producer and actress on the show. Gay lesbian shows too long bring this sense of correcting mainstream representations. The creators of lesbian comedy *The Real Girl’s Guide to Everything Else* crafted their series in direct response to *Sex and the City*:

> We got into this conversation about the world of *Sex and the City*…the world of rich, white, straight fashionistas. And it started me thinking – what’s the inverse of that world?...Perhaps a more ethnically diverse world where materialism is not

> valued, where being straight is not 'assumed,' where a woman's goals do not end at getting married or finding the perfect pair of ridiculously expensive shoes. (Christian 2010).

Several of these producers brought their shows to networks only have them rejected or diluted. Other creators, such as Al Thompson, created series (*Johnny B. Homeless*, *Lenox Avenue, Odessa*) to give themselves the kinds of meaty roles traditional media seldom offer actors of color.

This kind of independent production is far removed from the kind of user-generated celebrity that grabs headlines. The difficulty of producing a narrative, of successfully the discourses of connection, requires serious investments in capital, economic, social and cultural at the same time. As noted, the first season of *The Guild* was funded "with bagels" and relied mostly on a dedicated group of friends (Brophy-Warren 2009). The producers of *Kindred*, the creators of *Chick* and *The Crew* all echoed this sentiment. Going into debt often happens. Far from viral celebrity, web series production is a precarious practice requiring diligence and passion. The cost of connecting for individuals and small production companies requires the kind of entrepreneurship few are willing to take on.[6]

New media shifts the discourse on what the corporate-consumer relationship should look like. The Web 2.0 narrative of one-to-one communication greatly influences corporate interest in web series production. "It is a different medium, more personal, more one-to-one," said Gennefer Snowfield, who started a marketing firm, Space Truffles, to match web series with brands, said. Friedman, after creating two very

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[6] This kind of precarious, freelance labor is discussed in full, rich detail by Andrew Ross in his discussion of the "precariat." (Ross 2009).

successful branded web series, wrote a short manifesto for web production, using language I believe underscores the sentiment supporting the corporate discourse on connection:

> I believe that persistence of vision and purity of voice are key ingredients to success in New Media. Fresh is good, but authentic is the new cool. The long-standing division between content and creator has evaporated – you are your project online. Today's fans can smell bullshit a virtual mile away. If you want them to care, you need to care (at least) twice as much. Don't be scared of sincerity. Real passion is infectious. Share yourself with your audience. But most of all, really love what you do. (Friedman 2009)

The collapse described here between content and creator, and creator and audience, perfectly describes the dynamic the started this paper. Web series proponents envision "old" media as placing barriers between producer and consumer, but the hallmark of new media, the conventional wisdom goes, is the disintegration of that boundaries. The notions of authenticity and sincerity are particularly telling, as it places emotional with a market context. The veracity of this claim is less consequential than the rhetorical shifts it describes. What producers, independent and corporate, share is a need to transform one-way communication to a diffuse audience into a one-to-one connection, if not with the producer and characters themselves – through Twitter accounts, separate pages, blogs, and forums – at least through the creator's "vision" to the audience's desires for engagement: "real passion is infectious. Share yourself with your audience."

The roots on the web series, as told by *The Spot* creator Scott Zakarin, become far less anomalous framed in this way. Zakarin became inspired to create *The Spot*, which grew out of an advertising agency in 1995, by frequenting chat rooms and making up characters, using them to talk and tell stories to other people. *The Spot*,[7] with its personal pages displaying the diaries of each characters combined with short video clips (around 45 seconds), took the concept of one-to-one connection to narrative extremes: “You can talk to the characters. You can have individual relationships with them,” Zakarin told me about his ideals for web shows. “People,” he said of his original audience, “thought we were real.” Yet *The Spot*, for all its espousals of independence, was guided by and spurred itself a flurry of corporate interest in episodic programming, with millions of dollars invested in creating sites and stories – often through branded entertainment – looking to engage consumers in new ways (Weiner 1996). From the moment of its creation, serialized video married the corporate and consumer in circuitous, vexing and peculiar ways.

Distribution: Tapping Independents, Seeking A Fairer Market

Despite Zakarin and Friedman’s success engaging large sponsors to distribute their shows, independent producers still must access larger distribution channels, particularly at this early stage in the market’s maturity. These distribution channels function like small television networks, acting as intermediaries between independent producers (or production companies) and corporate sponsors of advertisers. They seek to marry the interests of these two parties, getting producers exposure and access to engaged fans (site traffic) and corporations programming more effective than traditional advertising (their main source of revenue and, essentially, their *raison d’etre*). So far, most of these sites have yet to be profitable, and while deals are happening, they are slow

[7] *The Spot* had a number of corporate sponsors, including Toyota and K-Swiss.

to close and not routine enough to offer a steady revenue stream. As the tissue holding together this market for connection, they have yet to live up to the ideals set forth in their marketing, raising questions as to whether online serialized storytelling can live up to its promise.

Seeking to tap into that passion corporate distributes like Viacom's Atom.com and Sony's Crackle and even the web arms of TV networks like BET (Viacom) and NBC (under GE), pick up the series and even fund new work: creators like Thompson film a season of their show using favors and friends from Hollywood and negotiate with larger sites like Atom. Such deals are rare, however, and the vast majority of minority produced and starred programming goes unfunded and unnoticed.[8] Mainstream media outlets like BET are stepping and distributing a few, mostly starring celebrities like Malik Yoba and Russell Simmons. For popular series like *Anyone But Me*, seen millions of times across the web, revenue-sharing agreements with video networks like Strike and Blip.tv, are not sufficient to fund production.[9] Corporate sites, which are starting to see value from independent production, offer enough ad sales and visibility to give value to a few producers.

The situation from independent networks is different. Koldcast.tv, one of numerous sites distributing videos, including Next New Networks (now owned by Google/YouTube), My Damn Channel, CollegeHumor, Babelgum, Revision3 and RowdyOrbit, solicits proposals from independent producers and have established relationships with large advertisers. Under this hybrid of independent/corporate collaboration, the same rhetoric persists. Marti Resteghini, vice president, network

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[8] For a survey of such programming, see the black and gay web series lists at http://blog.ajchristian.org.
[9] Film grants offer some cushion for production costs.

programming and acquisitions at Koldcast, said the most successful content elicits a strong response from viewers: “I get that, that’s for me, that’s speaking to me,” she imagines as the ideal response. For this reason, she said, 100,000 viewers on the web are much more valuable than the same number on cable television, already a targeted market. Viewers are, in theory, sitting at their computers, closer to the screen, and not cooking dinner or surfing other sites: “It’s more likely that it’s speaking to them personally,” echoing the ideology of new media spectatorship well-theorized by scholars like Michele White (White 2003).

Smaller distribution sites are becoming central hubs for establishing connections among producers and other film industry professionals, all of them hoping, within a digital economy, viewers will flock to content with an independent voice. Within this model, as yet only occasionally successful (particularly with a genre-focused like like CollegeHumor), creators get final say, while the distributors (as opposed to networks like ABC and NBC) foster and facilitate rather than censor and market-test. Strike.tv, a fascinating online network created by out-of-work Hollywood professionals during the writer’s strike, is a Petri dish for this kind of marketing ethics. The site houses a diverse slate of shows from a wide swath of writers and directors. One show, *Anyone But Me*, is a delicately shot series about two high schools girls grappling with a long-distance relationship. Of the series, Strike.tv CEO Peter Hyoguchi said: “I don’t think there’s a network that would green light a lesbian teenage soap opera. It’s just not going to happen…It’s servicing a community that isn’t being serviced by traditional media.” With this statement, Hyoguchi references the idea of niche marketing – that the “lesbian” market is not large enough for networks to cater to[10] -- while similarly implying web series are uniquely suiting to connect with certain audiences. Indeed, the site has a "forums" section for fans to discuss the show. For Hyoguchi, the production side of the market intimately connects with its ability to reach viewers: "The whole economy of filmmaking from production to post-production to distribution is allowing for a show like this, that a has a voice, that's different."

Yet the dark side of this form of marketing idealism manifests itself in the inability for distribution sites to obtain financing. Strike.tv has for most of its early years operated as essentially a non-profit, and the site, Hyoguchi says, is looking to pilot a strategy which relies on the websites of broadcast network affiliates (the urban branches of CBS, NBC and ABC) to distribute their shows. Presumably, the industrial rigidity of traditional media networks – with its annual upfronts and multiple layers of bureaucracy – has its benefits. While web series networks offer promising alternative, it is an alternative only sporadically viable. Rob Barnett, chief executive of MyDamnChannel, which distributes comedy and other programming, says the market will take a long time to mature. In the meantime, MyDamnChannel must spend time working individually with advertisers to forge branded entertainment deals, catering to their needs. The espouses an anti-mainstream media ethos: "This company is about the independent spirit, we don't have an overlord telling us what we can or can't do." Yet in practice, must rely on the same advertisers giving money to the mainstream in order to continue its mission of bringing independent content to cord-cutters and online video aficionados.

[10] Showtime did keep *The L Word* on for a numbers of seasons, but shelved plans for a spin-off, opting for a cheaper reality series instead. The network generally took a move away from gay-programming. (Christian 2010).

Among distributors, executives expressed a consistent discontent with the current metrics of online video, reliant as they are on ad networks, which serve ads and negotiate rates (CPMs) based more on impressions than audience quality.[11] The large supply of advertising space online devalues the ads serve on their content, which they feel audiences pay more attention and develop more sustained emotional bonds with. Here, again, serialization is used as an response to the viral and wild nature of YouTube hits or the informational and one-off videos of sites like WatchMojo, which sells content not to consumers but corporations and small companies. “The competition is in the mindshare of the audience,” said Douglas Dicconson, chief revenue officer for Babelgum, which distributes scripted and reality series online and mobile phones. “It can’t just be distribution. If you’re a brand, that video is right next to guy nailing his private parts to a board.” Dicconson is referring to Babelgum’s desire to create unique and brand-focused content aimed at developing return users, users who will invest their time and minds in specialty programming catered to advertiser needs. YouTube is random, the ideology goes, but web series networks are controlled, curated and specifically aimed at knitting connections between brands – who make up a large share of the site’s revenue – and their would-be consumers.

Conclusion

Why did web series come into existence? The answer to this question is complicated, yet one can point to a number of trends leading to the advent of web series. These include lower costs for production equipment (cameras, primarily), the growth of

[11] Whether the ad networks will be usurped by ad exchanges, which offer greater targeting and more audience-focused marketing metrics is a major discussion within the industry. (Winterberry Group 2009)

broadband, rise of video distributors (YouTube), declining ratings in broadcast television, the broader trend toward niche marketing (to the many segments deemed important to advertisers) and, in the end, any of the effects of digital convergence. All of these factors made it possible for independent production to find some value in a crowded media marketplace.

Clearly, though, a desire to remake how and why most (mainstream) media content was created and distributed was a driving force spurring the market for independent web series. This new media market, therefore, shifts the debate over whether regular users or big corporations will control and structure the future of media industries: neither unskilled amateurs nor well-endowed corporations, the independent producers and networks in the web series market do not clearly fit into the boundaries of the current scholarly debate over structure and agency in media systems. Instead, participants in the independent web series market must navigate competing discourses, grapple with industrial imperatives and improvise new cultural understandings for what they produce and distribute. Far from a user-generated utopia or a corporate-controlled dystopia, the world of web series suggests possibilities and illuminates the challenges new media.

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