

Indie TV: Innovation in series development

Aymar Jean Christian

Northwestern University

I spent five years interviewing creators of American web series, or independent television online,¹ speaking with 134 producers and executives making and releasing scripted series independent of traditional network investment. No two series or creators were ever alike. Some were sci-fi comedies created by Trekkers, others urban dramas by black women. Nevertheless nearly every creator differentiated their work and products from traditional television in some way. Strikingly, whenever I ask if any particular creator inspired them to develop their own show independently, I heard one response more than any other: Felicia Day.

Indie TV creators revere Day for her innovation in production and distribution: she developed a hit franchise, *The Guild*, outside network development processes. *The Guild*, a sitcom about a diverse group of gamers who sit at computers all day to play an MMORPG in the style of *World of Warcraft*, ran for six seasons, from 2007 to 2013, and spawned a music video, DVDs, comic books, a companion book, as well as marshaled the passions of hundreds of thousands of fans. By the end of its run, *The Guild* had amassed over 330,000 subscribers on YouTube, though it could also be seen on other portals.

In my work I have seen *The Guild* emerge as central to the online indie TV industry's case for itself as antidote to what ails Hollywood. Day initially pitched to

networks, who all passed. “People loved it, but said it was too ‘niche,’” Day said early in its development (Au 2007). The niche she refers to is gamers, but in other interviews Day has remarked on how production companies with network ties also mistreat women and actors, even when they are also producers:

I think it's very hard in Hollywood for women—in Hollywood, you're [treated one of two ways:] Either as an actress, so you look really pretty and perfectly polished and you're treated as eye candy, like an object....I've had some professional studio meetings, and the ones where I really got glammed up, I've had questions like, ‘You didn't really write that script, did you?’ I've actually had a couple of producers or executive people ask me that to my face Unless you're in Hollywood, you don't really understand how actors are treated—either like dirt, or you're a god, and there's no in-between (Ryan 2010).

The Guild, created by and starring a woman and featuring a lead cast from various ethnicities, ages and body types, is Day’s response to everything that’s wrong with corporate television development: its tendency to marginalize and undervalue storytelling, workers, identities and fans in pursuit of profit. So Day produced the first season of *The Guild* on her own, with a small but plucky team of fans. She published it via the Internet, and gamers—who spend hours a day online—started to champion it. When Day put out a call for money to complete the first season, 550 individuals help her raise it via PayPal (Goldberg 2011). At the same time fans were joining the production, donating their labor or locations. One such fan was Jenni Powell, who would become one of the most influential web television producers. Powell got her start on the early web hit *lonelygirl15* but moved up the ranks on *The Guild*. Powell met Day in a chat room and

told her how she got her start as *lonelygirl15*'s lone production assistant doing "80 different things." Day gave Powell a list of tasks and Powell joined season two as the head production assistant and Day's part-time assistant. By season three she was an assistant director. "Literally the show was built by the fans," Powell told me.²

Fans helped Day bridge the gap in financing long enough for her to negotiate a remarkable, if modest, development deal with Microsoft, who signed on as the semi-exclusive distributor of *The Guild* (at the time, Microsoft sought original programming for its Xbox console and MSN network), and Sprint, who signed on as a sponsor. Day retained ownership of her show, with enough money to make it, if not enough to get rich off it. *The Guild*'s fans never left, following Day from comic-cons, industry festivals and Twitter, where she amassed over 2 million followers, allowing her to use her celebrity power to manage *The Guild*'s disparate connections between fans, industry and media (Ellcessor 2012).

Any consideration of the value and function of the independent television market must contend with who has power in corporate series development and how power is brought to bear in making decisions. In traditional television, network development executives shape series pitched by producers and their companies, but executives' clients are advertising agencies, executives at media conglomerates and, by extension, shareholders of media companies. Despite the incredible rise of fandom and independent television series production, a small group of network executives continue to hold sway over the supply (creative production), consumption (fans or audiences) and financing (brands) of television content. This power imbalance and its inefficiencies were less visible before deregulation expanded the number of channels and original series on cable

and the Internet. Today it has grown irksome to nearly everyone involved in the development process, including the decision makers themselves. Studying the upfront buying process in the mid-2000s, Amanda Lotz found it in “crisis...with many in the industry expressing open dissatisfaction in public forums, one- on-one conversations, in trade press articles and as evidenced by the creation of an industry discussion group to formally reconsider the process” (Lotz 2007a: 550). Central to the crisis was the vast amount of pitches for extremely limited slots (constrained production), declining ratings for new shows (the challenge of creating new fans) and brand dissatisfaction with the reach and attention of commercials (Lotz 2007a).

Indie TV producers, during the period Day’s *Guild* franchise spans (roughly 2007—2013), inverted these dynamics, placing power in development in the hands of creative workers, their fans and brands. By “indie TV” I describe an under-counted segment of producers who create mostly short-form serials and release them through YouTube, Vimeo or other online platforms for web distribution. They comprise amateurs, film students and graduates, and television professionals (inside and outside Hollywood unions, above and below the line) who produce video for themselves, their communities or, most rarely, for independent and corporate online and TV networks. This sector is defined by limited access and amounts of capital, which predominantly takes the form of algorithmic advertising, licensing, crowd-financing, subscription or sponsorship. Extremely under-capitalized, the indie market nevertheless models the kind of open, and diverse, TV ecosystem the deregulated landscape was intended to fertilize, before corporations purchased profitable distribution channels, increasing the scale of production but not always wages, creative freedom or audience and brand input. This

chapter uses three web series—*High Maintenance*, *Whatever this is* and *Easy to Assemble*—alongside my wider study, to explore the pilot process and upfront financing, which support networks’ access to US\$70 billion in television advertising. I will show how pilot production, upfront monetization and audience selling are ill-suited to an age of online networking and market fragmentation; how network control over programming falls short of balancing art, culture and commerce; and how independent television development supports innovation in series creation by empowering producers, fans and brands frustrated with network control. I outline how independent production in online TV creates more innovative and open TV storytelling through three interconnected concerns: creative ownership with “free” labor, a “highly ambivalent” political project to counteract exploitation in corporate employment (Hesmondhalgh 2010: 280-282; Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2011); diversity, through the power of self-representation and community-led development; and authenticity, by working directly with sponsors to support producer-led stories. The indie TV market is massive, comprising thousands of series, and by the late 2000s and early 2010s, its most innovative projects inspire some television networks to develop them, most notably Abbi Jacobson and Ilana Glazer’s *Broad City*, which premiered in early 2014 to strong ratings and reviews. Few web series achieve that level of success, however, and development deals rarely result in series orders and the promise of good work—working with freedom for fair reward—elusive in independent media. Nevertheless the cases in this chapter show how independent production works toward a utopian system where workers, audiences and sponsors pilot new shows.

The pilot process and the politics of distribution

Independence from Hollywood in film, television or music is best understood through differences in production and distribution, even though most scholars employ aesthetic and cultural critiques of independently produced texts. As Geoff King argues in this volume, the aesthetics and ideologies of independently produced texts can vary in degree and kind from their mainstream counterparts, along a continuum of industrial strategies and locations (see King's essay in chapter 2 of this volume). My understanding of the online video market supports King's assertion that indie aesthetics and ideology do not differ from Hollywood as often as their industrial locations, contexts and strategies, where difference can almost always be found. Many web series deviate from Hollywood aesthetics to produce stories fractions of the length of traditional television. Yet, like in corporate television and film, heterosexual, middle and upper-class white men overwhelmingly produce the most visible and profitable productions in the online video market, which tend to be ideologically heteronormative, even misogynistic (Wotanis and McMillan 2014). The Internet marketplace accommodates independents whose production, storytelling and distribution strategies push against inequalities and the status quo. My work posits those differences can be instructive, a way of understanding Hollywood's industrial inefficiencies and inequalities, with potential but largely untested implications for television's aesthetics, ideology and its economic and social role (Christian 2013a; Christian 2013b).

If industrial practices are essential to differences between Hollywood and independent producers, I argue we must consider those practices that dominate the

development of new series on traditional television: the pilot process and upfront advertising sales. The pilot process includes the pitching of thousands³ of new series and the production of its first episode, presented to brands and advertising agencies at the upfronts in May, where 75 to 90% of ads are sold to finance the rest of the season. Piloting and upfront ad sales govern nearly all of US broadcast scripted television development—that of CBS, NBC, ABC, Fox and the CW. Sales for those networks represent half of all TV series monetization, totaling around US\$9 billion annually (Lotz 2007a). A slightly greater number of cable channels, now comprise the other half of the annual haul, a result of the rapid growth in interest in cable programming from brands and advertisers over the 2000s (Crupi 2013). These cable channels, most owned by conglomerates with ownership stakes in broadcast production (series) and distribution (channels), increase market share by controlling costs, filling schedules with cheap reality television produced by non-union contracts while green-lighting a few costlier, more often union, productions to attract big financiers and press attention. In the latter case they tend to give producers more creative control—for indie shows like *Louie*, *Portlandia* or *Girls*—or rely heavily on developing series with passionate fan bases in other media—for franchise shows like *The Walking Dead* (graphic novel), *Game of Thrones* (series of novels)—and from sports. When cable networks release original shows they pilot fewer and are more likely to commission straight to series.⁴ For several years corporate online networks like Yahoo and Hulu, and multichannel networks on YouTube, worked to replicate upfront selling through the Newfronts, run by marketing firm Digitas in its early years and moving to the Interactive Advertising Bureau (IAB).⁵ The online networks' lack of brand recognition as original program distributors, however, meant channels

Christian, A.J. (forthcoming). Indie TV: Innovation in Series Development, in *Media Independence: 7 working with freedom or working for free?*. James Bennett & Niki Strange, eds. New York, NY: Routledge.

catered heavily to the perceived needs of brands, producing uninspiring content from mostly Hollywood producers and a few YouTube personalities in its earliest years. For 2013 the IAB estimated internet advertising revenue at US\$43 billion, more than broadcast television's US\$40 billion, but video advertising, which delivers the highest rates for web television, comprised just US\$3 billion (IAB 2014).

Despite the increase in competition from corporate channels on cable and the web, broadcast networks have maintained and, in some years, increased the size of the pilot market and upfront ad sales. Amanda Lotz shows how upfront financing of series “remains remarkably steadfast” for a number of reasons, including legacy relationships between networks and advertisers, the perceived value of broadcast television compared to other channels for advertising, and the broadcasters continued, albeit waning, ability to attract audiences larger than other channels on cable and the web (Lotz 2007a: 556). The upfront process developed over decades, starting in the 1960s, to accommodate the needs of networks, brands and their agencies. It favors the networks: brands purchase time on series that have not been tested with audiences and without data on what rates other brands are paying; networks establish base rates for brand clients to guarantee a relatively stable amount of sales each year; the scarcity of programming, particularly for “hit” networks, incentivizes agencies to spend high and bid quickly; and scatter markets—where ads are sold at a discount during run of the season—provide networks an outlet for monetizing slots that haven't sold upfront or if programs underperform (Lotz 2007a).

Buoyed by the relative strength of the upfront market, networks increased the size and scale of pilot production, even as success rates for pilots did not rise in kind. Film L.A., which coordinates and processes permits for film and television in Los Angeles, has

counted the number of television pilots in production since the 2004-2005 season. That year, 124 pilots were produced, 101 of them in Los Angeles. Pilot production dropped under 100 from 2007 to 2009, following the recession and Writers Guild of America strike, but by the 2012-2013 season production rebounded to a record 186 pilots, 96 filmed in Los Angeles, most of those sitcoms. Accounting for the remaining jump in production were dramas, the vast majority were shot outside Los Angeles in New York, Canada (Vancouver and Toronto) and Atlanta, which offer financial production incentives to help companies offset costs: “Often, this means financial concerns trump creative concerns when deciding where to shoot” (Film LA Research 2013). The total amount broadcasters spent on pilots produced remained stable, despite increased competition for advertising campaign dollars. Film L.A. estimated networks and production companies spent US\$309 million on pilots in 2005, dipping to US\$207 million in 2009 but rebounding to US\$278 million in 2013 (Film LA Research 2013).

Continued brand investment in traditional television buoys the market for financing and producing new shows and allows networks to maintain control over who gets to make television and what kinds of stories audiences see. Networks have had this power for most of their history, and it has been fraught with uncertainty, and by extension, conservatism, about what kinds of productions audiences want. Because of this uncertainty, networks “develop[ed] ways to control both supply and demand—supply in order to smooth its workings, demand so that it remains of a sort the networks are set up to satisfy” (Gitlin 1983: 14). By controlling the supply (production) and demand (advertising, range and type of stories audiences can see) networks have avoided drastic shifts in revenue year to year and curtailed advertisers interest in migrating to other

platforms. But the process is antithetical to story creation. Todd Gitlin, in his analysis of television development during the beginning of the multichannel transition around 1980, characterized the pilot process as a “slow ‘no’... the business of satisfying executives who have to satisfy other executives—all with opinions about the mass market” (Gitlin 1983: 26). Because of limited distribution through broadcast networks, the effect of network control in series development has been to limit storytelling possibilities (ibid: 29). Risk-avoidance declined with increased competition from series on cable, paving the way for morally and narratively complex series from *Arrested* to *Community*, *Lost* to *Scandal* (Creeber 2004; Mittell 2006). But an unconventional program receiving a series order remains an exception to the rule, and typically possible only when pitched by elite producers with lucrative multiyear development contracts or with multiple projects in development or production (Ettema 1982; Turow 1982).⁶ The loosening of rules over program and network ownership increased the number of executives who could say “no” to projects while limiting the bargaining power of the independent producers who write them because networks own multiple channels. The result has kept diversity stagnant among television’s producers, where employment for women and racial minorities has barely risen – from 2007 to 2012 women comprised 27-28% and racial minorities just 10-11% of all television writers, according to the Writers Guild (Hunt 2014). This is despite the growth in production and existence of network diversity programs (Bielby and Bielby 2002; Bullock et. al 2008; Christian 2013b; Shah 2013). Network ownership structures make it difficult for executives to satisfy multiple constituencies—producers, brands, audiences. Empowered with balancing what is marketable, engaging and artistically or culturally valuable, networks only occasionally satisfy all three, and prioritize

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marketability, in service of a media conglomerate's chief goal: profit. Indie TV productions work toward balance, though they cannot guarantee the stable working conditions corporations provide when they do invest accordingly (see James Bennett's discussion of the movement to 'independents' in chapter 3 of this volume).

Innovation in Series Development and Challenges to Network Control

In their quest for creative fulfillment indie TV producers like Felicia Day intervene in corporate control over new series development. First episodes or seasons of indie TV shows are best thought of as pitches and pilots, which, if successful, can sustain themselves through producer, fan or brand support. The development of independent web series intervenes in network control over producers in the pitch process, their control over intellectual property and labor once the series airs, over what audiences watch through pilot selection, and over the process of monetizing audiences through crowdsourcing and brand sponsorship. In each case, indie TV offers an "innovation." Here, I am extending Stuart Cunningham's argument that innovation in creative industries is best defined beyond traditional Schumpeterian terms of new products and modes of production to include "the application of those ideas for realized or potential economic, social or public benefit" (Cunningham 2013: 4). This framing of innovation "provides a value-driven orientation to productivity and, ultimately, quality of life, rather than merely a cost-efficiency driver for intervention," a foil to investment-driven innovation that dominates digital technology product development (Cunningham 2013: 7).

In its ideals, and often in practice, the indie TV marketplace values creative producers first, whose work inspires fans and sponsors. As such indie development redefines the value of television away from the needs of network intermediaries and toward those who drive the commercial television system with their labor, attention and capital. Within the indie TV market, producers labor to create value for: writers, producers and actors, through ownership of intellectual property, narrative experimentation and engagement with cultural politics; for audiences, through storytelling shaped and financed by communities; and for brands, by creating stories that appeal to communities specific enough to meet increasing demand for complex and targeted marketing and publicity campaigns.

Where online indie TV producers focus on maximizing creative value, networks value advertising volume and price, but both are under pressure in the post-network marketplace (Lotz 2007a: 557). Advertising agencies deliver to networks brands and payment for time on new and returning series, time which networks (must) value more than the agencies. In return brands get the audiences they value more than the network (audiences in different sizes/configurations), and agencies get fees and a continued relationship with their clients and the networks. As new technologies allow audiences to bypass commercial spots, as ratings on broadcast networks decline,⁷ brands are starting to question the value they pay for TV time. The threat—the heart of the “crisis” in television—is declining value for advertising from brands and viewership from fans. Both influence each other, driving revenue down, albeit slowly.

Media studies have explored challenges to the process of corporate network piloting in financing, audience behavior and distribution (Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013;

Lotz 2007b; Rizzo 2007; Tussey 2013). Yet scholars have understudied the role of independent production in bridging competing industry stakeholders' needs through alternative practices and values. By considering the alternatives to the pilot process, I expose the limits of corporate television's power to raise capital while supporting writers, audiences and innovation. As Lotz argues of proposals to restructure upfront financing: "A different method of purchasing [e.g. an all-'scatter' market] would reallocate capital and value throughout the television industry in ways likely to affect the programming produced" (Lotz 2007a: 555). I argue indie TV creators are already reallocating capital and value, responding to Hollywood's tightening labor market on the supply side along with demand from brands and audiences. As will be shown, the types of programs produced are different from traditional television, including a consistent theme of individuals struggling and surviving, often humorously, the pressures of contemporary corporate capitalism.

The rest of this essay explores what online indie TV series development looks like when producers, their fans and interested brands spearhead development. What I found were greater degrees of creative freedom and ownership in production, greater agency from fans and audiences in the development of new and perpetuation of existing series, and series more responsive to the needs of TV's sponsors.

Producer-driven development: Creative ownership, experimentation and cultural politics

The story of television's hidden innovators is as complex as it is thrilling. Consider the JankyClown Productions team, or, the "Jankies," and their hit series, *High Maintenance*. *High Maintenance* started when Katja Blichfeld, a casting director best known for her Emmy Award-winning work on *30 Rock*, her husband Ben Sinclair and his manager, Russell Gregory, realized they had access to great actors and an idea they could execute. Each episode of *High Maintenance* takes viewers into a different New York apartment or locale and introduces them to a stressed-out group of people in need of weed. "We just want to get inside the apartment and meet these characters," Russell Gregory told me in an interview (Christian 2013d). Those characters were mostly actors with film and TV credits, but few, if any, starring roles. Blichfeld realized she was in a unique position to showcase great, undiscovered talent she couldn't cast or could cast but only in small roles: "A lot of the people who I loved either I never got to cast, or I would cast them, and it was like a two-line part that would be funny and have impact but I would always know that actor was capable of way more than anyone was seeing," she told me (Christian 2013d).

High Maintenance became a hit indie web series, with hundreds of thousands of views on Vimeo and a number of critical raves, including from myself in *Indiewire* and Rachel Syme in *The New Yorker*, largely, I argue, because of this innovation (Syme 2013). The series took a source of labor undervalued in the corporate system—actors—and gave them creative work, including the ability to write or shape the story. Access to seasoned acting talent, who expect to be paid, hinders many indie web series, which more often rely on new or unprofessional talent to save money for other aspects of production.⁸

The *High Maintenance* team cast great comedic talent, many of them indie producers

themselves. In “Olivia,” one of the series most popular episodes, Heléne Yorke (*Masters of Sex*, *30 Rock*) and Max Jenkins play chatty hipster-grifters. While both had tiny parts on *30 Rock*, their comedic chops are on full display—Jenkins’ talents previously carried Karina Mangu-Ward and B. Hodgson’s web series *Gay’s Anatomy*. Noted indie TV creator Michael Cyril Creighton—whose series *Jack in a Box* explores the sad life of actors and was the first indie series reviewed by *The New York Times*—wrote and starred in a *High Maintenance* episode, “Helen,” playing a character markedly more depressed and complex than his *30 Rock* cameo as a sales clerk for a Brooklyn clothing store owned by Halliburton. Hannibal Buress, a rising comedian who also appears in *Broad City* (the indie series and the Comedy Central show), plays a version himself grappling with racism and violence.

Producer-driven development involves a team of creative and technical workers collaborating on a project—investing labor time for an unguaranteed pay-off, or “sweat equity”—in the hope it finds an audience or a buyer, in form of a network or brand. Most web series are initially produced in this way; entire series have been filmed using this kind of precarious labor. While most web series are made by producers, just as in television, I distinguish producer-driven development as the creation of series whose “pitches” must be executed to communicate its effectiveness, or whose stories are too complex or outré to get brand or audience participation in pre-production. Producer-driven series need audiences, networks or brands, eventually, but because of the distinctiveness of their pitch, the creative team will make one or more seasons of the show without any interest from the aforementioned stakeholders. Indeed, some series go years without spreading widely but instead focus on craft in the hope of selling to

distributors on television and the web. For limited financial reward, producers find in independent production some solidarity with other creative workers and “meaningful self-realisation...social respect and recognition,” among other non-monetary rewards critics of free labor sometimes miss (Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010; see also Khiabany in chapter 12 of this volume).

Successful producer-driven web series reconfigure the scale and politics of the set to suit their storytelling needs. Blichfeld and Sinclair essay for the “Indie TV Innovation” series on my *Televisual* site (tvisual.org), they identified three reasons for their success: working with actors they like, working within their means, and working with the flow (Blichfeld and Sinclair 2013). At the time episodes of *High Maintenance* cost between US\$500 and US\$800, they wrote, based on producers taking on multiple roles, inexpensive equipment rentals and condensed shoots (from 16 hours to two days). Actors were not paid, but agreed because of the producer’s reputation in television and the chance to play a role explicitly written to showcase their talents in ways traditional television series did not. Because the production is so lean, the team can configure the story to the realities of the shoot and the talent on set:

Flexibility is a necessity, especially on a shoestring budget. That means everything we do is subject to change. For instance, when we heard winter storm “Nemo” was to hit NYC when we were planning to shoot, we incorporated the storm into our story. When a noisy Latin American street festival suddenly popped up outside of our shooting location, we wrote it in as a B-story to contrast the quiet isolation of that episode’s A-story. We usually just write shooting scripts

to convey the story and the imagery; but if a line of dialogue isn't working for an actor, or a shot doesn't look great to our DP, we ask the artists to change them to what they think would look or sound good, while still getting the story point or joke across. If the story is strong, than the script can undergo all kinds of on-the-fly changes (Blichfeld and Sinclair 2013).

Here, Blichfeld and Sinclair highlight their ability to shape the story to their environment and redistribute creative ownership of the series to actors and crew, in order to save time, money and do what's best for the story. Traditional television workers also tell similar trade stories, particularly after cost-controls and technological changes shifted the pace and intensity of corporate production (Caldwell 2008). Those who work outside the constraints of mainstream narrative (episode style and length) and distribution (corporate financing and control) find creative ownership and freedom in balancing the demands of the production with those of workers, fans and/or sponsors. We might, therefore, describe this balancing act as a never-ending effort to create "good work" when it is in decline in Hollywood (see Strange, Medrado, Bennett, this volume).

Traditional television networks achieve such efficiency, when they can, through deep investments in intellectual property, established producers, and marketing, but not necessarily by expanding creative freedom and ownership. Networks green light and develop pilots based on great ideas but control their execution to manage sales and audience reception. Series almost inevitably shift away from the creator's original intent—to varying degrees, based on the type of show and the clout of the producer—to meet network demands. Networks are aware of this and increasingly turn to producers

willing to work with network-owned studios to develop ideas they can market (Sharma and Hagey 2013). The growth of complex television, as coined by Jason Mittell, has coincided with rising network participation in production (Mittell 2012-2013). The result is more complex “poetics,” or format creativity on screen—Mittell eschews focusing on representation, or the cultural meanings of race, gender and sexuality, all under pressure in post-network TV—but less behind it, where producers now have less ownership of the fruits of their creative labor (chiefly, intellectual property).

High Maintenance intervenes in this issue of ownership, spreading it among creative stakeholders, but it also signals the possibilities for narrative experimentation and engagement with cultural politics when indie producers drive the development of new stories. Web series like *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*, *Broad City*, and the shows on the Black & Sexy TV network, who are inking development deals with traditional television networks, adapted the sitcom genre for niche audiences and online networks like YouTube, telling stories in shorter format that still inspired hundreds of thousands of fans and helped buttress the careers of its writers and talent. Issa Rae produced several episodes of *Awkward Black Girl* before turning to crowd-funding site Kickstarter to raise US\$56,000 in 2011, nearly twice her ask. In the process dispelling long-held industry lore: that black women could not star in and produce a sitcom explicitly dealing with racism and misogyny. As a sign her innovation broke beyond indie communities, in 2013 she signed a development with HBO (with *The Daily Show* and *Bernie Mac Show*'s Larry Willmore executive producing), released other original series on her site and helped advance her writer's careers (writer Amy Aniobi, for example, created her own web series, *The Slutty Years* and earned a job writing for

NBC's *The Michael J. Fox Show*. Dennis Dortch and Numa Perrier's Black & Sexy TV network's marquee series, *The Couple*, takes the opposite approach: a black romantic comedy that is at once intimate and arty, specific and universal; the team also announced an HBO development deal, with Spike Lee in 2014. Abbi Jacobson's and Ilana Glazer's *Broad City* was itself an experiment in the craft of storytelling, held together by a consistent, efficient engagement with gender and New York social life; each episode was essentially a punch line (Glazer 2013). These are just a few of many examples of how producer-driven development drives innovation through narrative experimentation and engaging with cultural politics.

Fan-driven development: Creatives inspire fans into development

In lieu of network development, indie producers must turn to direct financing, either from fans or brands. In the mid- to late-2000s crowd-funding emerged as an indispensable source of financing for indie creators. When fans drive development, they pledge their own money or labor (sharing and promotion) to support a particular story, genre, personality or production team.

Like many of New York's young creative class, Adam Goldman was an under-employed college graduate living in a gentrifying neighborhood in Brooklyn. Around him were writers, musicians, actors and cinematographers with lots of talent but no space to unleash it. Goldman saw opportunity. In 2012 he wrote *The Outs*, a drama about a group of young, sad, broke Brooklynites searching for connection and same-sex love. Goldman and his studio, Rascal Department, produced a 12-minute pilot for *The Outs*, "State of the

Union,” which he used to raise US\$1,000 on Kickstarter to make the next two episodes. His pitch? Help a team of creatives transform television with a sincere story about under-represented experiences:

Finally, you know that TV show you hate? The one with the stupid people and the bad actors spouting dialogue that makes you cringe? Less of that, please. Vote with your dollars. Then maybe next time someone's going to put something like massively offensive, short-lived sitcom *Work It*⁹ on the air, they'll think twice and produce something you'll actually enjoy. Makes sense, right?¹⁰

The pitch worked, and Goldman beat his goal by US\$600. Three months later Goldman went to Kickstarter again to raise US\$8,000 to finish the six-episode first season. He ended up raising US\$22,000, enough to produce a 45-minute “Channukah Special,” which premiered half a year later to a crowded room at Public Assembly in Williamsburg. While Goldman took meetings with television producers, he wrote another show, *Whatever this is*, a six-episode, half-hour dramedy about a diverse group enduring the horrors and indignities of working as crew in New York’s reality television market. When he executed his third Kickstarter campaign, he beat his goal and raised US\$171,000, much of it before the pilot aired during the campaign in August of 2013.¹¹

How did Goldman raise six-figures for an original dark comedy about inequality in media production? He capitalized on the lack of quality gay storytelling on television. On TV gay characters, if allowed to lead a show, were too often middle-aged, rich, white men stuck in mediocre sitcoms, and Viacom’s niche network Logo was moving away

from the gay market to reach “broader” audiences. Goldman’s success demonstrates how fans are willing, even excited, to develop a new crop of TV showrunners from their communities. Goldman brought together a team of Brooklyn creatives—from on-screen talent to the shows’ original music composer—to produce a “good gay show.” Fans are aware such synergy is rare, and if they don’t support they will lose their stories.

Digital and cable distribution challenged television networks’ ability to attract audiences to watch new series at scheduled times. Network financing presumes a certain number of people are going to watch a certain program at a certain time, but the growth in series production across platforms means audiences have more choices. Even though Americans are watching as much, if not more, television than they ever have (Lafayette 2013), ratings for viewers in the key demographic (18-49), for individual shows and cumulatively, are declining on broadcast television. While they are rising on cable in some cases, genres that do not employ new union-backed writers, mainly sports, reruns and reality television, make up the bulk of the growth. New scripted series on cable often launch weakly and grow over seasons, though most still never come close to the ratings broadcasters amassed in the 1980s and 1990s, before cable was a significant threat. Creating successful scripted entertainment now necessitates inciting fans to actively seek out new programming; networks want engaged audiences but are used to serving bulks of casual viewers. Cable and corporate online networks, freed from broadcasters’ profitable yet intractable practices, are having more success in this environment, challenging traditional development by greenlighting cheaper series where producers have more creative freedom (FX’s *Louie*, HBO’s *Girls*, Netflix’s *Orange Is The New Black*, Amazon’s *Transparent*, etc.) and picking up established franchises (AMC’s *The Walking*

Dead, HBO's *Game of Thrones*, Syfy's *Battlestar Galactica*, Netflix's *House of Cards* and *Arrested Development*.). Online networks like Amazon and Netflix incorporate fan interest as data in development while pushing against TV's homogeneity with series like Jill Soloway's *Transparent*, about a father undergoing a gender transition, and Jenji Kohan's *Orange Is The New Black*, about a women's prison. On occasion, fans can end a series, as when Amazon scuttled its adaptation of *Zombieland* when fans negatively reviewed its pilot.

In the indie TV market the only successful shows are those good enough to motivate a production team to invest their time and talent, and those whose team can motivate either a sizable group of fans or brands to invest money and time for production and promotion. Success can take several forms. Auteurs like Goldman, Rae and Day—who write, produce and star in their work—have proven capable of mobilizing followers to give more and promote their shows. Series in genres underrepresented on television have also proven particularly adept at generating fan interest, and in many cases fans value the show more than the creators (campaigns exceed the ask). Dramas, or soap operas, particularly about underrepresented groups, have been able to crowdfund for multiple seasons, including teen lesbian drama *Anyone But Me* and *Hustling*, about a biracial, bisexual ex-escort in New York. Fans with interest in specific action sub-genres have also done well. Freddie Wong's *Video Game High School*, a youth action comedy about a high school where gaming is pedagogy, was for a long time the most crowdfunded series on Kickstarter: over 5,600 people gave US\$273,000 for its first season, over twice the ask, and over 10,000 people gave US\$800,000 for season two, US\$160,000 over the ask. Fan interest from gamers allowed Wong to bring in major

sponsors. Martial arts series have similarly elicited significant interest: *Kung Fury*'s pitch, a send-up of 1980s cop films, incited 17,000 donations for US\$630,000 for the first season, three times the ask, and *Awesome Asian Bad Gays*, a comedic take on the disposability of Asian villains in films from the same era, raised US\$54,000 in 2012 for a first season. Successful crowdfunding campaigns respond to fan desires to see genres and subjectivities underrepresented in television storytelling.

Video stars who produce content quickly and cheaply can often amass enough fans to make money from algorithmic advertising. Mostly found on YouTube, these stars can sustain enterprises for years with a small crew, and can enter traditional or online network development based on the size of their audience. Lucas Cruikshank was one of the first to achieve this. His channel, *Fred*, about Fred Figglehorn, an adolescent too often “off his meds,” was one of the first YouTube channels to reach 1 million subscribers, earning Cruikshank a string of three movies and one season of a television show released by Nickelodeon. *The Annoying Orange*, a similarly irreverent, juvenile cartoon about anthropomorphized produce, similarly amassed millions of subscribers in under two years and ran for two seasons on Cartoon Network. Off YouTube, Jake Hurwitz and Amir Blumenfeld, of *Jake & Amir*, spent years cultivating a passionate fan base on College Humor before signing deals with corporate television networks.

YouTube claims tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of channels monetize through ads on their videos, but most work incredibly long hours for what amounts to middle class salary, at best. Few producers hoping to get a break become rich off “sweat equity.” The market is far from its ideal, but the productivity of fan-driven producers and the range and depth of stories they create models a more representative television market.

Self-representation, therefore, is the hope of independent television: fans develop stories that support a positive creative environment for producers marginalized by an industry that misrepresents them.

Brand-driven development: Creatives inspire brands to fund original stories

In most cases fan funds are not enough to support shows for more than one season or those productions that want to pay union labor industry rates. So brands have become the other major source of financing indie TV through sponsorship and branded entertainment. Frustrated by viewers skipping expensive advertisements on linear television, brands have been using the Internet to distribute their own programming since around the turn-of-the-century, when American Express financed *The Adventures of Seinfeld and Superman* and BMW released *The Hire*. Branded entertainment accelerated in the latter 2000s after the recession tightened budgets, streaming video grew in popularity and data showed online video viewers were more engaged than traditional television viewers (Friedman 2013; Moses 2013). Most of the recipients of these funds were short-lived network digital studios, advertising and marketing agencies and the independent production companies they contracted for work. From non-A-list actors to entrepreneurial executives, creative producers looking to increase their value in Hollywood supplied the labor brands needed to breath life into advertising and marketing campaigns.

Unlike producer- or fan-developed series, brand-developed series do not give producers complete creative control. Branded series rarely offend, deviate from

normative ideology or critique the companies who finance them, though there is considerable variation (McNutt 2014). In the context of post-network Hollywood development, however, where networks increasingly take stakes in intellectual property and manage storytelling through aggressive note-giving, producers working with brands framed their participation as allowing for creative freedom and ownership. Brands needed writers to produce authenticity, because branding is more than a process of commodification: “it is a cultural phenomenon more than an economic strategy ... [impacting] the way we understand who we are, how we organize ourselves in the world, what stories we tell ourselves about ourselves” (Banet-Weiser 2012: 4-5). Arguably, brands granted producers more creative control over narrative and character than corporate networks because they want to maintain relationships with consumers directly—where corporate TV networks focus on advertising agencies and their clients.

Early branded web entertainment featured a marriage between independent production and corporate sponsorship. This has precedent in early American television, when corporations sponsored prestige dramas and game shows before dishonest practices allowed networks to take control by 1960s (Anderson 1994; Hilmes 2014). In the 2000s, freedom from network interference drew independent producers to sponsors. In 2004 Illeana Douglas, an indie film fixture, pitched television networks a series based on a short film she shot with Jeff Goldblum, “Supermarket,” about almost-famous actors working at a grocery store. The series never made it beyond a pilot, but IKEA contacted Douglas after seeing it, expressing interest in “a new, hip approach to their brand,” Douglas said (Staff 2010). *Easy to Assemble* premiered in 2008, and “Supermarket” relocated to IKEA. IKEA invested only US\$50,000 in the first ten-episode season, a

sliver of the furniture maker's nine-figure global marketing budget (Dobuzinskis 2008). The per-season budget eventually increased to mid-six figures, still a fraction of the broadcast sitcom season budgets that regularly exceed US\$20 million. In return for less money, Douglas got creative control. When asked by *Fast Company* if IKEA ever censored what she wrote, Douglas said the company told her to change a line from ice cream to yogurt, since that's what the company sells. "The first season was wildly experimental," she told *The Wall Street Journal* (Tuttle 2012). Her only note for the next season was to keep it "family-friendly," a suggestion Douglas publicly disregards as significant, implying her original vision aligned with the brand's (Staff 2010). For Douglas and celebrity co-stars like Justine Bateman, creative control compensated for the lower investment. "Honestly I would rather be on the Web than be on television because I don't have any illusions that if this got picked up and went to network I would lose the creative control," she told *Reuters* (Dobuzinskis 2008). The series would eventually get a spin-off in *Spårhusen*, starring Douglas and Keanu Reeves as members of a fictional 1970s Swedish band. Within six months of its premiere *Easy to Assemble* garnered 800,000 views and 2,000 blog mentions, helped by exposure on IKEA fan sites (McClellan 2009). Subsequent episodes averaged views under 10 million.

CJP Digital, a unit of New York marketing firm CJP Communications, helped the series attract such a wide viewership. Started by PR executive and actor Wilson Cleveland, CJP Digital helped launch and promote the best of branded web entertainment from roughly 2006 to 2012, including *Easy to Assemble*, *The Temp Life*, *Suite 7*, *Leap Year*, *Bestsellers* and *The Webventures of Justin & Alden*. *The Temp Life* (2006-2011), created, produced and starring Cleveland, and *Leap Year* (2011-2012), co-created by

Cleveland with Yuri and Vlad Baranovsky, were its biggest critical and ratings hits. Funded by temp-staffing firm SFN Group (formerly Spherion), *The Temp Life* is a comedy about workers staffed through a “worst practices” firm, Commodity Staffing, which sends temps out on jobs like urinal maintenance and assisting a socialite with her webcast. When the recession hit, the series picked up as more people started temping, and SFN chief executive Roy Krause, who was hoping the series would reach younger workers, said the show was the company’s top marketing ploy and contributed to a bump in its stock (Hampp 2013). *The Temp Life* would eventually amass over 100 million cumulative views across platforms (Manarino 2013). Cleveland used its success to support other indie TV workers. Cleveland packaged *Bestsellers*, from Susan Miller and Tina Cesa Ward, creators of indie hit *Anyone But Me*, with SFN as a sponsor, and he tapped Baranovsky, who had created *Break a Leg*, to script *Leap Year*, a drama about a Silicon Valley start-up chasing a US\$500,000 pot of money, funded by small business insurance company, Hiscox. Storylines were taken from traditional start-up struggles and led to an increase in interest and sales of Hiscox products (Lewis 2013).

Cleveland successfully pitched brands on original production with two strategies distinct from network development practices: advocating producers shape the story and avoiding advertising agencies for financing. Through CJP Digital, Cleveland approached the public relations departments of the brands he thought could sponsor his stories, since PR executives are constantly trying to ‘earn’ media—as opposed to paid media, i.e. ads: “it’s a lot harder to tell your story... They will always be receptive to things like this. They never get to do anything cool like the ad agencies do, so give them something different to do,” Cleveland said in a Writers Guild of America East instructional video

(Writers Guild of America East 2012). Public relations helps brands shape the story they want consumers to hear, and Cleveland saw an opportunity for skilled writers, actors and producers to help brands reach increasingly disengaged audiences through authenticity, the prime goal of brands in late-capitalism (Banet-Weiser 2012):

The way to always approach it is: how will this brand benefit from the story I can tell? Nine times out of ten they can benefit from being associated with something that's not a shill, and just telling a story. They don't need you need sell more cans of soda. They don't need you to sell more packs of gum. They have plenty of people who are paid a lot of money to do that. What they can never get across—what's harder to get across—is that actual brand story that you don't necessarily see in terms of a logo (Writers Guild of America East 2012).

Here Cleveland argues that when producers' ideas can fit within brand campaign demands they can construct narratives with wider constraints than in traditional television. Cleveland contrasts advertising and logos with story, where creators can produce authenticity—a sincere connection to viewers—when given freedom or ownership over narrative. His producer-centered pitch to brands through alternative financing means worked, but the payout was small. SFN gave Cleveland less than US\$1,000 to make the four-minute pilot for *The Temp Life* (Manarino 2013). Three seasons in, *The Temp Life* had a modest mid-five figure budget, and production value was moderate (Hustvedt 2009); *Leap Year*'s budget for its second season was reportedly \$400,000 through PR agency Prosek Partners (Lewis 2013).

Networks continue to have the upper hand in attracting campaign funds from brands, but they have not created long-running original branded series for the web. Both

NBC and ABC created digital studios for this purpose, but each only produced one or two series before shuttering.¹² Fox quietly launched and quickly shuttered a digital studio, 15 Gigs, around the same time, but restarted their efforts with Fox Digital Studios, which continues to produce new series, though nearly all have lasted less than a year.¹³ Cable networks have experimented with releasing series produced by independent companies online but without brand integration, including AMC's marquee network AMC (*The Trivial Pursuits of Arthur Banks*) and sister network IFC (*Young American Bodies*, *Lizzie the Lezzie*, *Green Porno*). Traditional television networks have had an easier time finding financing for extensions of existing series, particularly NBC, which had extensive transmedia promotions for *Heroes*, and ABC, which did for *Lost*, along with a stellar but short-lived Subaru-sponsored series for *Happy Endings*.

What brand-driven development in the indie TV demonstrates are the limits, however small, of traditional television's upfront selling process. With more channels releasing more stories, networks are finding it challenging to make audience guarantees to brands; meanwhile brands want more data on who's watching, because they don't trust their messages are getting heard. Frustrated, they are moving to data-driven methods online, with questionable legality and ethics; advertising networks and publishers are partnering with data management and marketing firms to share, trade and sell user data — information from demographics, searches, purchases, even health status—to target and monetize individual users (Turow 2012). In this environment indie producers and brands forged a productive, if tenuous, relationship, where brands granted them more—but not complete—creative control and a small bit of financing so writers could produce a sense of authenticity that might engage consumers as more than data.

The possibilities for restructuring industry

Network TV development dwarfs indie TV development in size and consistency. Major networks still command the bulk of funds for advertising in the United States and this is unlikely to change, because of the decades-old process of piloting and financing series upfront. Yet this durable system becomes less so each year. The vertical integration and escalating size of media conglomerates has stifled diversity among producers, leading to a crisis of creativity in a global and fragmented media landscape, where consumers and brands have more choice.

The indie TV market allows new entrants to capitalize on these dynamics by empowering producers – creatively, if not financially – which excites fans and brands, who give modest sums to release series that speak to their communities or customers. This is, as a whole, an innovation, designed to benefit all those invested in original production. Critical scholars who ignore or dismiss it for its limited resources and impact fail to see how workers, fans and sponsors actively work to correct and improve the systems we critique. Indie markets are not only spaces for artistic experimentation and cultural reimagining but also for adapting industrial relations to support the needs of those entrenched decision-makers neglect, underserve or undervalue. Independent media creation, however compromised and impossible, pushes media industries away from extracting value to supporting its growth by expanding creative ownership, community-led storytelling and authenticity in marketing campaigns. Restructuring industry is the hope of independent media.

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¹ Series developed independent of corporations released via an open network, the internet, which I will refer to as “independent television” or “indie TV.”

² Phone interview with Jenni Powell. August 31 2009.

³ Estimates range from 2,000 to 3,000. See Chozik, 2011.

⁴ A practice some broadcast networks are starting to follow, most notably Fox. See Andreeva, 2014.

⁵ <http://iab.net/newfronts>

⁶ This has been the case historically (see below), but inequalities have been exacerbated as writing staffs cut back and are more egregious given possibilities to redistributing programs equitably across multiple channels. See Ettema, 1982; Turow, 1982.

⁷ Ratings for individual series, while rising, cannot match them—programs like AMC’s *The Walking Dead* and Netflix’s *Orange Is The New Black*, along with sports, aside.

⁸ Though, SAG-AFTRA, like the Producers and Writers guilds, do offer new media contracts that allow production companies to pay talent below union minimums.

⁹ *Work It* was the very short-lived ABC show about two straight men who dress like women because women supposedly are easier to hire, a laughable premise in light of Hollywood’s own diversity problems.

¹⁰ <http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/236250953/the-outs>

¹¹ After *Whatever this is* Goldman and his team branded Rascal Department as a producer of “groundbreaking web content with production values that rival traditional television programming,” placing independent television development on a continuum where only distribution contexts—“traditional” broadcast and cable vs. open digital distribution—not

production value or levels of fan engagement define hierarchies of television. Press release. 2013. "‘Whatever this is.’ Season Finale Now Live." December 17.

¹² http://www.imdb.com/company/co0215748/?ref=fn_al_co_2;

http://www.imdb.com/company/co0284326/?ref=fn_al_co_1

¹³ http://www.imdb.com/company/co0365818/?ref=fn_al_co_2