

New TV Incubators and the Perils of Platforms

Aymar Jean Christian, Northwestern University

The market for content creation continues to expand, and platforms have given tens if not hundreds of thousands of creators the chance at a career in creative industries, but not without conflict. YouTube, the biggest home for video by most metrics, and Facebook, the second, have increasingly restricted access to monetization and development, preferring to work with producers in Hollywood and censor videos to assuage corporate advertisers. Seeing the trappings of big data and multichannel networks, new production, distribution, and development companies like Portal A, Color Creative and my platform [OTV | Open Television](#) are focusing on developing smaller program slates and incubating creators who are more focused on storytelling than generating views. Meanwhile, legacy media curatorial organizations like Sundance, Tribeca, and SXSW are stepping in to curate select groups of series creators. As the television market matures, can it sustainably grow its base of producers?

Efforts to curate online video storytelling have a 20-year history (Christian 2018). Early channels experimented with providing access to text-, flash- and video-based short films and series, sometimes live-streamed via webcams (Klinger 2006). Lured by the hope of peeling away advertisers from legacy television, tech companies, indie studios, executive producers, and entrepreneurs rushed into the online market in the late 1990s and early 2000s. After the dot-com bust, the market shifted from indie channels actively curating a roster of programs or artists to platforms that allow users to upload videos without interference. Fueled by the dissemination of digital video cameras, broadband, flash technology and broader consumer awareness, video became “platformed” with open-upload websites like Break, Vimeo, eBaum’s World, Blip.TV and YouTube allowing thousands and eventually millions of users to post their own videos. After YouTube, some video distributors still curated their own programming but most successfully as a boutique business on top of an open platform, e.g. Funny Or Die or Break, which had in-house creator-producers making more sophisticated programs amid a steady stream of free, low- to no-budget original videos and programs.

Yet the rise of social media in the mid- to late-2000s privileged the networked social connections platforms could generate within their sites over original production, and today YouTube and Facebook dominate online video with hybrid open/closed content development and robust social networking features. Facebook and YouTube videos spread widely on their platforms, due to the many social connections it is the core business to develop. Other platforms like Funny or Die have had to cut staff, unable to compete without its own social media networking system. Facebook and YouTube have grown to such an extent that each now spends upwards of \$1 billion each year on original “premium content.” Most premium content, however, does not benefit the millions of users who have contributed original programming to these platforms for years but rather studios, agencies, executive producers, and writers within the Hollywood system.

What are the possibilities for developing independent, emerging creators in the networked TV economy? These artists are often more representative of the country and bring fresh ideas to our ideas about what constitutes “television.” As Hollywood faces crises in developing new audiences and diversifying its supply chain for talent, indie creators are critical, valuable developers of new intellectual properties and conduits to

underserved communities. Currently on YouTube “multichannel networks” alongside marketing firms stepped in to curate new talent, but only focused on those who had amassed millions of followers with little institutional support. Given the self branding-driven nature of their aspirational labor, most of these creators were more personality-driven than story-driven.

A new class of distributor has arisen, resembling earlier models of web TV curation and focusing on developing artists whose stories can “scale” from short-form to long-form. Seeing the success of creators who made marginally popular web series into multi-season critically acclaimed long-form series (*Insecure*, *Broad City*, *High Maintenance*, *The Chi*), this new group of companies are signing indie creators to develop and sell series in short- and long-form. Many initially pursued social media stars, with mixed success, while many also aim for the biggest names they can. On its face, this is a more efficient form of development that improves on legacy TV’s inherent inefficiencies (the high cost of pilot production and series licensing) and biases (the ways high costs dissuade executives from taking risks of new or historically marginalized creators). Resembling film’s “tiered” distribution model (Perren 2012), companies like NewForm, SuperDeluxe, Blackpills, Premo, Color Farm and many others produce and distribute series for higher costs than user-generated video but cheaper than long-form.

Running one such distributor and incubator as a non-profit, OTV | Open Television, I have seen firsthand how larger players seek out content developers amid the sea of overproduction online. Yet I also see how Hollywood prestige matters tremendously in making deals happen. Almost all shows from emerging creators need a senior executive producer with clout in the industry (the value of experienced writer-producers is rising rapidly seen by \$100M+ Netflix deals for creators like Shonda Rhimes, Ryan Murphy, and Kenya Barris). Distributors are still wary of taking a risk on a new talent unless their videos spread widely and achieve a torrent a critical acclaim, which is notoriously impossible to predict. As film festivals step in to help legacy studios and distributors curate I am concerned TV will replicate film’s hierarchies, where leading festivals continually fail to achieve full representation across social and cultural identities. Diversity initiatives from legacy institutions (e.g. Time Warner 150, Sundance’s new director of inclusion) and upstarts (5050by2020, Ava Duvernay’s ARRAY, Issa Rae’s Color Creative) are still new and trying to establish pipelines. In the end, the only thing that will correct TV’s economic and cultural inequalities is real investment in smaller platforms actively developing new talent.

Christian, Aymar Jean. *Open TV: Innovation Beyond Hollywood and the Rise of Web Television*. NYU Press, 2018.

Klinger, Barbara. *Beyond the multiplex: Cinema, new technologies, and the home*. Univ of California Press, 2006.

Perren, Alisa. *Indie, Inc.: Miramax and the Transformation of Hollywood in the 1990s*. University of Texas Press, 2012.