

“What Does That Mean?”: Apple’s Move into Television Production and Distribution

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It is difficult to call Apple an independent media entity, especially in light of its recent, historic \$1 trillion market capitalization. Best known as a tech company, Apple’s foray into media production over the last year has been heavily backed with a billion dollar investment. Apple’s content acquisition is overseen by the duo Jamie Erlicht and Zack Van Amburg, formerly the heads of Sony Pictures Television and the executives who helped turned AMC’s *Breaking Bad* into a massive financial and critical hit. Since the announcement of the funding in August 2017, Erlicht and Van Amburg have commissioned over two dozen series from key talent in film, television, and publishing, mimicking strategies employed by the major Hollywood studios. From a revival of Steven Spielberg’s *Amazing Stories* to a television series adaptation of Terry Gilliam’s cult film *Time Bandits*, several big-budget series have been greenlit. In addition, the duo struck a deal with Oprah Winfrey to produce content, as well as Reese Witherspoon’s production company Hello Sunshine which has three upcoming comedic series for Apple. Series from NBA star Kevin Durant, Oscar-nominated screenwriters Kumail Nanjiani and Emily Gordon, producers/directors M. Night Shyamalan, Damien Chazelle, and J.J. Abrams, and non-profit children’s programmer Sesame Workshop, among others, also have been commissioned, demonstrating a wide-range of impending content from the company.

Despite the pedigree of talent and diverse genres on display in Apple’s series pick-ups, it remains to be seen exactly *where* all of this content will air. While previous Apple original series *Planet of the Apps* and *Carpool Karaoke* have been solely available through the Apple Music app, executives have not clarified what venue Apple will use for these newly commissioned programs. In a profile for NBC News, one screenwriter suggested the murkiness of working with Apple: “My agents keep saying, ‘Hey! Let’s sell a show to Apple!’ And I say, ‘What does that mean?’” As recently as a May 2018 interview with Bloomberg, Apple CEO Tim Cook gave no details about any forthcoming venue: “We are very interested in the content business. We will be playing in a way that is consistent with our brand. . . . We’re not ready to give any details on it yet. But it’s clearly an area of interest.” Speculations have abounded about an upcoming Apple streaming service but as of yet, no announcements have been made about what that service might entail.

Throughout its history, Apple has consistently demonstrated the idea that “the ability to sell devices depends on the availability of media content,” as scholars Alisa Perren and Karen Petruska have argued in relation to the iPhone and App Store. Any streaming service being developed by Apple would be intimately tied to its devices. Given the company’s dominance in media technologies from smart phones to media players, it is

clear that any Apple streaming service has a built-in launch pad, and, as a result, a potentially large and lucrative audience for its series.

With its series tied to indie talent, independent companies, and Hollywood studios, Apple is just the latest streamer to enter the realm of television production. While it still lags far behind Netflix and Amazon in terms of financial investment and number of series, its \$1 billion allotment demonstrates a large commitment to establishing Apple as a go-to service for television programming. Coupled with the reach of Apple devices, the company may emerge as a formidable competitor to other streaming services with a focus on quality content. As surely as Hulu, Amazon, and Netflix have pursued awards in order to promote their subscription services, Apple's upcoming series suggest a similar strategy as the company jumps into an already crowded media sector.

Apple's moves into television provide an interesting case study of the blurred lines occurring between television and technology companies in the competitive world of streaming media. While Apple is at foremost a tech company with ties to Silicon Valley, its historic focus on design and marketing, use of media integration with its devices, and sustained walled garden approach to its products make its strategies akin to those of the Hollywood studios. Still, the company remains an outsider from the studio system, without the infrastructure to support the range of series produced by and/or distributed on broadcast networks, Amazon, or Netflix. Without a guaranteed place to call home, at least at the current moment, Apple's foray into television series production suggests content ownership may drive not only streaming service subscriptions, but also the future of media device sales in a highly competitive industry.