

## **Questions of Scale, Structure, and Agency in Media Industries Research**

“Indie TV: Investigating Scales of Networked Television Performance”

Aymar Jean Christian, *Northwestern University*

We have left the network era far behind and entered the “networked” era, where television’s organizational and technological strategies are converging due to Internet protocol and digital applications. Whereas “network era” TV involved tight control of production, representation, and distribution, web distribution has opened the television market to tech companies and independent producers. Television distributors now thrive on their ability to innovate in technologies for exhibition, cultural representation, and organizational scale. Most distributors focus on organizational and technological efficiency and scale, with companies borrowing strategies for developing, monetizing, releasing, and expanding access to programs. We see this in a myriad of ways: formerly free broadcast networks like NBC and CBS starting subscription portals through web and mobile distribution, Amazon offering ad-supported video, YouTube and Hulu investing in subscription, and Netflix releasing series episodes all at once around the globe.

Corporate networked television relies on big scale, just like the network era, only now the number of programs and ways of accessing them has increased while audience sizes have decreased. I argue this new environment calls for new methodologies for critical scholars. Studying and collaborating with indie producers on a small scale helps scholars better understand and critique networked television performance by showing how independents create value: producing with small crews and engaging thousands, then millions, of fans through diverse representations, as they start indie TV networks (Color Creative, Black & Sexy TV, Geek & Sundry, among many others) or sell programs to corporate TV distributors (Issa Rae, *Broad City*, *High Maintenance*, etc.).

Building on Jon McKenzie’s theory of performance and research creation as method, I developed a platform – [Open TV](#) <sup>beta</sup> – to queer networked television development in Chicago. The project uses McKenzie’s framework for 21<sup>st</sup> century performance – cultural efficacy, organizational effectiveness, technological efficiency – to experiment with networked television financing and production (organizational), distribution and exhibition (technological, both local and networked), and representation (cultural). Kara Keeling’s notion of “queer OS [Operating System]” inspires my question of how developing intersectional representations of sexuality might shape how we understand development.

Working with queer artists in Chicago to make and release pilots and series expands notions of production value, exhibition value, and the value of representations beyond big scale and broad impact to the value of work designed to meet the needs of underserved populations. In production, series creators must be empowered to produce culturally sincere representations because low budgets compel them to draw from their communities for support, and workers will more often accept reduced pay for stories that stand out or make a meaningful intervention in cultural production. In releasing series locally (in Chicago), fans connect with artists in their communities and have space to converse and reflect on cultural representations with the creators, producers, and among themselves. In online releases, programs demonstrating deep familiarity with small and distinct community discourses, spaces, and networks promote engagement. Most importantly, having funding for television on a small

scale gives new producers an entry into the industry and advances the development of diverse intellectual properties.

Consider the case of [\*You're So Talented\*](#), the first original series that debuted with Open TV in March 2015. An artistically shot and acted dramedy about a young black woman artist struggling through her twenties, *You're So Talented* quickly connected with the filmmaking community for its craft and with young women of color looking for representations free from stereotype. The show came to me already shot and in need of post-production support. Within a month of its release the Tribeca Film Festival recognized it in its New Online Work program, giving creator Sam Bailey an introduction to film festival programmers who would later solicit short film pitches from Bailey. Six months later the series scored a nomination for Breakthrough Short Form Series from the Gotham Awards and funding for a second season from a local grant for Chicago-based web series (CDMPF). This slow building on an audience can be seen beyond industry and sponsor recognition. Our first event for the series drew just over two dozen people of diverse identities at The Whistler, located in Bailey's neighborhood she grew up in. The second season premiere drew over 100, and finale drew over 70 at the same location. By the second season, black feminist blogs started to write about the show, and the producers success inspired the CDMPF to fund Bailey's next series, *Brown Girls*, written by poet Fatimah Asghar with original music from Jamila Woods. A management company in Hollywood soon approached Bailey to develop the series for a longer format.

Open TV's case studies reveal how, even as TV critics and scholars fawn over changes in television advanced by large corporations investing millions in program production, marketing, and release, there is considerable value in small-scale and local networked television, particularly as it relates to program diversity, narrative innovation, and community development.