

## Reconsidering Digital Distribution

### **Indie TV Is Open TV**

*Aymar Jean Christian, Northwestern University*

Netflix is critical to television's transformation from limited and free to multitudinous and privately accessed. Because of the bandwidth required to transmit HD video, the network plays a central role in efforts to preserve the "openness" of the Internet. But the company's chief concern is, reasonably, its stock price: specifically, losing subscribers for spotty service from cable operators or for a lack of programming competitive with HBO, Amazon and cable networks. Netflix's priority is not preserving open access to television stories: it already pays MSOs for faster, quality service and only works with established Hollywood producers who have developed intellectual property for traditional studios and networks. In this system, consumers are and will continue to pay networks and service providers more for series created from the same pool of producers who do not reflect of the country in their race, gender or class.

If the digital distribution is disrupting the television industry I argue it looks more like *High Maintenance*. Created by partners Katja Blichfeld and Ben Sinclair, *High Maintenance* is a comedy about a weed dealer who delivers product to stressed out New Yorkers. Each episode features a different customer, going through various highs and lows. Each of the early episodes was shot for under \$1,000. Producers attracted talent by spreading creative ownership, writing for specific actors or allowing actors to write, and because of Blichfeld's clout as an Emmy-winning casting director for *30 Rock*. After its third "cycle" of episodes, released on Vimeo whenever they were ready, *High Maintenance* received an investment from Vimeo for the production of six new episodes for its On Demand platform – producers get 90% of revenue after Vimeo recoups its investment and maintain creative ownership.

Understanding television production independent of television distribution – web series, where workers create value by producing and marketing work "native" to digital platforms – underscores what is at stake in the debate over net neutrality, the principle of open distribution at the root of challenges to the marketing and rating of corporate television. In its ideal, the indie TV marketplace values creative producers first, whose work inspires fans and sponsors. In online video, producers, fans and brands – not corporate networks – drive the development of the vast majority of original series released on the open network. Producers leverage creative ownership to tell new stories, which fans can support through crowdfunding or brands through direct sponsorship. By contrast, legacy channels profit from producers by increasingly securing ownership of intellectual property and from audiences by selling them in bulk, upfront to advertisers.

In this context indie distribution approaches a model for the open, diverse television system the deregulation of broadcasting was supposed to create

before corporations vertically integrated and gained the upper hand in negotiations with producers, audiences and financiers. Despite talk from executives in conferences and the press about the challenges of digital distribution, stocks for media distributors like Disney, Comcast and CBS have risen with the broader market, in many cases much higher and faster.

*High Maintenance* is one of the highest quality indie series, but many similar productions have attracted fans. Most indie series are created by small groups of passionate producers eager to correct mainstream narratives, provide “good work” for creatives above and below the line, or circumvent institutional distributors. There are numerous cases of entrepreneurs developing series and networks from the ground-up via open-upload platforms like YouTube and Vimeo. Many of them reflect communities Hollywood rarely empowers: Felicia Day (*The Guild*, whose YouTube network sold to Legendary Pictures), Issa Rae (*Awkward Black Girl*, starting a subscription network Color Creative), Dennis Dortch and Numa Perrier (creators of *Black and Sexy TV* and multiple comedies and dramas), Anthony Anderson (*Anacostia*), Abbi Jacobson and Ilana Glazer (*Broad City*) and Amy Rubin (*Little Horribles*, also releasing new shows on her YouTube network), to name just a few.

With pluck and luck, series find fans under-served by legacy distributors. Producers like Adam Goldman, known for Brooklyn dramas about depressed creatives and gay men, can raise funds through Kickstarter and Indiegogo, integral components of the indie economy used by web series creators since their inception. Today it is common to see popular YouTubers raise five- to six-figures, occasionally millions, for films, short- and full-format series.

Indie producers can also attract financing from sponsors frustrated with network control over piloting and advertising rates. While “branded entertainment” rarely produces great art, some major brands like IKEA (*Easy to Assemble*), and smaller ones like staffing firm SFN Group (*Temp Life*) and insurance firm Hiscox (*Leap Year*), have developed series that run for multiple seasons and win awards, for a fraction of their TV advertising spend. Wilson Cleveland, a major innovator in this segment of the market, attributes his success to pitching public relations departments, ever-important and more flexible than departments handling advertising.

To reconsider television distribution we must consider markets outside of legacy players, who can lobby regulators and buy visibility. The internet is a great technology for distribution, but it can only improve industries if allowed to support new modes of production and financing that benefit producers, sponsors, and consumers alike.