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What is This?

The Web as Television Reimagined? Online Networks and the Pursuit of Legacy Media

Aymar Jean Christian[1]

Abstract

Television's perceived weakness at the turn of the century opened a rhetorical and economic space for entrepreneurs eager to curate and distribute web programs. These companies introduced various forms of experimentation they associated with the advantages of digital technologies, but they also maintained continuity with television's business practices. This dialectic between old and new, continuity and change, insiders and outsiders, reflected the instability of television as a concept and the promise of the web as an alternative. Using articles in the trade press, this essay explores the history of episodic web programming—variously called web series, webisodes, bitcoms, web television and, in its earliest form, cybersoaps—as new media network executives hoped to replicate but also differentiate themselves from legacy media.

Keywords

television, new media, distribution, web series, history

By the 1990s nearly all media had been declared or forecasted "dead" in the wake of technological change. Television was no exception. Announcing a new online network for web series, American Cybercast (AMCY), then-president and former cable television executive Sheri Herman stated: "there's a shift going on: eyeballs that once were in front of the TV are now in front of a PC" (Staff, 1996). AMCY purported to challenge television via the web, but it extended its core business practices, using the

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network model of curation and control over content to streamline the glut of choices online. Broadcast networks were seeing audiences slowly migrate to cable, and before the government deregulated program ownership, those companies felt vulnerable. Web distribution offered a rule-free entry point for companies like AMCY. Herman stated

> The system has proven it works. The networks still have a lock on the business, but they also gave birth to the dozens of channels on cable TV. . . . The gateway model will work on the Internet because of the absolute proliferation of content. People want choice, but network-branded content can help sort out all the choices. (Staff, 1996)

Herman pitted the rhetoric surrounding the end of television against the advantages of its billion-dollar business model. Throughout the 1990s and into the 2000s executives would dance to the same tune: Use the splintering of television's cultural and industrial supremacy to make an argument for the web programming as new and different in various ways.

Television's perceived weakness in the multichannel transition opened a rhetorical and economic space for entrepreneurs eager to curate and distribute web programs. These companies introduced various forms of experimentation they associated with the advantages of digital technologies, but they also maintained continuity with television's practices. This dialectic between old and new, continuity and change, insiders and outsiders, reflected the instability of television as a concept and the promise of the web as an alternative. This essay not only explores the history of episodic web programming—variously called web series, webisodes, bitcoms, web television and, in its earliest form, cybersoaps—as network executives hoped to replicate but also differentiate themselves from television. From the time the Internet became available to most consumers, and even before, companies from Microsoft and NBC to independent production outfits and advertising firms declared the web the newest form of television. "Television" in the convergence era was one malleable concept through which Hollywood insiders, outsiders, financial backers and artistic leaders brought their hopes of media monetization (and domination) in a period of instability. What they often meant was the Internet, despite its cacophony and malleability, would eventually amass a large dedicated audience they could sell to advertisers. As is typical of media, the market has produced many more failures than enduring successes. Fifteen years after *The Spot* became the first "web series" hit, the web was still the web, though perhaps closer to television than ever.

Television was not the only inspiration for web entrepreneurs. The story of episodic web entertainment offers a glimpse into how new media markets emerge slowly and progress unevenly. From the telephone and radio, film to the earliest of television, each medium has developed in fits and starts. Numerous scholars have charted the complex relationships that develop across media, particularly when technologies are new and the government eases conglomeration (Anderson, 1994; Hilmes, 1999; Holt,

2011; Mann, 2008; Wasko, 1995). Indeed, the idea of the network was itself an outgrowth of radio. The writers, executives, and producers of web entertainment were quite aware of this history. As much as this essay probes how integral the web has been to understanding recent television history, the same can be said, for instance, of film: "Because the Internet embodies an especially energetic and expansive union of past and emerging forms . . . its polyglot nature presents a fitting opportunity to mediate more overtly . . . on how cinema's identity as a medium is influenced by the intermedia context that defines all types of home film exhibition" (Klinger, 2006, p. 192). Klinger argues the web in general, and in particular AtomFilms, one of the examples in this essay, were integral to a renaissance of short film, much in the way short-form television now serves conglomerates (Dawson, 2011). Television may or may not have been the primary parent for web marketers. Nevertheless it was an important one, even throughout the Internet's short and complex history.

The Web After Television

Despite television's periodic shifts, the multichannel transition[1] made clear the relative stability of the "network era"—what we commonly associate as "television" and its tight, central control of production and distribution—and opened the door to the "post-network" era of the Internet age, enabling "critics, industry workers, and entrepreneurs to envision radically different possibilities" for the medium (Lotz 2007, p. 12). This period of instability, as narrated by scholars from Amanda Lotz, John Caldwell and John Ellis, marked a transition from mass audiences and scarce programming to niche audiences and available programming. Television expanded and fractured, from production and distribution to content and audiences. The concept of television today can no longer hold one theory, instead "it presents a diffuse and extensive process of working through" (Ellis, 2002, p. 2). This process has been documented, most notably John Caldwell (2008). Few have examined the myriad ways in which web-based producers participated in this process by creating programming that both borrowed from classic television traits while experimenting with practices from other media and technologies available during multichannel transition. As Caldwell (2003) has said, ". . . scholars somehow managed (through ignorance or intention) to ignore the 60 to 70 years of television and broadcasting history that now seem to have assumed a much more central role in inflecting and defining new media than either film or art-world practices" (p. 132). Critical to Caldwell's theory of "second-shift aesthetics," a theory based on television's reaction to digital technologies, is the notion of competing industrial discourses: The collision of television's "push" marketing and the web's user-centric "pull" dynamics. I hope to offer further evidence of these collisions. Web entrepreneurs borrowed from television in pursuit of monetization, but they explored experimental possibilities of digital distribution in pursuit of user participation (audiences) and producer diversity (production), two primary sites of contestation and change for television networks during this period.

Efforts to reinvent television coincided with anxiety among corporations over what users wanted and how they wanted it delivered—the "push" dilemma highlighted by Caldwell and others (Curtin, 2009; Jenkins, 2006; Rizzo, 2007). Amassing audiences was always a challenge for media distributors, but it developed particular piquancy in the 1990s as new media technologies gave audiences more choices, and the networks' tightfisted grip on their domestic audience had slipped" (Boddy, 2004, p. 57). Constructing marketable audiences has been an essential function of media since advertising, and this function grew in sophistication throughout the 1970s and 1980s, as advertisers, armed with more information, desired opportunities to sell to various segments of the audience, mostly by age, but also sexuality, race, and gender (Dávila, 2001; Gray, 2004; Sender, 2004; Turow, 2006). This period saw growth in scholarship looking to complicate the notion of television audiences as ". . . an imaginary entity, an abstraction constructed from the vantage point of the institutions, in the interest of the institutions" (Ang, 1991, p. 2; Ettema & Whitney, 1994; Jenkins, 1992; Morley, 1992). For the companies in this essay, the Internet, with its ability to combine interpersonal communication and multimedia elements alongside entertainment programming, became a possible antidote to television's ailments. Audience desires and vernacular practices could be met and measured on an integrated platform, and short-form content, rapidly consumed on slower information lines, would allow for greater interactivity and "engagement." Throughout the web's history, the quest for greater engagement has been in and out of vogue but persisted, despite mixed success and questionable political value (Jarrett, 2008). Anxiety over audience value and retention struck at the core of television's existential crisis during this period. Mass audiences, along with mass distribution, lied at the center of the medium's identity, a legacy of the network era, "because of the necessity for programs to be widely shared within the culture" (Lotz, 2007, p. 33). Without mass awareness television might cease to be itself, the argument went.

Thus we can view the actions of web producers as a response to the relative stability of the television business as it gradually morphed and fragmented. In the 1990s, TV was still stable—the network era still in memory and federal deregulation somewhat new—so organizations producing for the web relied heavily on TV traits—genre (soap), serialization (heavily serialized content), business (web as extension of on-air shows, sponsorship)—but with some experimentation, mostly in production and reception. With bandwidth low, producers had little way of replicating the precise on-air experience, so they created multimedia experiences, integrating text, photo, video, and audience participation. In the second phase of web programming development, television became less stable as the multichannel transition, as defined by Lotz, gradually ended. Even as the dot-com bust initially scuttled online development, producers continued to experiment with television form (moving into Flash animation, along with brash and ambitious short-form video) while leaning heavily on television's core business practice of networking to curate programs—the rise of "netcasting." After 2005 the advent of streaming video spurred a broader swathe of producers to create original programming and networks across genres and forms, opening a space for

Internet entrepreneurs to imagine themselves creating a more open, diffuse and niche-driven form of television. In this framework, one cannot understand the television at the turn of the century without the companion story of web production. "New" media producers deviated from old media whenever possible and within technological and industrial constraints, while relying on television models for programming to facilitate audience engagement and advertiser interest.

Interactive Soap Opera and Nascent Networks: AMCY and the First Rush

By 1995 tech companies like Microsoft and America Online started to create entertainment properties on the web, while movie studios and television networks were creating promotional websites for franchises. Still it was *The Spot*, an episodic soap in the style of *The Real World* or *Melrose Place*, from boutique ad agency Fattal and Collins that gave the web its first hit series. The first phase of web programming saw numerous, fascinating experiments like *The Spot*, very visibly "not television," while relying from television genre, serialization and networking. As a new medium emerged while television was undergoing a gradual yet significant change, soap opera and mystery allowed producers from within and outside the industry to tweak television for users and advertisers in a shifting marketplace.

   The Spot was the first major project from creator Scott Zakarin, whose Prophecy Entertainment was a subsidiary of Fattal, since his first feature film went to Cannes in the late 1980s. In a significant shift from his roots in cinema, *The Spot* was a text-based series about the lives of a group of twentysomethings living in a Los Angeles beach house. Predating the rise of blogs, the site featured individual web pages or diaries of each of the houses' roommates. An early *Variety* article likened it to a magazine, but said it had "what in a film or TV show would be called production values" (Weiner, 1995).[2] Those "production values" were constrained by technology: Each page included text, photos and, eventually, short videos. All this cost reportedly US$500,000 to start and up to US$100,000 a month to sustain, eventually achieved through lucrative sponsorships with top brands like Hugo Boss, Honda, K-Swiss and Sony Pictures (Rohan, 1996; Spring, 1996).[3] The show, produced in-house at Fattal, grew popular quickly, logging hundreds of thousands of visitors a day. Like *lonelygirl15* 10 years later, *The Spot* also benefitted from initial confusion over whether or not the characters were real, which incited users to participate (Mann, 2010). It ran for 2 years, winning the first Webby for a series, spawning a companion book and eventually providing the catalyst for a short-lived online "network" of series called American Cybercast, which managed to gain investments from the likes of Creative Artists Agency (CAA) and Intel Corp.

   How industry watchers perceived *The Spot* as "television," as opposed to magazines or literature, has numerous reasons. The simplest answer was its serialization in regular installments, an old concept whose most profitable cinematic equivalent was TV at the time. As Hollywood aspirants, however, Zakarin and his collaborators

actively compared their efforts to television but touted the interactivity of the web as an innovation akin to "the early days of radio and television": "If you want to yell at your TV set because Heather Locklear is going to sleep with the wrong guy on *Melrose Place*, she's not going to listen to you, but if you say, Tara [a lead on *The Spot*], don't do that, she just might listen," he told *The Record* in 1996 (Rohan, 1996). Building an argument for the web as a different form of television, Zakarin would continue to privilege interactivity in nearly all of his subsequent projects.

In a bid to make *The Spot* television, investors built a "network" around it, with all the trappings and marketing advantages of TV networks. At its peak in the late 1996 *The Spot*'s success encouraged companies and entrepreneurs to head to the web. Perhaps the most ambitious of these efforts was AMCY, which aimed to be "the Web's first episodic entertainment network." Premiering in October of 1996, by November it was laying off staff and by the following January it filed for Chapter 11. Among AMCY's missteps was its implementation of an "old media" network bureaucracy: Hiring "executives upon executives" without focusing on content (Stalter, 1997). Other critics claimed the network had forsaken the storytelling of its marquee series (*The Spot*) by adding too many additional shows in search of full line-up, a planned fifteen (Kramer, 1997). All in all, AMCY had tried to become a full-fledged television network too quickly, and its investors, previously shut out of becoming major television players, were too bullish on the pace of media change. "The real problem seems to be that AMCY believed its own hype," one critic said at the time. "The company seemed to buy all that stuff about the Web replacing TV. They started to talk about themselves as a channel, a new network even" (McClellan, 1997).

The rapid expansion of AMCY was the result of a broad array media companies inside and outside TV businesses trying to cash in on comparatively cheap entertainment, establish early dominance in a new medium perceived as having fewer rules than television. AMCY counted CAA, cable television provider Tele-Communications Inc., investment bank Allen & Co. and Japanese media company Softbank as investors; it attracted major Hollywood players, including former Columbia Picture TV head Scott Siegler as its president (Stalter, 1996). It also had major advertisers, including Sony, Kodak, Apple, Toyota, and Visa. The precariousness of the television business became the lightning rod sparking interest from the top-down as well as the bottom-up, insiders and outsiders, each of whom created television tweaked for online but relying on recognizable genres and business practices. Cable programming in the 1990s slowly siphoned younger viewers from NBC, ABC and CBS, continuing through the 2000s. In news stories network executives continually cited the Internet and other new media products as another cause for ratings declines, particularly for soaps in daytime, another reason why NBC quickly signed a deal with Zakarin and partner Troy Bolotnick to do a web series and script a TV pilot (Graser, 1998; Newsbytes, 1996). Early on broadcasters took to the web, hoping to not be left behind, while studios from Warner Bros., Paramount and MGM created "interactive" divisions (Associated Press, 1995). Web-based stories, text-based and not traditionally television, served a broader, more conservative mission by media conglomerations to

diversify their portfolios, an effort made easier by the Telecommunications Act of 1996 (Aufderheide, 1999). And their efforts were not limited to the Internet, including games, CD-ROMs and various digital "walled gardens" like NBC's SuperNet and most of AOL. All these initiatives spawned digital experiences aesthetically different from on-air, like *The Spot* and *Whodunit*, but they nonetheless supported Hollywood conglomerates, nearly all of which had ties to on-air business. "Hollywood," moreover, extended beyond content providers and distributors: Even talent agencies like CAA, legally barred from investing in networks, took advantage of the less regulated Internet when it invested millions in American Cybercast (Weiner, 1996). As Todd Gitlin theorized, the business of television was always plagued with "uncertainty," and digital convergence merely provided another reason to worry: "Uncertainty is the permanent condition of show business. . . .As soon as capital pays lip service to risk (for which profit is its just reward), it gets busy trying to minimize it" (Gitlin, 1983, p. 14). This sense of uncertainty has historically motivated industries to participate in new technologies. As Janet Wasko (1995) writes about Hollywood's relationship to technological innovation: ". . . [T]here were a variety of reasons why the industry was not always successful in initially dominating or controlling these new technologies but there was nearly always great interest in the possibilities of exploiting them and some successful efforts to do so" (p. 10). From cable, pay cable and VHS to interest of film studios in radio in the 1920s and television in the 1940s, new media has both frightened but also spurred interest from Hollywood (Hilmes, 1999; Wasko, 1995).

As corporations tried to create order online by bringing mainstream production and distribution online, dozens of smaller aspirants entered the market to experiment, the bulk of them small communications, advertising, and production companies (many backed by conglomerates and private investors, admittedly). *The Spot* inspired scores of copiers of both its premise and the format, especially after the deal with NBC. For most of these smaller creators, the web represented a less expensive form of television they could use to improve upon the medium's flailing business models, most notably by involving in more users and producers: ". . . you don't have to sell it to anyone but the audience," said a representative from Marinex Communications, producer of *The East Village*, often referred to as *The Spot*'s East Coast equivalent (Rohan, 1996). The rhetoric of remaking television spawned a diverse array of programming from producers small and large, from gay series *Gay Daze*; numerous sci-fi shows like *Madeleine's Mind* and *The Pyramid*; traditional soaps like *As the Web Turns*; youth-oriented *Spot* riffs like *The Squat* and *Virtual Dorm*; and interactive experiments like *Ferndale*, a show about a therapy group that encouraged audiences to work through their personal issues. By mid-1996, it was estimated 60 cybersoaps were online (Gamboa, 1996). Niche-targeting through series, by then a common on-air practice, made web production similar enough to television to counteract its text-based peculiarities—the echoes of television were always present, even in show titles ("*As the Web Turns*").

The praise of cybersoaps as a new, better television was consistently tempered by the genre's obvious limitations. Users needed specific technology, hardware, and software, to view some of the stories' nonserialized extras. The need for certain

processors, browsers, media players (by Real and Microsoft) were all cited as reasons for the form's eventual demise. "Unlike TV, they make certain demands of their audiences," the *Globe and Mail* lamented (Fine, 1996). Audiences for a few series were respectable, given these limits. But high costs and declining advertiser interest eventually caused most to shutter by 1997. Nonetheless it could be argued these constraints encouraged the small innovations early web producers attempted, even as they mostly sought continuity with the old medium.

Quirky Producers Meets Users: The Sync and Webcam Networks

A visit to the website for The Sync in early 1998 would lead users to a limited but eclectic slate of programming: "The Aikman Film Archive" showcasing classic horror films like *Noseferatu* (1921) and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1919); The Sync Online Film Festival, where viewers could watch shorts from the festival circuit; *CyberLove*, a dating talk show; and the *JenniShow* a twice weekly vlog from the famed Internet lifecaster Jennifer Ringley and her webcam, *JenniCam*. "ABC could not have come up with the JenniCam," The Sync cofounder Carla Cole told *The Washington Post* in a lengthy profile; "the Internet stars are going to be more accessible to their audiences," her partner Thomas Edwards added (Weeks, 1999).

As the dot-com came close to a burst, producers started to push television to include a broader array of producers and simpler, edgier form of interactive video (webcamming or vlogging). Encouraged by the steady adoption of the web by regular users and the investments of large companies, independent entrepreneurs like Cole and Edwards flocked to the web in the late-1990s. Many of them used cutting-edge streaming video technology to create some of the first serialized video for web audiences. Like Microsoft and AOL, they had a mission to replicate television for the web, yet they also wanted to open it up to a wider array of producers, stars and genres: From Sync star and pioneering vlogger Terry Crummit, a.k.a SnackBoy who was gay, to the independent filmmakers looking for distribution for their shorts. The Sync would eventually become a leading "netcaster," a trend that would boom and bust between 1999 and 2002. It married its mission to reinvent television with a desire to incorporate outsiders, an admittedly celebratory rhetoric the media reinforced:

> Though megamedia monsters are rushing headlong onto the Internet . . . they are liable to get lost in the lotus fields. This is, after all, the medium of the common man. . . . In fact, anybody with a few thousand dollars worth of machinery and a killer idea can be a player on the Internet. Some of the smartest, tartest material is being fashioned by folks who are not in it for the money or the mass audience, but just for the hell of it. (Weeks, 1999)

Here the story of the web's "democratization" took deeper hold than before. Indeed webcamming, where individuals like Ringley streamed their lives over the web,

reached a peak in the late 1990s (White, 2006). The Sync and related networks turned webcamming—a starker genre break from TV than earlier soaps and mysteries—into a form of participatory television, yet with regularly scheduled, short-form episodes, curated for advertisers and sponsors—the domain of the classic network.

The Sync was not alone. Numerous networks aspired to television in slightly more dramatic ways by emphasizing their capabilities to incorporate more producers and users. Pseudo.com had eight "channels" of reality-based programming, with hip hop DJs injecting product placement into programs, and a similar relationship show: "When Evil D says 'Buy Sprite,'" [Pseudo CEO] Harris explains, "it's far more powerful than when Michael Jordan says 'Buy Sprite' to our audience" (Weeks, 1999). One network, TV on the Web, gave users serious programming in the style of C-SPAN. The audiences for these channels, many of which were based far outside Hollywood in places like Maryland and Virginia, spanned from the tens of thousands to low millions, according to their founders. Their audiences were small by television standards, but there was hope—if little evidence—smaller audiences could be monetized on the Internet.

And smaller films. This was the premise behind AtomFilms, started as an independent netcaster distributing short films and animation, it eventually became the network Hollywood, film studios and brands would look to during the next wave of televised content. AtomFilms, which would become AtomShockwave, then Atom before becoming Comedy Central Studies online in the late 2000s, was an early entrant looking to bring cheap content and emerging filmmakers and producers into the market for television, from which they had been excluded for years.

Edgy Productions for Network Distribution: AtomFilms and the Rise of Netcasting

"Definitely Not Hollywood" read the covers of AtomFilms' first two compilations of shorts, which touted its renegade image with "dark comedy" and "extreme comedy" DVD editions. The title was an exaggeration. With early investments from Frank Biondi, former chief executive of Universal Studios, and Warner Bros. Online, among others, AtomFilms could hardly claim complete independence from Hollywood (Katz & Peers, 1999). The company's self-positioning as a "next generation distribution platform" revealed its desire to contest the meaning of "Hollywood" as video became increasingly possible online (Business Wire, 1999). In its early years AtomFilms pioneered a number of online business practices: acquiring content from independent production companies through film festivals and by reputation (Graser, 2000b; Houston, 2000); cutting deals with such disparate exhibitors as local malls, airlines, handheld devices and other web networks (Nichols, 2000); and, most interestingly, offering equity in the company to filmmakers whose work it licensed (Graser, 1999).[4] The site's initial focus on shorts and eventual emphasis on animation and comedy mirrored the development of numerous other companies from the late-1990s to early 2000s. It was Hollywood, but a marginally different kind of Hollywood. As Klinger

has argued, it helped transformed cinema, but it was also in conversation with television.

When Mika Salmi, who had previously worked as a business development executive at streaming video company RealNetworks, created AtomFilms, he might not have guessed it would become one of the few enduring web networks. Premiering in 1999 and acquiring investors annually for the next few years, AtomFilms embodied several trends in the second wave of programming. If the nineties focused on replicating television's reliance on tent pole series and an integrated business model (the one-stop network), the next wave of the web focused on creating small-size quirky humor for alternative videos web networks that could syndicate to other media, including television, film, and branded websites. As technology improved—higher broadband adoption and Flash animation chief among them—viewership rose from the tens of thousands to the hundreds of thousands and often millions. "Web television" could stand on its own, but the ailing economy and growing skepticism of dot-coms meant entrepreneurs had to rely on each other. After the dot-com bust, broadcast networks and large tech companies cooled and ended many of their investments, paving the way for semi-independent networks, individual Hollywood producers, film studios, corporate brands, and cable channels to experiment with web programming, primarily in animation and comedy.

AtomFilms' reliance on film festivals, not to mention solicitation of prestige directors like Bernardo Bertolucci and Jim Jarmusch, represented an effort to bring independent filmmaking and short-form video to the web and television. To influence television directly and monetize its programs, the network also syndicated shorts to IFC, HBO, Cinemax, Fox and the Sundance Channel over the years, bringing the underexplored market for shorts to TV (Graser, 2000d). As advertising and venture capital for digital entertainment slackened around 2001, online networks hoping to distribute video had to diversify their revenue streams and sell content to whoever would buy it. If the web was to be the new television, it would have to partner with brands, film studios and its own new media companies to survive, in addition to the growing market for preroll and banner advertising.

With the strength of on-air networks seemingly in flux, the use of the online network as a vehicle for experimenting with television—bringing in independents producing brash, short-form humor for users—became more significant. Challenging the old medium would require adopting its central "network" practice in the new one. To justify their existence online—it had to be "new"—netcasters worked with a diverse array of producers, employing new technology (Flash) for animation, pushing edgier, often ethnic, humor, and some audience interactivity, all under the umbrella of a network.

AtomFilms was one of dozens of networks debuting from roughly 1999 to 2002 (Feiwell, 2000). Many of these networks, while nominally independent, were well-financed by former Hollywood executives, film studios, and venture capital firms. Most did not survive for very long. The networks focused on comedy, although some like AtomFilms also distributed dramatic shorts, docu-series and other types of

reality-based programming newly ascendant on-air as well. Because of technological constraints—broadband was still in its infancy—most focused on animation, much of its supported by Macromedia's Flash (Glader, 2002; Swanson, 2001). Flash was important enough to web programming in the early 2000s that even Macromedia—a tech company—jumped into "television" by creating a network for showcasing its technology, Shockwave.com, and enticed the likes of Matt Stone and Trey Parker, Ben Stein and Stan Lee to create content before the site merged with AtomFilms (Graser, 2000c).

Animation proved central to the networks' mission of providing "a more offbeat version of television that is often more profane and always less formulaic than its broadcast and cable counterparts" (Harmon, 2000a). Animation not only played better on slower Internet connections, but cartoons allowed programmers to be edgy and still advertiser-friendly, all of which secured the young male viewers advertisers and networks feared losing to the web. Many of the successful series from this period were controversial, including a number of "ethnic" cartoons that scored lucrative movie and TV deals, *Lil' Pimp* (Mediatrip.com, straight-to-DVD), *Mr. Wong* (Icebox.com, DVD), *Undercover Brother* (Urban Entertainment, released in theaters by Universal), and *Queer Duck* (Icebox.com, screened on Showtime). Mainstream distributors, looking for edgy content and experiencing an on-air "toon boom" with shows like *Futurama* and *King of the Hill*, bought these series despite frequent declarations they were too controversial for television (Schneider, 2000). Other programs got sold as well. Icebox's sci-fi series *Starship Regulars* was among the first, sold to Showtime, which previously supported female-targeted sci-fi series *WhirlGirl* online. But on the whole television networks were wary of the new players, and spats between the online upstarts and old media occasionally erupted (Harmon, 2000b).

Following AtomFilms' inspiration, more influential transformations in television programming and distribution came from non-Hollywood types. While bigwigs occasionally distributed buzzy programs, much of the successes online came from companies with slightly less well-heeled founders pushing the comedy genre with brassy shows that could never make it to broadcast channels but which users passed around online. A former executive director of the Los Angeles Independent Film Festival started MediaTrip, which distributed *Lil' Pimp*. Brash comedy site Newgrounds was the spawn of Tom Fulp, then a high school student in Pennsylvania, and innovative cartoon site Joe Cartoon was founded by Michigan-based comic artist and toy designer Joseph Fields. Other networks who stayed independent, Heavy.com and Break.com, did not have enough A-listers and honchos to get press, but their focus on steadily building audiences helped them weather the dot-com bust and become leading YouTube-competitors later in the decade (Swanson & Graser, 2001b). Unlike the more Hollywood-like networks, who commissioned content like traditional TV companies, these often gained notoriety based on one or a few hit videos whose formulas they could replicate: Mediatrip made its mark with the quirky short film *George Lucas in Love*; Heavy.com with its series *Behind the Music that Sucks*; Joe Cartoon from *Frog in a Blender*; and Urban Entertainment with *Undercover Brother*. Like the failed

new media studios of the 1990s, the early netcasters proved that starting a channel without a proven hit in the medium was precarious, no matter how powerful one's backers. For many, the fall of the Digital Entertainment Network, a product of NBC, Microsoft, Dell and a former chairman of Warner Bros. signaled the demise of pseudo-Hollywood netcasting (Graser, 2000a). Yet this brief period showed how deviating from television with genre and serialization while matching television in terms of network curation could yield results online.

The Web and Television Post-YouTube

Ten years after *Homicide: Second Shift* NBC premiered a comedy site, DotComedy, a venture targeted directly at YouTube. The Google-owned YouTube had become, by 2007, the frontrunner in online video. "The web has been a great democratizing force in the media landscape, and we figured it was high time somebody put a stop to it," Sean Redlitz, the head of DotComedy said after the company launched a slate of professional vloggers (West, 2007). Redlitz was, in the spirit of the site, joking, but the punch line rang true: A decade after the launch of Internet programming, the web appeared to open up. The arrival of YouTube showed venture capitalists that web video could function more seamlessly than in the past, and companies would eventually try to harness the labor of users—user-generated content—believing production had truly been "democratized." YouTube pledged to give users "their own personal video network," and venture capitalists, former television and film executives, media conglomerates, and independent writers and producers all participated in the next wave of the new television: streaming video. After two previous periods of relative failure and instability, the doors to the next wave of television seemed to reopen.

In the decade-long quest for the web to revolutionize television, the video streaming era offered the possibility for the "critical juncture," the great opening television's presumed challengers had hoped for (McChesney, 2007). As has been shown, the rhetoric of the Internet challenging television has primarily involved opening up the medium to more producers and users. Broadband adoption and streaming technology encouraged a broader base of video producers, each working in a variety of genres, storytelling modes (serialized, non-serialized), and under a variety of business models, from web-grown networks, traditional TV networks and omnibus "anyone can upload" sites like YouTube. With television entering the postnetwork era—sharp ratings declines on broadcast channels, series development and ad sales fragmenting, audiences experiencing more choice than before—the web experimented broadly with strategies for delivering video. The result was a complex free-for-all of amateurs, independents and corporations competing to shape the web into a form of television unrecognizable from its network-era past.

The question arises again: Why television? Through the history of web programming, the allure of television has been about its consistency: Once a network-developed show is successful it can provide steady employment for years. Television's reliance

on advertising and its control over distribution have enriched corporations for decades, all while occasionally allowing for varying levels of creativity, something especially true of concurrent "quality TV" developments of the 2000s (Creeber, 2004; Mittell, 2012). The web was a platform upon which corporations across media and ambitious independents placed their hopes of new profits and consistent creative production—while allowing for more producers and user participation, an unquestioned ideal.

Whether this form of television is "new" in any substantive way—whether, in Scott Zakarin's words, we will "see massive changes in how the mainstream media operate" (Rohan, 1996)—it is too soon to tell. Tim Wu (2010) argues each 20th century medium evolved from scrappy independents that disrupt and revolutionize old businesses only to see corporations monetize and monopolize those innovations. "We have seen how important outsiders are to industrial innovation: they alone have the will or interest to challenge the dominant industry" (p. 66). This is a bit simplistic. In fact, the history of television and web television specifically shows how on the ground there is always push and pull, a constant interplay of companies large and small responding technology, culture, and markets (Bolter & Grusin, 2000; Marvin, 1988). A vague belief in creating vast niches (production) attuned to audiences (user participation) birthed the varied efforts detailed in this essay, but profit and market dominance (TV network curation) arguably kept it going. With the television business as a guide, we should question to what extent the web can be different. By the late 2000s, web networks started escalating efforts to copy television practices, most notably through the NewFronts, modeled after the industry's centralized ad sales event, the Upfronts (Christian, 2012).

What the history of web entertainments shows is that it has never deviated from legacy media, including television, even at its most anarchic and open. Instead television has been an object of desire and abjection for those seeking an edge in online markets. During a period of industrial uncertainty, TV inspired web producers and entrepreneurs to create networks that hewed to its genres and business practices. Within these constraints, producers tested the medium from its margins and within Hollywood's increasingly complex production matrix. The illusory promise of a new form of television spawned an industry using strategies from its media parent while deviating from norms to support a broader array of stories, content creators and models for user participation. Whether those ideals can exist online, while they remain elusive on television, is a story only history can tell.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Funding

Notes

1. Lotz identifies the multichannel transition as the period from the mid-1980s to the mid-2000s when changing federal regulations in the 1970s—in financial interest and syndication and cable programming—shook up the three-network model considerably, paving the way for the digital convergence of the present (Lotz, 2007, p. 12).
2. One other article noted the connections between web soaps and traditional print writers (Bowden, 1996). This connection is probably best seen in the Lifetime web drama, *In the House of Dreams*, which was written by a popular novelist.
3. In terms of staff, *The Spot* started with a small group of about five people working after hours at the agency and grew to almost 70 in 1996 (Zerbisias,1996).
4. AtomFilms was not the only one. Icebox reportedly gave away stock and cuts of offline revenue to producers, though it's unclear whether this was a cost-cutting measure implemented in its final months before closing up (Strauss, 2000; Swanson & Graser, 2001a).

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Bio

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