

Intersectional Distribution

AYMAR JEAN CHRISTIAN

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Is the Internet revolutionizing TV? Or is it like twentieth-century “legacy” TV, dominated by corporations that will continue to lag in cultural innovation? The Internet allows producers to develop and release TV programming at almost any budget, lowering barriers to entry and letting new, independent voices speak their stories to potentially massive audiences. TV is not just a technology, it is an interconnected system that adjust to cultural shifts. This chapter shows how the Internet has opened opportunities to disrupt the TV system through diversity and innovation, but how tech companies are failing to catch up. Despite modest interest in cultural representation, “Internet TV” looks a lot like broadcast and cable. Yet if we look at independent, digital producers *and* distributors (channels), we can see hope for change.

The roots of this potential for change began in 2000 when the United States saw a TV boom following the introduction of new distribution technologies: the Internet and cable. In media, distribution is power. Distributors, or channels and networks, secure financing (advertising or subscription), “pick up” shows (productions), and release them to audiences. Television distribution of original narrative series used to be limited to three heavily regulated networks—ABC, CBS, and NBC. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, TV was deregulated alongside the introduction of cable and loosening of program and channel ownership rules. One of the results was more channels distributing TV to more specific audiences (e.g., CNN for news, Lifetime for women, BET/UPN for Black people, MTV for youth). The number of programs and the cultural specificity therein exploded in the so-called “post-network” or “networked” era. By the time the Internet saturated the U.S. market,

cable channels had accumulated enough wealth from subscribers and advertisers to make big-budget, high-quality narrative series. By 2012, the Internet distributors had done the same. Distributors from Netflix to Amazon started to buy up projects left and right, committing to hundreds of hours of programming every year. Feeling the heat of competition, researchers at the channel FX tracked the peak TV trend and counted 487 series in 2017—a record high, more than twice the 182 shows distributed in 2002 (Otterson 2018). Streaming services accounted for most of the increase from 2012 to 2017, increasing their buys sixfold, from 15 to 117.

Yet as tech companies move into the TV world, we still see a failure to remedy diversity problems. They continue to overlook great talent among those who have been historically excluded from Hollywood. Consider YouTube, the most popular online video site for many years after its debut in 2005. In 2017 YouTube's chief business officer, Robert Kyncl, said that he lamented what had happened with Issa Rae, a Black female creator who had risen to fame on YouTube through her show *Awkward Black Girl*. Rae's next project, *Insecure*, was picked up by HBO rather than YouTube Red, the company's premium subscription network for big-budget TV. Kyncl said, "Literally, if her life cycle was shifted by three years, if she came through and pitched us the show and her success on YouTube, we'd be like, Yes! Done! Makes total sense. . . . There's just nothing that would stop us from doing it." Yet this is disingenuous, as YouTube has consistently failed to develop its own talented creators.

Indeed, there are many YouTube creators aside from Issa Rae who have broken into mainstream film and TV since 2007, when more people started taking the platform seriously. YouTube was not interested in developing any of them. This list includes Abbi Jacobson and Ilana Glazer (*Broad City*), Hannah Hart, Franchesca Ramsey, Grace Helbig, Todrick Hall, Rhett James McLaughlin, Charles Lincoln Neal III, and Lucas Cruikshank (*Fred*), Felicia Day, Trixie Mattel, and Katya Zamolodchikova (*Unhhhh*), Jen Richards and Laura Zak (*Her Story*), and Cecile Emeke (*Ackee & Saltfish*). These are just a few of the creators who have gone on to make bigger-budget, long-format shows and films or achieve mainstream acclaim. Several other creators who initially published their shows on Vimeo and later published on YouTube—including Adam Goldman (*The Outs*), Ingrid Jungermann (*F to 7th*), and Sam Bailey and

Fatimah Asghar (*Brown Girls*)—all landed bigger development deals on other web TV and legacy channels. All of these are missed opportunities. If YouTube Red’s programming slate included these stars, it could be positioned next to Netflix as a leading innovator in TV development for its ability to advance cultural knowledge.

The Marginalization of Intersectional Talent

It is not surprising that most of these creators are “intersectional,” meaning they identify with multiple communities marginalized by their race, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, religion, disability, or citizenship status. The framework of intersectionality was developed throughout the twentieth century by Black feminist and women of color writers such as Sojourner Truth, Audre Lorde, the Combahee River Collective, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Patricia Hill Collins, and many others to describe the interlocking nature of oppression and the specificity of being both Black and woman (and often queer). As Audre Lorde (1984) writes, “Ignoring the differences of race between women and the implications of those differences presents the most serious threat to the mobilization of women’s joint power” (117). Marginalized by feminist and sexual justice movements for their race and by racial justice movements for their gender, intersectional writers could not deny the ways oppression—but also strength and innovation—is interconnected. Intersectionality has tremendous value in helping us understand how to represent specific experiences across individual, interpersonal, and institutional contexts.

YouTube has consistently failed to value the work of women, LGBTQ people, and people of color because their subscriber numbers tend to be lower. Yet this is in part because YouTube inconsistently promotes them.¹ For years, many in the industry excused YouTube’s inconsistent development of its own talent because the platform was not making money. It was not until the mid-2010s that YouTube became profitable. In 2018 it was valued at upwards of \$70 billion, and Google bought it for \$1.6 billion in 2006. I argue that the platform could have reached that valuation faster, and might be even more valuable now, had Alphabet (the parent company of Google) invested earlier and taken more risks.

Instead, YouTube made decisions that led to exclusivity, rather than support for its creators. In 2012, as Netflix acquired *House of Cards* by

shelling out \$100 million to beat out HBO for the series, YouTube was spending roughly the same amount of money. Yet this money was not being spent on homegrown creators. Rather, it spent money across more than a hundred channels, most of which were mainstream media corporations and celebrities without a demonstrated track record of getting consistent online attention or telling interesting stories. In the wake of the platform's disregard for its own talent, multichannel networks (MCNs) stepped in, signing up hundreds and sometimes tens of thousands of creators to give YouTube better targeting and monetization tools, representation in Hollywood and with brands, and occasional investments in original production. Investor interest in MCNs skyrocketed, eventually reaching the many billions Google had invested in YouTube itself. But creators had a number of complaints with MCNs, most notably that the networks invested only in the top 2–5 percent of its creators, leaving everyone else with minimal support. YouTube's subsequent development plans involved relying almost entirely on quantitative data to decide which channels were worthy of investment and preference in marketing. The company gave the top 5 percent of channels in each category preferential treatment in representation on its advertising networks and algorithms.

This quantitative perspective on cultural development replicates legacy media's desire for "mass audiences." It limits the value of specific ("niche") experiences and misses the cultural value of narrative series for branding a channel. Every channel needs at least one "hit" series or franchise with fan bases across communities, but series are valuable to networks beyond their popularity. Channels develop series to get attention from specific, passionate communities, critics, and the industry as well. For instance, HBO developed *Girls* for six seasons despite it never being particularly popular. The same is true with FX for *Louie* and NBC for *Community*. These series attracted fan dedication and made the networks culturally relevant, thereby inviting other viewers who weren't necessarily fans of those shows to remember to check out what the channel was offering.

The other tech companies who have pledged billions in original TV programming, including Amazon, Apple, and Facebook, should take notice. They have all gone into TV development by hiring mainstream media or corporate development executives and hoping that algorithms

and scale will make them relevant. But the lesson of YouTube is that algorithmic targeting and scale are not enough to make a platform stand out. Automating development organization through technology will only get them so far. If they are trying to “brand” their platform and give it an identity, they must first consider the identities of the people they invest in. They should consider their ability to tell complex, longer stories and not only their ability to get lots of views and comments—as well as consider the strengths of intersectional producers.

Indie Channels Forge New Paths to TV

While there are more TV shows than ever before, there has not been a rapid rise in diversity in television. Most channels use diversity to gain attention for their new original programming slates but find sustainable development a challenge. In the 1990s Black TV shows rapidly rose and fell on broadcast channels, which developed those shows to secure new audiences as cable siphoned away White viewers who could afford to pay for TV (H. Gray 1995). Cable picked up the slack in the late 1990s and early 2000s: HBO kicked off its ambitious programming with *Oz*, Showtime with *Soul Food* and *Resurrection Boulevard*, then *Queer as Folk* and *The L Word*, Logo with *Noah’s Arc*, and so on (Fuller 2010). Diversity also helps revive stale program slates, like when *Chappelle’s Show* reinvigorated Comedy Central or *Empire* and *Scandal* brought new life to stale old broadcast networks FOX and ABC. New TV platforms have caught on to the trend, with Netflix’s greenlighting the queer *House of Cards* and intersectional *Orange Is the New Black*, Amazon with *Transparent*, Facebook with *Quinta vs. Everything* and *Loosely Exactly Nicole*.

Series creators take risks by helping channels brand themselves and diversify, as corporations quickly lose interest when the money comes in (or does not come in fast enough). The cancellations of *Sense8* and *The Get Down* by Netflix, *Underground* by WGN and Amazon’s queer/feminist comedies *One Mississippi* and *I Love Dick* sent shock waves through diverse communities of TV fans (Adalian 2018). After years of demanding greater representation of queer people, women, and people of color in expensive dramas, fans were shocked to learn that the competitive TV environment was making networks risk-averse. Research from the Writers Guild of America and the University of Southern

California all show representation lagging behind and in front of the camera (Hunt 2016; Smith, Choueiti, and Pieper 2016). Without a solid base of producers, talent, and executives in Hollywood, sustainable development remains a challenge for creators large and small.

Fortunately, indie studios and networks have been creating new distribution opportunities and pipelines for talent. From popular online channels to newer networks and studios, the field is slowly opening for creatives who were historically locked out of the system. Simply put, straight, White, cisgender, middle-class able-bodied characters are everywhere on TV, and audiences looking for those stories have plenty of options. To get fans who are loyal to a channel's brand and stand out from the pack, the channel has to offer something different—and diversity fits the bill.

Signs of tides shifting are everywhere, starting with the success of studios developing intersectional programming—series about folks who share multiple non-normative identities along lines of race, gender, class, sexuality, disability, and so on. Issa Rae has been making waves outside HBO and *Insecure*, continuing to release new programs on her YouTube channel, producing an original queer podcast called *Fruit* with the podcast app Howl, and partnering with Columbia Pictures to bring new writers to Hollywood. There has also been evidence of studio interest in intersectional stories. Former talent agency executive Charles King started a production company called MACRO to create a pipeline for cross-platform multicultural programming. Perhaps more exciting is the presence of small indie networks operating outside the mainstream studios that are focused on helping creators build audiences for shows to speed the process of development by bigger players. Women and people of color working in Hollywood are starting their own channels to bring new writers to development. Director Ava DuVernay started a film collective called ARRAY for Afrodiasporic film. The LGBT film distributor Wolfe Video transitioned from distributing VHS and DVD to creating an online streaming platform called WolfeOnDemand. Comedians Horatio Sanz and Fred Armisen started Más Mejor, a digital comedy studio that focuses on cultivating Latinx voices. Actress Elizabeth Banks started a digital platform for female comedians called WHOHAAAA, and actress Erika Alexander started a production company called Color Farm.

Outside the industry's supply chain, channels are often more explicitly intersectional. Not content to wait for production funds from corporate-backed networks and celebrities, indie entrepreneurs are starting their own channels and winning over subscribers with programs they can't get consistently on bigger platforms. Black&Sexy TV was among the first. An outgrowth of Dennis Dortch's debut feature *A Good Day to Be Black and Sexy*, the channel was one of the biggest subscription channels on Vimeo's OTT ("over the top") platform, which creates an app for channels across connected TV devices. Black&Sexy consistently put out new programs, many of them with twenty-minute episodes and with characters who show up across different series. SLAY TV launched, courting queer and trans viewers with new and existing series. Joining SLAY are Revry TV, which has been doggedly working to produce and license diverse LGBT programming, along with Dekkoo, Between Women TV, and Tello films.

It remains to be seen whether new indie distributors can stick around. Historically, indie distribution online is much harder than indie production, because fans want access to libraries with syndicated series and movies, which are expensive. Netflix spends billions of dollars on licensing Hollywood movies and TV shows each year to keep its subscribers. Most indie networks can barely cover production of original programming and license series (many of which are already online free) for a cut of revenue or minuscule fees. Moreover, Hollywood historically sees diversity as a "fad," a way to generate buzz and interest in periods of media transition, as scholar Jennifer Fuller has argued. The Black sitcoms from the late 1980s and early 1990s mostly premiered on broadcast networks as White viewers "fled" to cable. Now diversity is back again as networks slowly transition from linear cable to on-demand networked distribution.

Indie Producers Forge New Paths to TV

Another important shift allowed by digital media is that individual producers no longer have to wait for channels and incubators to take notice—they are able to organize their own productions, take them directly to audiences, and even orchestrate a network pickup. To learn more about what it takes to find success through this difficult route, I

share the story of Fatimah Asghar and Sam Bailey producing and releasing *Brown Girls*, an intersectional web series.

Some of their insights can be generalized to broadly help underrepresented communities take control over their media. These include: Tell a story that has never been told on TV and make sure it reads as sincere to the people represented and cuts across identities. Represent community in front and behind the camera. Treat production, writing, directing, design, and music as crafts in conversation with the everyday lives and artistry of the communities you're representing. Keep fans updated on social media from production through release. Solicit coverage in publications relevant to that community. Premiere in the city or cities where there is demand to see your story and plan to engage viewers on social media by watching the story with them in real life.

Yet there is also much to be learned from the specifics of their story and the decisions these two women made each step of the way. After premiering on February 15, 2017, on *Elle* magazine's website and in over a dozen cities worldwide amid a torrent of advance press, *Brown Girls* was sold to HBO in one of the fastest acquisitions I had seen in ten years researching web TV. It proved how developing artists at small-scale can position them for big-scale development. OTV | Open Television, an intersectional platform I started in Chicago, helped Sam develop two seasons of her first series, the Gotham Award-nominated *You're So Talented*, contributing production funds through non-exclusive licensing (allowing Sam to keep her intellectual property), organizing screenings in Chicago, and assisting with online marketing. As Sam grew into her position as a director, producer, and marketer of her work in Chicago and online, she was able to put these skills to great use with *Brown Girls*. They didn't need much of my help. The *Brown Girls* sale is clear evidence of the power of telling diverse stories in a "peak TV" market. Most of the work of indie production is hidden, as Stuart Cunningham (2013) writes of cultural innovation generally. Intersectionality makes this work even more difficult to know. This is how they did it.

Financing and Pre-Production

Fatimah invited me and Sam to a reading of the script in early 2016. I could instantly hear how Fatimah's natural, humorous, and crisp

dialogue would translate beautifully on-screen. With Sam in the room as a potential director, I knew that the series would be gorgeous. Already I could see Fatimah making a crucial decision that eventually helped the show when it was released: all characters with speaking roles had to be people of color. There are so many great actors who rarely have the chance to play complex characters, and the series would showcase them in an act of solidarity with communities who have been excluded from Hollywood. A number of media outlets picked up on this and it became a selling point of the show.

Financing is always a challenge, but they used every available resource in their cities. *Brown Girls* was primarily funded by a grant from the Voqal Fund, which is administered by Chicago Filmmakers and specifically supports digital work made in Chicago. The team crowdfunded almost all the rest of the budget, with OTV offering minor financial support.

Production

Another selling point was that most of the crew were women, queer, or POC-identified. When *NowThis Her* covered *Brown Girls* right before its release, it mentioned this fact, and the video was seen over 2 million times on Facebook (“New Web Series” 2016). Sam has spoken extensively about how behind-the-camera diversity actually improves the artistry of what is being made, not only because there are tons of talented crew but also because it can help bring out great performances. As Sam told *Okayplayer*, “To the best of my ability, I try to make sure the people in my production crew mirror the story they’re helping to tell in front of the camera. . . . I wanted the actors to feel like they were entering a safe space to tell this story without being exoticised or judged” (K. Clark 2016). Because of this, they emphasize the importance of getting the word out about production before and during shooting. *Brown Girls* had just a temporary title card before shooting, but armed with this and a strong pitch, they were able to crowdfund for the remainder of the budget. Crowdfunding is never easy, but it allows producers to identify key supporters and fans before the release.

During production, Sam and the team worked to create a distinct world. They shot in Pilsen, a predominantly brown though rapidly

gentrifying neighborhood in Chicago. The wardrobe, from Vincent Martell of VAM, and production design, from Suzannah Linnekin, specifically and artfully represented the complex lives and worlds of the two leads.

Post-Production

The music of *Brown Girls* is intimately tied to the story and the artistry and narratives of women of color. The central friendship is loosely based on that of Fatimah and Jamila Woods, a Chicago-based poet and singer whose album *Heavn* comprises the bulk of the soundtrack. Jamila's stunning album, named one of NPR's fifty best albums of 2016, serves as the perfect score as it is rooted in Black feminism. For the trailer, which dropped in the fall of 2016, Jamila collaborated with Indian artist Lisa Mishra for an original theme song that perfectly reflects the bond between Black and brown women that is the core of the story. Indeed, the team knew in pre-production that they would be able to add Jamila's music in post-production, allowing the show to feel integrated.

Marketing and Exhibition

When the team released the trailer, they reached out to writers from publications specifically focused on brown people and women. From those few articles in outlets like Black Nerd Problems, Role Reboot (a feminist site), and Remezcla (a Latinx site), the mainstream press started to pick it up. *Brown Girls* eventually gained coverage from over fifty publications, including *Time* and the *Guardian*. Filmmakers always seek mainstream press, but after seeing where the views were coming from, I can say that targeted press is helpful in many ways. Sites like Remezcla, as well as queer publications like *Out* magazine and *Autostraddle*, drove more traffic than bigger sites like Vice and NBC.

Indie creators innovate in how they handle press. OTV has had a lot of success coordinating exclusive premieres with various sites, where trailers and episodes are viewable only on specific websites for a limited time. With so much competition for attention online, media outlets want exclusive content, and indie creators need viewers who come from their communities. *Brown Girls* premiered a scene from one episode

exclusively with *Out* magazine, and premiered the first episode exclusively on *Elle* magazine's website. After releasing the trailer, Fatimah also reached out to her personal network and asked friends to help spread the word. The result was that artists hosted screenings in sixteen towns and cities internationally on the night of its release—including premieres in New York, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Seattle, Rincón, and London. *Brown Girls* premieres showcased the talents of brown women, with artists across disciplines of dance, comedy, and music performing and attracting crowds. The premieres also featured local vendors who were women of color selling jewelry and T-shirts.

The premieres helped #BrownGirlsTV soar to the number two trending Twitter hashtag in Chicago on the night of its release, beat out only by tweets about the TV show *Star* on FOX. The creative team asked a couple of friends to live-tweet the day of the premiere, notably poet and University of Chicago professor Eve Ewing. Recruiting fans who were already known among the communities being represented to talk about the show the day of its release was key, but many of the tweets for *Brown Girls* also came from everyday fans who connected with key moments in the show and expressed their enthusiasm by posting GIFs and pics.

Conclusion: Measuring Success in Intersectional Storytelling

While all of this was happening, Sam and Fatimah were taking meetings in Hollywood. As we can see from their story, their success can be connected to a number of factors. First and foremost, I credit their success to their incredible talent and artistry, but it was also clear that they very intentionally worked to serve communities that are underrepresented. In a “peak TV” environment where hundreds of TV series are being released every year by major corporate networks, serving the underserved is a viable strategy for calling attention to these works. It is also a critical practice at a time when so many communities with intersecting struggles are fighting for their legitimacy and right to exist.

Their story helps us to see what can happen when filmmakers and creative people—whatever their race, gender, sexuality, class, citizenship status, or ability—support one another. It truly takes multiple communities to advance the art and business of TV. We need new stories from new writers who have been excluded, and media industries desperately

need to diversify intellectual properties by investing in new writers. Diversity programs are one way to prevent complete exclusion, but only pipelines with funding can help television distributors survive the competitive TV landscape. In an ever-diversifying America, this is a smart move not only for achieving long-term success, but also for combating our hate-filled political climate.