Producing Filmed Entertainment

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In recent years, the costs of producing and distributing media have dropped so steeply that anyone with access to an iPhone and the Internet can produce and distribute a short film or webisode for a few dollars. Concurrently, there has emerged a cacophony of voices that loudly trumpet the possibilities for fame and fortune in this brave new digital world. Yet in spite of such marketing promises and technological possibilities, the opportunities available to those hoping to make a living from producing feature films and television series remain elusive at best. By no means has the ease of online distribution translated into workable business models. Nor, in most instances, has the ability to gain an online audience enabled individuals to build careers in the traditional film and television industries. Indeed, the lowered barriers to entry and simultaneous proliferation of content have only made it more challenging for both media companies and individuals to profit from their creations.

Factors such as growing piracy enabled by the diffusion of broadband, ever-mounting production and marketing costs, the stagnation of the DVD market, the continuing fragmentation of the media marketplace, and the broader global economic crisis have placed long-standing business models for fictional film and television in jeopardy. The fragility of these business models, in turn, has contributed to heightened instability and uncertainty for media producers. Consequently, those in charge of managing commercial media productions have employed several measures in their efforts to ensure the viability of their projects in the marketplace. This essay surveys four prominent strategies that those producing commercially oriented narrative feature films and prime-time television programs have used as a means of cutting costs while differentiating their content from “amateur” productions: (a) renegotiating relations with unionized labor or employing more nonunion staff; (b) adopting the most sophisticated, high-end production and postproduction technologies; (c) taking advantage of tax incentives and rebates offered in locations around the world; and (d) assessing the ability to effectively market projects across multiple platforms and media outlets before initiating production.
The focus here is on strategies employed by North American entities. However, given the transnational nature of production and distribution, the examples offered below easily apply to many other national and regional contexts. This essay illustrates how decisions made with regard to labor, technology, locations, and marketing are having a substantial impact not only on the opportunities and constraints facing those working in production but also on the types of commercial film and television content shown on various screens.

Labor

Most feature films and prime-time television series are developed by what trade publication Variety calls “indie prods” or independent production companies. While conglomerates or deep-pocketed investors typically provide the money and therefore retain the copyright to these projects, companies such as Jerry Bruckheimer Films (Cold Case; Pirates of the Caribbean) and Imagine Entertainment (24; Angels & Demons) oversee the actual development, production, and postproduction processes. Executives at media conglomerates such as Disney, Sony, Fox, Paramount, Time Warner, and Universal certainly provide ample creative input (or the much dreaded “notes”), but the scheduling, budgeting, hiring, and location scouting are typically undertaken by these so-called independent production companies. Offentimes production companies are actively involved in securing financing and advising on marketing as well. Such is the decentralized nature of production in the contemporary post-Fordist environment (Caldwell, 2008; Curtin, 1996).

This decentralized structure means that, with the exception of a production company’s core office staff, most film and television employees are hired on a project-by-project basis. In other words, most production workers labor for long stretches while a project is either shooting or in postproduction but then find themselves unemployed for varying lengths of time. Although relationships and reputation count in terms of getting the next job, that does not mean that those who work in production and postproduction will move smoothly from one position to the next. From 2007 to 2009, as the economic climate worsened and the threat of or actual strikes occurred, many production workers found themselves either without employment for longer stretches than usual or forced to take lesser-paying jobs to make ends meet. For example, in Los Angeles from January to March 2009, between 70% and 80% of technicians and film crew workers were unemployed (Gumbel, 2009).

The project-based nature of production has been standard for the film and television business since the breakdown of the studio system in the 1950s (Bordwell, Staiger, & Thompson, 1985). However, since the 1990s, this long-standing instability has been magnified due to the rise of digital technologies and the development of new program forms such as reality television and computer-generated animation. Whereas many of those fortunate enough to gain positions working in the production of fictional prime-time television series and studio-financed films are able to reap the benefits of guild and union protections (DGA, such as reality television projects, are not similar).

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One example of how the financial benefit of workers can be seen in actors, SAG and AFTRA. SAG has been the more significant film and distributed by projects undertaken by they cannot be shot on inferior by the industry series. However, by 200 for far less apparent, and lucrative arena of prime

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union protections (DGA, WGA, IATSE, etc.), many working in newer fields such as reality television series and animated films, as well as “indie” feature projects, are not similarly protected.5

Even the protections offered by union or guild memberships are far less than they used to be. This is in large part because the organization that acts on behalf of the media conglomerates, AMPTP,6 has successfully employed a “divide and conquer” strategy in its negotiations with labor organizations. Each union or guild meets with AMPTP on a separate timeline, thereby weakening their ability to bargain collectively. For example, in the latest round of contract negotiations, the WGA wrangled first with AMPTP, followed by the DGA, then AFTRA, and then, more than a year later, SAG.4

One example of how contentiousness between labor unions has worked to the financial benefit of the conglomerates and to the disadvantage of media workers can be seen in the way the two major organizations representing actors, SAG and AFTRA, negotiated with AMPTP in 2008–2009. For decades, SAG has been the more powerful organization. Any projects that are shot on film and distributed by AMPTP companies have to be SAG signatories. Any projects undertaken by AFTRA have to be shot electronically (in other words, they cannot be shot on film). For as long as digital technologies were viewed as inferior by the industry, SAG retained the advantage on prime-time television series. However, by 2008, the distinctions between film and digital video were far less apparent, and thus SAG’s past advantage, especially in the particularly lucrative arena of prime-time television, was no more (Littleton, 2009b).

Significantly, AFTRA’s greater willingness to sign a contract before SAG would settle had an impact not only on the broader labor market but also on industry-wide production practices, technological choices, and television aesthetics. AFTRA’s eagerness to settle quickly and for less favorable terms than those pursued by SAG meant that those producers shooting pilots in 2009 opted to use AFTRA contracts. In doing so, producers committed themselves to shooting these series digitally for the length of the series’ run.6 In effect, AMPTP members bypassed SAG and proceeded apace with their television season. AMPTP was able to weaken SAG’s power at the same time that it lowered its own production costs.7 Costs were lowered not only because AFTRA’s terms were seen as more favorable by AMPTP but also because shooting digitally is both less expensive and more efficient than shooting on film.8

At the same time that production companies have kept their costs down by employing these types of complicated labor negotiations, they have also limited their expenses on other projects by increasingly turning to nonunion labor. The protections offered to those in newer areas such as reality television, special effects, and animation are significantly less than those available to older professions such as cinematography and editing. Yet digital effects and reality TV are among the fastest-growing areas of work in commercial media production. As a result, along with entry-level assistant positions, these areas are where many of those fresh out of film school begin their careers. Initially, the opportunity to work on a major commercial production may sound seductive to many young and eager filmmakers-to-be. And, in fact, on
occasion these positions do pay reasonably well. However, the 80-plus-hour workweeks of repetitive, often mind-numbing labor prove incredibly draining. Further, jobs in many of these newer areas, especially reality television, are viewed with disdain by some working in other sectors of the industry (e.g., fictional series television). This makes it even more challenging for those breaking in through many of the newer areas to transition into other, more prestigious—and unionized—forms of work.

While the promise of ascending to higher levels of management entices some to forge ahead, others burn out well before they reach their 30s. The lack of union support for these newer fields makes them even more precarious. Even more troubling is the always-lingering possibility that this type of work will be “outsourced” to other countries. Animation and special effects work are particularly likely to shift to other parts of the United States or beyond U.S. borders depending on the rebate and incentive programs on offer at a given time.

With more and more fields of work lacking protection, a caste system in production has become even more prominent in late. There are significant economic and cultural schisms not only between different types of labor but also between older and younger workers in the same field. Some media analysts believe that this structure, in which an extremely small number of individuals earn stunning sums of money while the rest struggle, might become still more magnified in the ensuing years as more content shifts to online distribution (McNary, 2008; Simmons, 2009). This is the case for a variety of reasons, including a decrease in the number of union productions, smaller residuals on offer through new media outlets than via traditional syndication, and lower pay scales for online video relative to traditional media. Cumulatively, the emerging situation threatens to further diminish the “middle class” of media makers.

**Technology**

In addition to these mounting stresses placed on labor, production workers face the additional pressure to become or remain conversant in the latest technologies. While it may be easier than ever for one person to develop, shoot, and edit a production on his or her own with low-end equipment, large-scale productions require keeping up with the newest technologies (e.g., new HD, or high-definition, cameras or the latest editing programs). One must be able to commit both time and money to attend training workshops, trade shows, markets, and festivals to keep abreast of the latest resources and to cultivate contacts for future work.

Recently, media companies have placed a growing emphasis on newer technologies such as HD and 3-D as a means of product differentiation, thereby making greater demands on workers and companies alike. Producers and conglomerates have increasingly recognized that motion pictures targeted for theatrical release need to “show” their production values through 3-D as well as more elaborate special effects. Some companies, such as DreamWorks Animation, producing all future titles, have been willing to pay to see more opportunities because it is the most up-to-date types of films at the box office.

Movies that don’t profit have been a central factor. Paramount Vantage (Time Warner), and Fox (Universal), Miramax (Lions Gate) output. Meanwhile, Miramax released 37 films in 1995, Sony released 31.

A reduction in out Certainly the opportunity for better-paying employments has long been a concern. However, these developments are well-payed employment challenging. Though perhaps ever been, espec Channel, Sony Picture: leverage over sellers. / number of buyers, men paycheck as small as $ to compensate those who deferred compensation. Could be struck down 13 days, however (Swatt &
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Some companies, such
as DreamWorks Animation (Monsters vs Aliens, 2009), have committed to
producing all future theatrical films in 3-D (Debruge, 2009a). A widely
held belief is that by heightening the spectacle in films, moviegoers will be
willing to pay to see movies in theaters. This emphasis impacts employment
opportunities because it both necessitates that media workers be conversant
in the most up-to-date technologies and leads to the production of certain
types of films at the expense of others.

Movies that don’t prove viable for effects and 3-D, such as the “indies” that
have been a central focus of specialty divisions like Miramax and Fox
Searchlight, have become less important to media conglomerates in the 2000s
(McClintock, 2009). During 2008–2009, several conglomerates shut down or
significantly reduced the number of releases coming from their specialty divi-
sions. Paramount Vantage, Warner Independent (Time Warner), Picturehouse
(Time Warner), and Fox Atomic (News Corp.) were closed while Focus
(Universal), Miramax (Disney), and New Line (Time Warner) all reduced their
output. Meanwhile, many of the big-budget divisions of the conglomerates
reduced the number of films they financed as well. For example, in 1995,
Disney released 37 films; in 2008, the number had declined to 19. Similarly, in
1995, Sony released 31 films; in 2008, the number was down to 18.

A reduction in output, of course, translates to a reduction in jobs.
Certainly the opportunities for earning a living by working on motion picture
production have long been far more limited than those available in television.
However, these developments promise to make finding employment—especially
well-paying employment—in the theatrically oriented film business even more
challenging. Though production in the low-budget film scene is as vibrant as
it has ever been, specialized distributors such as the Independent Film
Channel, Sony Pictures Classics, and Magnolia typically have substantial
leverage over sellers. A high supply of films, combined with a shrinking
number of buyers, means that those making films often celebrate receiving a
paycheck as small as $10,000 (Horn, 2009). Such a sum is scarcely enough
to compensate those who worked on these projects, many of whom either
deduct compensation or were paid scale in the hopes that a lucrative deal
could be struck down the road. Such deals remain few and far between these
days, however (Swart & Holdsworth, 2009).

Locations

Even as media companies attempt to lower costs by curtailing production and
acquisitions, they also try to reduce budgets by taking advantage of incentive
programs offered by different cities and countries around the world.

Though film productions have been shot on location for decades, television
production was, until the 1990s, largely centered in the Los Angeles area
(and, to a lesser extent, New York). However, this began to change as a wide
range of places started to offer more aggressive tax rebates and production
credits in an effort to entice companies already panicked by rising budgets.
Among the states that have approved these incentives are Massachusetts, Hawaii, Texas, Rhode Island, and Louisiana. Such programs appear to have worked in drawing productions away from Southern California. In the 2009 pilot season alone, 42 of the 103 television pilots were shot outside of Los Angeles. Overall, the production of pilots has declined by nearly 42% since 2005 (Littleton, 2009a). Similarly, the number of big-budget feature films shot in Los Angeles went from 71 in 1996 to 21 in 2008 (Gambel, 2009).14

Many projects have left the United States altogether. British Columbia, in particular, has benefited from runaway production activities. In 2009, it trailed only Los Angeles and New York in production days. Further, 75% of its projects came from the United States (McDonald, 2009). Movies such as Watchmen and The Incredible Hulk and television series such as Smallville and Battlestar Galactica were lured to Canada by the lower costs associated with shooting there.

At times, incentive programs can be seen as diversifying the types of stories told and images shown on screen; programs like Friday Night Lights (Texas), Burn Notice (Miami), and In Plain Sight (New Mexico) readily exploit their distinctive settings in their narratives. This is less true with many Canadian productions, which often strive to make their locations look like Anywhere, USA. In addition to introducing more varied landscapes and settings, location shooting often brings money into new communities and strengthens the base of below-the-line workers in new regions.15 However, runaway production also proves problematic because it further heightens job insecurity for below-the-line workers. Those based in traditional production locales such as New York or Los Angeles have witnessed many of their jobs move out-of-state or out-of-country. Meanwhile, those within any other locality benefit only for as long as the incentive program remains in place. Should a given state or region adjust its incentive program, producers will often swiftly move on to the next cost-effective locale—taking along most of the job opportunities they brought with them.

In general, the shifts in financing and production practices associated with the growth of incentive programs further heighten the instability being felt by those involved in film and television production. Whether one resides in a major production center such as Los Angeles or the latest hot spot such as Michigan (where producers have been seduced by a substantial 42% tax rebate), workers are forced to figure out ways to sustain themselves during unpredictable down periods (Egan, 2009).16

Creating and Marketing a Multimedia, Multiplatform Identity

There are two notable ways that some have responded to the industrial shifts discussed here. First, many people increasingly balance better paying commercially oriented projects (often of the high-concept variety) with lower-paying

Chapter 13 Producing

“projects of passion.” And assistant director or on weekends, they're on a small-scale but artsy and commerce are raters. The dream always that next “little indie” film is the future project.

Even if such projects local competitions, they build up or diversify the more long-standing ins in triple roles on a given project might seem counterintuitive ever before for amateur projects with minimal for the most part, rigid areas of professional fit and organizations con varied reasons. These ever-more fragile and resources, have little changes. Thus the one serve the highly specia while developing a d financially sound, new

Second, many people the kinds of work they volume). Given the number of jobs available move up the busines but the primary means by and television industry relate to specific tasks to specific types of w. comedies), It is import but must be able to through self-promoting networking events (e.; also Charles H. Davis. Significantly, the gpa continued by the expan... Thus, another rapidly and postproduction h
“projects of passion.” Often individuals will work at a lower level (e.g., second assistant director) on a well-financed project. Then, during their off time or on weekends, they will take on a more prominent role (e.g., primary editor) on a small-scale but artistically ambitious project. As this description indicates, art and commerce are often compartmentalized by contemporary media workers. The dream always remains, of course, that the “side project” will turn into that next “little indie that could,” thereby enabling greater autonomy and originality in future projects.

Even if such projects fail to gain any traction beyond the festival circuit or local competitions, they frequently become a way for industry workers to build up or diversify their credits and résumés. At present, guild or union rules and long-standing institutional traditions frequently prohibit working in multiple roles on a given project (e.g., both grip and first assistant director). This might seem counterintuitive considering that it is now more possible than ever before for amateur media makers to write, produce, and edit their own projects with minimal expense and little assistance from others. Nonetheless, for the most part, rigid hierarchies remain in place in most of the established areas of professional film and television production. “Old media” institutions and organizations continue to perpetuate the cultivation of single skill sets for varied reasons. These include older generations fighting to protect their own ever-more fragile turf and managers who, already pressed for time and resources, have little ability or desire to implement substantive structural changes. Thus the onus is placed on individuals to simultaneously be able to serve the highly specialized demands of older (often better-paying) companies while developing a diverse set of skills for promising, but frequently less financially sound, new media operations.

Second, many people are increasingly trying to “brand” themselves and the kind of work they do (see also Chris Hackley and Amy Tiwsakul, in this volume). Given the ever-expanding supply of labor and the shrinking number of jobs available, it has become imperative for those aspiring to move up in the business to cultivate a clear identity for themselves. This identity can begin to be crafted from early experiences in internships, which are the primary means by which individuals begin their careers within the film and television industries. The particular brand identity one develops can relate to specific tasks (e.g., trained on high-end effects software) as well as to specific types of work (e.g., skilled at polishing dialogue for romantic comedies). It is important to add that one cannot simply possess these skills but must be able to show others that he or she possesses such abilities through self-promotion via social networks (e.g., LinkedIn) and in-person networking events (e.g., local film and television association meetings; see also Charles H. Davis, in this volume).

Significantly, the growth of transmedia storytelling has, of late, been accompanied by the expansion of transmedia marketing practices (Jenkins, 2005). Thus, another rapidly expanding area for those seeking work in production and postproduction has been in generating promotional content—trailers,
promos, Web sites, and so on—designed to support or tie in to large corporate media brands across a variety of platforms. For those looking for some degree of stability in media production, one of the safer areas to focus on would be the creation of promotional materials (see also Chris Bilton, in this volume).

To a certain extent, an emphasis on "personal branding" fits in with the ongoing emphasis on branding that has developed throughout the media industries in the last few decades. Companies (Syfy, Bravo) and projects (American Idol, Batman) cultivate brands as a means of breaking out of the clutter. In this commodified landscape, why wouldn't media workers be expected to behave in the same way?

It might seem odd to conclude with an emphasis on the importance of marketing to those working in production. Yet regardless of whether one is speaking of a company, a project, or a person, selling has become ever more central from day one. Media producers have little chance of procuring production financing unless they anticipate and plan effective marketing strategies from the earliest days of a project’s development. Similarly, the prospects for media workers’ success in making films and television series are to a large degree dependent on their ability to establish a clear identity for themselves and their abilities both in person and online. Those individuals seeking to navigate the highly insecure terrain of contemporary film and television can benefit by recognizing the ways that marketability factors into both production—and hiring—decisions.

References


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1. In Holt and Perrin communication, media study the media industries are
2. DGA stands for America, and IATSE I Moving Picture Techni

 Territories, and Canada


Notes

1. In Holt and Perren (2009) 21 prominent scholars with backgrounds in communication, media studies, and cultural studies survey the key reasons why and how the media industries are facing intensified instability and uncertainty.

2. DGA stands for Directors Guild of America, WGA for Writers Guild of America, and IATSE for International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, Moving Picture Technicians, Artists and Allied Crafts of the United States, Its Territories, and Canada.
3. The minimum rates available for members of each union are available on their respective Web sites. For example, see http://www.sag.org/content/theatrical-film-contracts.

4. AMPTP stands for the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers. This name is a bit misleading, as the organization actually represents the interests of the major media conglomerates, not producers per se. Among the interests that AMPTP represents are Fox, Paramount, Disney, Sony, Warner Bros., CBS, and Universal.

5. AFTRA stands for American Federation of Television and Radio Artists; SAG for Screen Actors Guild. AFTRA members approved their deal in July 2008; SAG members in June 2009. For key moments in the negotiations, see Variety (2009).

6. The only way a production company could sign later with SAG is if it switched to shooting on film (Littleton, 2009b).

7. Approximately $20,000 per episode can be saved by shooting digitally. Furthermore, more footage can be shot and there is no delay between production and post-production because no time is needed for film processing (Littleton, 2009b).

8. As of July 2009, SAG had 120,000 members while AFTRA had 70,000. There are 44,000 dual SAG-AFTRA members. Though both SAG and AFTRA cover certain areas of television and new media, the most notable differences are that AFTRA doesn’t cover theatrical motion pictures and SAG doesn’t cover radio. SAG historically has covered predominantly prime-time television series, while AFTRA has covered much of daytime television. For a discussion of the contentiousness between the two organizations, see McNary (2009).


10. For a discussion of some of the job hunting strategies being used by film and television workers, see Debruge (2009b), Garrett (2009), and Smith and Forson (2009).


12. An emphasis on spectacle is also perceived as one means of combating piracy.


14. For the first quarter of 2009, only two big-budget studio films, Iron Man 2 and Alice in Wonderland, were shot in Los Angeles.

15. Often above-the-line crew members only remain in a city for the duration of the shoot.

16. Though Michigan’s incentive program has helped attract a number of productions, including HBO’s Hung (2009– ) and Paramount’s Up in the Air (2009), as of this writing, the program’s long-term viability remains in question. Michigan’s economy has been particularly hard hit by the financial crisis, which has led some to call for a reduction or elimination of the incentive program. See Click on Detroit (2009).

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