



The Future of

As they like to say in advertising, the future is here. New media—whether you're striking for a piece of it, trying to leverage it to get your name on a studio's radar, or just posting clips that amuse you and your friends—has already changed the way we experience entertainment.

So, what does a shift to new media mean for writers? Will a proliferation of Web channels mean opportunity and cash for all, or just a greater dilution of the funds to develop them? Will it be easier to create great niche programming that suits niche interests—without fear of cancellation—or will independent voices still suffer from lack of resources and exposure? And how will the writers strike, a *Matrix*-like pause in Hollywood time, affect how industry institutions operate?

Script wanted to know as much as our readers, and here's what we found out.



Screenwriting

THE FUTURE OF DISTRIBUTION

Imagine a not-too-distant future where you, for a nominal fee, can have instant access to every piece of content ever created on any device, no matter its size or portability. Just like home video revolutionized distribution in the 1980s, the current digitalization of media means that great changes are on the horizon for all sides of entertainment: consumers, producers and writers.

Over the past few decades, consumers have been the beneficiaries of an ever-expanding number of choices. Television moved from three channels to 300, then added OnDemand and DVR services. Movie fans now have different types of theaters to frequent, as well as reasonably priced home-theater equipment. The Internet offers all levels of media, from amateur fare to studio-produced hits.

The future of distribution lies on the Internet, which will ultimately offer all producers—big and small—a relatively inexpensive (if not free) means to distribute their content. By sidestepping broadcast fees and retailer middle men, producers will be able to connect directly with the consumers of their media. The days of projects gathering dust on a shelf will be gone, as will the countless

number of unseen feature films waiting for distributor attention at festivals. There will be an unlimited amount of digital space for projects to live, and consumers' choices will be infinite.

Herein lies the problem. With an infinite number of choices, the future of distribution will shift from simply a means of physical delivery to the tactics employed to stand out from the crowd.

As every movie ever made becomes available for purchase (or rental) online, the attention of "new distributors" becomes essential. Already, thousands of titles are available via the Internet from Apple®, Amazon and Netflix. Even TV set-top box makers like TiVo® and Vudu are making digital distribution deals, allowing their customers easy access to different types of previously unavailable media. All of these services feature a user interface—no matter the device—and because the majority of consumers do not dig too deeply into menus and options, it is crucial that content be highlighted or featured.

Sure, blockbusters with budgets big enough to buy name talent and special effects will also buy big marketing campaigns. Independent



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What are some of the challenges of Web distribution?

"There are thousands of indie films made every year (27,000 is the estimate)—so, how do we know which ones to watch and which ones to skip? Though there will be some word of mouth on films, we'll need a website that tells us what's good ... or critics ... or there will be adverts ... or people will select the movies that have stars they have heard of. All of that takes us back to more or less traditional distribution and distribution issues. The more money you have for adverts or stars, the better the chance people will see

your movie. So, the big boys will still control the movies (no matter where and how we see them). The thing is, it's still going to be a market-driven biz—and the market would rather see *National Treasure* than *Atonement*. The niche market is going to be serviced by the Internet—people who want to see nudist Westerns will be able to see them. But they could probably Netflix those, now."

— William Martell
Scriptsecrets.net

"The problem with Web-only distribution is several-fold: Educating the creators on the facts of life regarding the Web; educating the creators on monetization, licensing, PR and marketing; re-evaluating the terms 'movie,' 'television' and 'Internet'—they are each different writing forms and require a different sense of storytelling and audience involvement; cluing the writer-creators in about the fact that volume of content (reliability) is just as important as

quality. Yes, there will be a huge hiccup in the theatrical business. The fact is that the independents whose budgets are cheaper and production schedules shorter have an opportunity to make just as big an impact on the Web as the studios can."

— Bill Cunningham
D2dvd.blogspot.com

producers, however, will be able to compete by gaining the approval of site editors—employees scouring the Web looking for videos to highlight. Whether on YouTube or Netflix, MySpace or NBC's Hulu, these content editors will become the new filters, providing the same service to consumers that movie theaters and TV networks do today: featuring the best and most relevant content available.

However, providing consumers ready access and the approval of a trusted filter will not be enough. In order to gain traction, projects must have the third component of distribution: buzz, or its online cousin, pass-along value. In the future, consumers will control the most important barrier to success—their willingness to share, write about, or interact with media.

The individual, armed with infinite media choices but finite time to consume them, will become more savvy to authentic motivations and talent, and word of mouth will determine a large percentage of total viewership. In this way, re-distribution will become as important as the original method of delivery.

Re-distribution currently takes the form of online social network activity, such as adding

to Facebook's mini-feed, posting messages on MySpace, or embedding YouTube videos across the Web. These types of digital interactions give the most influential community members the ability to contribute their own sweat equity to help spread the word.

As a case study, consider the online series *Quarterlife*, which was originally billed as the first TV-quality independent Web series. With the help of a traditional marketing and PR firm, *Quarterlife* debuted on the home pages of YouTube and MySpace. Thanks to the exposure, the first nine-minute episode netted well over 1 million views across the Web.

Yet, subsequent episodes of *Quarterlife* have not proven as buzz-worthy. On MySpace, where the series has a distribution deal for home-page exposure, the series has consistently broken 100,000 views per episode, but on YouTube, most episodes fail to top 30,000 views. One can only assume that on YouTube *Quarterlife's* viewers have not been enticed to re-distribute the show, which might have carried it beyond the reach provided by marketing and PR dollars.

The inconsistent size of *Quarterlife's* online audience is almost moot because its

marketing buzz garnered the attention of traditional media outlets: NBC picked it up and aired it in mid-February. This move could signal an exciting trend: online series with high enough production values to move directly to a big network. You can follow the continually developing story by looking at current trade magazines and blogs: *Quarterlife* is raising new issues related to show development and the measurement of success. (Will it be re-broadcast back to the Web on NBC's video site Hulu after it airs on TV? Oh, the irony!)

The future of distribution will lie in the marketer's ability to both make a project stand out in the crowd and mobilize its fans. For media corporations, money will give their projects a leg up by buying exposure on services like iTunes® or Netflix, but success will come from one's ability to fan the flames of millions of connected voices in hopes of creating a passionate fan base. Giving power to the consumers should embolden today's screenwriters because in the "future of distribution," writing talent, a good story, and a real connection to the audience will certainly win out over anything else.

