

# Debating the Future of Television

*By Karen Petruska*

6-8 minutes

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On April 4, the fifth Transmedia Hollywood conference opened under a new name—Transforming Hollywood—that perhaps signals a shift towards a broader examination of the various changes impacting the media industries in the digital age. Indeed, this year’s event, co-hosted by the University of California, Los Angeles and the University of Southern California, spent a good deal of time considering the economics of traditional and web-based television, from business models to funding sources to the ways consumers pay to access content. A pre-conference event was hosted by USC as part of its biannual “Geek Speaks” series, which focused this spring upon the women who write and produce television. Both events brought scholars and industry professionals together to explore key [challenges](#) facing the industry, with panelists agreeing that longstanding business models continue to exert a powerful control over the ways the television industry implements new technologies.

The [lineup](#) for the female-focused “Geek Speaks” was

particularly impressive, featuring Alexa Junge (*Friends*), [Felicia Henderson](#) (*Everybody Hates Chris*), Melanie Chilek (Hoff Productions), Julie Plec (*The Vampire Diaries*), Winnie Holzman (*My So-Called Life*), Jenny Bicks (*Sex and the City*), Meg DeLoatch (*Single Ladies*), and Robin Schiff (*Romy and Michele's High School Reunion*). When discussing why women suffer a profound gender disparity in terms of representation within the ranks of above-the-line employment (for examples, see [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)), the panelists acknowledged long hours as an impediment. For example, one writer noted that when her father passed away, she was given two days off; similarly, another writer admitted that her children hurt her professional standing because she could no longer commit the time required. As Julie Plec summarized, "This job takes everything." The second panel at "Geek Speaks" was raucous, with many of the women having mentored or otherwise supported each other professionally. This panel focused more upon story and viewers, with all the panelists bemoaning that even the most complex and inspiring female characters may be [read](#) by viewers through stereotypes, including the killjoy, the purified, and the neurotic. While many of the women shared depressing stories of the prototypical masculine writers' room, they also spoke with pride about their own efforts to create more open spaces in which staff writers are encouraged to express their individuality rather than merely mimic the showrunner's style and priorities.



Transforming Hollywood featured executives from distributors like Pivot, Amazon, BET, and YouTube and writer/producers from web series like *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* and *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* to discuss virtual entrepreneurship, [cord cutting](#), [connected viewing](#), and prominent independent web series (full list of panelists [here](#)). A number of the panelists are involved in programs airing on YouTube, and they developed a portrait of YouTube as a network affiliate, with an audience eager to view content on a schedule. Appointment TV, it seems, exists on YouTube as well, with viewers tuning in at the moment new webisodes go live. The panelists disagreed about the extent to which search engine optimization (SEO) drives content creation and production. One point to which everyone did agree: no one is making money off of YouTube yet. Instead, they value the site as a space in which to build a brand, for the program and the larger distribution entity, though all the executives hope some day to monetize YouTube in traditional ways. Broadly, the panelists discussing The Future of Television referenced the past, with their hopes for the future of *online* television looking a lot like current cable television's dual stream business model.

Vicky Free captured the persistence of crucial TV business structures when she noted, repeatedly, that her network BET monetizes television content through ratings data. Period. Online content provides other [values](#) (as a “multiplier effect”),

but it is not a lucrative revenue stream. Along these lines, panelists demurred about the financial value of fan activity —because engagement cannot be measured. As one panelist noted, “if we can’t quantify, we can’t monetize.” The following exchange highlights the sense of pessimism in the room in terms of identifying innovative ways to add financial value to web-distributed content. Ivan Askwith, an independent producer who developed the crowdfunding strategy for the *Veronica Mars* movie, offered some hope: “There are ways to monetize what we can’t [measure](#), but not if we are only monetizing ratings for advertisers.” Vicky Free drily replied, “good luck with that.”



While there was a lot of optimism about the growth of [web content](#) and distribution, a passion for structural innovation was lacking. No one voiced a desire to transform television in a significant manner. Those creating web series were content to be developing their programs in the traditional 22-minute format of a cable half-hour program, particularly as many aspire to use their web series as a launch pad to the networks. For example, Issa Rae is in talks with both ABC and HBO about possible series development, and a version of Black & White’s series, “The Couple,” is also in development with HBO. Joe Lewis of Amazon issued many quotable lines that expressed a desire to explore a range of new technologies--“to be the company that ignores things like Oculus is to be extinct”--yet he hedged when asked why Amazon has

not adopted the [binge model](#) of releasing all episodes at one time (he said viewers who want to binge can wait the few months until the series completes its initial run on Amazon). When I inquired if the relationship between traditional multi-system operators (cable companies) and online distributors was adversarial or aspirational (with the multi-channel networks [MCN] of YouTube hoping eventually to operate their own cable channels), the only answer the panelists were willing to offer was “I have no comment about that.” YouTube’s Jamie Byrne also informed the audience that his company was working with both Nielsen and ComScore to provide the same ratings data as they currently do for traditional television networks. In other words, the future of television is exactly what we have, just more of it.

To read @mediaindustries tweets from both events, you can view a Storify stream about Geek Speaks [here](#) and Transforming Hollywood 5 [here](#).