

Careers in TV and Film: The New Path

By Justin Beckett, CEO BTV247, Inc.

The beginning line of Charles Dickens' acclaimed novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times," appropriately describes the current environment for employment and career prospects within the Television and Film Industry.

It is the best of times in that newcomers and individuals outside of the industry's traditional hiring channels have been able to make significant headway and achieve impressive levels of success.

And yet, it is the worst of times in that the industry has been seriously staggered by the devastating one-two punch of technological evolution and a bad economy.

While the pages of *Variety* and the *Hollywood Reporter* are regularly filled with sobering accounts of the demise of some of Hollywood's old line "buggy whip manufacturers", YouTube has reached the impressive milestones of 1 billion video views and 200,000 video uploads per day.¹

Independently produced television and film programming has not historically perfectly fit Hollywood's traditional and simplistic formula for commercial success. However, the increasing regularity of independently produced break out hits like *Paranormal Activity* (which was made for only \$15,000 and yet by its 11th week in release had generated over \$107 million²) and *LonelyGirl15* (the all web production which earned its creators \$5 million of funding for their next project³) are confirming the commercial legitimacy of the scaled down independent production model.

In light of the aforementioned challenges facing the TV and Film industry, the number of entry level positions and traditional internships has decreased. However, this environment of disruptive change has created an unprecedented opportunity for the aspiring TV and Film professionals who have historically been overlooked by the industry.

To this end, it is critical that prospective new entrants not allow themselves or their opportunities to be limited by what may appear to be a classic chicken and egg employment scenario. In particular, while most industry employers would prefer to hire someone with experience, as a result of some of the challenges facing the industry today, most employers don't have the luxury to be as discriminating.

Subsequently, the advice for aspirant professionals is to **AGGRESSIVELY** pursue any opportunity to get in to the industry during this trough. For example, I have seen a number of instances within the last two years where individuals agree to volunteer on a 20 to 40 hour basis for 6-18 month frames at the companies or within the industry sector where they aspire to obtain long term employment.

¹ You Tube

² "Box Office Mojo", <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?page=weekend&id=paranormalactivity.htm>, 10 Dec 2009

³ Rafat Ali, "Lonely No More: Lonelygirl15 Production Company EQAL Gets \$5 Million Funding", [Paid Content](http://paidcontent.org/article/419-lonelygirl15-production-company-equal-gets-5-million-funding/), April 2008, 22 Dec. 2009 <<http://paidcontent.org/article/419-lonelygirl15-production-company-equal-gets-5-million-funding/>>

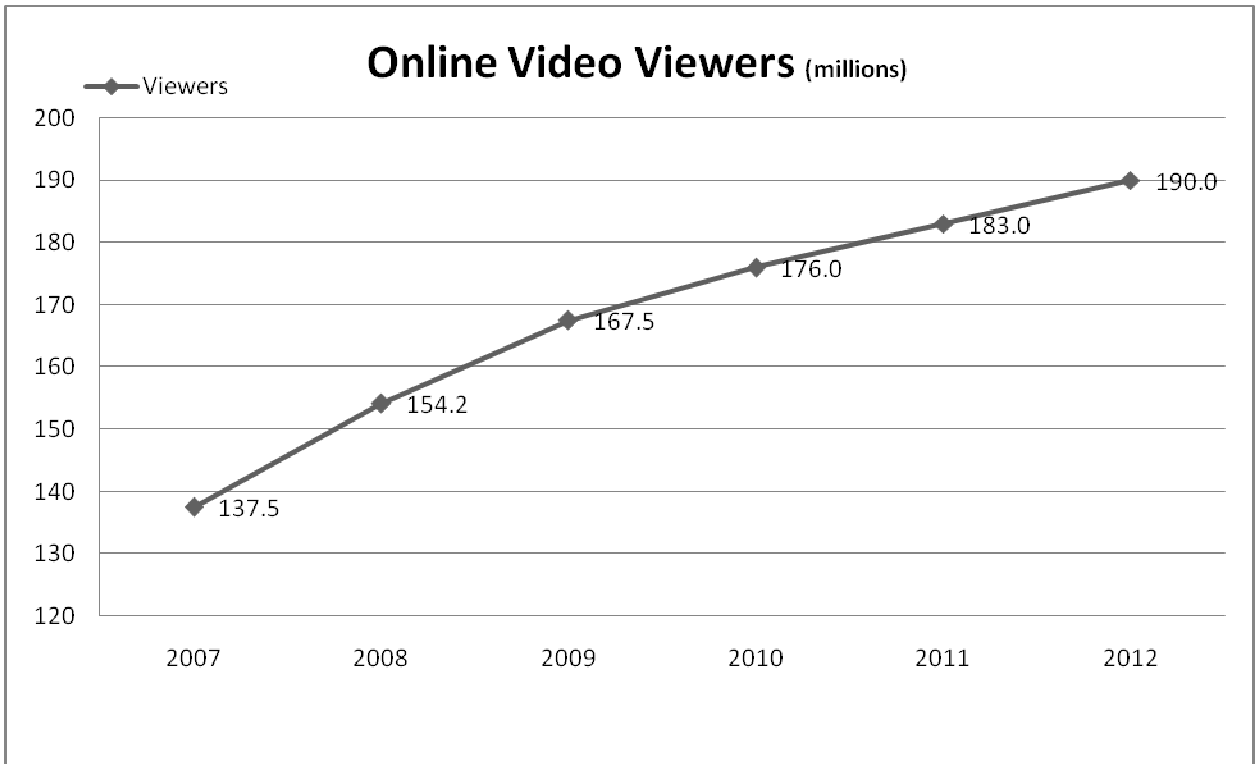
Obviously not everyone can afford to be this aggressive; however, I have seen this strategy work successfully more than a few times. Another suggestion is to join or form project specific skills collectives whereby various members of a production team contribute their skills in exchange for a percentage of any future potential revenue stream that is generated by the project. While this process is generally less of a time commitment than a 6-18 month, 20-40 hour volunteer internship, it does facilitate skills development and networking opportunity. This method's popularity is, while still providing skills development, largely related to its flexibility and generally cost effective construct.

I recently observed an independent film project where the entire cast and crew comprised a team of over 50 people. If this team were paid salaries during the two week shoot, the film's production cost would have reached the mid six figures. However, because of the writer/producer's charisma, credibility and the team's agreement to forego up front compensation, the entire project was produced for under \$20K. Another option that is becoming increasingly more popular are Internet-based courses and internships that are focused on the TV and Film industry.

The bottom line is that where once the mailroom was the only way into the industry for the privileged few, there are now a myriad ways for aspiring TV and Film professionals to obtain experience and get into the game.

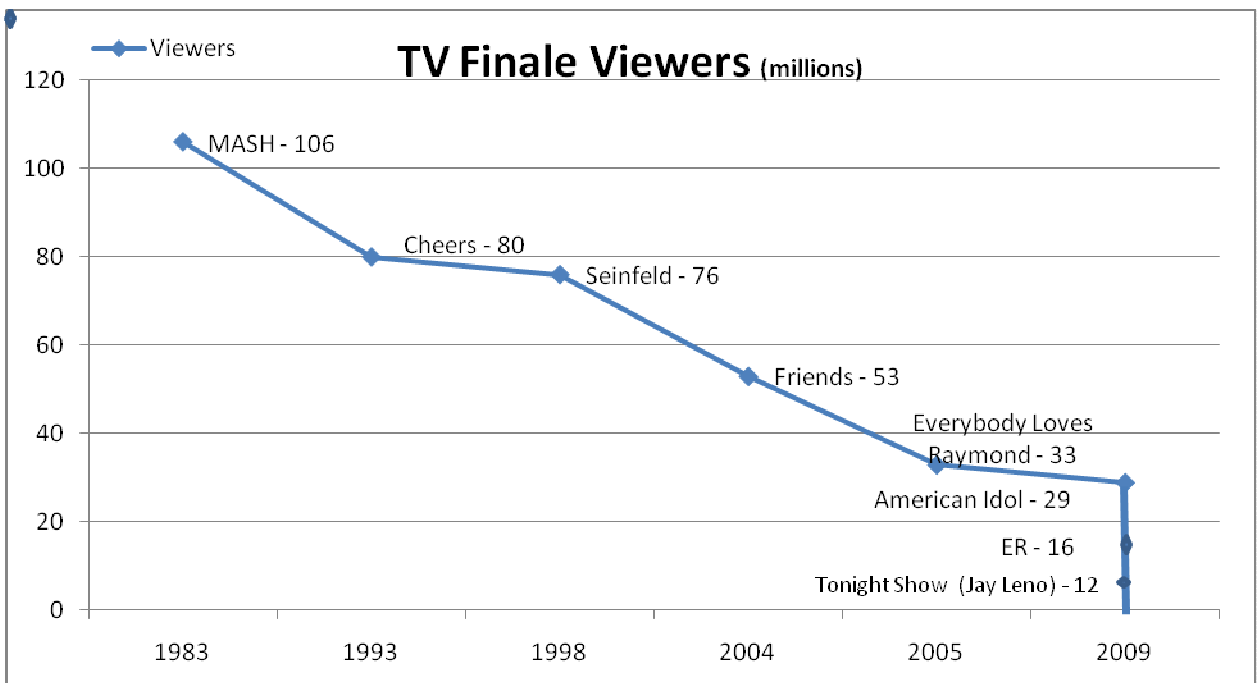
Things we know which will affect future careers in TV and Film

- As the first graphic below illustrates, the overall amount of video media consumed has increased. However, as the second graph below demonstrates, the actual size of viewing audiences has decreased.
- Historically, TV has represented a push distribution model (in that the programming decisions are primarily controlled by a limited number of TV networks who decide what audiences can see through their channels) however, the virtually unlimited network of Internet-based content providers have empowered the audience to the point where they can now watch what they want, when they want and how they want which has resulted in the creation of the audience driven Pull distribution model.
- It is unlikely that the increasingly more fragmented video distribution construct will ever revert back to the programming oligopoly known during the last 50 years of television.
- The independent production route is far more receptive to newcomers and individuals who have historically been excluded from mainstream production opportunities.
- There are an ever increasing number of independently produced programs and films that are achieving financial viability.



Source: eMarketer

Graph 1



Source: Wikipedia

Graph 2

Things we don't know that will affect future careers in TV and Film

- We don't know if the genie can ever get back in the bottle in that with audiences empowered to the point of customizing their own playlists, will they ever be interested in subjecting themselves to TV's push programming model again?
- Will the traditional studio and network revenue models survive the industry's current evolution?
- Will the new production and distribution models support the industry's historic revenue generation capability?
- Will the new production and distribution models result in a net neutral, net decrease or net increase in the total number of writing, editing, directing and producing professionals supported by the industry?

As previously stated, the evolution of technology has been a significantly positive occurrence for aspiring TV and Film professionals in that the industry's once formidable barriers to entry have been eliminated.

While the notable advancements in TV and Film facilitated by technological evolution are clearly evident, less evident but equally relevant is the impact that these advancements have had relative to the evolving human capital needs of TV and Film production. In particular, as the means for TV and Film production and distribution have become more streamlined and more cost efficient, so have the human resource requirements in that the size of the typical production crew has decreased. Subsequently, the need for functional dexterity is more relevant now than ever.

At a time when successful web series are being written, produced, directed, edited and distributed by one person production teams, aspiring TV and Film professionals are well served to maximize their functional dexterity by developing proficiency in as many areas as possible. And while mastering a specific skill set and becoming a specialist in a specific area is still encouraged, gone are the days where aspiring industry professionals should rely upon this route exclusively. Rather the successful TV and Film Executive of the future will be distinguished by both mastery in a limited number of areas and proficiency in a maximum number of areas.