

Jennifer Porst
Ph.D. Candidate, University of California, Los Angeles
jenporst@mac.com

Tweens, Teens, and In Betweens: The Legacy of the WB in Online Channels for Teens

To understand the legacy of the WB, we must look back to the imperatives that led to the network's creation. The WB launched in early 1995, largely in response to Warner Bros.' anxiety over the major networks' increasing in-house production as a result of the repeal of the fin/syn rules. Warner Bros. and Paramount were two of the biggest suppliers of programming for the networks, and the studios did not want to lose that significant business. So, in an attempt to provide guaranteed distribution and exhibition for their studio productions, Warner Bros. created the WB and Paramount created UPN. To fill their schedule, the WB relied almost exclusively on their own studio productions for programming. They targeted the teen audience because of Warner Bros.' enormous library of animated properties, and they saw Fox shifting to an older audience and leaving the younger audience behind.

The legacy, then, of the WB can be seen in the many TV websites that have sprung up with content that targets teen audiences. In the age of the internet, studios and independent producers can launch their own websites as a means of insuring distribution for their programming. This is especially relevant for producers targeting teen audiences because the internet shifted many younger viewers from television screens to their computers. By 2009, there were approximately 33 million teenagers in the United States and 1.2 billion teenagers around the globe, so the economic incentives for advertisers to reach those potential consumers is high.¹ Sites like Nick.com, CartoonNetwork.com, Teen.com (from the media giant behind teen-targeted hits like *Gossip Girl*), and YouTube's channels for teens like AwesomenessTV and the Young Hollywood Network, emulate the WB's combination of control over production, distribution, and exhibition, as well as their targeting of the youth audience.

AwesomenessTV, for example, launched in June 2012, and by mid-August had attracted twelve million views.² It was created by Brian Robbins, a veteran of the TV industry who directed and produced TV series for Nickelodeon and the CW, who has said he was inspired to create the channel by watching the behavior of his son as he shifted from the television screen to the computer screen. Robbins hoped AwesomenessTV would reach those teens and tweens that the networks have been finding it difficult to connect with lately. Venture capitalists seem to agree, as AwesomenessTV recently received a \$3.5 million investment. The investors were attracted to the economics of cheap production, virtually free distribution, advertising and product placement revenue, and potential licensing deals.³ As of late-September, only about four months after its launch, AwesomenessTV had 166,157 subscribers, and over 29 million video views.

One of AwesomenessTV's signature shows is "IMO," which features teen girls in a *The View* type talk-show format, where they discuss topics like BFFs and "Who has it easier: boys or girls?" They also include celebrity guests, like *Modern Family*'s Ariel Winter, as guest hosts and interviewees. Each episode usually lasts around five minutes in length – easily digestible for short attention spans or on mobile devices - and you can watch them here if you

want to chance getting addicted to their teenage enthusiasm:
<<http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLD30FEA940C89EA37>>

These sites are potentially even more valuable than traditional television because the interactive element of the internet has the promise of creating more dedicated and engaged consumers. One way these sites use interactivity is through their comments section. Often, viewers are explicitly asked to weigh in on a particular topic. Teens in particular are less reticent than older audiences about sharing personal information online, which makes them a potential goldmine for companies who collect valuable data on audience behavior. Advertisers can be especially excited about teens watching video online, because a recent study found that teens recalled ads better when watching television shows online than they did when watching them on television.⁴ The combination of engagement, willingness to share personal information, and improved recall of ads are a marketers dream!

So as more studios and independent producers launch their own channels on the internet, whether or not they know it, their driving motivations to insure the fiscal health of their business by owning their own means of distribution and exhibition, and their desire to reach that valuable teen and tween audience, follow directly in the footsteps of the WB network.

¹ Terdiman, Daniel. "What Websites Do to Turn on Teens." *Wired*. 08 February 2005.
<http://www.wired.com/culture/lifestyle/news/2005/02/66514>.

² "AwesomenessTV Provides Must-See Content for Tweens & Teens." YPulse.com. 10 August 2012. <<http://www.ypulse.com/post/view/awesomeness-tv-provides-must-see-content-for-tweens-teens>>.

³ Wong, Matthew. "VCs Tune In to YouTube Channels." *The Wall Street Journal*. 9 August 2012. <<http://blogs.wsj.com/venturecapital/2012/08/09/vcs-tune-in-to-youtube-channels/>>.

⁴ "How Teens Use Media: A Nielsen Report on the Myths and Realities of Teen Media Trends." The Nielsen Company. June 2009. Downloaded from:
http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/reports/nielsen_howteensusemedia_june09.pdf.