<u>"An Impermeable Structure": Minority and Female Employment</u>

Minority and Female Employment (or lack thereof) in the Television Industry
Alexis Carreiro, Queens University of Charlotte

"My career has only become what it has out of sheer need, not because I wanted it that way. I knew if I wanted to perform I was going to have to write it myself."
        -- Mindy Kaling; creator, writer, producer, and star of *The Mindy Project.*

Examining minority and female employment matters because stories are the fundamental building block of any society. Individuals, families, and communities know themselves through the stories they tell and the stories that are told about them. But who gets to tell the story? That's what this roundtable is really about. It's about who does—or does not—have the power to shape and disseminate stories (and ideology) in the media industry.

In its most archaic form, the American media industry is an elite and exclusive white, boys club. Without strong, interpersonal connections to anyone on the inside, breaking into it is no easy feat. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that women and minorities are at a distinct disadvantage when it comes to working in the media industry.[1] That may be one reason why they are turning to the Internet to produce their own indie web series like *The Slope* (by Desiree Akhavan and Ingrid Jungermann), *Uninspired* (by Becky Yamamoto), and *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl* (by Issa Rae)*.* Indie web series (from here referred to as IWS) allow producers (otherwise marginalized by the industry itself) to circumvent broadcast and cable outlets while simultaneously taking center stage.[2]

There are several benefits for minority and female creators to pursue an IWS in lieu of (or as a strategy toward) entering the corporate media industry. For starters, production costs are *much* lower than broadcast, cable, and other high-profile web series. According to CAA TV literary agent Peter Micelli, original content on Netflix costs at least 3.8 million an episode.[3] In contrast, many IWS creators can crowd-source their production costs on Kickstarter. Akhavan and Jungermann only needed to raise $8000 to fund the second season of *The Slope.*[4] This benefit also refers to costs related to marketing and promotion. According to Issa Rae, the creator of *The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl*, "Blogs also played a HUGE role in terms of spreading the word about our campaign… Many presented ABG as opportunity for viewers to put their money where their mouth was and support the change in media they wished to see."[5] As a result, she raised over $55,000 to fund the second season of her show.[6] Lower production costs equals lower barriers to entry which means more people can produce content and avoid broadcast and cable channels altogether. An additional benefit is that it allows creators to develop their unique voice (and

point-of-view) apart from corporate oversight. They have the chance to try out and test content without answering to anyone—except themselves and their fans.

Yet, for me, this leads to several questions.

Popular IWS are often short episodes *and* comedies. What do creators do when they want to branch out and tell longer-form and more dramatic content? Does the form (the Internet itself) constrict the content? What stories are we *not* hearing? Where might minority producers go to hone a different *type* of storytelling? Or, how might the major players *within* the industry work with IWS creators as a way to develop new content for TV?[7] What models could be developed for this type of partnership? Minorities and women have a lot to gain by selling their series to television companies but what, if anything, is lost as a result?

[1] Two recent reports that highlight this are the "Status of Women in the U.S. Media in 2014" from the Women's Media Center and the "2014 Hollywood Writers Report" from the Writer's Guild of America West.

[2] It is important here to distinguish between "indie" web series and, simply, web series. The non-celebrity-driven, indie series I discuss here are usually written, financed, produced, acted, directed, edited, and published by the same small group of people. In contrast, a web series like *House of Cards* (produced by Netflix) employs closer to 1000 people on the cast and crew and cost approximately $100 million for the first two seasons. (Rosenbaum, Steven. "Netflix's Risky Strategy For 'House Of Cards'" Forbes. February 5, 2013. Accessed August 1, 2013.)

[3] Wallenstein, Andrew. "Netflix Series Spending Revealed." Variety. Accessed August 18, 2014.

[4] "The Slope: Superficial, Homophobic Lesbians." Kickstarter. Accessed August 16, 2014.

[5] Rae, Issa. "How *Awkward Black Girl* Raised Over $44,000 Through Kickstarter." The Huffington Post. August 10, 2011. Accessed June 11, 2013.

[6] "The Misadventures of AWKWARD Black Girl." Kickstarter. Accessed August 18, 2014.

[7] Comedy Central's recent acquisition of *Broad City* (co-created by Abbi Jacobson and Ilana Glazer, and co-produced by Amy Poehler) may shed some light on this. It is currently in production on season two. Aymar Jean Christian provides a model for what this type of IWS-cable pipeline might look like here.