

Robert L. Johnson: Disrupting Content Distribution Enables Better Targeting of Niche Auds



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Technology as it interfaces with the conventional television set has eliminated, to a certain extent, the traditional gatekeeper model that has allowed very few strategic players to reach consumers. That creates a tremendous opportunity for producers to deliver content and monetize it in a number of ways, delivered to consumers in the format they want with a different economic model. And it will cause the rise of an unlimited number of producers, both professional and amateur, that will create new talent, new brands and new monetization models.

From my perspective, it is really back to the future in terms of what I did with Black Entertainment Television. BET came about, as well as other basic-cable channels like MTV and ESPN, because of technology—geostationary satellites positioned over the Earth. You could aggregate audiences that local (TV) stations couldn't aggregate. Out of that came huge brands and successful businesses. When I was starting BET, I had to do a pilgrimage to each cable operator, and they had to determine whether it was viable. I had to convince advertisers the product was worth it.

But with technology, the audience is really just one digital device, one click, away from going beyond the gatekeepers.

With the Urban Movie Channel, we can go to African-American creators who are grossly underemployed and underutilized in Hollywood. You don't need to go to the studios, who will say, "Gee, we'll only do five urban movies a year," or that they don't know how to promote the product. You just free up so many stories to be told.

There has never been a distribution path for African-American entertainment that was solely dependent on African-Americans paying for that content. Before, you needed to go through the cable operators. Previously, it would have to go through some level of censorship, because if Procter & Gamble didn't like it, you had to change it.

The consumer is the ultimate decider. If you don't recognize the technology disruption, you will definitely be a loser. Once you can stream to the TV with one click, it's over for people who don't embrace it.

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