

## **The web series as a form of script development: audience as content gatekeeper for Australian comedy creators**

### **Abstract**

This article argues that, for Australian comedy series creators, the web platform has opened a new space in which the ‘rules’ of script development are being expanded, enhanced or otherwise refashioned through having direct connection with and input from their audience. With the audience’s potential as a ‘comedy gatekeeper’, the web series has audience become integral to the ways in which these texts are developed, namely skipping the erstwhile second-guessing of demographic tastes by more traditional broadcast development executives and commissioners. Referring to a range of well-known Australian comedy web series, such as *Bondi Hipsters* and *The Katering Show* – including what their creators, writers and audiences have said about them – we investigate the processes behind the success of these series to argue that a new form of script development has emerged: namely, that development is both facilitated and influenced by the direct line that exists between comedy creators and their viewers. Furthermore, we suggest that through such a collaborative and open-access process of script development, comedy writers and performers might also benefit from an expanded form of talent development.

### **Keywords**

Web series – Webisode – Comedy – Script Development – Screenwriter – Australia

## Introduction

“While television was once defined by a broadcasting model where few spoke to many”, writes Whitney Monaghan, “it has rapidly moved into a post-broadcast era marked by increased choice, flexibility, mobility and greater diversity of representation” (2017, p. 83). Indeed, online viewing of Australian-made comedy content has emerged as a strong rival for Australian-made television (Tofler 2017, p. 1). During the 2016/2017 financial year, the Australian Government’s screen funding body, Screen Australia, funded over \$4 million for the development of online content, mainly comedy, through its Multiplatform Drama Program. (This was a drop from over \$5 million during the 2015/2016 financial year.) Online content supported through this program has been viewed over two billion times. For example, an episode of the Screen Australia funded series, *The Katering Show* (2015-2016), which satirised household item the Thermomix, was viewed by nearly 600,000 people in just five days, and at the time of writing has had over 2.4 million YouTube views. Collectively, content from Screen Australia’s *Skip Ahead* program (see below) has reached a global audience of more than 27 million via YouTube (Screen Australia 2017). In contrast, recent Australian television comedy, *Here Come the Habibs* (2016-2017), had an opening night viewership of only 1.249 million.

Viewing figures have a higher currency in the online world than the terrestrial world, and the phenomenal success of *The Katering Show* – which also received strong exposure from international web series festivals, winning awards and nominations at the Los Angeles ‘Streamys’, the New York TV Festival, and the Miami and Melbourne Web Festivals – led to a second series being co-funded by Screen Australia, state funding body Film Victoria, and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC); initially for ABC’s online platform, iView – Australia’s number one online television platform – and later ABC Television broadcast. More recently, a new series by creators Kate McCartney and Kate McLennan, *Get Krackin’*, screened on ABC Television.

The success and international visibility of *The Katering Show*, as well as other web series hits such as *Bondi Hipsters* (2011) and its television broadcast successor, *Soul Mates* (2014), raises important questions about the nature of script development; and by extension, when considering the role of the writer-performer that is particular to comedy, talent development. While, on the one hand, the web series might be conceived of as a *form of development* for broadcasters such as the ABC, on the other

hand, if the web series is considered an entity in its own right, we might position the web series as a work that is always *in development*, continually responding to audience feedback. In this way, the web series performs a complex role in the practice of script development, specifically in relation to web series audiences acting as ‘comedy gatekeepers’: they are the ones who, to some extent, decide what is funny and what should be produced, as opposed to more conventional gatekeepers such as script producers and development executives.

In this article, then, we position the comedy web series, arguably the most ‘shareable’ of screen genres (see Tofler 2017a; Berger and Milkman 2012), as a major player in the re-shaping of script content development in Australia. As Stephanie Van Schilt notes, while the structure of the web series form “lends itself to comedy rather than drama” (2014), it also offers an “experimental space filled with sharp observational humour and insightful explorations of the inconsequential moments of everyday life” (2014) that may very well appeal to audience tastes, and as a result, viewing habits. We argue that the web series is actively disrupting traditional practices of script development, skipping the traditional steps that second-guess the desires of an audience and instead drawing directly from viewer feedback.

Has the audience replaced gatekeepers such as development executives, programmers and commissioners? As Marilyn Tofler has observed, “new and innovative methods of commissioning screen comedy” have led to a type of new “audience authority over what receives the greater share of funding” (2017a, p. 2-3). We draw on various fields, themes and methods to help us achieve our argument. This includes understanding the role of the television pilot, and how the web series works within (or outside of) this tradition; deconstructing the practice of script development as it pertains to the web series, especially in relation to shifts in funding policy and opportunities; and examining the role of the audience in shaping the evolution of what emerges as their preferred comedy series.

### **The Australian Comedy Web Series and Script Development**

It is important here to note the lens through which we are primarily asking questions: that of script development. A practice that is central to the broader practice, and world, of screenwriting, but that is often hidden and/or unacknowledged (Batty et al. 2017; Conor 2014), script development allows us to understand not only the ‘what’ and ‘why’ of the comedy web series, but also the ‘how’. Briefly, script development

might include the various preparatory processes of bringing a comedy idea to the page – if, indeed, there is a written script. This might include creating memorable characters; building an appealing story world; plotting action and reaction; structuring theme; and for comedy in particular, dialogue or ‘gag’ polishing (where verbal humour is refined). Script development almost always includes the writing of multiple drafts, and in most professional instances also includes the writer’s incorporation of ideas, notes and changes from those in various executive or production roles. This is the step we argue is less entrenched in the development of comedy scripts for the web. As Amar Christian argues of the web series, or what he has termed open or networked television, the protocols arise from the medium, which in the case of the internet “is digital, on demand and peer-to-peer, meaning any participant in the web – a producer, a fan, a sponsor – can directly connect to another at any time, eliminating the need for legacy network executives” (2018, p. 13).

In mainstream screenwriting processes, comedy script development typically involves a ‘gag pass’, where comedy specialists are brought in, usually by those at the top of the production hierarchy, to add or polish jokes in the script. This is because, as argued by Stayci Taylor, “the problem with comedy is that it is subjective, yet it has to be unanimous”, meaning that each in the chain of collaborators bring “their own notion of what is ‘funny’, working towards an outcome that unites an audience in laughter” (2014, p. 7). In the case of comedy web series, the number of online shares – let alone direct and specific feedback from the audience in the form of ‘comments’ – gives an immediate perspective for the creator about what type of humour is working, and what is less popular. As a form of ‘development note’, this audience reaction can lead to informed re-writes of future episodes and other development work, bypassing the more traditional cautionary measures as outlined.

Taylor argues that a significant way in which the rise of the web series has challenged entrenched practices of script development, is the webisode’s resistance to standardised durations (2015, p. 5). In other words, “Audiences can now watch what they want, when they want, which, in turn, means that [television] shows no longer have to be packaged in 30- or 60-minute instalments” (Brown 2011). This contributes to the culture of online development, where, as LA Web Fest founder Michael Ajakwe suggests, “both the newbie and the veteran can create their own shows without permission from, or the approval of, traditional electronic media networks and studios which historically served as gatekeepers” (cited in Liang 2013).

Unlike traditional broadcast series, which are locked down months before screening, creators of web series may change or develop their projects in response to online viewer feedback overnight. In this way, the web series may always be considered as being ‘in development’, taking on board feedback from audiences who not only vote with their feet, but who sometimes care enough to provide ‘notes’. Connor Van Vuuren, writer and director of the web series *Bondi Hipsters*, states that within online content, “You get instant audience feedback so you get a really good sense for your audience and it causes you to make stuff that is really audience focused” (cited in Turnbull 2015). This immediate audience feedback enables web creators to discern which aspects of their material are hitting the mark, and which aspects might need further development. As Williams argues, “More than any other medium, web series allows content creators to receive feedback from, and interact with, their viewers almost instantaneously” (2012, p. 143).

To take this concept further, in 2013 the Australian multi-platform comedy series, *#7 Days Later*, was the world’s first crowd-sourced television show, created by its online audience. Each week, the creators of the series would seek suggestions for the weekly episode’s plot, characters, title and other content, via social media. This put the development of each episode directly in the hands of the online audience, and in 2014 the series was recognised internationally when it won a Digital Emmy Award for fiction. Who, then, has the power to influence scripted content? Does comedy rely on a different knowledge of what ‘works’ than, say, drama?

While creators of television comedy may rely on development notes from trained (and experienced) script developers, producers and television executives, the web series is a far more democratic medium through which an audience can give direct, digital feedback. For comedy in particular, which often relies on a subjective response to gags, perhaps audience taste is the litmus test. Through ‘likes’, ‘dislikes’ and qualitative comments, audiences can have a direct influence on characters, storylines and even dialogue. For example, an online comment relating to *The Katering Show*’s ‘Thermomix’ episode states: “My wife has TWO thermomix’s and this is spot on!! she cant [sic] shut up about it to the point of being intolerable!! I shared the video and I hope this becomes an internet sensation” (The Brat Attack).

Comedy creators can view and assess such comments to ascertain whether their characters, storylines and jokes are having the desired (or otherwise) effect on their audience. Positive audience reinforcement gives creators immediate validation to

continue what they are doing, or to be brave enough to take characters even further, pushing comedy boundaries that television is becoming less willing to do. The sharing of online content by audiences leads to more views, which in turn increases the likelihood of further (and more traditional) development funding for the creators (if they are seeking it), because an audience has already been established. Thus, for web series such as *Bondi Hipsters* and *The Katering Show*, which were both picked up by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC), online exposure and audience testing may be thought of as being equivalent to a successful period of script development, leading as it did to strong concepts and proven brands that were seen as highly lucrative for transition to broadcast television.

### **The Australian Comedy Web Series as Pilot**

As Tofler and Batty (2017) outlined recently in an article for *Comedy Studies*, the pilot – or recorded proof of concept – has become important to Australian comedy commissioners, and in more recent times the web series has developed into a popular platform for showcasing (‘piloting’) new comedy talent. In this way, the web series as a form of pilot enables ideas that in traditional modes of script development are usually contained to the page, to be tested out on screen with their real – not imagined – audiences. For broadcasters who are looking to commission new series, not only does this piloting allow ideas to be tested quickly, putting the pilot in the hands of the creators absolves them of the costs associated with script (and talent) development. This is not without its problems, of course, as aside from those creators who are successful in being granted development money from the likes of Screen Australia, it breeds a culture of self-funding and free labour. Though perhaps this is no less than has happened historically, in the form of comedians paying to put on shows at festivals and touring in venues that pay for expenses only.

*Bondi Hipsters* writer and performer, Christiaan Van Vuuren, said that he treated the web series of *Bondi Hipsters* like an online pilot, using YouTube and the internet to put his characters on the screen, build a world for them, establish their belief systems and, consequently, grow an audience that would later lead to other media platforms (Van Vuuren 2014). In this capacity, the online platform gave Van Vuuren and the *Bondi Hipsters* team an avenue to test and grow their creative content – script and story development – while simultaneously building a loyal audience that would later be used as leverage for television commissions. As a form of pilot that

sees characters and stories always *in development*, the web series thus enables comedy teams such as the *Bondi Hipsters* to simultaneously screen and refine their material. The result of this is a pilot that not only functions as a proof-of-concept for broadcast commissioners, but that has also gone through its own form of audience-driven script development to ascertain what works and does not work.

With traditional modes of script development, experienced script readers and commissioners can visualise a story from the documents presented to them and understand the world being created on the page. With comedy, however, a difficult challenge is presented, in that tone and style cannot always be appreciated from words alone. As Debbie Lee, Director of Script Development at Matchbox Pictures, reported, the pilot – and here, the web series as pilot – ‘makes it easy to tell whether ... you think it’s a goer or not ... you get a sense of the tone, you get a clearer sense of where it sits comedically’ (see Tofler and Batty 2017). Aside from referring explicitly to existing series to conjure up a sense of tone<sup>1</sup> – which in comedy can be understood as relating to story perspective, visual/aural aesthetic and performance style – it can be hard to describe the style of a comedy with words, hence the power of the recorded proof of concept. For Lee: ‘it is the hardest thing to get a sense of, the hardest thing to write about ... and that’s where sometimes your little teaser scene might help because it means you’ll get a sense of the tone (see Tofler and Batty 2017); and for Rick Kalowski, Head of Comedy at the ABC: ‘you really need to *see* it as fully executed as possible to *get* it’ (see Tofler and Batty 2017, emphasis added).

In this way, the web series can both present and respond to/develop its style in accordance with audience taste – which for comedy is usually very much *en vogue*, or can rapidly change due to social shifts and political events. Unlike the broadcaster-produced pilot, which may take months to air, the web series (as pilot) can be made, re-made or re-edited overnight, and streamed within minutes of being completed: a rapid process of development without the need for traditional script gatekeepers. With this comes not only a strong and ready-made concept (e.g., a story world tested and refined according to audience response), but also a ready-made audience that will stay with the show precisely because of how it has developed in response to feedback. In other words, a web series that is built on audience response garners a strong sense of trust – perhaps even respect – due to its passing through multiple levels of audience

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<sup>1</sup> For example, this show is *Schitt’s Creek* meets *The League of Gentlemen*.

gatekeeping. For comedy creators and those looking to transition into broadcast television, this may assist in convincing the more traditional commissioners that they and their work will be successful. They have, after all, already ‘passed muster’ with the all-important audience.

### **The Australian Comedy Web Series and Talent Development**

The broadcast professionals and screen funders Tofler interviewed for her project on comedy commissioning collectively signalled a preference for hiring and funding performers with an existing fan base, especially if that fan base represents a wide demographic (see Tofler and Batty 2017). Debbie Lee, for example, who commissioned Josh Thomas’s ABC2 series, *Please Like Me* (2013; 2014), was encouraged by the fact that Thomas’s existing live stand-up comedy audience comprised much diversity and a wide demographic. As she explained, even though Thomas was not an experienced narrative comedy writer or performer, his stand-up work demonstrated he was relatable to a wide demographic and could talk about challenging and vulgar material in an accessible and hilarious way (see Tofler and Batty 2017). With this, of course, comes potential for strong viewing figures.

Similarly, the funding of online comedy content is often based on its creators already having a large online audience (Screen Australia n.d.; Marx 2011). Screen Australia, for example, largely assesses its *Skip Ahead* program – an initiative with Google that provides up to \$100,000 per successful project – based upon the project’s existing YouTube subscriber numbers. The economics of this type of project assessment might make clear sense to producers, but for writers and other creatives this, perhaps somewhat problematically, signals a market-driven approach to content development, rather than one premised on ‘good’ ideas and potentially innovative material. Nevertheless, while there does appear to be a trend towards online sharing of content based on its shock value (Berger & Milkman 2012; Tofler 2017a), the web is clearly a useful platform for emerging Australian comedy creators to develop and test out characters and storylines, and build their fan base.

Recent Australian television commissions that have been made possible in particular by the existing fan bases of their performers, specifically evolving from successful web series, include *The Katering Show* (Kate McLennan and Kate McCartney) and *Soul Mates* (Christiaan Van Vuuren and Nicholas Boshier). Like television sketch comedy and live performance, “the web has proven a useful



platform for emerging writers and performers to test and workshop characters as well as develop their performance skills” (Tofler 2017b). As Christian Van Vuuren has noted, YouTube is “a nice place to put the content, for it to be able to get seen, passed around, for us to establish the characters and build a world around their stories” (cited in Turnbull 2015).

Van Vuuren originally received worldwide notoriety and media coverage after posting an online video of himself as the *Fully Sick Rapper*, when quarantined in hospital with tuberculosis. The video received up to 300,000 online hits per day, and now has in excess of 1.6 million views. Similarly, a fake YouTube video appeared of Van Vuuren’s *Bondi Hipsters* co-creator, Nick Boshier, as crude ochre kid, *Trent from Punchy*. The video alleged that Trent was a real person from Punchbowl who was offered twenty dollars to be on camera. Trent’s ludicrous antics and colourfully offensive language gained worldwide notoriety, and the video became a viral sensation with currently over 8.6 million views.

For emerging comedy writers and performers, then, in the absence of opportunities to screen new material on mainstream television, the web is a viable and highly accessible platform to develop and showcase new material. It ‘levels the playing field’ (Tofler 2017a, p. 821), bypassing the usual spheres of approval required of the traditional gatekeepers of comedy, resulting in a form of development that delivers on many levels: draft content; re-worked content; notes (feedback) on story, character and world; and vitally, audience feedback. The advent of international web series festivals, such as those in Los Angeles, Marseille, Melbourne and Rome, has encouraged high levels of participation in web content, with some web series now being produced with six-figure budgets. In Australia, which arguably suffers from a relatively low population and only a small percentage of screen content gaining an international reach, national broadcaster ABC Television has an unusually strong presence in the web series world, with the network’s online platform, iview, used to screen innovative comedy material and test its success with audiences before projects evolve into broadcast television. This creates an interesting relationship between new talent, established audiences and younger audiences accessing broadcaster content via the web.

This talent-platform-audience relationship has enabled the ABC and Screen Australia to fund and develop comedy projects and build new audiences that may later transition to television; and unlike some of the content funded and developed through

other national support programs, many of these web series projects have found international audiences. For example, in 2017 the ABC and Screen Australia gave twenty comedy teams \$15,000 to make 3 x 5-minute comedy sketches for its second online series of *Fresh Blood*, which was released on iview in late 2017. Later this year, four teams will be chosen to progress to the second phase of *Fresh Blood* and will receive \$75,000 to produce a full pilot episode.

In 2014, the *Fresh Blood* initiative commissioned 25 online projects in a bid to nurture emerging comedic talent online. The first season premiered on iview and produced over seventy online sketches, which were viewed by over 900,000 people.

The strongest 2014 projects, based on the largest audience numbers, subsequently received additional funding to create a thirty-minute pilot that screened on ABC television in 2015, as part of the *Fresh Blood Pilot Season*. Two of these projects, *Fancy Boy*, a sketch comedy series based in the Australian suburbs, and *Wham Bam Thank You Ma'am* – a female-based sketch comedy series – later received ABC Television commissions for six-part series. The *Fresh Blood* initiative has enabled emerging comedy creators to move from short form online video content to a full series commission in only a few years. In addition, sketch comedy group, Aunty Donna, who were also part of the original *Fresh Blood Pilot Season*, were chosen as Comedy Central's first Australian commission for its *Not for TV* web series platform. Aunty Donna also received \$100,000 from Screen Australia's *Skip Ahead* program in 2015 to make a ten-part web series.

*Skip Ahead* is a joint initiative between Screen Australia and Google, designed to help online storytellers build their skillsets and a sustainable career. This program enabled Aunty Donna to develop their sketch series, *1999*, which, across 10 episodes, was set in an office in the lead-up to Y2K. The series saw their subscriber base nearly double, and since then, with support from Screen Australia and SVOD service, Stan, have been commissioned to develop a pilot for their series, *Chaperones*.

With shrinking production budgets, the screening of comedy pilots online is an opportunity for the ABC to test projects via its digital platform, iview, before committing funding to develop full series. For example, in 2016 the ABC teamed up with Screen Australia, and State funding agencies Film Victoria, Screen New South Wales and ScreenWest, to develop the *Comedy Showroom*, featuring six comedy television pilots made by popular Australian stand-up comedians. Following the television premiere, the *Comedy Showroom* pilots were available to watch on iview,

which allowed the ABC to accurately monitor the number of viewers each pilot received. As part of the commissioning process, audiences were actively used to vote for the screened pilots via iView, to help select which ones should become future full series. *Ronny Chieng: International Student* was the first *Comedy Showroom* show to be green-lit for a full series on the ABC, based on overwhelmingly positive audience response. It screened in June 2017 and was the ABC's first co-production with the US's Comedy Central, where Ronny Chieng is a contributor on *The Daily Show with Trevor Noah*. The series also aired on the Comedy Central channel in late 2017.

Screen Australia's Tim Phillips outlines that the benefit of online comedy development programs is that they provide the 'intermediate step between shooting [one's] own YouTube clips and then talking to a broadcaster. So if we can be the middle step of that platform, that's really good' (cited in Tofler and Batty 2017). The online programs funded by Screen Australia and the ABC have enabled emerging comedy creators to develop and test material and build audiences that later may be used as a proof-of-concept for television commissioners.

A version of the more traditional pilot, then, we might argue that the web series – whether bedroom-produced or supported by a screen agency or similar – is both a form of script development and a form of television pilot, which as well as entertaining audiences and bringing them into the development process, usefully gives commissioners an opportunity to assess the popularity of a project before deciding whether or not to commission it for television or their own web platform. As Williams argues, 'If there is one thing internet users do well (and seem to take pleasure in), it is sniffing out phonies. The best thing to engage an audience is to speak to them as a peer about a common interest' (2012, p. 34). In short, the web series allows commissioners and screen agencies to avoid second guessing markets by 'plugging straight into the source' (Taylor 2015, p. 9).

Online platforms may also have an influence over the type of comedy projects being commissioned for television. In her article, 'Australian Made Comedy Online – Laughs, Shock, Surprise and Anger', Tofler argues that the online audience "knows what it wants to watch and share... a younger audience is more likely to watch, comment upon and share online comedy... online content most likely to receive funding are those that are the most popular amongst the younger audience" (2017a, p. 10). Tofler further argues that online comedies that result in audience responses of laughter, shock, surprise and anger appear to be the most widely watched and shared,

hence are the most likely to receive subsequent funding for development. Is this, then, changing the fabric of contemporary screen comedy?

In his seminal text, *Understanding Media*, Marshall McLuhan states that “the medium is the message”, as it is the medium that shapes and governs the measure and form of human connection and action (1994, p. 9). Correspondingly, online platforms shape what is created and their audiences’ reactions to it, which in turn – if successful – would also shape the material that is commissioned for broadcast television (Tofler 2017a). We have discussed how the online projects most likely to receive future television commissions are those with large audiences. These usually tend to be those that appeal to younger audiences and contain a type of shock value. The web platform therefore changes not only *how* comedy ideas are being developed, but also *what* ideas are being developed. The web series provides emerging Australian comedy creatives with a platform to develop and test characters and storylines of appeal to (usually younger) audiences that might not otherwise be commissioned for broadcast media. Further, this gives Australian television broadcasters the confidence to commission projects that have been developed, and have achieved success, with an online fan base.

## **Conclusion**

This article has argued that digital technology and the internet are enabling new and established Australian comedy creators to bypass the traditional script and story gatekeepers of broadcasting to develop, produce and screen material online, in turn building large and diverse audiences. This is shifting the onus of development onto creators and their audiences, resulting in (arguably) more ‘developed’ and refined screen content with ready-made audiences that is subsequently appealing to television commissioners. Comedy creators are thus being empowered to develop new material and build audiences without requiring the ‘approval’ and support of the more traditional, and arguably less democratic, broadcast platforms. This does, however, come with its own problems, such as shifting the cost of such development work to creators themselves, and a growth in undertaking free labour.

As *Bondi Hipsters* creator and star, Christian Van Vuuren (2012), argues:

YouTube has been the perfect platform for ... anybody in their living room to be able to gain an audience of millions of people worldwide and it’s changing traditional production. It’s changing the relationship that creators can have with networks and film companies because you can actually build your own

audience online, prove that your idea works and walk into a TV network or film studio with not only scripts and treatments ... but also an audience ... there's this massive opportunity ... from traditional media providers and film studios and TV networks to better understand what makes good online content. [They're] actually seeking out people's work on the internet. It's effectively the best way to pilot a new idea now'.

Further, given the inclination for instant sharing and tagging of content, are web series actively engaging their audiences in 'good' ideas and fresh concepts, or are they merely attracting them with big personalities? These are questions for another paper, though they are important to raise as the scholarship around the web series grows.

In summary, the web series can, on the one hand, be seen as a *form of development*, resulting in tried and tested content that can lead to commission and/or uptake elsewhere, usually in a mainstream broadcast context, which we suggest – from our script development standpoint – might facilitate those “Shifts in the basic practices of making and distributing television” that Amanda Lotz claims are not “hastening its demise, but are redefining what we can do with television” (2014). On the other hand, the web series can also be seen as always *in development*, taking on board audience responses and feedback and weaving them into the fabric of the content produced. The audience as comedy gatekeeper, then, subverts traditional processes and structures of script development, resulting in a creator-audience relationship that ensures, or at least intends, that creative content arises from the potential of the very form itself.

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