TV $uffering Under Corporate Control

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On Aug. 2, my social media feeds were bombarded with disbelief as news outlets announced the cancelation of the movie "Batgirl." The Warner Bros. project — set to be released exclusively on HBO Max — was already filmed and in post-production, simply to be discarded without even a heads-up to its creators. And why? Why was a movie with a star studded cast and a preexisting loyal fanbase thrown away?

It did not fit the company's new business plan, according to an official statement. Since Warner Bros.'s parent company, WarnerMedia, was acquired by Discovery Inc., in spring 2022, there has been a push to center theatrical releases over direct-to-stream, consolidate content and cut costs. Sources speculate that Warner Bros. would rather take a tax write-down than release "Batgirl" anyway. Nevermind the actors and crew who want their work seen, or the audience who wants to see it. Instead, the suits in a boardroom play judge, jury and executioner.

The backlash from consumers was compounded when, soon after, HBO Max removed 36 titles with no forewarning to creators. Although these series are still available for digital purchase, some are indefinitely unavailable to stream because they were Max Originals. Those belonging to Cartoon Network have had any mention of them stripped from the channel's social media. Again, this move was part of corporate strategy to make HBO Max into a leaner product — specifically to remove children's programming to change the image of the service. While this makes sense from a business perspective, it means less options for consumers and less exposure for creators.

There has always been a question of profitability when producing television and film. The business side of media is intrinsically tied to its creation, with the exception of truly indie content. The only job of the suits in a boardroom is to make their company profitable. However, this position has come with the added title of "Arbiter of Art" as society's main methods of entertainment lie in the hands of big businesses.

The mediums of TV and film are suffering under corporate control, where what is culturally valuable may be stifled for what is monetarily valuable. This is not a new phenomenon, but is becoming more egregious with the rise of streaming services who have complete control over production and distribution of their own and licensed content. This vertical monopoly, along with the horizontal monopoly of buying out competitors, puts more power into the hands of the money-driven few. It is understandable that corporations must carefully choose what will be the most successful project, but that does not give them a pass to "play it safe."

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These media companies have a reputation for shunning more unique undertakings in favor of content they know will be popular, like franchise material. For instance, Amazon will reportedly spend over $1 billion on the premiere season of "The Lord of the Rings: The Rings of Power" in production, marketing and legal costs. The series is set to run for five seasons — a deal made before the first episode even aired. On the other hand, the tech conglomerate cancels shows like "The Wilds," which cost much less and still perform well, but are seen as disposable. Netflix has its own string of series canceled prematurely, usually after only one season and on a cliffhanger. These cancelations have been attributed to low viewer-completion numbers, but also coronavirus-associated production costs. Fans and creators have blamed poor marketing for their shows' lackluster numbers.

> *"CUTTING COSTS FOR THE SAKE OF GREED"*

What is important to note is that all of these shows have audiences. They may not garner the same attention as a "Lord of the Rings" project or a blockbuster starring Ryan Gosling like "The Gray Man," but they have the freedom of creativity to appeal to more niche demographics. In several instances, these smaller shows that were cut off were quite representative in terms of storytelling and characters. The aforementioned "The Wilds" and Netflix's "First Kill" both centered marginalized identities in their narratives. "Infinity Train," one of the cartoons culled from HBO Max, innovatively explored mature topics of personal growth tailored toward a younger audience. While larger-scale projects can and do experiment creatively and portray representation, smaller passion projects are where these efforts tend to shine. That is, before they are canceled.

When taking into account the business model of streaming services, this aversion to taking chances on smaller series becomes more baffling. Unlike films in movie theaters or series on cable television, content on streaming platforms do not make money from ticket sales or ad revenue. Netflix, HBO Max and the rest — although some do have ads — do not profit based on clicks or watch-throughs, but instead on subscriptions.

Therefore, the success of individual shows or movies does not directly impact profit. The more important aspect is whether a consumer deems the streamer's catalog worth the price. While streamers also license material for limited periods of time, they create original content to bolster catalogs with movies and shows that will belong to the service forever. Currently, half of Netflix's U.S. library is original content.

This model affords streamers greater opportunity to produce riskier projects because the more popular endeavors create room for potential missteps. While there are certainly instances where they take chances, content is still judged by the lofty, perhaps unachievable criterion of whether it will garner new subscribers instead of by its general entertainment merits.

This method of prioritizing more financially safe material extends to other corporate-controlled mediums. Barnes and Noble, the world's largest retail bookseller, is limiting its hardcover stock to books with proven sales records. This disadvantages new authors who are denied a space to prove their work's worth, similar to how series and movies with poor marketing fall victim to underperforming numbers.

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The book-publishing world, like television and film production, is dominated by a handful of companies. One of them, Simon and Schuster, is a subsidiary of Paramount Global which also owns various movie and television studios, networks and streaming services, to highlight the monopoly across media. In November 2022, a federal judge prevented Simon and Schuster from being acquired by Penguin Random House, the largest English language book publisher. The Department of Justice stated in a deposition that the acquisition, which would form a publishing company far larger than any of its competitors, would give "outsized influence over who and what is published" to Penguin Random House.

These companies, in the publishing and producing worlds, already hold enormous influence over what is made, marketed and distributed. Of course, they are contributing their own resources to create this content, so it is justified for them to control what projects to support. Again, a business is expected to put its own desires over anything else.

However, a company making hard decisions to save needed cash is different from one swinging at the chopping block to amass more wealth. Consistently, it seems like these money-saving moves fall into the latter category, cutting costs for the sake of greed and to fix problems that do not exist in a successful service. There comes a point where companies play such a large part in the cultural zeitgeist that there must be some accountability. Corporations have a responsibility to their consumers to make entertaining, meaningful products — not just profitable ones. They also have a responsibility to creators to highlight innovative and representative work. Until corporations fully embrace this mission, consumers and creators alike should continue to advocate for their media of choice and support indie endeavors.