Building Buzz and Episodes with Bite-Sized Content: *Portlandia's* Formula for Turning a Video Project into a Television Series

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Media consumers have grown accustomed to content that is broken down into digestible chunks. Portlandia, an Independent Film Channel (IFC) comedy series that affectionately satirizes Portland, Oregon's hipster culture, offers a model of how to attract online viewers and create television programming using short videos intended for a niche audience. IFC promotes these decoupled, song-length clips online and encourages sampling and sharing. Using interviews and an analysis of the program's structure and content, this case study explores how Portlandia takes advantage of the synergy between television and new media, and the way audiences consume video programming in the digital age.

Viewers were introduced to *Portlandia*, a television series that began its brief first season in January 2011, through a 3 minute 19 second video posted to YouTube. In the music video, a character played by former *Saturday Night Live* cast member Fred Armisen introduces a character played by his co-star, alternative-rocker-turned-actress Carrie Brownstein, to Portland, Oregon. An entourage of tattooed, pierced hipsters and misfits wearing flannel shirts, leather, and clown costumes marches through city streets singing the title of the video: "The Dream of the '90s is Alive in Portland." They proclaim that in Portland, "all the hot girls wear glasses." It's a place where "Gore won; it's like the Bush administration never happened ... People are content to be unambitious, to sleep until eleven and hang out with their friends and have no occupations whatsoever, maybe work a couple hours a week at a coffee shop." The video portrays Portland as "a city where young people go to retire" (Armisen, Brownstein, & Krisel, 2011a).

Independent Film Channel (IFC), the cable television station that airs *Portlandia*, uploaded "Dream of the '90s" on December 20, 2010, one month before the series debut. IFC provided no context about the video or its connection to the series other

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than a teaser announcing the date and time of the show's premiere and a brief listing of credits. "Dream of the '90s" attracted nearly 1 million YouTube page views in its first year, and more than 2.3 million page views and 3,400 comments in its first three years (Armisen, Brownstein, & Krisel, 2011a). In the days before *Portlandia* premiered, IFC continued to build buzz by uploading individual sketches from the first season. "Put a Bird on It," a 1 minute 35 second sketch from episode two that pokes fun at artisans who attempt to be innovative by placing bird designs on clothing, attracted more than 2 million page views three years after first being posted to YouTube (Armisen, Brownstein, & Krisel, 2011b).

Portlandia's debut episode attracted 263,000 viewers (live plus same day) and its cumulative audience was 725,000 (live plus DVR viewership up to three days later). IFC posted the first episode for free on its Web site, YouTube, and Hulu in the week before its television airing, and attracted more than 500,000 combined viewers (MCN, 2011). Season 1 of *Portlandia* was watched by 5.4 million people (live plus 3 days), a total that surpassed IFC's viewership expectations and drew a record number of hits to IFC.com (J. Caserta, personal communication, May 3, 2011).

Portlandia found success by creating content that is designed to appeal to online viewers and seamlessly adapts to the length requirement of the traditional television comedy. The creators and distributors of *Portlandia*, described by IFC as "a short-based comedy series" (IFC, 2011), capitalized on the Web's increasing popularity as an entertainment hub. *Portlandia*'s building block is the short comedy sketch that stands on its own, caters to users who prefer media broken down into digestible chunks, and has the potential to "go viral"—spread by many Web users and viewed by millions (Shifman, 2013). IFC used these comedic sketches early in its promotional campaign to attract casual viewers online and entice them to watch full episodes on television or a variety of digital platforms. Online viewer sampling and sharing of individual sketches is integral to the program's marketing strategy. IFC posts some sketches online and considers user uploading of clips not as an encroachment but a sign of audience engagement (J. Caserta, personal communication, May 3, 2011).

Portlandia's sketches are stitched together into 22-minute episodes, most of which follow the same nonlinear format and have self-contained narrative arcs. The show's second and third seasons increasingly catered to devoted viewers with recurring characters, references to earlier plotlines, and jokes that take an entire season to unfold. Yet throughout the first three seasons, the program remained defined primarily by its individual unit—the bite-sized sketch that functions independently and as well as in connection to others.

Using interviews and an analysis of the program's structure and content, this case study explores how *Portlandia* was created and promoted in a direct response to the way people consume video programming in the digital age. Online audiences have become accustomed to media content that is decoupled from its original packaging. For many, music singles and individual news stories have supplanted the album and the full newspaper or magazine as favored units of media consumption. Digital downloading and streaming of music allow listeners to sample individual songs

instead of an entire album. Online news sites—even those with metered paywalls—allow readers to sample individual articles instead of the entire publication. *Portlandia* extends to broadcasting the strategy of encouraging online viewers to sample and develop a taste for individual pieces of media content. Aspects of *Portlandia's* format, comedic approach, and narrative structure were derived from other shows. However, IFC and *Portlandia's* creators were able to refine and combine them with a savvy use of digital technologies to vet the show's popularity and promote it with standalone sketches that fit naturally online and can function together as a full episode. *Portlandia's* formula takes full advantage of the potential synergy between television and digital media, and the way its niche target audience accesses media content.

Literature Review

Traditional Formats, Formulas, and Flow

Major broadcast networks established norms that television programming last 30 or 60 minutes, include commercial breaks, and air at the same time each week (Lotz, 2007b). Traditionally, production practices adhered to well-worn programming formulas, including stock characters and a familiar, linear narrative arc in which the plot is resolved in the slotted time (Gitlin, 1979). Television has long been a medium that invites viewers to have a low level of involvement. New channels and new programs regularly appeared, but little changed in the ways in which people passively consumed television (Barwise & Ehrenberg, 1998).

Another longstanding characteristic of television is planned flow (Williams, 1974), based on the aggregate experience of television viewers over time (Kompare, 2006). Networks have long presented to viewers and advertisers the entire 20- to 25-episode season as the primary unit of programming (Lotz, 2007a). A key moment in television's turn away from the flow model came first with the VCR and later with the DVR, transforming television from a "flow of content that was available only at a particular moment to individual programs that could be reordered, saved, and re-viewed at will" (Lotz, 2009, p. 52). This marked a return to media consumption before broadcasting, when the essential items in communication systems—a book, a play, a newspaper—were distinct items viewed in isolation (Williams, 1974). With no stream of programming, consumers negotiated their relationship with individual pieces of content.

Digital Media Culture: Active Involvement with Decoupled Content

In an era of multiplatform content distribution and on-demand viewing, people once again are their own programmers. Many online viewers take a lean-forward ap-

proach, creating their own flow by clicking on video clips, and alternating between traditional programming and user-generated content. Agency has shifted to viewers, who can "cherry-pick" their content by "jumping from text to text in precisely the sequence they desire" (Uricchio, 2011, p. 31). The database, "a collection from which viewers can choose," rather than the schedule, "a linear progression," is the key principle organizing online television content (Kompare, 2010, p. 82).

A media text's "durability in repetition" has been a primary feature of many television series (Kompare, 2005, p. 169). Programming previously valued mostly for suitability in reruns also has its durability measured in the digital age by the ability to attract online audiences after its original airing. "Programming must now be designed to travel, both spatially and temporally, as never before. The commercial value of programming is no longer based on its temporary scarcity (now available across so much media, so readily time-shifted), but instead on its ability to translate to new spatial geographies," including different broadcast systems, different formats, and different outlets. (Shimpach, 2010, p. 4).

For promotional purposes and to satisfy consumer demand, content producers and distributors stream programming on their Web sites and on video-sharing sites such as YouTube and Hulu. "These platforms have quickly become a significant and normative site of 'television' viewing far from the traditional institution of the sched-uled, local station broadcast watched on the stand-alone TV set" (Kompare, 2010, p. 81). Networks use these digital platforms as a way to recruit fans who may then view the traditional television product. As Lotz (2007b) explained, "The non-linear opportunity to view programming offered a valuable tool for exposing audiences to shows in a way that could encourage them to join the linear audience" (p. 112).

Still, many online viewers never make the transition to television. Digital au-diences have come to expect that programming is "unbundled" from its original television packaging (Kelly, 2011) and "cut down to teaser-size for the small screen with the blessings of their network producers" (Uricchio, 2011, p. 34). Grainge (2011) defined this easily digestible, Web-friendly content as "ephemeral media," a range of "temporally compressed media that can be viewed or consumed in seconds or minutes" (p. 3). YouTube has become the leading aggregator of ephemeral media. "In a burgeoning 'clip culture' where moving images are consumed swiftly and on the move, television has been adapted and abridged to fit the temporal and aesthetic specificities of mobile and Internet-based platforms" (p. 7).

Specifically, content producers face the challenge of creating material that is conducive to digital audiences who consume media content in short spurts. For its wildly popular show 24, FOX created 1-minute "mobisodes" and 5-minute "Webisodes." NBC created 2-minute replays that summarized recent episodes of Friday Night Lights and Heroes. ABC released 5-minute videos that reviewed past seasons of popular shows (Dawson, 2011). Hulu hosts what Kelly (2011) described as "officially produced ephemera," short-form visual material—clips, excerpts, Web exclusives, digital shorts, and recaps—that largely run under 5 minutes and act as promotional texts, "increasing the visibility of a show and ... offering a point of entry to potential new audiences" (p. 131). Among the most popular clips of all time

on Hulu are self-contained sketches from popular television shows such as *Saturday Night Live* (Kelly, 2011). *Quarterlife*, a 2007 MySpaceTV series about friends in their twenties finding their way in the world, was created exclusively for online viewers. Each "Webisode" of the program ran a Web-friendly 8 minutes long and the show's site included interactive content (Peirce, 2011). As *Quarterlife* illustrates, the Internet can be a destination for original programming—and in some cases can be a proving ground for writers and producers to determine whether they can attract a sizable following. "Perhaps the biggest change new distribution windows have introduced to television as a cultural institution is the creation of new means for independent or amateur productions to find audiences" (Lotz, 2007b, p. 148).

User Sampling and Sharing of Media Content

Audiences appraise media content in an effort to determine its value to them and its potential value for sharing within their social circles (Jenkins, Ford, & Green, 2013). Media content is more likely to be shared if it is available when and where audiences want it, adaptable to different conditions, and part of a steady stream of material (Jenkins et al., 2013). Digital technology has greatly lowered consumer costs to sample and experience media, and to interact with other users (Bhattacharjee, Gopal, Lertwachara, Marsden, & Telang, 2007). User sharing of digital video became widespread with the advent of YouTube in 2005. The sharing of digital music files using peer-to-peer (P2P) technology became widespread earlier with Napster's creation in 1999. Media executives and content producers have long feared the negative consequences of widespread user sampling of free online content. However Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) argued that fans do not depreciate the value of intellectual property but rather increase its value by expanding its shelf life, opening it up to new markets, and making an emotional investment. Baym (2012) found that individuals develop relationships with artists as they help share their music, and the artists view fans as "relational partners" (p. 313).

In the music industry, broad consumer sampling that fosters demand and creates a favorable buzz *before* actual release of the full product (the album) has been found to have a positive effect on commercial success. For content producers, the benefits of allowing users to sample digital media content that suits their taste has a sufficiently strong positive effect on revenue that it may outweigh the negative effects of free access (Peitz & Waelbroeck, 2006). Research suggests that sampling and experiencing music prior to purchase and being influenced by how a song or album is perceived by others are potentially crucial components in consumer purchase decisions (Bhattacharjee et al., 2007). Sharing enables consumer behavior to be driven more heavily by the value attached to the actual product, reducing market advantages otherwise held by major artists and labels with sizable promotional budgets. Among the most important characteristics in assuring an album's longevity on the charts is the initial debut rank, which largely reflects approval by early adopters (Bhattacharjee et al., 2007).

At least one news outlet has recognized that free access to video may support, rather than undercut, the commercial interest reflected by a paywall allowing users to sample only a limited number of articles before having to pay for digital access. *The New York Times,* after allowing limited non-subscriber access to digital content, in 2013 began offering unlimited access to short videos regardless of subscription status (Editor & Publisher, 2013). Many of the videos include advertisements but still serve the purpose of attracting a highbrow audience to the *Times'* Web site who are viewed as potential subscribers to content behind the paywall (Von Drehle, 2013). As later discussed, these mechanisms of the music and news industries have likely applicability to video content producers seeking success on commercial television.

From Broad Viewership to Niche Audiences

Several decades ago, most television viewers watched only three national networks that delivered programming on a linear schedule (Lotz, 2009). Television networks gauged national tastes and selected programming to attract the largest conceivable collection of viewers who would appeal to advertisers (Gitlin, 1979). The 1980s brought an increasing emphasis on niche marketing on television (Hesmondhalgh, 2010). Advertisers commonly separate Americans into niche groups based upon their age, gender, race, cultural interests, and political affiliations. People are encouraged to separate themselves into specialized groups and to develop distinct media consumption habits that highlight group differences (Turow, 1997). Cable channels seek a clear identity to set themselves apart in a crowded field of competitors. Television executives strive to "build their brands through the acquisition and promotion of programming appropriate to their image" (Kompare, 2005, p. 172).

Not needing to attract as wide an audience, programming in the "post-network era" can be more creative with narrative and cover themes less likely to appeal to the masses (Lotz, 2007b). Television's current business model no longer favors the major broadcast networks and has opened the door for cable channels to thrive by targeting specific demographic groups and promoting their brands across media platforms (Edgerton & Nicholas, 2005). Fewer television programs draw massive ratings, and fragmented audiences spread their media use across more channels (Picard, 2010; Webster, 2005). The trend toward targeted specific audiences, which Smith-Shomade (2004) called "narrowcasting," is "heavily touted by cable and Internet executives as a democratic part of the technological future" (p. 73). Curtin (2009) explained that,

> These niches were constituted as much by their audiences' shared world-views as they were by their sense of difference from other viewers. To serve these audiences, producers began to pitch programs with "edge," meaning both programs that pushed up against the boundaries of mass taste and programs that hailed their viewers as self-consciously distinct from others. (p. 11)

As discussed in the following sections, *Portlandia* represents a shift away from the traditional formats and formulas of broadcast television. Its decoupled media content is aimed at a niche audience and is intended for broad viewer sampling and sharing.

Method

Information on *Portlandia* was gathered through interviews and an analysis of the program's structure and content. The analysis of *Portlandia's* first three seasons involved creating a coding sheet with the following categories: season number, episode number, sketch title, sketch number within an episode, sketch length, and whether the sketch is dependent on others or can be viewed independently without its central meaning being lost. Sketches that are part of an episode- or season-long narrative arc were coded as being "dependent" because they are reliant on other sketches for context. Those that are unrelated to a narrative arc were coded as being "independent." A sketch with a recurring character or jokes that carry over from an earlier episode or season was deemed "independent" if it could be reasonably understood on its own.

A telephone interview was conducted with Jennifer Caserta, the president and general manager of IFC, who green-lighted *Portlandia* in 2010. Caserta discussed the program's sketch-based format and IFC's online promotion strategy. Radio and print interviews with *Portlandia's* executive producer, Lorne Michaels, its co-creator, writer, and director, Jonathan Krisel, and its co-stars, Fred Armisen and Carrie Brownstein, were analyzed to gather information about the genesis of *Portlandia*, the creative process of producing the show, and IFC's distribution strategy.

Results

From Creative Project to Network Series

Portlandia creators Armisen (punk band Trenchmouth) and Brownstein (punk rock band Sleater-Kinney) met through music. Brownstein commented that "Both Fred and I consider ourselves musicians first and foremost" (IFC, 2012). Instead of writing songs and performing together, the two decided to create sketch comedy under the name Thunderant, generating more than a dozen videos from 2006 to 2010. Thunderant was not Portland-focused, but some of the characters eventually appeared on *Portlandia*. Brownstein and Armisen posted their free videos online, encouraged viewers to voice their opinion about sketches, and attracted a loyal following on Thunderant's Web page. They took the idea of turning their side project into a full-length show to Broadway Video, owned by *Saturday Night Live* and *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon* producer Lorne Michaels.

Michaels, Armisen, and Brownstein pitched the show to IFC, known for its quirky original series. Launched in 1994, IFC promotes itself as "embrac[ing] content with an indie perspective" through its slogan, "Always On. Slightly Off" (IFC, 2011). The channel creates original content, and airs films and television series such as *Freaks and Geeks* and *Arrested Development* that have not achieved widespread commercial success and "are typically not the kind of programming you'd see on other networks" (J. Caserta, personal communication, May 3, 2011). Before the pitch from Michaels, Caserta had seen only the popular, rough Web shorts produced by Armisen and Brownstein. But she was intrigued enough to ask them to quickly develop a pilot episode, completed within 6 weeks of her green-lighting it in spring 2010. Caserta then approved six episodes to run on IFC, filmed in less than 1 summer month.

Embracing Niche Programming

Portlandia affectionately satirizes daily life in Portland. The specificity of location gives *Portlandia* a small built-in audience, but to succeed, it needed to draw viewers from outside of Portland. *Portlandia* likely owes its existence to increasing audience fragmentation and the trend toward niche programming, about which Caserta commented:

> There are so many more choices out there that niche is not a bad thing anymore. Niche doesn't necessarily mean narrow. It's how to speak to someone's likes and dislikes. This is what makes someone engaged with a brand—[the term niche] doesn't mean small or inconsequential anymore. (J. Caserta, personal communication, May 3, 2011)

Still, *Portlandia*'s focus on poking fun at the idiosyncrasies of Portland's culture and lifestyle is such an extreme example of niche programming that Caserta was initially concerned about whether the show would appeal to viewers in other parts of the country (J. Caserta, personal communication, May 3, 2011). Voicing modest expectations, Lorne Michaels, *Portlandia*'s executive producer, told *The New York Times* in December 2010 that *Portlandia* "isn't going to be wildly popular, but I think it'll find an audience" (Iztkoff, 2010).

The niche audience to whom the show's humor appealed proved to extend well beyond Portland. Brownstein and Armisen captured the lifestyle and dispositions—often referred to as a cultural habitus—of eco-friendly, liberal urban dwellers who share sensibilities but not necessarily the same zip code. As Caserta noted,

> This is a loving ode to people who are a little smarter, more earnest, and serious—there's a little bit of that in any metropolitan area. If you look around, there are aspects of these character types who exist in places like Williamsburg, New York, Seattle, and Austin, Texas. The audience for this show shares a sensibility. It's an independent point of view that comes across no matter what stage of life you're in or

where you live. That's why viewers don't have to know about Portland. (J. Caserta, personal communication, May 3, 2011)

Brownstein said that the humor in *Portlandia* is not limited to Portland or the Pacific Northwest. "This sort of incessant optimism and ideology of Portland is something that lots of other cities can relate to" (Shapiro, 2011).

Portlandia's sketch-based format and irreverent comedy have drawn comparisons to *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, which first aired on BBC in the 1960s, and *Saturday Night Live*, a sketch-based show that produces comedy shorts and shared with *Portlandia* the common involvement of Armisen and Michaels. Michaels has compared *Portlandia* to another sketch comedy show he produced, *The Kids in the Hall*, which aired on HBO and CBS from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s (Iztkoff, 2010). Caserta called *Portlandia* show "a modern-day ode" to *Monty Python* and *The Kids in the Hall* (J. Caserta, personal communication, May 3, 2011).

The Promotion of *Portlandia*

Episodes of *Portlandia* aired Fridays at either 10 or 10:30 p.m., a seemingly disadvantageous timeslot for a show that attracts a primarily 18- to 49-year-old male audience (J. Caserta, personal communication, May 3, 2011) prone to spend this time away from television. But each episode then aired on IFC numerous times over the following days and weeks, diminishing the importance of the time slot for its premiere showing. "We know that our audience lives in a time-shifted world. People watching the show on DVRs and TiVos within three days of airing provide a huge boost to us" (J. Caserta, personal communication, May 3, 2011).

Offering *Portlandia* content online is central to IFC's distribution and promotion strategy. On its home page, IFC directs viewers to digital platforms such as iTunes, Amazon, and Xbox where they can pay to watch full episodes. Early seasons of the show are available on Netflix. IFC's *Portlandia* Web page also highlights viewer options for watching free clips, including a feature in which the show's co-stars, producer, and director select their favorite sketches from the first three seasons. Caserta credits *Portlandia* for driving up the number of page views of IFC.com to a site record of more than one million in January 2011, the month the show debuted (J. Caserta, personal communication, May 3, 2011).

IFC uploads individual sketches from each episode to its own Web site and Facebook page, as well as to YouTube and Hulu, as an integral part of its effort to attract viewers with free content. This strategy is predicated on the notion that Web viewers will "like," comment on, and share videos, thus helping the show build buzz organically rather than through an expensive marketing campaign. Talk show hosts such as Jimmy Fallon and Jimmy Kimmel, and sketch-based shows such as *Saturday Night Live*—all of which regularly feature short, Web-friendly video segments—have successfully employed this strategy of viral video promotion.

Media organizations have varied views about their content appearing on online sites other than their own. Viacom has gone to great lengths—including suing

YouTube for airing unauthorized clips—to keep control of its shows. By contrast, IFC proactively uploads sketches with programming schedule reminders, and does not impede fans from uploading individual sketches and montages of sketches that are part of an episode-long narrative arc. "We'd rather choose what people go and watch—it serves as a great promotional tool. We get teasers in the online space and through social media and try to control our destiny there" (J. Caserta, personal communication, May 3, 2011).

Some visitors to IFC.com's *Portlandia* page have expressed frustration that the channel offers only individual sketches and that full episodes are not uploaded for them to watch for free (IFC, 2011). Caserta said, "We're protective of where people can see entire episodes and seasons for free. We won't do full episodes online because it's important that people watch the show on our network. The television-viewing experience needs to remain sacred. We need a reason for IFC to exist (J. Caserta, personal communication, May 3, 2011).

Portlandia's Structure and Content

Portlandia aired 27 episodes with a total of 199 sketches across its first three seasons (See Table 1) (A full listing of sketches by season, episode, title, length, and ability to be viewed independently of others without meaning being lost is included in Appendix A.) Each episode has from 7 to 9 sketches with a mean length of sketches from all three seasons being 2 minutes 52 seconds. Aside from one episode in season two and two in season three with a single, 22-minute storyline, sketches ranged in length from 30 seconds to 5 minutes 20 seconds. Nearly half of all sketches (n = 98) are between 2 minutes and 2 minutes 59 seconds in length (see Figure 1).

Portlandia episodes typically have only one narrative arc. Opening sketches in the 24 multi-sketch episodes are short (79% are shorter than the 2:52 mean length) and always unrelated to the narrative arc. They are some of the most popular sketches as measured by YouTube page views. In season one, episodes one and two began with viral hits "Dream of the 90s" and "Put a Bird on It"; the opening to episodes four and five attracted more than 500,000 and 820,000 YouTube page views, respectively, 3 years after their original airing on IFC (Armisen, Brownstein, & Krisel, 2011c; Armisen, Brownstein, & Krisel, 2011d). The second sketch is always the first in a

Table 1
Portlandia's First Three Seasons

Season	Episodes	Sketches	Mean Sketch Length
1 (1/21/11–2/25/11)	6	48	2:36
2 (1/6/12–3/9/12)	10	70	3:02
3 (12/14/12–3/1/13)	11	81	2:36

Figure 1
Number of Sketches by Length (in Minutes)
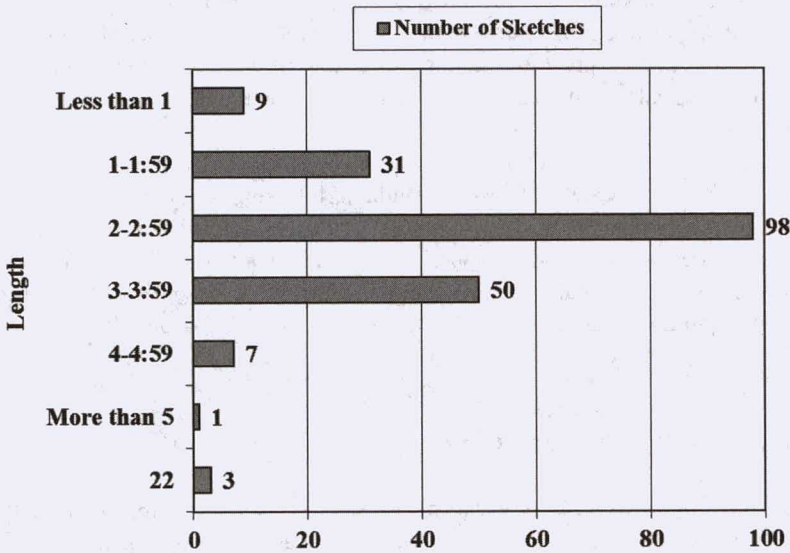
series of either three (88% of the time) or four (12%) sketches that contribute to the narrative arc of the episode. Narrative-arc sketches are rarely placed back-to-back—typically one or two unrelated, standalone sketches are sandwiched between these related ones. The final sketch of the episode is always the conclusion of the narrative arc.

For its first three seasons, 58% of *Portlandia's* sketches constituting 60% of its time were "independent," meaning they can be viewed without the central meaning and humor being lost.

These figures are largely consistent across each season. In addition to seasons two and three having one and two episodes, respectively, with a 22-minute single storyline, the three seasons differ in the number of sketches that, while considered "independent," reference previous plotlines and punchlines that enhance the humor. In season one, every episode follows the sketch-base formula. One episode is entirely based around a common theme—an alternative music festival—but still has sketches that are unrelated to each other and can be viewed independently without losing meaning. No sketches in the season refer back to previous episodes. In season two, every episode follows the sketch-based formula except the finale, which has a linear narrative. While the percentage of "independent" sketches remains the same as season one, an increasing number of sketches in season two refer back to previous episodes. Season three includes two episodes that do not follow the sketch-based format. All but the first episode include a 30-second infomercial that is dependent on

a previous sketch from the prior episode. Season three often references sketches in previous seasons and has the most sketches (46%) that are "dependent" on others.

Although *Portlandia* is packaged to fit into a traditional 30-minute television time slot, episodes in its first three seasons mostly comprised a series of comedic vignettes that could just as easily be grouped to fit time slots of other lengths. As Armisen noted about the show's initial season, "It's very much short little films. We don't even like to think of it as sketches, really, even though in reality I suppose that's what they are. It's not that kind of a thing—it's just these pieces we put together" (Thorn, 2011). Brownstein said, "When I watch the show I do feel like I'm watching a series of short indie films" (IFC, 2012).

Krisel, the mastermind of the "Dream of the '90s" video, commented that "I think a lot of the pieces for this show, we shoot them like music videos. We'll shoot them here, we shoot them there. And then we get into editing and we put it together." Brownstein said of Krisel: "There's a musicality to Jon's directing style" (IFC, 2012). And as Armisen said about his acting style,

> The sketches are like the same length as songs. I'll always think of myself as a drummer ... even when I'm in a sketch I'll think of myself like a drummer in a sketch. The drummer because the cymbals and snare demand a bit of attention but at the same time (you have to) keep it all together. (Gross, 2012)

Online comments to *Portlandia* clips frequently focus appreciatively on the content of individual sketches, illustrating that many viewers consider them as standalone videos. Press reviews of *Portlandia* often focus on top individual sketches rather than episodes or seasons (Robinson, 2013; Talbot 2011). In a column that included videos of some of *Portlandia's* most popular sketches, *Salon's* Willia Paskin argued that the best way to view *Portlandia* is through the Internet and that the show is, as the column's headline says, "As good as its best sketch (Pastkin, 2013).

Caserta explained that the bite-sized sketches in each *Portlandia* episode's main narrative can be understood and stand on their own as well as those that are unrelated to it, enabling them to be easily decoupled from the full episode to take advantage of Web-based material's potential to go viral. "The sketch/song 'Dream of the '90s' was probably the anthem for the entire first season. It was the best way to do something completely viral that people would want to pass along, and because it's funny it helped set the tone for what Portlandia was all about" (J. Caserta, personal communication, May 3, 2011).

Discussion

Portlandia's creators took full advantage of digital technologies to promote their own independently produced videos and build an audience for a successful network television series.

How they did this reflects several trends away from traditional television programming identified by media scholars and observers. Instead of seeking the broadest

possible audience, *Portlandia* targets a niche that even its early advocates in the television industry feared was too narrow. The show takes aim at the hipster, eco-friendly, coffee shop culture that has emerged in urban areas nationwide through a focus on one medium-sized city—Portland, Oregon. *Portlandia* appeals to those who identify with the alternative culture it parodies and provides broader license for others to laugh at the hipsters depicted in the show. In an age of audience fragmentation, the creators' and ultimately IFC's strategy of tailoring programming to the tastes of a well-educated, largely metropolitan young audience appealed to advertisers seeking to reach this demographic.

Portlandia's primary unit is the short segment instead of the 30- or 60-minute episode. The bite-sized sketches that are stitched together to make a full episode can largely stand on their own, enabling them to be easily decoupled from the full episode to take advantage of Web-based material's potential to go viral. IFC consciously uses the Web as a marketing aid rather than viewing it as an encroachment on broadcast control. Instead of being broadcast once each week over a 20- to 25-week season, with reruns shown unpredictably, *Portlandia* is designed to travel both spatially and temporally, with each episode available numerous times on IFC and short clips at any time online.

The path *Portlandia's* creators took contributed to the show's eventual distribution and success on independent network television in several ways. The cost of creating video can be an imposing barrier of entry for independent producers hoping for a pilot to secure eventual pick up by network television. Cable channels have typically been a venue for more cheaply produced original video content (Lotz, 2009). But the initial sketches that led to *Portlandia* began as a project without outside financial backing. Production cost is less of a consideration for the short clip format *Portlandia's* creators developed to demonstrate the concept's appeal. Production of complete episodes could be deferred until after network support was secured.

Television companies are understandably hesitant to bankroll an unproven new show concept and then hope that an expensive mass marketing campaign will create an audience. A television show may have a limited time period to demonstrate popularity to a network. The popularity of Thunderant, Armisen and Brownstein's original sketch comedy project, played a large role in IFC's initial decision to produce *Portlandia*. Just as a music album's success correlates with its popularity out of the gate, the creation of pre-studio-release buzz for video is likely of great importance to independent content producers seeking distribution through independent media companies. Broad consumer sampling of media content fosters demand. The appeal of music and video is equally a matter of personal taste that must be experienced before being assigned a value. The demand for popular general entertainment products is affected by word-of-mouth feedback which, when "spread electronically, can significantly impact the consumption decisions of potential customers" (Bhattacharjee et al., 2007, p. 1362). As it has done with music, digital technology has lowered consumer costs to sample and experience video, to learn about its writers and performers, and to interact with others.

Portlandia demonstrates that video makers with initially small budgets can demonstrate their project's appeal by posting clips online and attracting sizeable audiences. In this bottom-up model, Web viewers help decide what gets produced by providing a large sample of opinion and interest upon which station executives may ultimately make programming decisions. Armisen and Brownstein were not unknowns when their project was pitched to network decision makers. However, in the music industry, lesser known artists have succeeded by first developing an online following. *Fleet Foxes* is among a growing number of musicians achieving commercial success on an independent label (Sub Pop) as a result of self-promoted digital sharing and word-of-mouth exposure. Major music labels hold a traditional market advantage by signing and widely promoting major artists (Bhattacharjee et al., 2007). Yet resourceful musicians have shown that independent labels can successfully distribute popular music vetted by Web-savvy listeners. Independent television networks should be able to do the same with video of proven appeal to niche audiences, even if produced by unknowns.

Attracting a Web following does not guarantee success on television if the show's format and narrative arc are not well designed to maximize the buzz. Despite gaining a sufficiently passionate online audience to induce NBC to buy its rights, *Quarterlife* ultimately failed to attract a sufficient number of viewers to stay on the air despite its initial Web popularity. Each *Quarterlife* "Webisode" ran roughly 8 minutes, likely too long to attract as many eyes as *Portlandia*'s approximately 3-minute videos, a length similar to that of the online music to which consumers are accustomed to hearing and sharing. Peirce (2011) argued that *Quarterlife* drew poor ratings on NBC in part because the series followed a complicated, chronologically ordered plot line that made it difficult for casual viewers to follow when picking up the show mid-stream. *Portlandia*'s segments and loosely structured narrative arc allow sketches to be easily decoupled and packaged as standalone online clips that can be appreciated in isolation.

Creating bite-sized videos meant to be viewed independently online and packaged together into a traditional-length program is a strategic choice by content producers to adapt to a converged media environment. IFC adopted what Jenkins et al. (2013) defined as a hybrid model of circulation, where "a mix of top-down and bottom-up forces determine how material is shared across and among cultures in far more participatory (and messier) ways" (p. 1). The station took advantage of the Web's inherent flexibility, which "enables a range of new promotional and distributional opportunities, offering a very different experience of TV than that of its broadcast counterpart" (Kelly, 2011, p. 135). Once established as a hit, the show's creators began to slowly exercise the freedom to experiment with longer-format content. Krisel, *Portlandia*'s co-creator, writer, and director, said after the second season that viewers had "gotten used to a sketch show" and that the show was shifting away from standalone sketches (Turnquist, 2012). Still, the addition of only one and then two full-length storyline episodes in the shows second and third seasons reflects the recognition of the continued importance of its initial design.

Similarities in *Portlandia*'s production and promotion to aspects of the music industry are notable. The show's primary unit—the individual sketch—is similar in length to a typical, commercially successful song. Its sketches are then combined into 22-minute episodes or shows in much the same loosely structured way that characterizes how many music albums are crafted from songs. *Portlandia*'s content and format are designed to appeal to younger viewers who have long been comfortable with accessing and sharing the song as a unit of entertainment on the Web. Viewers were first introduced to *Portlandia* through a 3-minute music video posted on YouTube. Armisen and Brownstein are both musicians. Armisen described sketches he writes as songs and Krisel, who directed sketches, noted shooting them like music videos. Regardless of whether a connection to music consciously affected decisions about the sketches' content, format, or distribution, by using the Web to allow users to sample, experience, and develop a taste for their show, *Portlandia*'s creators followed a model of production and digital distribution pioneered by the music industry.

Conclusion

Portlandia illustrates that individuals can take advantage of the way media is consumed and shared in the digital age to create and distribute video, attract the interest of independent commercial television, and ultimately produce a successful series. Primary elements that enhance the likelihood of success include: (1) Targeting a niche audience from a demographic that routinely accesses and shares digital media content; (2) Creating video in short (2–5 minute) segments that can be appreciated in isolation and be grouped together to create loosely organized narrative arcs within longer episodes; and (3) Posting sample segments online to allow consumers to sample and develop a taste for them and share them with others to create a buzz and build an audience following. This path to commercial success with audio was pioneered by musicians. *Portlandia*'s creators and IFC turned the reality of audience fragmentation and ready access to entertainment media on the Internet into an asset instead of a liability. This offers a model for creative video producers seeking commercial success and independent media companies seeking access to a niche television audience.

Appendix A

**Portlandia Sketches by Season, Episode, Length, Title, and Ability to be
Viewed Independently of Others Without Meaning Being Lost**

Season	Episode	Sketch	Length (Minutes)	Title	Independent*
1	1	1	3:19	Dream of the '90s	Y
1	1	2	2:17	Local Chicken	N
1	1	3	1:48	Technology Loop	Y
1	1	4	4:38	Feminist Bookstore	Y
1	1	5	3:09	Local Chicken	N
1	1	6	3:39	Hide & Seek	Y
1	1	7	2:15	Local Chicken	N
1	2	1	1:35	Put a Bird on It	Y
1	2	2	2:39	Song for Portland	N
1	2	3	1:16	Bicycle Rights	Y
1	2	4	3:07	Feminist Bookstore	Y
1	2	5	2:13	Song for Portland	N
1	2	6	3:19	Dog Rescue	Y
1	2	7	3:14	Safe Word—Cacao	Y
1	2	8	2:10	Song for Portland	N
1	3	1	1:59	Over	Y
1	3	2	2:16	Aimee	N
1	3	3	2:15	Coffee Land	Y
1	3	4	2:52	Box	Y
1	3	5	2:46	Aimee	N
1	3	6	1:11	Get Out of There	Y
1	3	7	1:50	Strip Club	Y
1	3	8	3:42	Dumpster Divers	Y
1	3	9	2:38	Aimee	N
1	4	1	1:45	Did You Read?	Y
1	4	2	2:29	Mayor is Missing	N
1	4	3	3:24	House Sitter	Y
1	4	4	4:26	Mayor is Missing	N
1	4	5	1:02	Flower Girl	Y
1	4	6	1:40	Mayor is Missing	N
1	4	7	3:30	Wieden + Kennedy	Y
1	4	8	2:11	Mayor is Missing	N
1	5	1	1:49	Blunderbuss Poster	Y
1	5	2	3:08	Blunderbuss Check-in	Y

Appendix A

(Continued)

Season	Episode	Sketch	Length (Minutes)	Title	Independent*
1	5	3	1:27	Sparkle Pony	N
1	5	4	3:14	Acupuncture	Y
1	5	5	1:30	Sparkle Pony	N
1	5	6	4:35	Blunderbuss: Film	Y
1	5	7	1:43	Sparkle Pony	N
1	5	8	3:19	Sparkle Pony	N
1	6	1	1:18	Employment Ad	Y
1	6	2	2:21	Baseball Team	N
1	6	3	2:01	Artisan Bulbs	Y
1	6	4	4:10	Feminist Bookstore	Y
1	6	5	3:40	Baseball Team	N
1	6	6	2:31	Chef Photo-shoot	Y
1	6	7	2:41	Outdoor Movie	Y
1	6	8	2:31	Baseball Team	N
2	1	1	1:43	Pickle That	Y
2	1	2	3:10	Mixologist	N
2	1	3	2:49	River Trip	Y
2	1	4	5:20	Mixologist	N
2	1	5	3:28	Feminist Bookstore	Y
2	1	6	3:01	Door-to-Door	Y
2	1	7	2:40	Mixologist	N
2	2	1	3:02	Allergy Pride Parade	Y
2	2	2	3:21	Battlestar Gallactica	N
2	2	3	2:53	Artisan Knotts	Y
2	2	4	1:42	Fire Pit	Y
2	2	5	3:50	Battlestar Gallactica	N
2	2	6	3:33	Eddie Vedder Tattoo	Y
2	2	7	3:41	Battlestar Gallactica	N
2	3	1	1:44	iPhone Fall	Y
2	3	2	2:32	Cool Wedding	N
2	3	3	1:29	Polite Drivers	Y
2	3	4	2:26	Shopping Bags	Y
2	3	5	2:55	Feminist Bookstore	Y
2	3	6	2:23	Cool Wedding	N
2	3	7	3:06	Mailman	Y

Appendix A

(*Continued*)

Season	Episode	Sketch	Length (Minutes)	Title	Independent*
2	3	8	2:52	Cool Wedding	N
2	4	1	3:39	DJs	Y
2	4	2	2:32	Grover	N
2	4	3	2:32	Dog Park	Y
2	4	4	2:13	Hold Music	Y
2	4	5	2:36	Grover	N
2	4	6	1:55	Panhandlers	Y
2	4	7	3:26	Sgt. Peppers	Y
2	4	8	2:07	Grover	N
2	5	1	3:18	Dream of the 1890s	Y
2	5	2	2:19	Police Redesign	N
2	5	3	3:00	Rats	Y
2	5	4	2:59	PTA Meeting	Y
2	5	5	2:20	Police Redesign	N
2	5	6	2:00	Do You Know?	Y
2	5	7	3:12	Bad Art, Good Walls	Y
2	5	8	1:58	Police Redesign	N
2	6	1	2:00	Two Girls, Two Shirts	Y
2	6	2	2:32	Catnap	N
2	6	3	2:10	Music Video Donations	Y
2	6	4	3:10	Feminist Book Store	Y
2	6	5	2:42	Catnap	N
2	6	6	2:20	Haircut	Y
2	6	7	3:29	Bike Movers	Y
2	6	8	2:38	Catnap	N
2	7	1	2:25	Hippie Musicians	Y
2	7	2	2:38	Motorcycle	N
2	7	3	2:46	Thrift Store	Y
2	7	4	2:39	Joining Facebook	Y
2	7	5	2:40	Motorcycle	N
2	7	6	4:48	Adult Babysitter	Y
2	7	7	2:55	Motorcycle	N
2	8	1	2:05	Recycling Bins	Y
2	8	2	2:16	Feminist Bookstore	N

Appendix A

(Continued)

Season	Episode	Sketch	Length (Minutes)	Title	Independent*
2	8	3	2:28	Hikers	Y
2	8	4	2:48	Soccer Sign	Y
2	8	5	2:37	Feminist Bookstore	N
2	8	6	1:22	Dance Class	Y
2	8	7	4:41	Vegetable Delivery	Y
2	8	8	2:52	Feminist Bookstore	N
2	9	1	1:58	Baby	Y
2	9	2	2:48	No Olympics	N
2	9	3	2:07	Water Theater	Y
2	9	4	2:39	Park Design	Y
2	9	5	3:09	No Olympics	N
2	9	6	2:50	Lewis & Clark	Y
2	9	7	2:53	Bike Valet	Y
2	9	8	2:24	No Olympics	N
2	10	1	22:00	Brunch Village	NA
3	1	1	1:58	Catching Sun	Y
3	1	2	2:09	Pasta Addiction	N
3	1	3	3:32	Feminist Bookstore	Y
3	1	4	0:56	Lunchtime	Y
3	1	5	1:20	Outlet Hotel	Y
3	1	6	2:19	Pasta Addiction	N
3	1	7	2:47	Stu's Stews	Y
3	1	8	3:02	Recording Studio	Y
3	1	9	3:06	Pasta Addiction	N
3	2	1	2:15	Protest Anthem	Y
3	2	2	2:43	Take Back MTV	N
3	2	3	2:23	Meditation Class	Y
3	2	4	0:30	Cow's Milk	N
3	2	5	3:47	Take Back MTV	N
3	2	6	3:10	Street Renaming	Y
3	2	7	2:58	Tent Video	Y
3	2	8	3:31	Take Back MTV	N
3	3	1	1:45	Deodorant Ad	Y
3	3	2	2:12	Missionaries	N

Appendix A

(*Continued*)

Season	Episode	Sketch	Length (Minutes)	Title	Independent*
3	3	3	2:11	Pedicab	Y
3	3	4	0:30	Cow's Milk	N
3	3	5	2:49	Doily Shop	Y
3	3	6	2:50	Missionaries	N
3	3	7	2:25	Have You Watched?	Y
3	3	8	3:50	Feminist Bookstore	Y
3	3	9	2:26	Missionaries	N
3	4	1	22:00	Nina's Birthday	NA
3	5	1	1:32	Nerd	Y
3	5	2	2:33	Kid's Band	N
3	5	3	2:15	Raw Food	Y
3	5	4	0:31	Cow's Milk	N
3	5	5	3:07	Feminist Bookstore	Y
3	5	6	3:50	Kid's Band	N
3	5	7	4:50	DMV Fairytales	Y
3	5	8	2:40	Kid's Band	N
3	6	1	0:46	Plastic Bag Ban	Y
3	6	2	3:00	Off the Grid	N
3	6	3	2:28	Battle of the Bands	Y
3	6	4	0:30	Cow's Milk	N
3	6	5	3:32	Newspaper	Y
3	6	6	3:54	Off the Grid	N
3	6	7	2:38	Bed and Breakfast	Y
3	6	8	3:02	Missing Cat	Y
3	6	9	2:16	Off the Grid	N
3	7	1	1:22	Wedding Dance	Y
3	7	2	2:38	Temp Mayor	N
3	7	3	2:51	Baristas Unite	Y
3	7	4	0:30	Cow's Milk	N
3	7	5	1:31	Patio Dining	Y
3	7	6	2:45	Temp Mayor	N
3	7	7	3:33	Hippie Exercising	Y
3	7	8	2:59	Rats	Y
3	7	9	3:15	Temp Mayor	N
3	8	1	1:43	Kid's Toys	Y

Appendix A

(*Continued*)

Season	Episode	Sketch	Length (Minutes)	Title	Independent*
3	8	2	2:53	Soft Opening	N
3	8	3	2:10	Man Profile	Y
3	8	4	0:30	Cow's Milk	N
3	8	5	2:30	Soft Opening	N
3	8	6	3:14	Oracon Convention	Y
3	8	7	2:10	Soft Opening	N
3	8	8	3:39	Italy Trip	Y
3	8	9	2:35	Soft Opening	N
3	9	1	3:06	Art Project	Y
3	9	2	2:52	Roommate	N
3	9	3	2:15	Cinetopia	Y
3	9	4	0:30	Cow's Milk	N
3	9	5	2:43	Japanese Toys	Y
3	9	6	2:05	Roommate	N
3	9	7	2:31	Missing Cats	Y
3	9	8	2:47	Punk Tour	Y
3	9	9	2:33	Roommate	N
3	10	1	1:23	Happy Baby	Y
3	10	2	2:08	Rats	N
3	10	3	2:40	Escalator	Y
3	10	4	1:13	Cow's Milk	N
3	10	5	2:55	Breakup	N
3	10	6	3:39	Rats	N
3	10	7	2:39	Breakup	N
3	10	8	3:08	Professor	Y
3	10	9	2:02	Rats	N
3	11	1	22:00	Blackout	NA

Note. *Y = Yes, N = No, NA = Not Applicable.

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