

ADDING UP *HIDDEN FIGURES* p. 72

# PRODUCED BY

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KEVIN  
FEIGE

"I'M ON THE MOVIE'S SIDE.  
WHICH IS ALSO SAYING:  
I'M ON THE AUDIENCE'S SIDE."

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PHOTOGRAPHED BY KREMER JOHNSON PHOTOGRAPHY



THE COVER:  
KEVIN FEIGE

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Jean-Claude Van Johnson

# TELLING STORIES IN THE AGE OF BIG DATA

MARKETING IS NO LONGER SOMETHING YOU DO.  
IT'S SOMETHING YOU ARE.

WRITTEN BY W. VITO MONTONE



The Tick



Epic Rap Battles of History



Mojart in the Jungle



EVERY PART OF THE ENTERTAINMENT INDUSTRY HAS BEEN DISRUPTED AND MOVED, WILLINGLY OR UNWILLINGLY, CONSCIOUSLY OR UNCONSCIOUSLY, INTO A NEW ERA—THE ERA OF DATA. THOSE ON THE FRONT LINE OF CHANGE HAVE RESISTED THE DESIGNATION “DIGITAL.” AFTER ALL, DIGITAL VERSUS ANALOG IS SIMPLY A FORMAT ISSUE, A MATTER OF STORAGE AND TRANSPORT.

The advent of digital media in our world did not alter the essence of storytelling, but it changed stories and everything around those stories into data. There is gold in the data. And it's easy to miss it. If we dismiss it or misunderstand it, we're flying blind. And flying blind is guaranteed to hurt and cost us dearly.

The data I'm referring to is “big data” and by “big”, I mean huge ... nearly unfathomable, with many distinct waves of impact—small and large.

That data is ready to upset the rules underlying storytelling and distribution. We love rules. They make us feel safe and provide the illusion that we “know” something, making it easier to manage.

For instance, I'm sure you've heard these gems of conventional wisdom:

- Digital entertainment, like videos on YouTube, is best served in 1-3 minute segments, i.e. short-form.
- Millennials, the new blood for our product, have short attention spans.
- Millennials don't care about news.
- Social media is all about silly cat and dog videos.

Sounds pretty ridiculous now, huh? But remember, five years ago it was the bible.

Here's another oldie but goodie ... “Marketing” is separate from “creation.”

If you think you know what the audience is thinking, sadly, there's a high probability that you are wrong. As Chris Moore observed in this magazine earlier this year, “Our contract with the audience is broken.” It is broken because our content is data and we didn't revise the terms to reflect that. As a brief but hopefully illustrative example, consider our recent presidential election.

Regardless of your political affiliation, if you were surprised by the result, you weren't **looking at the right data**. Everyone has been asking how the pollsters got it

wrong, but big data has been getting it right for years. The title of a *TechCrunch* article says it all: *Analysis of social media did a better job at predicting Trump's win than the polls*.

Likewise, the artificial intelligence system MogIA, developed by Sanjiv Rai, the founder of Genic.AI has accurately predicted the outcomes of every U.S. presidential election since it was created in 2004. On YouTube, the average Trump livestream averaged 30,000 viewers; the average for Clinton was 500.

I share this slightly off-topic subject to illustrate the way data “blind spots” can derail our safest expectations.

This particular inquiry grew out of a panel discussion at the Produced By Conference, “The Inside Secrets of Entertainment Franchises.” The conversation was genuine, open and interesting, featuring real opinions shared without agendas.

The discussion about franchises provided a helpful boundary, focusing on material that had a previous public awareness in the marketplace. What was special was the presence of Peter Shukoff of *Epic Rap Battles of History*, whose web series commands nearly 14M subscribers and over 2.4B views.

What I took away was a greater appreciation for the blurred line between the audience and the creator/writer/producer/showrunner as a result of our highly connected world.

Several months later, I caught up with the panelists to follow up on the discussion and share their thoughts on the connected world's impact on creative and marketing.

Those conversations have suggested a new taxonomy of marketing in the age of big data:

- Push Marketing
- Reactive Marketing
- Integrated Marketing

## PUSH MARKETING

Push is the traditional, 20th century approach that takes product and “pushes” into the awareness of the market, the potential audience, and works to convince the audience the product is worth their investment of time and money.

This model assumes an inherent separation between the art and the audience. The project might have been inspired by the lives of the audience, but they have no connection to it until it is pushed into their awareness. As a one-time consultant with ABC Digital, I learned firsthand how the departmental separation between production and marketing was real and deemed difficult to breakdown.

This is a costly and, honestly, risky method, as the quality and approach used in the marketing creative becomes another element of success and failure.

Jaime Paglia works on both franchises and original material and understands this separation as a way to set realistic expectations. When he is focused on the task of making the best pilot, the question of how to engage with the audience feels like an ancillary concern. Plus there has been no “green light” so it feels wrong to start something you might not finish.

In our highly-connected and transparent world, there are effective ways to do Push Marketing, but it requires subtle analysis and fortunate guesswork about which part of the project will stand for the whole in a marketing campaign. Engaging with the right communities can give you a leg up when you're ready. But as you're about to see, you are really changing the marketing method when you do that.

## REACTIVE MARKETING

Franchises are wise to listen to the market. After all, the audience got them to their enviable spot in popular culture and the

fans are hungry for more! At this stage, it is dangerous to ignore the market, and it may even be impossible.

In Paglia's experience with networks, they are open to changes based on distilled fan response that big data enables. This had led to more fully-fleshed secondary characters and new storylines that neither violated canon source material nor undermined the vision of the series.

For instance, in addition to increased audience appreciation rippling through social media, an added benefit on *Eureka* was the way alterations based on fan response gave Colin Ferguson the chance to recharge creatively by directing an episode thanks to his reduced screen time. The CW accepted the reduction of their star's screen time based on their faith in the audience's appreciation of the secondary characters and storylines.

Like Paglia, James Middleton has been working on franchise extensions for years and acknowledges the value of working with the "market." For Middleton, the challenge is to embrace the fans, yet defy their expectations, observing, "If you give out too many of the ingredients of the cake, it is hard to surprise them."

Reliance on the element of surprise comes with its own costs, however, including the need for increasingly

tighter security. On the other hand, if something is exposed unintentionally, are the admittedly disruptive forced changes (based on audience response) a bad thing? Middleton admits the changes are usually improvements. I was left wondering, when the data flow is so easy to tap, is it better to try to hold information tight—or embrace the market with controlled leaks? And if you chose to embrace the market we're led to Integrated Marketing.

### INTEGRATED MARKETING

Here's a broad statement for you because of the organic embrace of the big data at their fingertips: new creators are the ones with the market. And this is true regardless of the format of the content.

I know from a personal experience the distinct advantage of tapping a starved fan community using new data streams. At least they were new in 2002 when I produced the first-ever official virtual/3D *Star Trek* convention. By engaging, embracing and co-creating with the fans directly, I was able to get 1.4M of them to visit the website without a lick of traditional "push" marketing dollars.

The Creators, the self-described title for the new generation of writers/producers/showrunners born of YouTube, are reach-

ing uncharted heights and branching out into all facets of the entertainment industry launched by uncontrolled access and interactive insights from big data. These creators view themselves as surrogates for their own audiences—the polar opposite of push marketing.

*Epic Rap Battles of History* is an online powerhouse. Its fans are passionate, offering characteristic comments like, "I like this series enough to say that it may very well be the single best YouTube creation." The fact that *Epic Rap Battles of History* is recognized as a TV Series on IMDB provides further context for that testimonial. There are creators with more views and more subscribers, but the creativity, production quality and execution of **ERB** makes it a clear standout.

Michelle Maloney, Senior Director of Studios at Maker Studios, has held several producing titles for *Epic Rap Battles of History*. She feels, "Traditional [push] marketing is something very few Creators have thought about. They have marketed their content via word of mouth."

Big data and the digital revolution have in fact been driven by this oldest form of marketing. It is this zero-cost, word of mouth marketing that remains the essential goal of brand building. The same marketing that kept the local cobbler in the medieval village busy has now been integrated with content via YouTube, a purely data-driven platform.

Peter Alexis Shukoff, also known as "Nice Peter", is *Epic Rap Battles of History's* creator along with Lloyd Ahlquist, executive producer and cast member. Personally, he has over 2.6M subscribers and nearly 1B views.

Peter was the most adamant on the panel when the subject of marketing came up. When discussing the ways that marketing has influence over the creative process of large Hollywood projects, Peter insisted that "Marketing should be a service to creative. If they can't sell it, they should be fired."

I admit, I was surprised. Haven't we heard this before? It's a reaction that might not be unusual in a more traditional content environment with its separation between production and marketing, but I was

## THE INSIDE SECRETS OF ENTERTAINMENT FRANCHISES

Originally livestreamed from the Produced By Conference 2016 at Sony Pictures Studios, "The Inside Secrets of Entertainment Franchises" pairs A-list producers with hot YouTube Creators to have an open discussion on franchise building.

### PANELISTS:

- James Middleton (*Terminator Salvation*, *The Sarah Connor Chronicles*, *Heroes Reborn*) @james\_middleton
- Jaime Paglia (*Eureka*, *The Flash*, *Scream: The TV Series*) @jaimepaglia
- Michelle Maloney (Sr. Director, Maker Studios) @michellemaloney
- Peter Shukoff ("Nice Peter" *Epic Rap Battles of History*) @nicepeter

### MODERATED BY:

- Shira Lazar (*What's Trending*, *Tubeathon*, *Huge on the Tube*) @shiralazar

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BOdNOTIEaIE>





Left: Colin Ferguson stars in (and sometimes directs) Syfy's *Eureka*.  
Top: The Amazon original pilot *I Love Dick*.

stunned to see this approach in the context of the Creator lexicon. I had to get to the bottom of this and understand his view.

As Michelle observed, Creators market via word of mouth through their content. For *Epic Rap Battles*, the access to data via the direct connection with the audience from day one was instrumental in their success, fueled by Peter and Lloyd's talent and leadership. From the very start, the audience was asked who won the battle and what figures the duo should parody next. If you like it or think it is good, you're encouraged to share it. Big data enables that that connection in real time, accurately.

So during my conversation with Peter, I shared this hypothesis: if marketing success is measured by reach, engagement and adoption by the audience, then *ERB's* success defines it as clearly at "one" with market and therefore actually marketing itself.

There was a pregnant pause. "No," Peter countered. "That's not marketing. That's collaboration."

You say, "tomato"...

Word of mouth may be the oldest and most effective form of marketing, but now it is so closely integrated, woven into the data stream, it's all but invisible. Thus, it is possible to be excellent at marketing without knowing anything about marketing. Great content is marketing.

In YouTube parlance, to "collab" is to work in tandem with another channel,

driving interest to each other. Marketing and collaboration are two sides of the same coin. They make each other better. Add your creative, your content, your series, your feature, and you've got integrated marketing, powered by data.

The Amazon Original Pilot season is an excellent bellwether. While some pilots don't make it, there are standouts like Golden Globe and Primetime Emmy winners *Transparent* and *Mozart in the Jungle* that make it through with flying colors. *I Love Dick*, *Jean-Claude Van Johnson*, and *The Tick* all got Amazon orders this year.

Just recently, a new player appeared to service independent producers, Amazon Video Direct. It provides self-service access to the massive Amazon market reach via Amazon Video (TVOD revenue) and Amazon Prime (Shared SVOD revenue). I was able to catch up with the Head of Amazon Video Direct, Eric Orem. (Unlike other sources in this article, Eric was not part of the conference panel discussion.)

I was especially impressed with the service's ability to use algorithms focused on viewing habits to put new and independent work alongside established fare. Eric, without divulging any details, alluded to new marketing-oriented features to be added to enhance the push marketing-based big data. Next year? Sounds hopeful!

Caytha Jentis, a PGA member and the writer, producer, and director of *The Other F Word*, shares, "Amazon Video Direct

has been a great platform for our show. Our targeted audience is already Prime members, so it's really easy for them to find and watch, although you don't have to be Prime to watch. As your show does well, you have potential access to their entire database of subscribers."

On top of that, the platform has added the AVD Stars program, a \$1 million monthly fund that distributes bonuses to creators based on streaming activity and engagement—even more incentive to use Integrated Marketing as early as possible! Jentis can testify to the incentive it creates, as *The Other F Word* was recently among those awarded for the month of October.

So let's put it all together. In the best of all worlds, there is no separation between creation and marketing. If it exists, it's because of an artificial mandate. Meanwhile, the most powerful marketing is a collaboration with the audience—when your content becomes directly integrated.

Take a moment to appreciate that the digital revolution has enabled big data that gives you direct access to the market, trends and the audience themselves.

It is the challenge for creators of all forms of storytelling to find the most effective path to engage with the audience as soon as possible. Big data is waiting for you. Producers who can harness it have the power to transcend the magic of creation and aspire to true storytelling alchemy. ■