

How web series are shaking up Australia's screen industry

Written by Sue Swinburne, Lecturer in Film and Screen Media Production, Griffith Film School, Griffith University



Starting from ... Now! tells the story of four women in Sydney. It's one of many successful web series transforming the TV landscape. Starting from ... Now!

The recent [Film, Television and Digital Games Survey](#) , conducted by the ABS for Screen Australia, showed a staggering growth in web series made in Australia: from just 107 episodes in 2012 to 3,248 in 2016. At the same time, the amount of TV drama broadcast fell from 632 hours to 497, while the quantity of TV documentaries being made dropped from 566 hours to 444. This explosion in web series is fostering a far more democratic platform than TV or cinema.

This week at [Melbourne Webfest](#) , 50 series from Australia and around the world are competing in 21 categories, with the winners announced at a gala event on Sunday. The Melbourne awards follow the [Australian Online Video Awards](#) , and

international events like

[The Webby Awards](#)

, [The Streamy Awards](#)

, and

[LAWebFest](#)

The relative youth of the world's major web festivals reflects the immaturity of the form itself. But these fests are growing up fast, and online content is being taken seriously by industry elders in broadcast TV and cinema: both the [Emmy](#) and [AACTA Awards](#) now welcome online video into some categories.

It may be that the Screen Australia figures don't show the true scale of the growth, as online content isn't always produced by an established production company or broadcaster, making it difficult to track. Still, while 2011 may not be the Year Zero the statistics suggest, there can be little doubt that there's been extraordinary growth in this mode of TV production.

Who is making the content?

Drilling down into demographics is tricky given the nature of the web, but some high profile

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success stories help to paint a picture of who's behind this surge. Women feature strongly, with comedy stand-outs from producer Tamasin Simpkin ([The Katering Show](#)), and the team behind [SketchShe](#) , a trio of female sketch comedians perhaps most famous for their [lipsynch car videos](#)

Online has also been a great proving ground for LGBTIQ voices like Julie Kalceff, creator of [Starting From … Now](#) , and [Jade of Death](#) director Erin Good, a six-part supernatural drama. The web has given these emerging writers, directors, and producers the chance to create content that would have struggled to see the light of day in a conservative, risk-averse broadcast market.

Australian factual content also does well online. One example is YouTube science powerhouse [Veritasium](#) . Its creator, Derek Muller, came to YouTube as a 29-year-old, while working on the ABC's Catalyst program.

It's telling that while Catalyst has been [pruned back at the ABC](#) , Muller's YouTube channel has gone from strength to strength, racking up an astonishing 4 million subscribers. His most popular video, on the Magnus effect, has over 34 million views.

An episode of Veritasium.

Animation has also contributed to the growth in Australian web series. The [Sexual Lobster](#) YouTube channel, for instance, has been a recipient of Screen Australia and YouTube's Skip Ahead funding program for Australian YouTubers.

[In 2016](#) the program awarded funding to three established YouTube channels for longer projects, either one-off films or pilot episodes.

[ArtSpear Entertainment](#) , which began as a live action project, has seen its subscriber base grow from just a few thousand to over a quarter of a million in just two years after shifting to parody animations of blockbuster movie trailers.

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Amid the surge of new web series, there are also a sizeable number of very low budget projects, often produced by film students or recent graduates. That in itself is nothing new, with series like [SYD2030](#) , [Flat Whites](#) , and [Newtown Girls](#) examples of web pioneers from the early 2010s.

But while those early series may have lacked the production polish of a broadcast TV show, the passion of these shows' makers is now matched by ever-improving production standards. WebFest's Content Director, Alexander Hipwell, has noted a "massive jump" in quality web series.

Digital technology continues to level the playing field, allowing emerging talent to compete alongside bigger budget productions. Series made for as little as \$2500 were selected for Melbourne WebFest over projects with budgets between \$500,000 and \$1,000,000. These "amateur" works may hold their own - competing even in the top festivals - alongside fully funded work.

So what does this mean for the traditional funding models, and regulatory frameworks? The Australian government is looking to recalibrate the screen industry through its [review of screen content](#) , while the broadcasters are working hard to find ways to stay afloat within their current business models and funding structures. What is clear is that the screen industries are being gradually taken over by new content creators like those treading the red carpet at Melbourne Webfest. They will undoubtedly be at the forefront of the changes to come.

Richard Fabb was a judge at the Online Video Awards and LiveLab was a sponsor of the event. He is Executive Producer of Two Weeks, a web series in competition at Melbourne Webfest. Two Weeks also received funding from LiveLab.

Sue Swinburne does not work for, consult, own shares in or receive funding from any company or organization that would benefit from this article, and has disclosed no relevant affiliations beyond the academic appointment above.

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