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Changing media landscape takes center stage in strike

- Story Highlights
- Electronic media has changed a great deal since the last strike in 1988
- Broadcast TV viewers could gravitate elsewhere, away from TV altogether
- Cut of Internet revenues at stake, but that value remains an unknown

By Todd Leopold
CNN

(CNN) -- It used to be a writer wrote something, the program aired, and that was pretty much it.

Sure, there was the possibility of syndication, but there weren't cable channels that ran "Law & Order" marathons. There weren't DVD box sets of a program's season-by-season run -- a huge source of revenue.

There weren't video games that began where a TV series left off, or on-demand TiVo subscriptions that allowed viewers to catch up with that episode they missed, or Internet sites that downloaded, highlighted and offered behind-the-scenes glimpses of a 38-second guest-star appearance.

There wasn't all this ... technology. And, by the same token, all that technology wasn't splitting the audience for TV and movies into smaller and smaller pieces.

Consider how the world has changed since 1988, the last time the Writers Guild went on strike. "The Cosby Show" was America's No. 1 TV program. Fox, just ending its first season with a weekend-only lineup that included "21 Jump Street" and "The New Adventures of Beans Baxter," was barely a blip on a TV screen dominated by ABC, NBC and CBS.  [Watch the writers strike in 1988 »](#)

And if a household had cable -- and just a bare majority did -- channel selections didn't include much beyond CNN, HBO, ESPN, MTV and the Weather Channel. Bruce Springsteen's song "57 Channels [and Nothin' On]" didn't come out until 1992. Now Bruce, and the rest of us, are staring at 500 channels and countless media permutations.

About the only thing that's remained consistent are fickle viewers, who now have more means to channel-surf -- indeed, media-surf -- than ever before. And if they leave their TV shows behind, they might be hard to get back.

"Once another medium, particularly cable, gets a chance to draw viewers away, they don't come back, and that wasn't the case in 1988," TV historian Tim Brooks told the trade publication Multichannel News. (Actually, Brooks is a little off: Broadcast viewership *did* decline slightly after the 1988 strike, according to Multichannel News, and has been trending downward since the early '90s.)

The catch today is that there are far more media than just cable. Indeed, the media conglomerates have caught on to this fact, allowing viewers to watch programs over the Internet and through podcasts. (Indeed, with the strike affecting late-night talk shows, movie and music promotion has gravitated to the Web. "Traditional media needs the exposure on the talk shows, but what they really need is to go where the audience is migrating to, and that is the Internet," Jerry Del Colliano, a University of Southern California music-industry professor, told The Associated Press.)

The residuals due for airing over the Internet is a key issue the writers want tackled.

In a pre-strike post on his New York Times blog, Times technology writer Saul Hansell observed that the Web is a knife that cuts both ways. If the writers get a cut of Web revenues -- an unknown value since nobody knows what Web syndication is worth -- the value of broadcast and cable syndication could decline. Or if the price the writers receive is perceived to be too high, new, nonunion talent could establish a beachhead.

Or, he adds, "bored viewers may suddenly start deep explorations of puppy punting and other specialties of YouTube."

 [Watch a writer talk about how "nobody wins" »](#)

Robert Thompson, the Syracuse University pop culture expert, doubts things will come to that: "When you think about the shows we loved best ... they were told by brilliant writers," he told Multichannel News. "I think the industry is going to have to cede that fundamental basic value, and in doing so cede some of the real estate of these new technologies."

Certainly, there's always going to be a market for well-told stories. "There is no dream until we dream it. There is no word written until we write it," the commentator and science fiction writer Harlan Ellison ("Babylon 5," the story "A Boy and His Dog," the TV column collection "The Glass Teat") told CNN during the 1988 strike.

But the earlier strike -- which began March 7 of that year, lasted 22 weeks, postponed the beginning of the 1988-89 TV season and cost an estimated \$500 million -- gave rise to a group of low-budgeted shows, including "America's Most Wanted," "Cops" and "America's Favorite Home Videos," which became the forerunners of the reality show trend.

Reality shows, of course, are now one of TV's most prominent genres. They're generally inexpensive to produce -- and, as many writers noticed during the reality craze earlier this decade, they don't need writers.

So there's a lot at stake. And watch out: On June 30, 2008, the contract for TV and film actors comes up for renewal.

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