Introduction

Entertainment media is one of the United States’ most lucrative and influential exports, and Hollywood, in Los Angeles County, California, has historically been the locus of such media’s production. While much study has been done on the subject of film and the connection between Hollywood and Los Angeles as a whole, there exists less scholarship on the topic of animated Hollywood productions, even less on the topic of changing rhetoric in animated features, and a dearth of information regarding the rise and influence of independent, so-called “indie” animation. This paper aims to synthesize scholarship on and close reading of the rhetoric of early Disney animated films such as Snow White and more modern cartoon television series such as The Simpsons with that of recently popular independently-created cartoon features such as “Narwhals,” with the goal of tracing the evolution of the rhetoric of cartoons created and produced in Hollywood and their corresponding reflection of Los Angeles culture.

Hollywood and Animation

In a 2012 report commissioned by the Hollywood Chamber of Commerce, The Los Angeles County Economic Development Corporation acknowledged that “[f]or many people, the words Los Angeles and Hollywood are synonymous with entertainment” (“The Entertainment Industry” 1), and with good reason: Los Angeles’s year-round fair weather first attracted live-action filmmakers in the early 1900s, and filming-friendly Hollywood slowly grew into a Mecca of entertainment media production. In 2011, the entertainment industry accounted for “nearly 5% of the 3.3 million private sector wage and salary professionals and other independent contract workers,” generating over $120 billion in annual revenue (8.4% of Los Angeles County’s 2011 estimated annual Gross County Product), making this “one of the largest industries in the country” (“The
Entertainment Industry” 2). Also in 2011, entertainment industry-related employment accounted for approximately 17.6% of Los Angeles County’s “non-farm wage and salary jobs” (25). Certainly, the Hollywood mystique is also a well-known cultural export, spawning such international imitators as Hollywood North, Bollywood, and Nollywood. Hollywood and its exports are crucial to the success and popularity of Los Angeles as a whole.

In *Hollywood for Historians*, Andrew Dawson argues that Hollywood is “woven into the fabric of American culture and society,” and therefore “represents or embodies many of the themes that political historians identify as central to the study of modern societies.” Dawson further states that “the [entertainment] industry is a strategic component of the US economy, a significant employer of labour in southern California, Canada and Western Europe, and a major component of world trade” (3). Indeed, animation accounts for a significant portion of Hollywood’s economic value as a whole. Current figures are difficult to quantify, but in 2004 Ted Tschang and Andrea Goldstein reported in “Production and Political Economy in the Animation Industry: Why Insourcing and Outsourcing Occur” that revenue from animation was approaching $50 billion worldwide (2). In 2004, $15 million was considered to be a low budget for an animated feature film, and the budgets for “A list” features often exceeded $100 million. A single episode of an animated television series cost $250,000 on the low end, and up to $1.5 million for popular series, such as *The Simpsons* (5). With the introduction of new media, however, Hollywood’s currently established big-six studios (Warner Bros. Entertainment, The Walt Disney Studios, NBC-Universal, Columbia TriStar Motion Picture Group, Fox Filmed Entertainment, and the Paramount Motion Pictures Group) may seem to no longer form a secure oligopoly of animated media production. With recent technological advancements, it has become quite easy for even individuals to produce and distribute “cartoons” of all sorts, although such “amateur” pieces have yet to be seen by the broader public as anything but, at best, a diversion and, at worst, a waste of time. However, this paper intends to prove that Hollywood animation has and will continue to reflect Los Angeles’s social and economic landscape. While indie animations can—very rarely—be lucrative for the original creator, even the most popular
*independent* animated Internet series usually cost little to produce (compared to productions financed by one of the Big Six), but have estimated earnings in the low hundred thousands per series, total—not annually (Amidi). Unsurprisingly, there is usually a direct correlation between the cost and revenue of animated media: more expensive animated pieces generally have greater economic returns, likely due in part to marketing budgets. Despite current fears that the recent trend toward independent, online-only, Peer-to-Peer (P2P) animation threatens to dismantle traditional Hollywood production methods, thereby threatening Los Angeles’s economic climate, the current “Internet Age” is simply representative of the existing oligarchies’ most recent appropriation of current trends. The dissemination of new cartoons via the platform of the Internet has an impact on the evolution of cartoon rhetoric, but not the way in which such rhetoric is used to attract financial success.

**Background and Methodology**

This paper avoids study of the broader category of “media,” and even “film,” in favor of “animation,” for several reasons. First, the wider category of “media” is truly immense, and examining the scope of independent creation is a task for a much more ambitious project. While live-action film and animation are quite similar in some respects (and mainstream studios produce both), it is difficult to designate a demarcation between categories of live-action P2P video. Any individual with a computer and Internet access can create and share live-action video content, but not all of this content qualifies as entertainment media. A quick glance at the front page of YouTube, the most popular P2P video sharing platform, reveals a plethora of amateur music videos, tutorials, and video blogs, each of which constitute a separate category of video media. Sometimes, the purpose of such live-action videos is unclear. Animated media requires a greater investment of time and a different skill set, and its permutations are easier to distinguish and quantify.

Second, economic limitations make it difficult for P2P creators of live-action video to generate content of the same caliber as big studios, and, in contrast, individual animated creations can be compared on a more level field. Many indie producers of live-
action video have limited access to video-recording equipment; many, in fact, primarily use cameras built into other devices, such as cellular phones and laptops. While the standard of commercial video equipment is rapidly improving, independent filmmakers and small studios simply cannot afford the same standard or amount of equipment available to the big studios, and the end product of the latter is easily distinguishable from the former. Conversely, commercial digital animation software is comparatively affordable. For example, “Narwhals,” a popular indie cartoon, was made using Adobe Flash. A monthly subscription for Adobe Flash is available to individuals for less than fifty dollars per month (“Adobe”). Flash is the same program used for major television cartoons such as Hasbro’s *My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic* and Cartoon Network’s *Foster’s Home for Imaginary Friends*, both economically successful and popular properties, employing well-known mainstream talent and spawning mass-produced merchandise. Although individuals without access to big studio resources would need to invest a great deal of time into each project, the necessary production materials still pose a relatively low investment cost. Many individuals are then able, presumably, to create and present animation at a comparable quality with big-budget productions.

Although these individuals and small studios lack other important resources available to bigger studios, the ability to create an indistinguishable end product does allow for a somewhat more fair comparison between indie and mainstream animation. In addition, the higher quality of these creators’ end product makes them more competitive in the market and, therefore, more likely to gain attention from the mainstream public (and, often, major corporations), which is a crucial factor when examining the impact of their rhetoric.

Finally, as previously examined, animation is simply a different artistic vehicle than live action film, with its own “toolbox” of rhetorical devices. In her 2010 article “Animation: The New Performance,” Teri Silvio situates animation as a wholly different performance than theater and on-screen acting. By definition, animation requires that artists give the appearance of life to lifeless objects, from traditional or digital images to lumps of clay. Silvio posits that the kind of projection necessary to achieve animation’s illusion sets the form wholly apart from live action (427). Silvio also notes that, because
of this projection, “animated characters ‘belong’ to fans in a different way than embodied human stars like Marilyn Monroe or Mick Jagger” (428); fans of animation see their favorite characters as autonomous beings with “lives” (428) outside of their media representation. Sherry Ortner, argues that indie media—and by extension independently created animations—“embod[ies] the valuation of art over money” and true passion, of creating art for art’s sake, establishing a stronger connection between creator and product and product and viewer (6, 9). Therefore, independent animated media possesses a uniquely powerful position in entertainment. Because the media is animated, the audience is invited to participate in the creation of this illusion of life, claiming ownership; additionally, the creator/media/audience bond is further strengthened if the media is independently created and therefore more intimate.

**Animation as Art**

Despite the common public perception of animation as “cartoons for children,” trends in Hollywood animation often influence or at least are indicative of broader trends in Los Angeles County and the United States as a whole. Indeed, recent scholarship has made much of animation as an art form. In *Hollywood Flatlands: Animation, Critical Theory and the Avant-Garde*, Esther Leslie supports the existing argument that animation is as worthy of literary attention as any other art form; specifically, she posits that animation may be best examined via modernist critical theory. For example, *Fantasmagorie*, a French animated short made in 1908 and considered one of the very first examples of animation, uses rough line work to portray a surreal dreamscape in which a figure morphs and changes, sometimes violently but without any serious effect. In reference to *Fantasmagorie*, Leslie insists, “From the very first, animation, self-reflexive and unmasking, establishes a circuit of life and destruction. Animation, the giving of life, battles with annihilation, and always overcomes, always reasserts the principle of motion, of continuation and renewal” (2). As the field of animation developed, “experimenting artists found that cartoons touched on many things that they too wished to explore: abstraction, forceful outlines, geometric forms and flatness, questioning of space and time and logic—that is to say, a consciousness of space that
is not geographical but graphic, and time as non-linear but convoluted” (19). When audio/visual innovation allowed for cartoons to be set to sound, cartooning became further set apart from other art forms because “with its frame-by-frame fully controllable structure, the links between sound and image could be drawn so tightly that a symbiosis, a perfect rhythmic synchronization, could occur” (Leslie 26-27). Dawson further expounds on film’s importance in general (animation included) by pointing out that the motion picture industry is able to and does deal with issues of “class, race, gender, and the cultures of authority and resistance” and therefore “has immense cultural, political and economic power. It acts as an important ideological force in its own right while also being a barometer of important political and cultural trends” (Dawson 3). It must, therefore, be worthwhile to examine what trends Hollywood media reflects.

**Textual Analysis**

I will also focus my attention on cartoons produced after 1928 and are, therefore, able to make use of audio production linked to their visual images. Though this audio/visual technology had been used previously, the first method of linking sound to animation was made truly popular by Walt Disney’s short, “Steamboat Willie.” The technology soon became known as “Mickey Mousing” because of this relationship (Leslie 28). Of sound techniques, Eric Walter White, defender of animation as art, observes, “The important discovery made by Walt Disney . . . concerns the unexpected relations that exist between visual and aural phenomena” (qtd. in Leslie 30). Disney’s early shorts established a relationship between sound and moving picture that we still expect today: “For instance, when a stream of bubbles appears on the screen, Mickey will almost certainly prick them with a pin, and as they explode they will play a tune in which the frequency of the wave-vibration of each note will be inversely proportional to the size of the bubbles” (qtd. in Leslie 30). These and similar early cartoons were rough, still setting the ground rules for what animation could do and what audiences should expect. Since the medium was so new, most cartoons were experimental, bearing some semblance with the surrealism of Fantasmagorie from decades previous. These
cartoons were also not explicitly designed to appeal to children; rather, they were a new and interesting amusement for people of all ages (Leslie).

The first big shift in animation design came with the great depression of the 1930s, and Disney was at the forefront of this change, just as it was with the introduction of audio. Walt Disney and his brother, Roy, invested all of their savings into Disney Brothers Co. (the original name of Disney Studios). As the economy worsened, the studio had to find some way to keep afloat. In a bid to gain more revenue, the studio made changes to their animation style and the design of their lead character, Mickey Mouse. Leslie concurs that “it might have been the merchandising, and a toy market to exploit, that compelled Mickey mouse to become cuter, more toy-like” (31). The characters’ lines became rounder, less jagged, and their movements became less severe. There was a general softening of not only the appearance but also the behavior of animated characters. In addition, cartoons began to become “a vehicle for good behavior— at the Saturday afternoon Mickey Mouse Clubs, children learnt how to cross the street, wash behind their ears and respect their elders. Children were formed into conformist adults” (Leslie 31). This shift toward appealing to parents and the accompanying merchandising revenue helped to usher in the Golden Age of animation, which included such classic animated films as *Snow White* (1937), an early Disney Studios success story, becoming not only an economic triumph but also a vehicle for socializing the next generation of children.

When making *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, Walt Disney devoted great time, effort, and money to developing exactly the aesthetic he desired. With painstakingly created watercolor backgrounds and more than three million individually inked and colored acetate sheets, as well as a full orchestra’s jovial musical score, *Snow White* was produced at the cost of a million and a half dollars (“Making of”). While the cost seemed outrageous to Disney’s contemporaries and during production the project was often referred to a “Disney’s Folly,” the end result was a smoothly animated, brightly colored, artfully scored masterpiece, quickly earning $416 million at the box office. The character of Snow White is characterized as “warm” and “human” (“Making of”) due to her smooth, slow, dreamlike movements, made possible by the sheer
number of cel frames devoted to bringing her to life. Presumably, the film’s cheerful score, bright colors, and dreamlike beauty—as well as its “happily ever” sanitized ending, in direct defiance of the more gruesome fairytale on which it was based, was inspired by Disney’s recognition that the public wanted to be made to feel safe and secure—against the economic threat of the Great Depression of the 1930s and the military unease abroad. Themes of danger are included in the film, as when Snow White runs through the dark forest, seemingly pursued by ghosts and demons, and when the evil queen makes herself into an ugly old hag and poisons the titular character. However, the evil queen is defeated in the end, and the enemies in the dark forest turn out to be friendly animals—Snow White’s ability to communicate with the animals and receive assistance from them with household chores was so iconic that it is now a trope in popular culture signifying a traditionally idealized female character who reinforces conventional expectations, transforming domestic drudgery into a joyful act as she awaits her prince. Even any possible element of sexuality is avoided, despite the story’s several potentially sexual elements: the Dwarfs are made comfortably round, small, and cartoonishly sexless; the prince who awakens Snow White with “True Love’s Kiss” is also nonthreateningly feminine, with large, round eyes, long lashes, and red lips. The kiss, an important plot point, is presented with a complete absence of sexual tension, administered by the prince as one might kiss a child, rather than a lover. This film was so successful because it inspired awe due to the sheer amount of work and the novelty of what it accomplishes as the first feature-length cel-animated film, while reinforcing the social norms of its time and, therefore, winning the public’s favor.

Around this same time period, cartoons also began to take on a more conscious political ideology. Films “moved to the centre of political power as government turned to it for support during the profound economic crisis of the 1930s . . . and World War Two” (Dawson 9) a position which they, arguably, still function in to some extent; even today’s animated characters, whose voice actors are never on-screen, may spout rhetoric which live-action stars would find too radical. In the post-war years, the studio system was undermined by the “ideological straitjacket of anti-communism” and new competition from the adoption of television—by 1955, half of all American households owned a TV
st (Dawson 9). Studios also lost their centralized workforce as people moved from the inner city, where the studios were located, into suburbs. Thus began “The New Hollywood,” in which studios combined with other producers to form multimedia corporations “with global reach” (Dawson 9).

Cartoons for television in the 1950s often followed Disney’s lead, producing family-friendly cartoons featuring characters who exhibited idealized, often prescriptive behavior. However, the spirit of experimentation and subversion never truly died. For example, *Looney Tunes/Merry Melodies* (1930-69), produced by Warner Bros., featured “safe,” unobjectionable material alongside more subversive images such as cross-dressing (a technique often employed, and apparently enjoyed, by Bugs Bunny), drug use, and violence, including the use of firearms. In the 1960s and 1970s, Hanna-Barbera’s cartoons such as *The Flintstones* and *Scooby-Doo* appealed to adult audiences with a mix of social commentary, pop culture jokes, and postmodern undertones. Many cartoons produced between the 1950s and 1980s snuck in similar subversive concepts and in-jokes to appeal to adult audiences without becoming too overtly subversive for children. Of course, there have always been cartoons made for a strictly adult audience, such as the film *Red Hot Riding Hood* in 1943, the *Wait Till Your Father Gets Home* series in the 1970s, and the *Beavis and Butthead* series in the 1990s. Perhaps because of their subversive nature or their limited audience, these cartoons are invariably less popular than those intended for a wider audience.

*The Simpsons*, boasting an impressive twenty-six seasons so far, is one of the most successful animated television series to come out of the 1990s. *The Simpsons* began in 1989 as a series of crudely-drawn, low-budget shorts on *The Tracey Ullman Show* (“America’s First Family”), and audiences quickly responded to the show’s offbeat, sarcastic humor. The show resonated with audiences because it showed a family that wasn’t perfect—one that was, in fact, far from perfect. Homer, the patriarch of the family, started out as a clumsy, angry oaf who would physically strangle his ten-year-old scamp of a son. This violence might have been frightening if not for the completely unrealistic representation of the figures: all characters are made up of simple, geometric shapes with thick black lines and completely round, white eyes. Most
of the characters are a bright, unnatural yellow. Although the characters are often portrayed as in danger, enacting violence, and even—sometimes—dying, their cartoonish appearance and acts are treated farcically, rather than realistically.

This is, perhaps, why *The Simpsons* was able to “push the envelope” as it did (and, to a lesser extent when compared to other, more recent cartoons, still does). Homer works in a nuclear plant and is exploited by his greedy, ancient boss—a satirical Marxist commentary of the state of the working class. Issues of education are often highlighted as Bart and his sister, Lisa, navigate an elementary school in the midst of a perpetual budget crisis, led by a spineless “mama’s boy” principal and a handful of apathetic teachers, who are often shown smoking, drinking, and bemoaning their lot in life. Authority figures are also often portrayed in a negative light: church officials are uncaring, the police are inept, and politicians are corrupt.

The TV industry’s financial distress in the late 1990s led to the bankruptcy of many large networks, which consequently affected the animation industry (Tschang). When the studios economically rebounded, it was under new ownership. For example, Paramount merged with Viacom, Warners merged with Time Inc., Sony bought Columbia (which was previously owned by Coca-Cola), and Universal changed hands several times before finally being bought by Comcast in 2011. Animation work that was already outsourced to relatively expensive countries like the Philippines was moved to countries with cheaper labor, like China and India (Tschang 13). Although subversive independent properties like *Beavis and Butt-head* continued to thrive during this time of financial uncertainty, big studios backed noticeably tamer cartoons, once again prioritizing citizenship and family values, with the exception of some more daring properties like *Animaniacs*, no doubt emboldened by executive producer Stephen Spielberg’s popularity. During this time, *The Simpsons* slowly continued to build a following and its budget continued to rise, leading to more sophisticated animation techniques that still sought to preserve the original cartoonishness of the series.

The animation industry began to rebound in the early 2000s, and this financial windfall brought with it more adventurous and risqué programming, such as those found on Cartoon Network’s *Adult Swim*. Still, today’s large animation-producing studios are
owned by even larger corporations, which by necessity are somewhat restrictive of their production content. As with Disney’s move toward commercialization during the Great Depression, today’s economic climate and the risk-adverse tendencies of financing powers, as well as the broad reach of the Federal Communications Commission’s (FCC) censorship powers, do place limits on the content of animated films. Consequently, one might think that the uncensored reality of the Internet’s P2P content delivery system would allow for extravagantly subversive and shocking content. In the face of many more risqué modern cartoon programming, recent seasons of *The Simpsons* seem comparatively tame: Homer has become more befuddled and less angry, celebrities continue to make campy cameos, and audiences have gotten used to the once bold tactics with which the show used to tackle controversial topics.

**Indie “vs.” Mainstream**

The phenomena of indie animation is yet another trend in the ever-transforming history of animation. My interest in the P2P network is limited strictly to the creation, content, and position of so-called “indie” animated media. Independent live-action films have long been a component of media production and the Hollywood process, and indeed many previously “indie” production houses have found success and joined together to form the current Hollywood studio oligarchy. It is useful, then, although difficult, to define indie media and animated indie media, in particular. In “Against Hollywood: American independent film as a critical cultural movement,” Sherry B. Ortner defines independent film as “the antithesis of a Hollywood studio film”—Hollywood films, she says, differ from indie films in that they are “very expensive,” geared toward “entertainment” rather than creating a thought-provoking piece, and politically conservative; in addition, they make use of “fantasy and illusion,” rather than being “highly realist” like indie films, and generally have “happy endings” (2). She further states that indie films should takes risks, “embody a ‘personal vision,’” be independently funded, and “embody the ‘valuation of art over money’” (6), but the main difference between studio and indie films is embodied in a single buzzword: “passion” (9). It certainly does seem that, in our society’s collective consciousness, indie media
production of all kinds (including, for example, indie live action or animated film, graphic art, such as that from uncommissioned artists or creators of underground or web-based comics, independent writers, such as bloggers and non-commercial columnists, independent musicians, and theater and other performance art) is associated with the idea of “passion,” of creating art for the art’s sake. Conversely, mainstream production of these same artistic genres is labeled “commercial,” a “sell-out,” or even “greedy.”

In *Hollywood Drive: What it Takes to Break In, Hang In & Make it in the Entertainment Industry*, Eve Light Honthaner offers advice to those aspiring to a career in entertainment media. She concurs with Ortner that “indies” are “very different from traditional studio films” in that they “invariably have smaller crews and shorter schedules and are generally financed by private investors, *although some are funded by major studios operating under indie banners*” (Honthaner, emphasis mine). Emanuel Levy’s *Cinema of Outsiders: The Rise of American Independent Film* acknowledges that 1980s “industry forces such as the Creative Artists Agency (CAA) or Twentieth Century-Fox” would consider working with “fringe players” (independents) as “unthinkable”—independent modes of production would be a threat to the established studios. By 1999, though, CAA represented “indie cinema’s guru David Lynch, and Fox established a division, Fox Searchlight, to produce artistic movies.” Further, “The big agencies now have officers who specialize in indies. The William Morris Agency recently restructured its independent film division, which has its own logo and is autonomous, with the goal of boosting the agency’s status in the independent world” (Levy). These so-called “independent” studios, backed by larger conglomerates, are often what popular culture thinks of and refers to as “indie” producers: big studios offer their “independent” subsidiaries the starting capital necessary to create higher-quality films, as well as advertising resources and a system of support for dealing with legal issues, such as union rules. Honather states:

> At one time, being independent always meant low budget, and low budget almost always meant non-union, but now that the unions and guilds are offering low-budget (and low-low-budget) agreements, more indies are becoming signatory. These low-budget agreements allow producers to pay
union and guild members lower salaries while preserving their pension, health and welfare benefits. (Honthaner)

The Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Arts (SAG-AFTRA) Union does indeed have provisions for independent productions, including the Ultra Low Budget agreement Honthaner referenced. However, SAGindie, an ancillary branch of SAG-AFTRA, makes it clear that the Ultra Low agreement “is not intended for pictures produced for television broadcast, cable use, video/DVD markets or otherwise produced primarily for commercial exploitation” and can never be applied to animated media. This means that any production house wishing to make any revenue and work within union rules must have enough starting capital to pay talent and other labor costs upfront. Animated films are in a special category and, therefore, cannot be produced via the Ultra Low agreement, even if producers do not intend to make a profit or broadcast via mainstream channels.

The 2014 SAG-AFTRA Animation Agreements included modest pay and benefit raises for union members involved with animation production. They also established a residual system from free on-demand viewing of union-sanctioned productions. However, no minimum rate was established for New Media productions; such rates are to be “individually bargained” as long as they fall below a certain budget threshold. Such thresholds vary, but average around $25,000 per minute (SAG-AFTRA). The union dictates that standard television rates would apply to mainstream productions disseminated via Subscriber Video on Demand (SVOD), such as Netflix. However, “made for new media” programming, such as Netflix original series, need only pay residuals if their budget is high enough. Productions disseminated on P2P platforms such as YouTube have yet to ever exceed the budget thresholds established by the union, and no residuals are paid “unless the program is a derivative of another television or theatrical picture.” The union admits, “Currently, there are no high budget SVOD animated programs in production. However, with the increase in these types of programs, it is possible that budget breaks may be met and the newly bargained provisions will apply over the term of the contract” (SAG-AFTRA). While these restrictions allow individuals to create animated media and disseminate it via P2P
platforms without repercussions, the rules also encourage big studios to create so-called “independent” tributaries to take advantage of union allowances. This may well be the reason why so many popular “independent” animated films on YouTube and other P2P platforms are actually backed by big studios from the beginning, and individual producers who start out successful are often absorbed by the mainstream. This somewhat insidious modus operandi proves that the P2P method of transmission the Internet offers, once feared as a threat to traditional production methods, has actually become relatively simple for big studios to appropriate.

**Current Trends**

In today’s “digital age,” and with the increasing influence of the Internet as a distribution platform alternative to theatrical release and television broadcasting, the entertainment industry appears to be changing. For example:

Content may originate as a feature length movie, but is now distributed across a range of platforms. The production of content has changed as well. Digital imaging is displacing film in the production of movies while lines are being blurred between such related industries as movie production, electronic computer games, and other entertainment media. These changes have transformed the entertainment industry, while at the same time transforming the local economy. (“The Entertainment Industry”)

Despite these changes, mainstream Hollywood is coping and adapting. In “Hollywood Versus the Internet: the media and entertainment industries in a digital and networked economy,” written in 2006, Andrew Currah states that Hollywood’s entertainment industry is ruled by six major corporate entities: Walt Disney Co. (Walt Disney Studios), News Corporation (20th Century Fox), Viacom (Paramount Pictures), Sony Corp. (Sony Pictures), NBC-Universal (Universal Studios), and Time Warner (Warner Bros. and New Line Cinema) (440-41). The entertainment studio components of these corporations, he says, “have increasingly functioned as gatekeepers (rather than film factories), which control access to the finances required to produce, market and distribute films (and related spin-off products) in major markets around the world.” Currah argues that, like all
oligopolists, these studios “neglect” and “marginalize emerging markets” such as the Internet, which seems to “threaten the status quo” (440); therefore, he sees the Internet as a force for “bringing about a dramatic increase in consumer choice and a relative decline in centralized oligopolistic control in [entertainment] markets” (Currah 443). While this may have been the case in 2006, the Big Six’s current use of the Internet’s P2P abilities suggests a mainstream adaptation, rather than an independent revolution. As I will show, it is not actually possible to categorize true “indie” media as any kind of threat against the Hollywood “mainstream.”

It is true that indie animated media is often created without the restrictions of the larger and therefore more cautious Hollywood studio oligopoly. Large studios have a greater economic investment than P2P creators, and the stakes are higher; it’s easier for P2P creators to take risks when generating original content. Obviously, common themes in indie media of all kinds are humor and shock value; Cartoon Hangover, one popular “indie” YouTube channel, boasts the tagline “Too ___ for TV,” inviting the audience to imagine any number of reasons why these cartoons would be inappropriate for wider public consumption. There are, certainly, violent, pornographic, and otherwise extreme indie animations, but the most popular—including those produced by Cartoon Hangover—seem to be relatively benign. Indie animated films and shorts are not relegated to the Internet because of content restrictions alone; many indie films are completely innocuous, and, as previously shown, mainstream cartoons have a long history of “pushing the envelope.” Purposely subversive and boundary-testing cartoons such as Southpark and The Simpsons have been on modern mainstream airwaves for quite some time. In addition, even the presumed freedom of “indie” status does not allow for just any content: Levy acknowledges that the “typical indie-type film costs the equivalent of ‘pocket change’ to Warners, Disney, or Paramount,” but, as production values increase, “their executives become more frugal” (Levy). Popular franchises solicit increased capital and, therefore, greater oversight from the parent company.

There exists today a wealth of so-called indie animated media distributed primarily or exclusively via the Internet on a free-to-watch basis. However, if American “independent” animated media, aside from the other definitions of “indie,” is simply
animated media not produced and disseminated by the main Hollywood studio oligopoly, then popular and successful examples of truly independent animated media are rare. The nature of the P2P platform allows for unfiltered content production, and the risks taken by P2P creators often do not resonate with wider audiences. Still, such risks do sometimes bring rewards, which is why mainstream Hollywood studios are increasingly making use of the traditionally indie platform of the Internet, masking their mainstream status by creating small subsidiaries of themselves to reap all the benefits of the indie creative world while still having access to big-studio funding. Today, truly “independent” animators—animators who create and distribute work on their own—find it more difficult to gain exposure; the popularity of indie Internet cartoons has attracted many first-time creators, but few are able to keep a persistent online presence without support.

For example, a recent “indie” studio “winner” as far as exposure and success is certainly Cartoon Hangover, as mentioned previously. This “studio” is a “television channel” created for and distributed on YouTube. While it presents itself as an indie studio, Cartoon Hangover was created by Frederator Studios, which was founded in 1998 and which has produced such popular syndicated cartoons as *The Fairly Oddparents* and *Chalkzone*, which were bought by Nickelodeon (parent company Paramount). Frederator Studios is also the creative force behind *Adventure Time*, which continues to be a lucrative franchise for Cartoon Network (Warner Bros.). Despite its connection to Frederator studios, a commercial, mainstream studio, Cartoon Hangover appears to remain true to its “indie” roots—for now. Individual creators gain the financial support of Frederator Studios, but retain creative control of their properties, such as Pendleton Ward’s *Bravest Warriors* and Natasha Allegri’s *Bee and Puppycat*. However, Frederator Studios is currently partnering with Sony Pictures Animation to create Go! Cartoons, which will meld with Cartoon Hangover in the summer of 2015. The direct influence of the commercial studio giant, Sony, may mean changes for Cartoon Hangover’s indie ethos, but it’s doubtful that Sony would want to claim ownership of Cartoon Hangover’s more controversial series, such as James Kochalka’s
Superfuckers. Mainstream media may absorb new “edgy” trends quickly, but there’s only so much that the wider audience can be deemed ready for.

Cartoon Hangover was connected to Frederator Studios from the beginning, but even individuals don’t seem to be able to remain truly independent once they’ve found a lucrative audience. One example is Jason Steele’s story. He created “Charlie the Unicorn,” a short dark comedy, as a flash animation test and uploaded it to Newgrounds, a popular online video and gaming community, in 2005. “Charlie the Unicorn” soon became so popular that Steele formed his own studio, FilmCow, and began producing fan-demanded “Charlie the Unicorn” sequels. He has uploaded many other shorts, but his most popular recent series is “Llamas With Hats,” another darkly sarcastic comedy, this time featuring talking llamas. While FilmCow remains Steele’s personal studio, he’s partnered with retail chain Hot Topic to produce and disseminate “Charlie the Unicorn” and “Llamas with Hats” merchandise. While Hot Topic may not be directly connected to the Hollywood studio oligopoly, its main merchandising partners include such studio giants as Disney and Dream Works. Hot Topic, while a private company owned by Sycamore Partners, has business agreements at least tangentially connected to all of the Big Six studios.

For another example, in 2002 Jonti Picking and Chris Vick began uploading episodes of the very popular Weebl and Bob, a simple flash cartoon in which egg-shaped characters rant nonsensically (and, in the earlier episodes, sometimes inaudibly) about pie. Picking and Vick stayed independent for several years, until the end of Weebl and Bob in 2005. Picking later joined with Sarah Darling to form Jelly Penguin Studio, producer of cartoons accompanied by such viral earworms as “Badger,” “Amazing Horse,” and “Narwhals,” the rights to which were recently bought by Sprint for a new advertising campaign. The original “Narwhals” cartoon was uploaded to YouTube in 2009. Like “Badger” and “Amazing Horse,” it quickly became popular. Like many indie or indie-appropriate animated features, “Narwhals” appeals to the current public’s short attention span with garish color, figures made up of simple shapes with thick black lines to delineate them from the background, and, perhaps most importantly, repetitive movement and sound. The original “Narwhals” is only a few minutes long and features
several of the titular animals enacting the content of a short, simple, and irritatingly catchy jingle: “Narwhals, narwhals / swimming through the ocean / causing a commotion / because they are so awesome.” Later stanzas have the narwhals fighting polar bears, inventing the shish kabob, and saving a fisherman from Cthulhu, Lovecraft’s elder god, all against rave-style flashing colored lights and enacted with very simple animation processes in Adobe Flash.

Like most trends, “Narwhals” and similar videos were quickly forgotten, but when the first Sprint commercial featuring “Narwhals” aired in early 2015, the hashtag #Narwhals immediately began trending on Twitter, as denizens of the Internet either celebrated the return of a favorite meme or bemoaned the resurgence of a hated earworm. In the commercial, though, only the first section of the song is used, presumably because later verses include a reference to male genitalia. Sprint, as a large company with connections to Sony, was likely adverse to taking too much of a risk, but still benefits from “Narwhal’s” indie cred as a creation of Jonti Picking’s, who is either living the dream of indie creators everywhere by finding a lucrative market for his creation or becoming a massive “sellout” by working with a big studio.

Though some indie cartoons started by individuals without studio backing, such as “Narwhals,” do become popular, their appeal and popularity has not gone unnoticed by Hollywood’s studio oligarchy. These studios, in an effort to eke out the competition and wishing to make a profit, quietly move to overtake new creators before they gain enough popularity to become too powerful. Mainstream studios are not blind to trends. Once concepts are tested and found lucrative in the P2P market, the Hollywood oligopoly happily absorbs these properties. The problem with pitting indie-created media against mainstream media is that Hollywood seems to inevitably be more successful (both economically and in popularity) than any indie creator may hope to be. In addition, even marginally successful “indie” properties often are or become connected to one of the major Hollywood studios; there is no true “indie” success—there is only the inexorable machine of Hollywood: it evolves, but its power remains concentrated in an oligopoly system.
Conclusion

Further research is required into the rhetorical significance of the somewhat scandalous relationship between so-called “indie” producers of animated media and major mainstream Hollywood studios, as well as the continually evolving rhetoric of mainstream and “indie” cartoons in response to current events and shifting trends. The point, I believe, is that the physical space of Hollywood remains crucial for media production, for it is not only the physical and cultural space of creative media production, but also the home of many of the major studios. The rhetoric of products of Hollywood will continue to reflect the shifting ideologies of this location and disseminate these concepts throughout the world.
Works Cited


*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Dir. Larry Morey, et al. Disney, 1938. Film.


