The Rebels Saving Hollywood

How Ben Stiller and a New Breed of Talent, Studios, and Agents Are Blowing Up the Media Business
Robbins financed the Fred movie himself for $1 million, bypassing his production deal at Paramount, figuring that the studio’s reaction would be, What are these stupid videos with him shouting at the camera? How is that a movie? (This predates the studio’s digital deal with Stiller.) Robbins completed Fred: The Movie in just four months, and it aired on Nickelodeon the weekend of September 18, 2010. When Robbins learned of the ratings, he was astounded. “In two runs that weekend, more than 12 million people watched the movie,” he says. Smallville, whose pilot alone cost $7 million to make, averaged 4.34 million viewers over 10 seasons.

Most satisfying, however, was that for the first time, Robbins wasn’t just a filmmaker for hire. He—along with Cruikshank and Cruikshank’s management company, the Collective—held the rights to a property that could be valuable forever, in everything from home entertainment to merchandise. (There have already been two Fred sequels.) That’s when Robbins decided to go all-in on YouTube as a place to launch new ideas.

His timing was propitious. Shortly thereafter, YouTube began to fund an array of high-quality original content that could make the site feel more like a real TV viewing experience, investing a reported $100 million. The YouTube Original Channels initiative set off “a feeding frenzy,” says Brent Weinstein, head of digital media at UTA. Hollywood loves nothing more than new money, and Robbins, with Weinstein’s help, became one of the first people to receive funding.

**CHASING THE NEW CABLE TV**

_Spend even a few minutes with Robbins—or any executive involved with a YouTube channel—and he will tell you that YouTube isn’t just a lot like cable TV but that it will eventually be exactly like cable TV today: a targeted programming paradise that’s also a gusher of cash and profits for the major players. “I don’t know if you know about how ESPN started but it was, like, these guys in Connecticut,” Robbins says, analogizing its middle-of-nowhere roots to the unfashionable home base of his teen- and tween-oriented YouTube network, AwesomenessTV amid sushi-ramen joints and a Bed Bath & Beyond. “This is not that different.” Steve Raymond, a former Comcast exec who’s now CEO of Big Frame, the YouTube production company that he founded with Penna, says, “It’s like the new Viacom or the new NBC, and YouTube is kind of the new Comcast.” “I always think of it like HBO in 1970 or 1977,” says Michael Green, who, before cofounding digital management and production company the Collective, repped stars such as Roseanne Barr and the Backstreet Boys. He’s sitting in his Beverly Hills office wearing a baby-blue-and-white-checked shirt and jeans, his Adirondack encased feet propped up on a wood table with a Galaxy soccer ball prominently displayed in the center. “The difference is that because of technology, it can happen a lot faster than it did for cable.”

As Green indicates, no one wants to wait one or two decades to build the new cable TV: They’re in land-gold mode now. Machinima, a network of video-game-oriented content that generates 2.5 billion views a month, raised $35 million last May (valuing the whole company at rumored $190 million) to fund further expansion. In December, Maker Studios raised $36 million, at a similar valuation, from a roster of Hollywood names including...