

## [Transcript] Plain English with Derek Thompson / How Hollywood's Writers Strike Could Change the Future of TV and Movies

You may find this hard to believe, but 60 songs that explain the 90s, America's favorite poorly named music podcast is back with 30 more songs than 120 songs total. I'm your host Rob Harvilla, here to bring you more shrewd musical analysis, poignant nostalgic reveries, crude personal anecdotes, and rad special guests, all with even less restraint than usual. Join us once more on 60 songs that explain the 90s every Wednesday on Spotify. Today's episode is about Hollywood and the writer's strike that could change the future of media. In May of this year, the Writers Guild of America went on strike. And for weeks now, TV and film writers have been walking in picket lines in Los Angeles, New York, a strike threatening to bring development to a screeching halt. Today's guest is Matt Bellany, host of the Ringer podcast, The Town, and a writer with Puck News. He is here to break down what's at stake for writers, for studios, for entertainment consumers, and to answer my deeper questions about how this strike could change the future of TV and film. But first, a history story, a brief history story. I was going back through previous WGA strikes, and it occurred to me that you could tell a pretty good history of media technology via writer strikes. In 1952, a predecessor to the WGA, called the Screen Writers Guild, had a strike against TV and film producers in part to allow radio and theatrical writers to submit material for a new entertainment medium called television. The 1950s were the decade when TV penetration in the US went from less than 10% to about 90%. And writers, of course, wanted a piece of this newfangled market. Eight years later, in 1960, the WGA had another dispute to fight for higher pay and pensions. This time, as demand for TV content was rising, more movies were being shown on TV, and writers wanted a piece of income from old movies, the movies that they had written that were airing on television and benefiting their studios. In the 1970s and 1980s, cable TV boomed, and there was a new crop of so-called paid TV channels like HBO. This happened alongside the rise of home video, VHS, Betamax, and that meant that film studios were making a bigger share of their revenue from cassettes. The film business wasn't just about butts in theaters anymore, it was about TV, it was about home video. So in 1981, there was a three-month writer strike to get writers where in the writers wanted to get better compensation for all those new market segments, paid TV, cable, home video. Now as cable grew, a growing part of the business in Hollywood was something called residuals. This is the reruns and syndication I've been talking about, VHS. So another 1988 strike was fought in part over how to benefit writers now that Hollywood had figured out how to extend the financial shelf life of their work. Maybe most famously, in 2007, 2008, there was a long and famous writer strike fought over residuals for DVD sales and content made for the internet. Well, among many issues, it was DVD sales and content made for the internet. This strike might be most famous for inadvertently accelerating the rise of unscripted TV. All these studios and producers and channels were like, well, if we can't have writers write original stories, we'll lean on reality television. And the number of reality shows bloomed during and after the strike. This really was an important acceleration point for unscripted TV. So now you come to today. And today, you have this entertainment industry transformed by Netflix, Disney Plus and other streamers. Writers are striking over how they should be compensated in an age of streaming that has yielded more original shows, but shorter seasons. That means more writers, but smaller paychecks and less opportunities for, you know, median income writers and young writers who used the long television seasons of yesteryear to learn the ropes. And when I look back over this history,

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when I look back over the causes of those strikes, the rise of TV in the 1950s, home video in the 1970s, cable in the 1980s, DVD and internet sales in 2007, and now the messy economics of streaming

in 2023. You really see that the history of writer strikes is the history of entertainment, and specifically it is the history of entertainment distribution and economics.

Strikes reflect history and strikes change history. So how will this one end?

I'm Derek Thompson. This is Plain English.

Matt Bellany, welcome back to the show. Thanks for having me.

So we're talking writer strike, and I want to cover some basics here before we discuss some of the deeper implications. For those that are still catching up, what kind of writers are on strike and what are they protesting? So these are members of the Writers Guild of America, which covers a lot of things, but these contracts are for film and television screenwriters. And television includes the streaming services because they are now members of the studio coalition that signs the deal every three years with the writers. So these rights come up every three years. The last time it came up in 2020, there was a pandemic, so everybody sort of punted, and a lot of these issues probably should have been resolved then. They had three years to sort of fester as we all stayed at home, and now they are coming to the fore in a big way.

And what are they protesting? What are the main issues here that they're striking for?

Well, there's a lot of specifics, but Big Ball Park is that the writers believe that the streaming revolution has left them behind, that the way that the television industry has evolved, and the film industry to a certain respect as well, has changed the economics of the business in a way that the streaming companies have found a way to make this work for them, but it doesn't work for the writers. And there's a bunch of different reasons for that. There are fewer episodes of television series now because the model is not to sell advertising against these shows. The model is to bring in subscribers and keep those subscribers. So you got to have a lot of shows, but you don't need very many episodes or seasons of those shows. There is the issue of the way television is produced, which used to be by a large writer's room that would sit for months at a time and crank out dozens of episodes of shows. Now that doesn't happen. If there are writers' rooms, they're smaller, and they are more pointed. There's this concept called the mini room, which is where a couple writers get together before a show goes into production, and they crank out what the beats of the show are going to be. Then it gets turned over to an experienced producer that finishes the show, and that leaves the writers out of the equation, and they don't like that. And then there's just the standard issue money questions. They believe they should be paying more. They believe inflation has outstripped what the increases in their contract are. So there's a lot of different things. The way that residuals are calculated in the streaming universe are also less than traditional television because when they were determined, there wasn't necessarily a model around this. So there's a lot of questions on both the financial side and the existential question of how writers are going to be treated going forward. That's a very specific one. It gets into the AI question as well. The writers also believe they should have protections against AI. I really get into the AI bit in a few minutes. I want to put a pin in the fact that one of the themes I'm so interested in about the history of entertainment is how the economics of distribution determines everything. You said in ad-supported television from 20 years ago, 30 years ago, even 10 years ago, you had fewer shows, more just Office and CIS,

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but they were longer seasons. Now with subscription-supported TV, how do you get subscriptions?

You

need churn. You need a lot more people coming in to see new titles, new titles. You need more shows, but more shows mean shorter seasons. Shorter seasons means that the average writer on that show is making less money. The domino effect between the business model, which is ads versus subscriptions, have completely different implications for the economics of being a writer, being a worker in this industry. One big question that I have not heard answered well to my satisfaction

is this. There are more original shows than ever. I think by some counts, there's five to six times more original shows than there were 15 years ago. 500 scripted shows as of last year, although that is now starting to decline. Starting to decline, we've probably seen peak originality when it comes to original shows, but that number was at 100 or below, I think, 15 or 20 years ago. The number of original scripted dramas and comedies has exploded in the streaming age. Writers are writing those original scripted dramas and comedies. How do you explain this dynamic where there are more shows than ever and therefore presumably more lead writers than ever, but many of the writers are doing worse, which is motivating this strike. Couple things there. First, objectively here, there are more writers working in film and television than there ever have been. That is something even the Guild would acknowledge. They're not saying we have fewer members or people aren't out there writing. There's a lot of writers. By most measurements, the makeup of that writer's Guild is more diverse than it's ever been. It's more female than it's ever been. There have been big gains towards diversifying the people who are given access to this industry. The question is, what is available to those people once they become writers? What happens here is that typically you are a young writer. You get on a show. You get to write on that show as a staff writer or as a junior writer producer or something like that. It's a stepping stone. You then work on that show. You get to graduate to writer-producer on the next show. Then you get to graduate to an executive producer. Then you're a showrunner. Then you create your own show. That's sort of the traditional hierarchy. What's happening now is there isn't that path to grow because of these things that I've mentioned, the mini rooms where you're not actually working on the show, these six-episode shows where they don't actually need a staff writer or junior people. It's the White Lotus, and Mike White writes the entire thing himself. It's a Marvel show, and they really just need a little mini room to sketch out the beats of the show. Then they turn it over to a director writer-producer who sort of effectuates the entire show. That's the one side. The second side is just the bare economics. If you're on a show that has 13 episodes a season, it doesn't matter if you're making 20 grand, 30 grand, 50 grand, an episode. That's not a middle-class

lifestyle for a writer in a way that being on 24 episodes of NCIS used to be. That's the big difference here. You and Mike sure on your podcast recently, this is the writer showrunner behind Parks and Rec and The Good Place, Brooklyn Nine-Nine. He made a really interesting argument that develops what you just said, which is that the old system was really good for, in his mind, both writers and networks. Because when there were fewer shows and longer seasons, it gave opportunities to writers like Shore, who was a co-writer on The Office and SNL before he started Parks and Rec and The Good Place. It gave them lots of time to develop the skills they needed to become a star showrunner, to really understand what they're doing when they're launching their

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own show. It's like this old model, which the streaming wars have blown up, was an amazing apprenticeship program for writers that wanted to become showrunners. That was so educational for

me to listen to your conversation with Mike, because I had never thought about the idea that this old model, which you could absolutely make fun of, like 25 episodes of law and order. We're just doing the same thing over and over again. It seems laughable on the surface, but in fact, it was an incredible college and graduate school for becoming a showrunner and delivering us a stable ecosystem of great shows. Just add to that whatever you also took away from that really great conversation with Shore. Well, I will take the counter here because I heard from a number of people after that interview that said, Mike is completely right. The apprenticeship system worked really well. It also produced a television product that objectively and on the whole was not as good as the television product is today. The level of sophistication in the writing, producing, the level of special effects that you see in television, and the level of execution is higher today than it was when you had a 24-episode season. If we're being honest, episodes 16 through 22 were probably not great because they were spinning their wheels and it was February in the writer's room. They all wanted to get to their ski vacation. That just was the way that television worked because people of a different generation didn't expect much and there wasn't that much competition.

And Matt, to your point, cheers to points before, it's about advertising. We've got this bucket of Honda money that we have to put up against hours of television. We have to do 25, 30 shows of NCIS or CSI Miami, even if we only have 13 good ideas for ways that David Caruso can say funny things into the camera, put on his sunglasses and then the who screams yeah. Even if we only have 13 good ideas, we have to stretch it to 25 because that's what the advertising dictates. It's interesting to think what has been gained and what has been lost by the shucking off of this old model. But yeah, back to you in terms of what you heard from people after your conversation with Shor. Mike Shor has been a recipient of that. The Good Place was not a 22-episode season show. The Good Place had limited seasons and that was designed to serve the creative. Many writer producers like the 10 to 12-episode model because it gives them additional freedom to do what they want with their show and not feel the pressure to extend it. Many people have six-episode shows now. They have eight episodes and there is just a greater flexibility in the creative process now. And the downside of that is that there is a toll on the writers because there aren't as many. And this is one of the things that The Guild has picked up on. They want this concept of a mandatory writer's room where if you green light a show, you also agree as a studio to support a robust writer's room, whether or not the show needs it or the creator wants it. You say there are jobs available here and the studios have really pushed back on that because they're like, wait a second, we're not going to pay people to not work. We're going to staff these shows appropriately. And if we have a showrunner who doesn't need these writers, we're not going to just put them there. And the writers say that's a cop out and they're using that as a kind of fig leaf there to hide the fact that they really don't want to spend the money on this. But where Mike makes a great point is the apprentice system begat the writers we have

today. He is a product of that. Many of the writers out there that are considered A-list, top tier writers are a product of that system. And if you chip away at that, you are going to

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hurt not just the writers, but ultimately the quality and the profitability of these shows. That's the argument. Right. You are disinvesting in the human capital pipeline that is necessary to create generations of excellent showrunners. I definitely have time for that argument. It's the model. It's the automated. If you don't invest in your Ford workers and you don't teach them how to become the next generation of automotive executives, you're not going to have very good

executives. Yeah. I mean, look, we just went through 18 hours ago, the show Succession just ended. This is a question of succession. It's a question of who takes over in the next generation of showrunner? How do you set up the next crop of 25-year-olds to be brilliant 35 and 45-year-old showrunners that are masterful at understanding not only how you run a room, but also how you set up the shooting and how you hire the best people to be in the staff and to hire the actors? It makes it makes sense to me. Here's the question. Well, Jesse Armstrong also has a robust writer's room. And he's a guy that came up on a number of British television shows and was a writer on the thick of it and all these other things where he got the experience and the exposure to this where when he was finally in that chair, he sort of knew how to do it. Absolutely. Everything you're saying raises a bigger question, which is it'd be one thing if the writers were striking against studios that were making record profit margins. Instead, they're striking in a very strange period in entertainment history where Netflix has lured all of these different studios into a, I think as I called it, I said it to Bill, it was as if they told all these studios that streaming was this beautiful pasture and it turned out to be filled with quicksand. And now you're seeing Disney losing money on streaming and Paramount is losing money on streaming and all these companies are losing money on streaming. And it raises the question, who is winning here? I mean, when you do the whole

arithmetic, more shows with lower margins, more show runners, but the typical writer is making less money. If this streaming economy is growing, who is benefiting from it? What kind of worker or executive, as it might turn out, is really benefiting from this emerging system?

Great question, because that gets to the whole issue in the strike as to whether these studios can afford to even pay what these writers are demanding. I would argue they can, but that's a separate thing. The key thing, the person who's winning right now is the consumer. You and I are winning because for the last decade and a half, we have had a highly subsidized content ecosystem here where Wall Street decided that Netflix was the wonderkin and the future was streaming and these services were going to have 500, 600, 700 million customers worldwide and the economics were all going to pencil out eventually and it was going to be like Amazon where they lost money, lost money, lost money and then all of a sudden became the best business in the history of the universe. So the consumer has been watching all of this stuff and having extraordinary choice when it comes to content. Now on the business side, I would argue that Netflix is a winner here because they actually had this model from the beginning, said we are subscription video service, we are going to grow our subscribers and the economics will pencil out. That worked for a long time. They had a hiccup last year where the stock, everybody decided that streaming was no longer the Shangri-La and there were not going to be 700 million, 800 million paid subscribers, the Netflix stock tank. They pivoted, they now sell advertising, which they said they would never do and they are now cracking down on password sharing. If you haven't gotten the email,

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you will get the email very shortly saying, we're sorry, but you're going to have to pay if you want your ex-girlfriend or your brother-in-law to continue watching Netflix. But the fact that Netflix has turned streaming into a profitable business, I think, makes them, at least in the short term, the winner here. All the other companies are really struggling. It does seem like if you scope out, there's a big picture story you can tell here about 21st century media and you tell me how off-base you think this is because you know this landscape better than I do. But it seems to me like a big theme of the 21st century in entertainment is that digital media has tended toward more choice and lower prices in a way that often subsidizes consumers, is a great deal for consumers just as you said, and scrambles the economics of the content makers in ways that are often very anxious. So for example, what was iTunes? Well, it was more choice than the largest tower records in the world at lower prices. You could buy the song for \$0.99, so more choice, lower prices. And it just intermediated the album, which was the key. And it just intermediated the album, which paves the way for, right, the next name on my list, Spotify Hello Corporate Overlords, which is incredible choice, 40 million songs for a monthly price. It's basically one album, but lots of musicians are incredibly pissed at Spotify and make their pissedness known all the time, that they don't feel like they are genuinely and fairly compensated for the streams that are essentially not necessarily benefiting our corporate overlords so much. It's not like Spotify is raking in profit. Instead, this is a kind of customer subsidization bottom line that is sometimes screwing over or seeming to screw over the musicians. Sort of the same thing with Netflix, except with a positive profit margin, rather than a negative profit margin. But even Netflix feels like they have to crack down on passwords in order to raise the margins on their business in order to please Wall Street. So it just seems like again and again in 21st century media that the internet has been this machine for expanding choice and lowering prices in a way that should theoretically make consumers very, very happy, but often causes a ton of on-wee behind the scenes. Does that sort of big pictures storytelling kind of sit with you? Absolutely. And I would just simply just call it a disruptor. I mean, the cable television bundle was the greatest business in the history of media. I mean, the fact that you got millions of people, 100 million people in the US at one point to pay for a bunch of channels that they never watched. I mean, think about that. Think about the economics of that. It's very similar to the album. You love the song. You had to buy the album. And there were 10 songs that you would never listen to. That was a huge, huge revenue generator for people that probably shouldn't have made that revenue or subsidized the hits and the hit factory. The difference is the music industry has pivoted and found a way to make money on touring. The touring business used to be, I mean, I'm reading all these Tina Turner obituaries and the fact that she and David Bowie had to do a diet Pepsi commercial in the 80s to fund the tour that they wanted to do because in those days, the albums were the revenue generator and the tours were the marketing. Now it's the exact opposite. The album is the marketing for the tour. And the tour is where you make all your money. The music industry pivoted there and the labels found a way to get themselves in on that. And the television universe hasn't really found that way yet because the cable bundle has been completely blown up. It's disintegrating at a pace that is far outstripping what people anticipated it would be. Streaming is not a good business yet. And we are in this no man's land where a couple of companies will figure it out and figure out how to survive. Many will not. I'm really glad you said that about cable because I do think it's an under

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appreciated point that as much as Americans hated cable and possibly reflecting the fact that many Americans hated cable, it was the best business model in the history of media. I've compared it sometimes to a private sector income tax system. I mean, what are the business models whereby you get 100 plus million households to give a single entity hundreds of dollars a year? There's only three that I can think of. Number one, the U.S. tax system. Number two, cable from the 1990s early 2000s. And number three, Amazon Prime. I think Amazon Prime is getting to be a kind of private income tax system. Don't forget Spotify and Apple Music now. All right. There we go. Spotify and Apple Music. I was explaining this to my older relatives about how music is now a utility because they were all saying, oh, I'd love to listen to Tina Turner. I'd love to listen to some of the old recordings. They're all on Apple Music and Spotify. You can just listen to any of them. And it was just this weird people over 70 don't comport. They don't understand that the history of recorded music is on my phone. And I pay \$11 a month or \$10 soon to be more probably at Spotify. But I pay that for access to this just like I pay for access to water and electricity and these other things. And me as a 40-something person, the music industry probably would have lost me a previous generation ago. I would not have bought albums. You know, I would not have been into music. But now the music industry, because music has become a commodity, they will have me in my 40s, probably 50s, probably 60s. And I will give them \$110, \$130 per year for access to all the music. And that is, it's just such a different way of thinking about an entertainment product. And cable was that. You gave \$1,000 a year to your cable company if you got all the channels. And even if you did not like sports and did not care about sports, you paid the Walt Disney Company \$6, \$7, \$8 a month for ESPN. Amazing business. It was an incredible business. One that especially worked really well for ESPN that were getting so much money from these people that were not watching sports one single minute of the year. And this is one of the reasons why, and we'll get back to the registry in about 15 seconds, ESPN is now thinking that even they have to go over the top and sell access to their channel directly to subscribers. That is going to be an unbelievably expensive product. I mean, to make up the amount of money that you were getting, that ESPN was getting from cable, they're going to have to be charging people \$15, \$20, \$25 a month to be making it back. It's going to be really interesting with that. At least to ESPN, to Disney, the entire cable bundle, that might be a different conversation. But the ESPN question is a really big one. And the sports leagues, don't forget, the sports leagues, that's a whole separate conversation. But these \$300 million contracts are all ultimately supported by the \$7 a month that your grandma pays for ESPN and never watches. Right. Yeah. So you might see the next, right, the next negotiated CBA might be sort of peak salaries, at least inflation adjusted, if that television model that has funded sports so profitably over the last few decades starts to show some cracks in the edifice. All right. To get back to the writer's strike, I want to know how motivated you think the studios are to end the strike quickly. Because I was reading a mutual friend podcast guest of ours, Rich Greenfield from LightShed Partners. And he pointed out that the studios and the streamers have so much content. They simply have so much that has already been greenlit, that is already in production, that they can probably go months and months, just slightly more slowly rolling out everything that they've already approved and see minimal impact to earnings and free cash flow from a strike that lasts even six months. How much do you think it is true that the studio

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is right now because they're dealing with such an enormous mountain of content, they've said yes to, are not as motivated as they had been in previous strikes to actually end it?

Well, there's a couple of questions there, because comparing to previous strikes, you are correct. The stockpiling and the fact that they all have this ton of content and the streaming services can lean on international content as well, that is a huge benefit. But I think it's a little short-sighted to say that these companies are not vulnerable.

These fall television seasons still matter to the legacy companies. They just got through with their television up fronts in New York, where they present their new shows to the advertising buyers and you get \$9 billion in ads that are changing hands. If they don't have a fall season, that really impacts the ad buys on those platforms. And that's still a significant business. It's not something the analysts talk about a ton, but that is the linear television business. It's an ads business. And now a lot of those packages now are for both linear and streaming. So if you are NBC Universal, you're selling into new episodes of shows for the fall and on Peacock. And there's a symbiotic relationship there. And if you don't have scripted shows for the fall, that does hurt. And then I think secondly, it may not hurt a quarter from now, but two or three quarters down the line, the fact that Stranger Things has shut down is a big deal. The fact that the Yellow Stone pipeline and these Taylor Sheridan shows, the fact that he's not pumping out new scripts and they're not doing that, that does hurt Paramount Plus. They are reliant on those shows. So I think it's right to say that the studios are better prepared to withstand a short-term strike of a few months. But when you start getting into four, five, six months, and it starts to impact the release calendar for next year, that's when we're going to start to see problems for these companies. On the studio side, on the producer side, who is most vulnerable to a prolonged strike? I'm thinking like if I am a part of the WGA and I'm a part of that, that whatever it's called, the lead committee that's figuring out strategy and messaging, where's my weak point that I can find in this sort of vanguard of studios and producers? Is it Apple? Because in a weird way, movies are a nothing burger of their business, but that also might mean that they're like, what the fuck are we doing? Just pay the writers. We don't care. We make \$10 billion from phones every second of the day. Just give writers \$100,000 more dollars. Or is it like a Netflix or an NBC that is really the most important domino they need to fall in order to win this strike? Where, if you were advising or you're listening to people like Mike and talking to other writers that are leading the strike, where are they focusing their strategy?

Yeah, I think they have not said, by the way, that they are going individually to these companies and trying to hit certain pressure points. They are trying to shut down shows all across the ecosystem. The other side of the Apple argument could be that Apple and Amazon, the Hollywood stuff is just kind of going out money. It's just kind of fun to do, and it's not their core business. So they could just be like, all right, whatever, we'll just write off this year. Call us when you guys are back working.

I don't think that's going to be the case. These companies have such different business models now, and they only come together in this cartel to negotiate labor agreements. The AMPTP only exists for this one purpose, really. And these companies, the Netflix business model is different from the NBC model, which is different from Apple and Amazon. I think that the best leverage is to be had over the legacy companies, the ones that still rely on the fall television series, the season, and that still have the late night shows that are all dark right now, and that still have this kind



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of daytime dramas, the soap operas. These are the companies where, if we're in September and October and they're not able to put on scripted shows, it will hurt in a way that Netflix can kind of fake it for a little while. And Apple, who cares? And Amazon, football, and whatever. So I think the legacy companies are where they should be pushing.

That makes sense to me. I want to ask you how you think this is going to change TV, because one of the themes of the strikes of previous years, especially most famously the strike of 2007-2008, is considered an important threshold moment for the acceleration of reality TV that the original scripted shows were shut down. And so the channels relied more on reality TV and realized they could get enormous viewership for less money being paid out the door to writers. I could imagine maybe a way that this strike could also change TV in ways that consumers actually notice on their screens. Like maybe, for example, we have the difference between the age of platinum television, which is 600, 700 new shows a year, but all of them are like 5 to 10 episodes. And the previous regime, which was 100 shows a year, but all of them are 20 episodes, maybe we end up, after negotiations and after writers, you got a bit more money, maybe we end up with fewer shows with more writers. Maybe that means shows get better, that the outcome of this strike is that we have a higher average quality of show. That's a sort of optimistic guess of something that could happen at the end of this strike. Given what you're seeing in terms of the dynamics, what's happening on the ground, what do you think is going to happen? What do you think is actually going to happen at the end of the strike? And do you think there's a way that it changes television enough that viewers notice? Well, there's two questions there, because I think there will be ramifications of consumer behavior during a long strike. And that's two things. The reality television boom that came from the last strike was because of the experimentation that occurred during the strike. These companies were essentially forced to look for non-guild programming. I don't think we're going to see that. The reality TV landscape is pretty saturated at this point. What I do think we're going to see is a shift to more global content where consumers, if they are not being fed a new American show every week on Netflix, maybe they try out a foreign show. Maybe they get hooked on Casa de Papel or something.

Souda. Souda, exactly. One of these shows that is not guild and that people may have not had time for or the algorithm may not have served it to them because there's other stuff that it is prioritized and they may try that out. That's one. The other is just the ongoing transition to digital content. TikTok is a huge winner here. YouTube is a huge winner. If there is not a steady pipeline of professionally produced content, people are just going to look on their phones and look elsewhere and further that transition to where the next generation of viewers is being even more socialized to expect entertainment in short form like that. That's the thing. That's very interesting. I'm rooting for the writers and I hope they get higher minimum wages and larger writing rooms. But something that you just said reminded me of a conversation I had with Ted Joya, who's a music writer, where he pointed out in our interview that if you look at the share of old music that is being listened to by Spotify consumers, it's gone up and up every year for the last, I think, five to 10 years.

So partly this might be a reflection of the fact that people who are new subscribers to Spotify are getting older. But it's partly a reflection of the fact that if music becomes utility, as you said, and you can listen to any of the 40 million songs that exist on Spotify at

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any given moment, you might be more likely over time to listen to songs that aren't new as you get older. And to connect that to TV and film, it's possible that people might deal with the shutdown in new shows by becoming more comfortable watching and rewatching old shows. So the same thing we saw in music, which is a sort of shift toward listening to older stuff, you could similarly see an audience response to the strike be a shift toward what I suppose our company colloquially calls rewatchables. That might be a marginal shift that one could see. I think that's right. And it comes at a time when all of these media conglomerates are pushing their fast channels, which is free ad supported television and streaming, Pluto, 2B, Amazon Free V. These primarily are platforms for old shows where you go in and you're willing to watch old episodes of Everybody Loves Raymond with ads. And that is a real business for these companies. It's essentially replacing the old syndication market for television, where you turn on your local channel at 11 o'clock at night and there would be a friend's rerun. But they want these channels to be bigger portions of their business, and perhaps if there are fewer new shows, people will be pushed into those old shows. I wanted to save AI for last because it is relatively speculative. I talked about it with Bill on a podcast last week or the week before, sometime in the last 10-ish days, where we speculated about the future of AI as it could impact Hollywood and TV and film and a couple other industries. It still is, I think, very much in the realm of we'll see. It has not been a number one song recorded by AI. There's not been anywhere close to a hit television or a film series or many series that incorporates AI in the writer's room or as a sort of the sort of premise creation device. Tell me how you see the role of AI, tell me how you see AI playing a role, I should say, in sort of the state of the strike right now. It's a huge issue. And what is really scary for the writers and something that was alarming even to the leadership was the studio's unwillingness to discuss the issue. They thought that the AI discussion would be pretty simple, that they could say, okay, this is what we are afraid of. And the studios would say, okay, we want a little room for experimentation, but we're willing to say that there is no AI for the next three years until the next negotiation. We will not have an AI authored script. The studios weren't willing to do that. And that was a big red flag for the writers and now also for the actors. The actors have huge issues with AI because generative AI is already being used on films to generate extras, to generate a little portion of an actor for a reshoot. When you don't need to call the actor back to Morocco, you can just kind of fudge him a little bit with an AI-generated actor. And there's all sorts of issues going on with the writers, or sorry, with the actors in addition to the writers. Practically speaking, AI is not being used for scripts right now. And to be honest, copyright law has a big role to play here because copyright law requires human authorship. So a studio is not going to use an AI-generated script if it can't get a copyright on that script. So that's sort of a legal protection that is baked in right now, where we do see it and where I think the studios are looking to use AI is enhancing. Taking a bad script and potentially making it better. Can you just go one level deeper on exactly what it is that writers fear from AI? And I think it's useful to be specific here because sometimes I didn't ask you the best lead in question, but sometimes it's easy to get really abstract in terms of how AI is going to be incorporated into the writing process. Am I right to understand that one of the big fears of writers is that it is really easy, and I've tried to do this myself, to use chat GPT to come up with storyline premises.

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So for example, if I prompt chat GPT to say, write me a treatment of 800 words for a corporate thriller in the style of Michael Clayton that has three twists, the first twist should happen to the protagonist, the second twist should happen to a source, and the third twist should happen at the end and in a usual suspects kind of way, recast the meaning of the entire movie. I've done that. I've done like almost exactly verbatim that prompt to chat GPT. And I'd say it does a BB plus job coming back with a relatively original idea for a script. My understanding is that writers are worried that if studio executives can do that, that means that studios maintain the story writing credit. Writers don't get the story writing credit. And as a result, AI is used as just another instrument for blunting the returns for typical writers on movies and shows that use AI to come up with the premises. Am I right in understanding that that is one of the active fears?

I think it mistakes a little bit the credit process because a studio executive cannot get a story by credit unless that executive is a member of the writer's guild. There is an arbitration process that happens with most scripts where it is determined who wrote what and who gets what credit. And it's a very intricate process. If a machine is one of those writers, that is a difficult question because like I said, a machine cannot have a copyright and cannot assign its copyright to a studio if it is an author. So how do you use a machine to enhance an idea and turn it into a usable script? That is the question here because we're not talking about Oscar level writing here. I'll give you an example. There are hundreds of Christmas movies that are released every year. Hallmark, Netflix, Lifetime, all of them do these Christmas movies. They're quickies, they have guild writers on them that make guild wages and write them, then they shoot them in Bulgaria in a week and a half in the summer and they manufacture all the snow. I bet if you did your experiment on a Christmas movie, you could come up with original Christmas movies that hit all the notes. You don't have to have Oscar-winning screenwriters on these, but they're jobs. It is a portion of the business and that's where AI could really chip away at the writer's guild because if you don't need writers to do this, if a computer can do it, then they're left out. That's what they fear, the lower end of the writing spectrum.

I just want to understand, sorry, and this can be a really, really quick answer.

Exactly how are the writers left out if you can't give a story or screenwriting credit to an AI? Then who gets the money? Who gets the credit if not ultimately a human?

It's undetermined. That is a gray area now. The studios argue we don't need to have specific AI protections in the writer's guild agreement because they're already protected by the law. The writers say, that seems a little convenient. We want it in our deal

that you will not use AI to conceive, enhance, or do anything to these scripts that would cut writers out of the process. That's the issue. Matt, last question. Where are we? What inning

are we in, in the strike? Does it feel like we're in the middle? Does it feel like we're closer to the end? I'd say second inning, second or third inning because we've gone through the lineup once, but the big hitters are coming up. The director's guild and SAG-AFTRA, the actor's guild, are both now either negotiating or about to start negotiating their deals.

The deadline for those are June 30th. There's wide speculation that the directors will make a deal. They typically do not strike. They've only struck once in their history. If the directors make a deal, it could put some pressure on the writers to make their own deal. However, the actors have called for a strike authorization vote. If that passes, as if it's probably going to, that will put a lot of pressure on the studios to make a deal with the actors or have a double

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guild strike in July, which would absolutely shut down everything. Right now, productions are allowed to go. The guild has shut down a couple due to protests and having teamsters not cross the line. Films and television are being shot right now, but if there's a strike in July by the actors, you can't make anything without actors. That would be the worst case scenario, and it would mean that this thing is going into probably September, October.

Well, we'll have you back in September, October, if that is indeed what happens.

Matt Bellany of The Town and Puck, thank you so much.

Thanks to you.

Plain English was hosted and reported by me, Derek Thompson, and produced by Devon Manzi.

We'll see you back here every Tuesday for a brand new episode. Have a great one.

you