

# Interview with Paris Barclay

## Carsey-Wolf Center at UC Santa Barbara

9-11 minutes

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In May 2012 Paris Barclay sat down with MIP to discuss the impact of social media and the importance of audience engagement for directors and showrunners working today. He also touches on the DGA and compensation negotiations for digitally distributed content.

One of television's most successful and honored directors, Paris Barclay is the President of the Directors Guild of America.

Throughout his illustrious career in television, Paris has directed over 130 episodes of television, including *NYPD Blue*, *ER*, *The West Wing*, *Lost*, *The Good Wife*, *CSI*, *NCIS: Los Angeles*, *House*, *Glee*, and the Steven Spielberg-produced series *Smash*. He won two Emmy Awards for his direction of *NYPD Blue* and has received four additional Emmy nominations for producing and directing, most recently for *Glee*'s seminal episode "Wheels." Paris has also garnered ten Directors Guild nominations, for shows as diverse as *NYPD Blue*, *ER*, *The West Wing*, *House*, *Weeds*, *In Treatment* and *Glee*. He became the first Director in the history of the Guild to receive a comedy and drama nomination in the

same year, two years in a row (2008 & 2009). He's also received three NAACP Image Awards, for producing, co-creating, and directing *City of Angels*, directing *Cold Case*, and this past year for directing *Smash*. He has been nominated for the Image Award for Directing in a Drama Series every year it has been offered, from 2006 to 2012. He's also received honors such as four prestigious Peabody Awards, two Humanitas Prizes, and countless other recognitions.

For more on Paris Barclay's prolific career, click [here](#).

## **Social Media, Audience Engagement, and the Director**

**Is audience trust and engagement more important to directors now than five or 10 years ago? Do you think about these aspects differently than you did in the past?**

It's absolutely more important. Show creators, writers, and directors are now extremely sensitive to what the blogosphere is saying about their shows. Sometimes creators take comments too seriously. Some shows have become increasingly dull because taking risks with the show is discouraged. Audiences generally want to see a different version of the show that they loved. They don't really want to see it become something else.

I'd be killed if I did a musical version of *Sons of Anarchy*, even though it might be a cool idea and would surprise people. Before social media, Joss Whedon would do strange things with *Buffy*. No one knew they were going to happen until they aired. He did an episode without any dialogue; he did an episode that was a musical. He got away with these things. I

don't know if he could get away with them right now because of the way that social media has changed the television landscape. The urge to criticize would be too great. Even someone as brilliant as Joss Whedon would end up getting slammed.

**Do you think increased viewer feedback and social media require a different sort of showrunner than ten years ago?**

The characteristics of a successful showrunner have definitely changed. For instance, I don't think David Milch is a great showrunner in the era of the Internet. I do still think he's the finest writer in television, though. I just don't think this is something that interests him or that he would be able to jump into full bore. He's from an era when just writing well was enough. Maybe that's part of the reason why some of his shows aren't quite as popular nowadays. Writing well is still enough, but you also have to figure out how to promote that show and you have to be able to create things that are promotable.

Ryan Murphy is excellent at that. Obviously, he did not think of doing a Whitney episode until a day or two after Whitney died. It just happened that the *Glee* character Mercedes was singing 'I Will Always Love You' two days after Houston's death. Ryan said, "This is really strange. We should do something." It struck a chord with the blogosphere and that's when the episode was born. We were in production four weeks later. He knew it was something that is going to be promotable. He also knew that it may have been controversial to a certain extent, so he also had an idea of how to do it in a way that wasn't salacious and manipulative. I thought his idea was wonderful because it became about the kids' loss and the teacher's loss and not so

much about Whitney. The topic was the trigger for the characters' feelings about not being together anymore. It was a brilliant way of doing it. Plus, we knew we had social media to support the project all along. We could develop, present and push this idea forward because of that support.

**Do social media also affect the way you shoot things? Do you ever think about what kind of viral life a scene might have if it's filmed one way as opposed to another?**

We realize now that our shows have to fit a shorter attention span, that you can't really get away with building a story the way you used to because viewers just won't stay with you long enough for the payoff. There is a new adrenalized storytelling as a result of Internet clips and the ability for viewers to multitask on their iPads or their phones while watching. Television is telling stories in shorter bursts. Even dramatic shows have adapted. We rarely will go longer than three pages with a scene. It used to be quite common. Will they ever again sit there for three entire pages of people talking with no one getting killed? Rarely. I often find myself thinking about how we can pace up the three-page scene so we don't lose viewers.

**DGA, Compensation, and Digital Distribution**

**Can you tell us about some of the DGA's discussions concerning compensation for digitally distributed content?**

I cannot.

**Nothing?**

There are a lot of them, though.

**Could you talk about them an abstract way?**

Yes, I can talk about some of the major trends. For example, studios often super sell the growth of new media to help investors see their company as progressive and worth the investment, but that growth is actually going to be much slower than they say. Television and DVDs are not going to be dead in five years. It's not like everything will be new media five years from now. It's going to take some real time and creativity to figure out the best models. Just like back in the early days of television, it's going to take a few very successful programs to show the way: *American Bandstand* and *Ed Sullivan*, but also *All In The Family*. The transition will require the development of creative products that are done primarily for the Internet and that show it is a model that can work. That's going to take some time. Slowly but surely the money will flow and the balance will start to shift. Right now, advertisers spend the lion's share of their money on network television, but that will change.

**What is your strategy for ensuring you're positioned well when new business models appear?**

I can only speak for myself, but my answer is to act sooner rather than later. You cannot wait until it's a big business to ask for your fair share. You have to do it on a dollar-for-dollar basis. You have to get your fair percentage when dollars start coming in. Then you'll already have a percentage when those dollars increase. You can't wait until it becomes huge. You can't take a penny on the dollar now and then say you want five pennies. It's

too late. The ship has sailed. That's what I think we learned with VHS and DVD. You have to make your claim clear, and you have to show the producers [the Alliance of Motion Picture and Television Producers] that they don't have anything without the creative content. They just have the commercials. We need to be compensated for the value that we provide.

**Has the producers association been responsive to that approach?**

They are looking at history, too, and saying, "Hmm, we'll make a killing if we can keep a cap on this and keep everything as low as we did with DVD and VHS. We recognize we didn't compensate people fairly for what they created. We got away with it, though. Why should we do anything different this time?" I think the Writers Guild would agree with me when I say that we learned from that. I think the next couple rounds of negotiations are going to be very interesting.

**Do you think you're heading into a round of negotiations that could head in the same direction as the last round?**

I think in their heart of hearts, producers recognize that without writers and directors and actors, they are screwed. What are they going to do? In the long run, the Internet is proving that we need them less than they need us. The ground is shifting and distribution is becoming much easier.

**Can you give me an example?**

An example is the independent filmmaker who makes something like *Martha Marcy May Marlene* or *Paranormal Activity* for a dime. *Chronicle* is a film about kids whom all get

super powers and start to destroy each other. That was made for maybe 10-12 million. They ended up grossing over a \$125 million. I think there are great ideas for properties that can be created using digital technologies at much less cost. These are projects that can be financed by your dentist or your mom's savings. It's just a few dresses for Ann Romney and suddenly you have a movie. That's something new. And these movies can work. They can be distributed independently or over the Internet.

[Read the complete transcript of our conversation with Paris Barclay in \*Distribution Revolution: Conversations about the Digital Future of Film and Television.\*](#)