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CAREER SPOTLIGHT: ANGELA JONES

Angela Montag Jones is Senior Director, Business & Legal Affairs (Original Series) at Netflix, based in Los Angeles, California. She joined Netflix in early 2013 and currently leads a team of business and legal affairs executives that make up Netflix’s U.S. Studio Partnerships team. Prior to joining Netflix, Angela started her legal career as an associate in the Business & Finance group at Morgan, Lewis & Bockius, LLP, where she counseled clients on mergers and acquisitions, public and private company finance and securities law, and later as a Senior Counsel at Comcast, where she handled a range of content acquisition deals for Comcast’s Cable division. Angela graduated from Juniata College in 2001 with a B.A. in Politics (Political Philosophy), and received her J.D. from The College of William & Mary, Marshall-Wythe School of Law in 2004. She currently lives in Manhattan Beach, California with her husband, their three children, and two dogs. She is also active with Soroptimist International of Manhattan Beach (she has served as President, Treasurer, and is a member of the board of directors), which is a service organization focused on empowering women and girls, both locally and internationally.

QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

1. Please briefly explain your career path and what led you to your current position.

My choice to attend law school, following my undergraduate studies, was motivated not by any specific vision of what type of law I wanted to practice (I had no idea) or by any specific career path that I wanted to end up on—it was driven by the fact that I was still very much unsure as to what type of career I ultimately wanted to pursue. I also knew that getting a law degree would be a helpful and versatile tool on my way to figuring all of this out. I attended law school at the College of William & Mary, Marshall Wythe School of Law, and while I was there, I worked as a graduate research fellow for one of the bankruptcy professors. I quickly realized that as far as transactional vs. litigation goes, I was much more interested in pursuing a transactional path. So, I decided to spend my 2L summer at Morgan Lewis in Philadelphia as a summer associate in their Business & Finance practice group. I joined the firm after graduation and spent just under six years as an associate, where my early practice focused on public and private company M&A, debt and equity financing, securities work, and general corporate governance. I ultimately knew that becoming a partner was not what I wanted to do, so I was open to considering in-house options. A friend-of-a-friend let me know that Comcast (which was right across the street from Morgan Lewis) was
looking for an attorney to join their interactive media group, Comcast Interactive Media (CIM). CIM was structured as a start-up within Comcast to work on all things related to their website and apps—including their upcoming “TV Everywhere” initiative, where the cable companies were starting to make full episodes of television shows available online. Since this was late 2009 through early 2010, online streaming was still a fairly novel concept, and there really were not many lawyers who had experience in this area. So, fortunately for me, they were just looking for someone with good negotiation and drafting skills who could help them figure out how to structure and draft these deals. I spent the next three years at Comcast working with some incredibly smart people who were effectively crafting what the initial streaming landscape looked like in the legacy cable television world. This initiative evolved very quickly in my time at Comcast. These internet streaming discussions eventually became an integral part of Comcast’s multi-billion dollar affiliate deal negotiations; so by the end of my tenure there, I had been in the room negotiating with top executives from Disney, Fox, CBS, and other prominent entertainment networks. A recruiter from Netflix reached out to me in mid-2012. At that point, Netflix did not yet have a global footprint, as they had had only launched their streaming service in a handful of countries beyond the U.S. and Canada, and had not yet made the leap into commissioning original content. They were looking for an attorney to work on licensing TV and movies for its service in the U.S. and Canada, and, just based on the luck of good timing, I was one of only a handful of non-Netflix attorneys that had direct experience working in the still fairly nascent streaming world on the platform side (licensing in for a distributor). I eventually decided to take a leap of faith on the role, moved my entire family to Los Angeles in April of 2013, and have been at Netflix ever since.

My role at Netflix has evolved over the years from legal support for licensed content in the U.S. and Canada, to helping launch our service in Australia and New Zealand and attaining a combined business and legal role focused on original series. But it has always maintained a throughline of managing external studio and producer relationships, which is what I really love doing. Currently, I manage the U.S. Studio Partnerships business affairs team for series, which is responsible for negotiating deals for all original series commissioned by Netflix that are produced by another studio, as well as managing the ongoing relationships with these studio partners.
2. **What are the most common legal challenges or issues that you encounter at Netflix, and how do you address them?**

   One of the most common issues we encounter involve the underlying rights to the series that we are commissioning. In some cases, a series that we want to make is based on a book, graphic novel, or article, while in other cases, it is simply based on an original script written by an individual. In all cases, verifying that the rights granted to the studio or producer who we are relying on to produce the series for us is the single most important step to ensuring that we are (1) able to exhibit the series in the manner that we need to (e.g., globally, in all languages); (2) appropriately protected from a business and investment perspective (e.g., the rightsholder may not permit someone else to develop a competing project at the same time); and (3) at a basic level, getting the rights needed to actually make the project we want to make. We typically ask our producing partners to deliver us a “chain-of-title” for the project, which is a series of documents that effectively demonstrates the rights’ ownership lifecycle of the project. We typically review these documents to make sure there are no big red flags. If there are pieces of the rights that need to be cleaned up, we may reopen some of the rights deals to try and negotiate for the necessary terms.

3. **What was the first professional “win” that made you confident that you belonged in your role or the industry overall?**

   When I first came to Netflix, it was a big shift for me as far as company size, hierarchy, and process. At that point in time, Netflix was still a relatively small company. I had just come from the largest cable company in the U.S., and before that I had been at a very large law firm. I distinctly remember my first deal at Netflix (the license of an independent film to put on service) where we had negotiated through all but one last issue. I had a creative solution to offer up to try and finalize the deal. When I ran it by my then-manager and asked him who needed to sign off, he told me that there was no one else to run it by—it was completely up to me. So I offered it up, and we closed the deal. This closing was such a powerful moment for me as an executive. The ability to take complete ownership (both good and bad) of a decision was such a shift for me from my prior roles, and it was one of the defining moments in my career that gave me a huge sense of confidence in what I was doing. If the company would trust me enough to empower me to make these types of decisions, then I should trust myself in the same way.
4. What sorts of crossovers do you see between popular streaming platforms and the sports industry working primarily with Netflix Original Series, and what do you hope that relationship will look like in five to ten years?

From my own personal experience as a more casual sports fan, I can see the value in some of the leagues, teams/organizations, and even individual players leveraging streaming platforms to build awareness, interest, and fandom through really entertaining storytelling—especially when well-done stories get served up to a subscriber who may not be a current fan. I never thought I would ever care about Formula 1 racing (F1), but I can’t get enough of *Drive to Survive* and all of the compelling backstories and drama with the racing teams. Plus, it also got me interested in watching actual F1 races because I now feel a connection to the personalities and the stories behind the racing. My hope is that these high quality, entertaining, sports-adjacent programs continue to grow over the next five to ten years.

5. How do you stay up to date with the ever-evolving landscape of entertainment and media law surrounding streaming services, and how do unexpected disruptions, such as the ongoing SAG-AFTRA strike, affect your ability to accurately forecast in the space?

There are a couple of really great entertainment law symposiums in Los Angeles every year, so I make it a point to attend all of those events. Streaming has been a big focus of those events over the past five years, so it is a particularly relevant forum to listen, learn, and stay current. Additionally, our business is built on relationships and networking, so I make it a priority to make regular lunches, dinners, and other meetings with my counterparts at each of the other studios—we learn a lot from each other through these relationships. As far as unexpected disruptions, the biggest effect they have is that they really force us (particularly business and legal affairs executives) to continue to be nimble and react quickly. We learned a lot from the widespread halt in production during the COVID-19 pandemic (as far as the logistics of shutting down production and then eventually having to ramp back up), although one hopes that such disruptions will not be a regular occurrence.

6. What is one of the biggest misconceptions in your industry?

That working as an entertainment lawyer in Hollywood is super glamorous! I am sad to report that most of the time there is nothing fancy about deal negotiations.
7. What is something that has changed since you began working in streaming technology, and how has that change impacted your current job in the industry?

The biggest change that I have felt in the industry over the past fourteen years or so (as far as impact on my role) is the proliferation of players in the streaming business—both in terms of platforms and producers. Netflix was one of the few subscription streamers in the game for a long time, and we had crafted our initial deal structures and terms in a particular way that made sense for our then-nascent original series business. As we have increased the number of shows on our slate over the years, more companies have created their own streaming platforms, and more producers are prepared to produce series for streaming services as well. As a result, projects have become increasingly competitive, and we are now consistently reevaluating our typical deal structures by looking at creative ways to evolve with the industry and stay competitive with the other platforms. In the end, this competition has made my job much more interesting and rewarding because creative problem solving is a great exercise to go through.

8. What is some advice you would give to law students interested in working in your field, and what are some action items they can execute now to stand out?

First and foremost, network and make connections. Start by reaching out to alumni from your undergrad or law school who are in the entertainment industry and just ask for a quick call to pick their brains and ask questions about how they got where they are. I have met with a number of students from my alma mater over the years in this exact way, and I promise that ninety-nine percent of people you reach out to will be happy to get on the phone for a quick chat. Second, do not discount the path of starting out in a more general transactional or litigation field in order to get some solid legal training. A lot of the really talented folks I work with did not go directly into entertainment—they took some time to get some great basic drafting, negotiation, and/or litigation training at a firm before they made the leap to going in-house. And finally, be open to opportunities as they become available. Streaming television was not even a thing that existed when I was in law school, so I could not have possibly conceived that this is what I would have been doing! There will be more groundbreaking technology and business models on the horizon, so you just need to prepare yourself to have a good foundation of legal and business skills and be open to unexpected things that arise.