

TWO AND TEN

BY **GRAHAM FLASHNER**

A pair of Hollywood heavyweights are betting cell phone viewers will click on Quibi, where the A-list content will top out at ten minutes a pop.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY **IAN SPANIER**

A black and white portrait of Meg Whitman, an older woman with short, light-colored hair, smiling slightly. She is wearing a dark, quilted jacket over a plaid shirt. Her hands are clasped in front of her. The background is plain white.

MEG WHITMAN

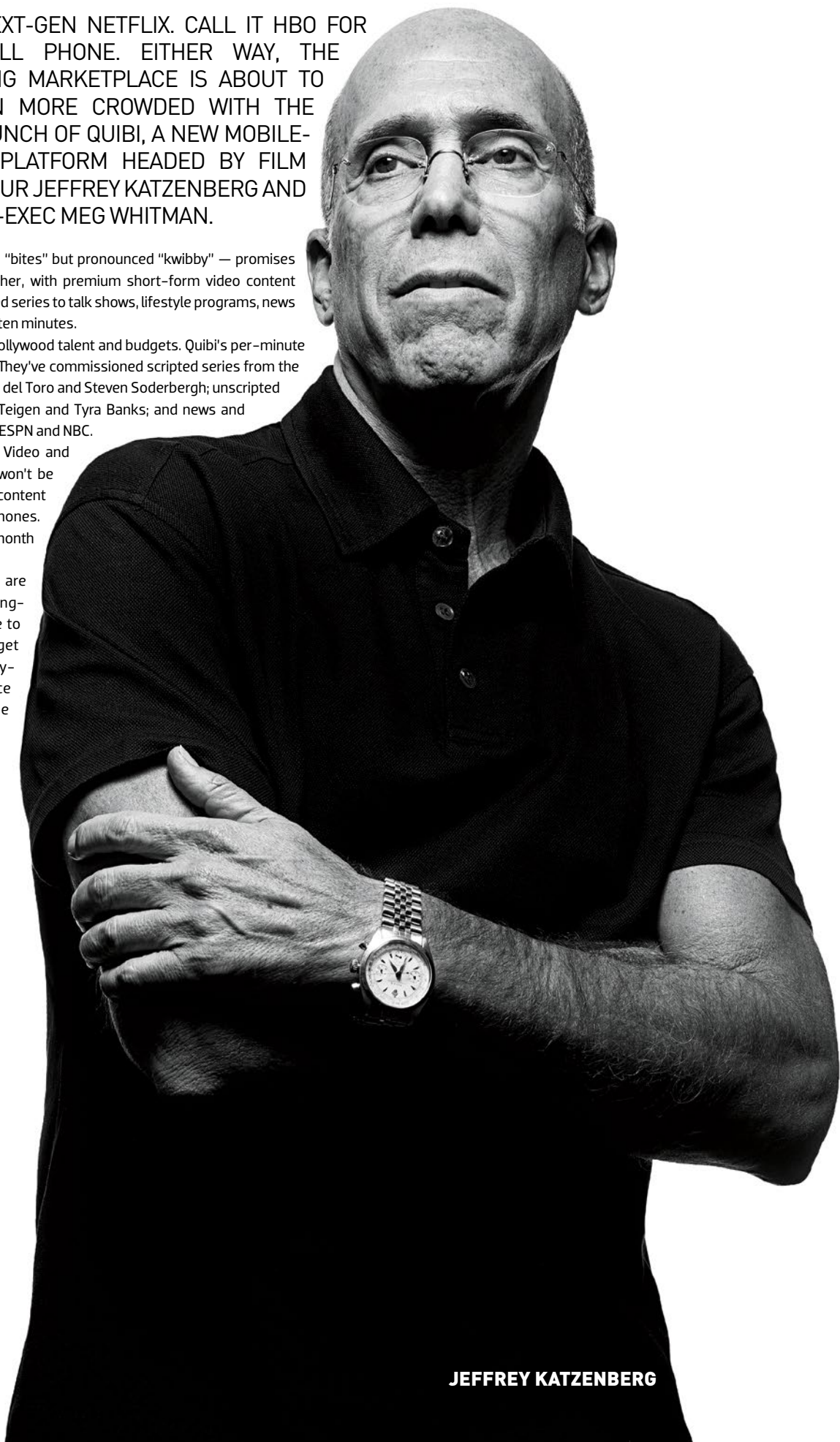
CALL IT NEXT-GEN NETFLIX. CALL IT HBO FOR YOUR CELL PHONE. EITHER WAY, THE STREAMING MARKETPLACE IS ABOUT TO GET EVEN MORE CROWDED WITH THE APRIL LAUNCH OF QUIBI, A NEW MOBILE-CENTRIC PLATFORM HEADED BY FILM MOGUL-ENTREPRENEUR JEFFREY KATZENBERG AND SILICON VALLEY ÜBER-EXEC MEG WHITMAN.

Quibi — a blend of “quick” and “bites” but pronounced “kwibby” — promises a streaming experience like no other, with premium short-form video content ranging from scripted and unscripted series to talk shows, lifestyle programs, news and sports. No episode will exceed ten minutes.

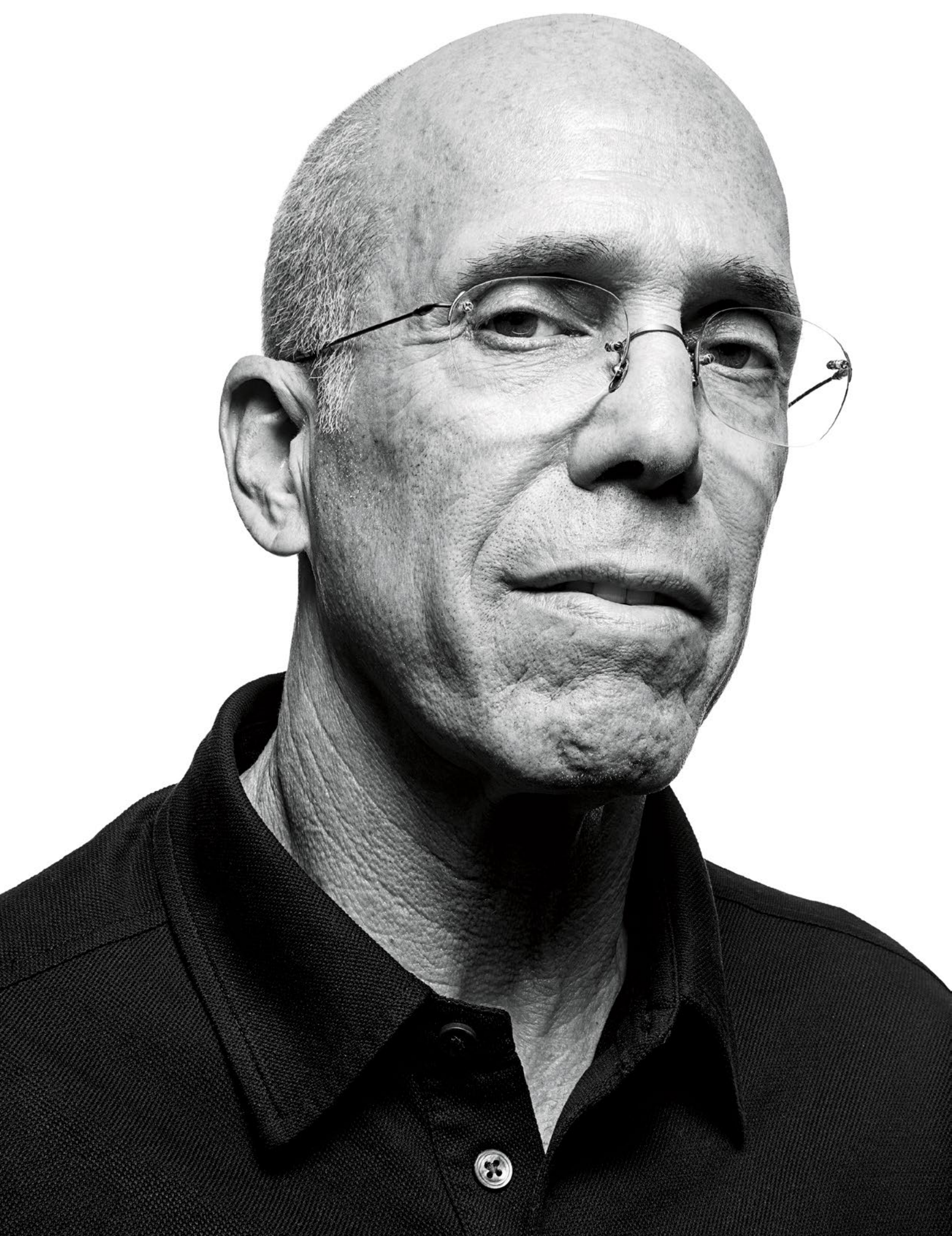
Imagine YouTube with A-list Hollywood talent and budgets. Quibi’s per-minute cost of programming is \$100,000. They’ve commissioned scripted series from the likes of Steven Spielberg, Guillermo del Toro and Steven Soderbergh; unscripted shows from Trevor Noah, Chrissy Teigen and Tyra Banks; and news and sports content curated by the BBC, ESPN and NBC.

Unlike Netflix, Amazon Prime Video and other streaming platforms, Quibi won’t be viewable on laptops or tablets; all content is created exclusively for mobile phones. Subscriptions will cost \$4.99 a month with ads and \$7.99 without.

In a world where viewers are already inundated with more long-form content than they have time to watch, Quibi is betting that its target audience — millennials twenty-five to thirty-five — will embrace shorter content designed to be



JEFFREY KATZENBERG



consumed during what Whitman calls “those in-between moments” from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m.

“You’re on a commute, you’re waiting in line for your coffee, waiting for a meeting to start, for a friend to arrive... and for those moments, we will create very high-quality, fabulous stories for our audience,” Whitman explains. “Quibi helps you make the most of your moments on the go.”

Katzenberg sees their brand of elevated short-form content as “the third generation of film narrative,” a lineage that began with motion pictures and evolved into television, where audiences learned to process stories divided into multiple act breaks and episode arcs. Now, he says, “We’re taking this tried-and-true, tested skill set and applying it to a new form: two-hour movies in chapters that are seven to ten minutes in length.”

Katzenberg likens the advent of Quibi to the impact HBO made on the free TV landscape. “In the late ‘80s and early ‘90s, broadcast TV was at its pinnacle,” he says. “*Seinfeld*, *Friends* and *Home Improvement* had more than 40 million people a week watching. HBO came along and said, ‘It’s not TV, it’s HBO.’ They had a subscription model; because of that, they could afford to make content that an ad-supported platform couldn’t do. That’s what Quibi is doing.”

But will it work? Depending on your perspective, Quibi is either a visionary game-changer, or a risky venture in a saturated marketplace where Netflix, Amazon, Hulu, Disney+, Apple TV+ and the forthcoming HBO Max and Peacock are engaged in the so-called “streaming wars.” Katzenberg stresses that Quibi is not in direct competition with those platforms.

“We view Quibi as complementary to, not a competitor of, the new and existing streaming services,” he says. “The studios are our partners and have given us access to their talent and showrunners because they think this is the next big growth opportunity.”

Hollywood has also provided a heavy influx of cash. Investors such as Disney, 21st Century Fox, NBC Universal, Sony Pictures Entertainment and China’s behemoth Alibaba Group have helped Quibi raise an initial \$1 billion. In addition, the company has stockpiled \$150 million in upfront ad inventory, with major sponsors like Google, PepsiCo, Progressive, Procter & Gamble and Walmart.

Lacking the brand equity and extensive library of, say, Disney+, Quibi is banking on a formidable talent roster — and a bundling deal with T-Mobile for starters. Rich Greenfield, an analyst at LightShed Partners, says, “Their biggest challenge is that Quibi’s starting from a base of no subscribers. Netflix had a DVD base; Amazon has free shipping; Quibi is literally starting from a base of zero.

“On the other hand,” he adds, “all the data indicates that cord-cutting is accelerating and that people want to stream great content... and most people have never seen the level of content quality in short-form video that Jeffrey has created.”

Veteran TV producer Phil Gurin (*Shark Tank*, *The Singing Bee*) concurs: “Crafting content in more bite-size, digestible pieces sounds of the moment, and sounds ‘right on’ for our short-attention-span generation.”

QUIBI’S HOLLYWOOD HEADQUARTERS RESEMBLES A TECH STARTUP, WITH ITS WIDE-OPEN FLOOR PLAN, JARS OF CANDY IN THE HALL AND WALL OF EMPLOYEE LOCKERS. THE FAST-GROWING COMPANY HAS MORE THAN 200 EMPLOYEES; KATZENBERG PROUDLY NOTES, “FIFTY-ONE PERCENT ARE WOMEN, 43 PERCENT OF THE LEADERSHIP TEAM ARE WOMEN, AND 47 PERCENT IDENTIFY AS NON-WHITE.”

The company has experienced some growing pains: at least three high-level execs have left in the past six months, including Diane Nelson, the former DC Entertainment president who was head of content operations, and Janice Min, former copresident of The Hollywood Reporter–Billboard Media Group.

In person, Katzenberg and Whitman share an easy rapport, a familiarity that dates back to 1989, when Katzenberg was chairman of The Walt Disney Studios and Whitman joined Disney as vice-president of strategic planning.

“Everything I don’t know, she knows,” he says approvingly.

Neither is a stranger to taking risks. In 2010, Whitman — the former CEO of both Hewlett-Packard and eBay — spent \$100 million of her own money to run (unsuccessfully) as a Republican candidate for governor of California. Katzenberg, as Disney Studios chairman in the ‘80s and ‘90s, had tens of millions of dollars of studio money riding on many an opening weekend.

The Quibi origin story dates back to 1999, when Katzenberg, intrigued by the potential of short-form video, created Pop.com with his DreamWorks partner Spielberg, along with producer Brian Grazer and director Ron Howard. The intent was to produce short films for the internet. Although Howard shot a few, Katzenberg says, “We lost every dime we put into it... there was no way to monetize it.”

A few years later, Katzenberg met Brian Robbins, the creator of AwesomenessTV, a YouTube channel that became a forerunner in long-form stories told in chapters. “Brian is Yoda in this story,” Katzenberg says. “He was the one who created this format about six to seven years ago.”

In 2013, Katzenberg acquired AwesomenessTV. In 2016, he sold DreamWorks Animation; a year later, he formed WndrCo, a media and technology holding company. Quibi became its first venture. Katzenberg — who had helped revitalize Disney as a global empire with films like *The Little Mermaid* and *Beauty and the Beast* — knew he had the creative end covered. What he needed was a partner to run the business side.

Enter Whitman. She became a billionaire by turning eBay into a household brand in the early 2000s, then stepped down from Hewlett-Packard in 2017 after a six-year run. Whitman was looking forward to taking some time off, enjoying her ranch in Telluride, Colorado, and focusing on her duties as the incoming chairwoman of Teach for America. Then she got a call from Katzenberg.

“Meg said she was going to go fly-fishing, reintroduce herself to her husband, all those normal things,” Katzenberg recounts as Whitman laughs. But he had other plans. He hopped a plane to the Bay Area that night, and the pair dined at Nobu. Over the next few hours, he laid out his vision for Quibi. By the time the check arrived, Whitman was hooked.

“This is a really good idea,” she remembers thinking. “I did a little more diligence, went through the numbers and said, ‘I think I have one more startup in me.’ So that was the end of the ranch and fly-fishing.” Whitman promptly relocated to Los Angeles and began assembling a tech team to work with Quibi’s creatives.

“We drew from Google, Tinder, Snapchat... there was plenty of talent to get started,” she says.

Whitman and Katzenberg are not only excited about the way content is being curated for Quibi, but also about the way it’s being produced — with an interface that provides unprecedented enhancements to the mobile viewing experience.

“What we are doing is the convergence of a new technology married with a new form of storytelling,” Katzenberg says.

The technology, a patented software called Turnstyle, allows Quibi users to view content while rotating their phone screens seamlessly between portrait (vertical) and landscape (horizontal) modes — a feature that, Whitman points out, is not available in any other streaming format. “Netflix allows you to browse in vertical, but only allows you to watch in horizontal,” she says.

She holds up her phone and plays a series of clips. One of them takes the potential of this new interface to intriguing new levels. At home alone, a teenage girl is notified through a doorbell app that a man is trying to break into her home. Her POV is shown in portrait mode, but when Whitman rotates the screen to landscape, the visual switches to the intruder’s POV — in effect, letting viewers choose which perspective they want to follow.

THE BIG SHORT

Steven Spielberg is just one of the heavy hitters working in Quibi's short format. Here's a short-form preview of upcoming content:

SCRIPTED

After Dark

A ten- to twelve-chapter horror series, this is director Steven Spielberg's first original writing endeavor since A.I. *Artificial Intelligence* in 2001.

"Steven came in and said he has 'a super-scary story I want to do,'" Jeffrey Katzenberg says. "He's actually writing it himself. Getting him to write something is fantastic." While the cast and storylines are still under wraps, the director made an unusual request: in keeping with the title, he wanted the series to be available only after midnight. Quibi engineers devised a ticking clock icon that will count down to showtime. Once the sun begins to rise, the show — from Spielberg's Amblin Television — will disappear until the following night.

The Fugitive

Don't look for the desperate Dr. Richard Kimble in this loose reboot of the classic TV series (which was remade in 1993 as a film starring Harrison Ford). The two-hour, ten-chapter modern update stars Logan's Boyd Holbrook as Mike Ferro, a blue-collar worker wrongly accused of an L.A. subway bombing. As Ferro seeks to prove his innocence, a determined cop (Kiefer Sutherland) tries to bring him down. Created by Nick Santora (*Prison Break*, *Scorpion*), the series is produced by Thunder Road Films, 3 Arts Entertainment and Warner Bros. Television. Stephen Hopkins (*24*, *The Dark Tower*) is directing.

UNSCRIPTED

You Ain't Got These

This twelve-episode show about inner-city sneaker culture comes from writer-producer Lena Waithe. "I'm the voice guiding you through," she says. "I'm interviewed, and I do some of the interviews. We're telling a story about this culture in the inner city and how it's been commodified by big businesses. And how that business is using us to sell shoes, yet we're trying to buy shoes we can barely afford." Boardwalk Pictures and The Mission Entertainment are producing, along with Waithe's Hillman Grad Productions.

Chrissy's Court

Imagine being Judge Judy and having your mother as the bailiff. That's the premise of this ten-episode courtroom reality comedy starring model-influencer Chrissy Teigen (*Lip Sync Battle*) and her mom, Vilailuck "Pepper Thai" Teigen. Chrissy will adjudicate small claims while Pepper Thai maintains "order in the court." The show is produced by Suit & Thai Productions and 3 Arts Entertainment. Teigen and Luke Dillon serve as executive producers. —G.F.

Shooting for this platform requires directors to stage and frame their work to optimize the picture in both vertical and horizontal modes. "It's actually a new way of making a story," Katzenberg adds. "I've never met a storyteller that isn't an entrepreneur.... We handed them the ball and they ran with it."

Director Catherine Hardwicke (*Twilight*, *Miss Bala*) says the new interface is "mind-expanding for both the editor and director.... You see more background details in horizontal. Vertical gives you the advantage of getting more intimate with the characters."

She is directing *Don't Look Deeper* for Quibi. Coproduced by New Form

and Doug Liman's *30 Ninjas*, the fourteen-episode sci-fi thriller is about a young woman (Helena Howard of *Madeline's Madeline*) who harbors an otherworldly secret. The director — who admits to having "a crazy busy life and a short attention span" — is delighted by the challenge of keeping viewers hooked with bite-sized episodes. "It gives you an extra jolt of energy you don't get in a long-form series. There's always a reversal, something scary that can happen," she says.

"Every ten years you're supposed to learn a new language or play a new instrument to keep your brain active," Hardwicke adds. "That's what directing a Quibi episode can do for you."

Emmy-winning writer-director Lena Waithe (*Master of None*, *The Chi*, *Queen & Slim*) is executive producer and host of *You Ain't Got These*, an unscripted show that explores race, politics and gender through the prism of one of her favorite obsessions, sneaker culture.

"We had initially set it up somewhere else, then Jeffrey called me," Waithe says. "Everyone knows he's a pioneer in this industry. He explained how he wanted to change the way we do short-form storytelling and that he wanted me to be a part of that new wave. I really wanted to take that risk and jump off the cliff with him."

An added inducement for both Waithe and Hardwicke — and all of Quibi's partners — is that after two years, the rights to their shows revert back to them, and they're free to repurpose them in other formats such as feature films and long-form series, and to shop them elsewhere.

QUIBI PLANS MORE THAN THREE HOURS OF ORIGINAL CONTENT A DAY AND APPROXIMATELY 175 NEW SHOWS AND 8,500 EPISODES FOR THE FIRST YEAR. CONTENT WILL FALL INTO THREE TIERS: LIGHTHOUSES (PRESTIGE SCRIPTED SHOWS THAT DROP EVERY OTHER MONDAY, TWENTY-SIX PER YEAR); QUICK BITES (UNSCRIPTED) AND DAILY ESSENTIALS (NEWS ROUNDUPS).

"Our lifestyle programs tap into pop culture and give you everything from food and fashion to action and adventure," Whitman says. "Daily Essentials are news and information shows that deliver everything you need to know and why it matters."

Katzenberg slides a chart of mobile phone usage across the table. It shows that in 2019, while less than 10 percent of long-form TV was watched on phones, millennials spent more than seventy-five minutes a day on short-form mobile consumption.

"This market is growing faster than what's happening in the TV marketplace today, and we think we can accelerate that growth," he says. "Daily consumption is something we're trying to build as a new consumer habit."

Quibi is not the first to take on the mobile video arena; startups like Verizon's go90 and Samsung's Milk Video failed ignominiously. But neither of those enterprises boasted the A-level talent and capital that Quibi brings to the table.

Andrew Hare, senior vice-president of digital research and strategy at Frank N. Magid Associates, says, "We're going to learn a lot about consumer tolerance as it relates to non-traditional formats.... The idea of mobile-focused video that people will pay for in that eighteen-to-thirty-four demo, the success stories on the subscription side have been really few and far between. It's a very hard thing to do, but if they pull it off, they will change the landscape in a lot of ways."

Katzenberg and Whitman are aware of the skeptics, but he points out, "We only need a tiny slice of the 2 billion people that are watching a million hours of video a day."

"Doing something that has not been done before is part of the fun," Whitman says. "Jeffrey and I are both builders. We don't mind living in that line between the improbable and the impossible." ©

