

On investing in yourself



Television writer and journalist Alex Zaragoza on the growing pains of working in a new industry, community as a creative lifeline, and proving you can do the work.

September 8, 2023 -

As told to Sara Tardiff, 3201 words.

Tags: Writing, Journalism, Television, Identity, Money, Success, Process, Beginnings, Collaboration.

How have you been structuring your time during the strike?

I've had to learn to be very good about structure. Historically, my schedule has been either super rigid or extremely free, depending on my circumstances. I think both have been detrimental to my mental health and creative output, so I've had to find a balance. Sometimes I'd realize it was four o'clock and I hadn't brushed my teeth yet. Other times I had my day planned out so thoroughly I didn't give myself time to eat or go outside at all. I've learned that structuring my day in a way that feels productive but also nourishing makes me feel better not just in the work, but in my body and my life.

My strike schedule looks something like this: I'll wake up, make coffee, check emails. I try to go to a morning yoga class a few times a week. I'm going to try not to lie to you and say, "I wake up every single day and I take a class." But right now I'm probably doing it two, three times a week. I do think it's also important to try to rest your body and rest your brain.

Right now, I'm really focused on rest because when I am in a writer's room, it's pretty draining. If you're writing every day, you just get so tapped out. Last year was a very, very busy year for me. Up until April of this year, I was pretty much working nonstop. Then, after we went on strike, I began regularly contributing to The LA Times' 'De Los' section. So I've honestly been trying to take advantage of this time to rest and sleep and care for my body, in between picketing and writing for The Times. And only just recently, I've started letting some TV writing ideas become bigger than just ideas, like outlining an idea for a series. I've been trying to carve out some time in the day just for outlining or writing or brainstorming whatever ideas come up. Jotting stuff down, seeing where it goes, tapping into my experiences for fodder, all that good shit. Then I eat a beautiful dinner made by my partner and I watch Love Island. That's literally my life and then I go to fucking bed.

I would love to hear what the strike has illuminated for you, particularly as someone pretty new to the industry.

I came from 20 years as a journalist. I started at an alt weekly in San Diego, which no longer exists. Then I freelanced while working a ton of random jobs to get by, and eventually landed at Vice for a few years. I think coming from that career path, [journalists] see TV as like, Oh, that's it. You're fucking set. Because [in journalism] you just get so used to being beaten down and driven out and laid off. It's such a hard pursuit, especially like in my case, if you're one of the very few Latinx people – or have any kind of underrepresented background – within those spaces. You end up doing so much double duty explaining identity and experience.

When I hit the wall at Vice, I'd realized that no one was really investing in me. I constantly felt like I was having to prove myself. A lot of my career felt like people were underestimating me and me being like, Fuck you,

I'm going to do this anyway. So I only really had myself in some ways, and then eventually the community I built that was supportive and mutually supportive.

But when I started working in TV, I had the realization that it has its own problems just like any other industry. And I know it's kind of bleak, but there is no Promised Land. We're always going to be fighting, especially as creative people because our creativity and our work is going to be constantly devalued. But you have to know your own value. You have to know what you're worth and what you can do, and that you have to be willing to invest in yourself at all costs because they're not going to. We're dealing with it now with the AMPTP.

What has been really heartening is that, just like when I was a union rep at Vice, picketing with the Writer's Guild has offered me a really strong group of people who all support each other and are willing to fight with you so you're not alone in your fight.

Can you walk me through that journey, from journalism to TV?

I was in a group chat with a bunch of other Latinx writers started by [Shea Serrano](#), as a space for us to support each other, talk shit, and just joke around. Everyone was in journalism, digital or print media, TV or film. One day the conversation of money came up and the TV writers shared their rates and I was like...*Whoa. You make how much? I have to work the whole year and still don't make as much as you do in like a month or two.*

I think we start making concessions in our lives at a pretty young age sometimes. Writing for TV or film, that was always something I dreamt of when I was younger. But I was like, *well, maybe one day*. But journalism was considered a more practical writing career. Then when things just became so untenable working in digital media for me, I knew I had to get out. It just wasn't sustainable.

So, I decided to just write a pilot. I needed something to prove that I could actually do this. Because I could say, *I'm really interested in writing for TV and I'd be really great at it*, but you have to prove how serious you are. It's important to be willing to do the work, not just say you want to do it and then wait for someone to let you do it. You need to be able to prove that you have a voice and a vision—that you know what kind of show you want to make and what kind of jokes you want to tell. I wrote on very late nights—until 2 or 3 A.M.—whenever I still had the energy to be creative after work. Sometimes, I slacked off enough at my day job so I'd still have some juice. And then I just started reaching out to my community and being like, "Hey guys, I wrote a pilot. Is anybody willing to read it and give me feedback?"

Then one day, I got a DM from Shea. He and I had been Twitter friends and I was in that group chat, so we've known each other and supported each other's work from afar for years. He really was one of my favorite writers, and from what I understand, he liked my work, too. He hit me up and was like, "Hey, can we talk on the phone?" I was a little confused because anyone wanting to talk on the phone that isn't your mom can feel very serious. Like your doctor doesn't even talk to you on the phone. So, I sat down and I got a beer at the Trader Joe's in Downtown Brooklyn and we got on the phone.

He was like, "So, I sold a TV show. It's with this guy named Michael Schur. I don't know if you know him, but he's done some pretty cool stuff. Anyway, I think it would be really cool if you wrote on the show." First of all, yes I fucking know who Michael Schur is because I am obsessed with him. He's like my comedy hero, he's so cool. And I was like, "Absolutely. But I've never written for TV before." He was just like, "Me neither. I think you're really funny and smart. And with the work you do, I think you would be a cool fit." I was so stoked that he saw the potential that I knew I had.

From there, I had to do an interview and send in a package. I included my spec script, but also clips of articles that I've written. But I didn't immediately quit my job or anything. I had to cash out all my vacation time and then take a leave of absence. I did the first writer's room and then eventually came back, and by that time I had left Vice and gone to Netflix. And so it was possible for me to do both. Shout out to Evette Dionne, who was my boss at [Netflix's] Tudum. She really supported me by just giving me the space to do this thing. Evette was like, *This work can be done at any time, come back after your writer's room.*

You spend a lot of your career just hoping somebody sees you and recognizes something in you that's worth investing in. When somebody does see it, and nurtures it, it's so exciting—and often a result of the investments you made in yourself all along.

That's really special, to have experienced that kind of acknowledgement and investment from writers you respect. From Tudum, you jumped fully into TV?

Yeah, it really is. After I later got laid off from Tudum—we all got laid off—then I had no choice but to be a full-time TV writer. This was all I had now. Thankfully Debbie Wolf and I became friends — she was one of our writers in the first half of season one of *Primo*, and she sold her show *Lopez v. Lopez* to NBC, and she chose to bring me on. And again, she was just like, *I see you and I want you on my show. That felt like such validation that I was on the right path.*

I always had my eye on what the larger vision was, but sometimes it was pure chaos. I see now I was just planting seeds the whole time. Now, in the last couple of years, I've really been watching them grow and bear fruit and blossom. It has been really incredible. But there were years that were extremely brutal, especially when other life stuff got in the way. When my dad got sick and then died. Or when I went through a divorce when I was really young. You wonder, I have to get through all of this and make my dreams come true? Bro, I'm tired.

Creative pursuits under capitalism can require so much patience and resilience!

They really do. For me, it took 39 years. But we're here. I'm honestly glad it took the time it did, because at 25, I don't think I would've been able to handle it as well. I've always felt it's important to trust the universe, and I think in my gut I knew it was always going to work out. I didn't know how or when, but I really trusted that the universe was looking out for me. Where that trust came from, why I decided to bet on it, I don't know. But I always felt like my purpose was there and I just had to move in a way that I felt good about and things would work out. The ancestors would look out. Whoever it is, whatever it is, would look out for me.

Kind of a pivot, but what are your ideal working conditions?

Two hours a day max. And five hours of *Love Island*...

Honestly, I do not love working long hours, but you do it sometimes because you have to and that's fine. My ideal working conditions involve a very open collaborative environment with people that are supportive and where everyone wants the best for each other and wants to get the best out of each other in a really kind and generous way. A leader that is there to instill their trust in you, and also help you become a better writer. Mike Schur is that person, and so is Shea, and the people they hired for *Primo* are those people too, including Lisa Muse Bryant and Peter Murrieta. And even others like my friend Sylvia Batey Alcalá. Same went for many of the folks at *Lopez vs. Lopez*, like Keith Heisler, Erica Harrell, Desiree Proctor, Lesley Wake Webster, and Marcos Luevanos. It's so important to work in an environment where everyone's really looking out for each other and it's based in care and growth and everyone wanting to make the best possible, funniest, coolest, raddest show.

Also, free food. A lot of options for beverages. Those are the main things I require: A beautiful collaboration where we care for each other. And also there must be snacks.

What about your ideal work-life balance?

At the end of the day, work is work. Making TV is great and as cool as it is, it's not your whole life. Your life is your family, your friends. That's your life. This is your work. And I think when you work with people who understand that—especially those people in leadership positions—it makes such a huge difference.

I remember working at Vice, where they acted like if this fucking blog post doesn't get out by 1:35 P.M. on the dot, it was the end of the world. In reality, this is a blog about *Love Island*. I'm stoked to write it, but I just don't want to live like that. And I just can't produce good work if I'm under stress. As a leader, if you

aren't understanding that people have lives and other responsibilities and need rest, then you just aren't a good leader.

I'm curious how you determine whether a project deserves your attention and your time to pursue it and see it through, as opposed to projects that you feel good abandoning?

Sometimes I don't really have that luxury, to be honest. Sometimes I have to see a project through because it's a check. That's the reality of it. And sometimes I get to do a project and I invest in it. I now have a development deal for a TV show based on my upbringing in Tijuana and San Diego. And a lot of the work I've had to do with that is not paid. Even with a deal, you don't get paid until you sell—and you might not sell. So that's like two years worth of work and I'm doing it because that's my story and I'm willing to do whatever it takes. I should be paid for it, but at the moment, that's not the case.

A lot of projects that I take on, I try to make sure they matter to me in some way or that I'm excited by some element of it. But sometimes I'm just like, this one is going to pay for my AT&T bill and a few other things and that's fine too. There's room for all of it. I'm at the point where I could be more selective, but not all the way selective. I'm not balling that hard yet, but hopefully one day.

When I do have the choice, I try to think about the people I'll be working with and the ways I could grow from it. I just try to approach everything as though there's a reason for it coming into my life, and inevitably I'm going to get something out of it. Sometimes the shitty thing leads to an amazing thing. It all eventually leads to something better. You're always taking a big gamble on yourself. But I'm willing to roll the dice on that one.

Alex Zaragoza Recommends:

five things

Picketing with the WGA and SAG-AFTRA: I've been a proud member of the WGA since 2018, from my time at VICE to now as a TV writer. It's been hard seeing our work and our very selves be devalued, so much so these greedy CEOs think machines can replace us. While picketing is a necessary action for the very future of our profession and our lives, it's also invigorating to be fighting alongside so many cool, brilliant people to demand a better world for all.

What We Do in the Shadows: I don't think there's an episode of this show that doesn't make me do a full spit take. The 2015 film this show is based on, which was written, directed, and starred Taika Waititi and Jemaine Clement, is in my top 5 all time favorites. I was nervous the show wouldn't be as good, but I was extremely stupid and wrong for doubting for even a second. It's pure genius, everyone on it gives incredible performances, and it's one of the most inventive, lovably odd comedies ever made.

Past Lives: Let me tell you something. Going to the movies at 11 am rules. My partner and I like to indulge in a nice morning movie pretty much every weekend, and then after we eat and talk about the movie. Listen, I'm 39. That shit is lovely. We saw *Past Lives* by Celine Song and I was a sobbing mess. It was such a beautiful way to approach a story of immigration, what we leave behind when we start new chapters, and the What If's that stay with us forever. I still haven't recovered.

LA's Flower District: This is really such a magical place. My partner and I regularly go head down to the Flower District to pick up fresh flowers and plants for our house. We peruse the aisles of the cold warehouse, dodging cats and carts hauling stacks of hydrangeas and buttercups as we pick out a few bundles to make arrangements to put around our house. Sometimes, if we have a party coming up, we also hit up the Piñata District, one of my favorite places in LA, to pick out candy and a piñata (we recently did this for my birthday. I'm 39, what about it?) and we always stop to get micheladas and food from one of the vendors. Bandas will set up, too. Last time I requested "Acábame de Matar" by Banda El Recodo and it was the best \$20 I've spent in a long time.

"Normal Gossip" podcast: I'm not a huge podcast person, because I don't like to encourage men to talk, but *Normal Gossip* is led by two really smart, cool women and I love the topic. Host [Kelsey McKinney](#) brings on a guest and shares an audience-submitted gossip story with them. It's always juicy but low-stakes and not mean, so you're giggling and gasping. It has really kept me going on the picket line. The podcast feels like when your best friend texts you "Bitch, can I tell you what this girl at work just told me?" You know that shit's gonna be good.

Plus, I'm Mexican. Chisme (and shit talk, really) is such a profoundly intrinsic part of our culture, for better or worse. So this satiates my thirst for gossip when I haven't spoken to my mom for one whole day.

Name

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Vocation

television writer and journalist

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