

**JP Kelly, University of Nottingham, UK.**

## **Roundtable Response: Television's Post-Network Promotional Strategies**

### **'Promoting the Brand: transmedia marketing in a culture of convergence'**

In 2003 the British Labour government passed a new communications act, which, like the FCC's 1996 *US Communication Act* some years earlier, led to concentrated industrial convergence. In Britain, by early 2006, the impact of this legislative relaxation had become visible, giving rise to tri-communication media conglomerates led by BSkyB and Virgin Media. This response will suggest a couple of ways in which the promotion of television programming has developed specifically in relation to this context of industrial and technological convergence:

1. The first and most readily observable trend is that post-network promotion has increasingly become a transmedia experience, expanding a show's narrative universe through a myriad of ancillary texts such as webisodes, mobisodes, commercial tie-ins, and online virals – that is if we choose to define these as *promotional* forms rather than texts in their own right.
2. Given their inherent transmedia potential, certain “new media” franchises have become a focal point in the marketing strategies of tri-communication conglomerates. In other words, these shows are not only marketed to attract viewers but are also part of a larger tri-comms promotional agenda that encourages consumption beyond the medium of television. The implication here is that franchises which match a conglomerate's multiplatform ambitions will receive a greater degree of promotional visibility than their less transmedia-friendly counterparts. I'm going to explore this growing trend in the remainder of my response by considering the emergence of tri-comms in Britain and their persistent promotional emphasis on “new media” franchises.

Formed from a telecommunications merger in 2006, Virgin Media's entrance into the pay TV market has centred upon promises of “Television Liberation” and technological

innovation – a rhetoric that has formed the basis for much of their promotional output. Given this particular sales pitch, it is unsurprising that the distributor invested so heavily in one of the more technocentric shows of recent years – *Terminator: The Sarah Connor Chronicles (T:TSCC)* [Fox, 2007 – Present]. The programmes thematic preoccupation with technology enabled Virgin Media to create and explore a series of multiplatform promotional texts that complimented the shows narrative logic. Submerging the viewer in a ‘virtual 360° promotional surround’ the original marketing included an online viral (fitting perfectly with the franchises theme of technological dystopia) which led unsuspecting viewers to a spoof news website. Once there, the unwitting victim reads a tailor-made headline, “Third [insert name] ‘Executed’ in Office Attack” below which a pixelated video clip, supposedly caught on a cell phone, plays the event in its entirety. The campaign allowed Virgin Media to both promote *T:TSCC* and to develop their larger multiplatform strategy by encouraging audiences to utilise their range of other media services (online, on-demand, mobile etc.)

Virgin Media’s chief rivals – satellite broadcaster BSkyB – have followed a similar promotional path. The company’s high profile acquisition of *Lost* [ABC, 2004 – Present] from terrestrial network Channel 4 (for a reported £1m per episode) coincided with their venture into the tri-communications market. As a result, the show became a pivotal text in BSkyB’s experimental trials for new forms of advertising and content delivery, premiering on their video-on-demand service, as well as launching their home PC download system, and ‘multi-start’ (a service that allows viewers to start the show at 15 minute intervals during its broadcast slot). As BSkyB publicly admitted, *Lost’s* status as a key new media text was used as a vehicle to market their innovation of new distribution methods.

But despite their intentions BSkyB have ultimately failed to live up to *Lost’s* full transmedia potential. Aside from a series of weekly podcasts (with a supposed panel of “experts”) the company have produced little if any original content and have been unsuccessful in acquiring the rights to any of *Lost’s* other official ancillary texts. A case in point was the recent series of weekly promotional mobisodes that aired on the Verizon network (and appeared six days later on ABC’s website) in the build up to season four.

Whilst these short episodes are not necessarily integral to our understanding of the central narrative, they potentially enrich and affect the audiences' relationship to the show in various ways.

As these examples suggest, transmedia-friendly programming will continue to receive a greater degree of promotional visibility due to the current climate of industrial convergence. In turn, this may have a potential impact upon various aspects of television productions and their promotional texts (genre, demographic targets, narrative form, aesthetics etc.) The marketing strategies of both BSkyB and Virgin Media also raise important questions regarding post-network promotion within a growing transnational market. For instance, Virgin Media's creation of *original* promotional content suggests a need to critically address the ways in which texts are branded and consequently perceived within different geographic markets. Likewise, Sky's failure to acquire rights to pre-produced promotional material points toward bureaucratic obstacles that may prevent producers attempts for a synchronised "promotional surround" on a global scale.