

## **Post-Network Promotional Strategies**

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The provocation I originally submitted for this panel posed a series of questions about the implications of the move to a post-broadcast environment for the way television networks draw audiences together via promotional strategies. Specifically, it asked, how are things such as multi-platforming, alternative distribution, and online delivery impacting the way programs are presented as part of a station or network's offerings? What are the implications of these changes for the audiences television constructs, and the ramifications for the relationship between television, local, national and international communities?

Network and station promos, like all branding material, are instructional; designed to communicate what a station or network is 'about,' these bits of continuity material provide viewers with cues about what to watch, when to watch, and how to engage with television's fare. Doing so, they are a key way television's audience is brought into being; Promos not only advertise to viewers the experiences television offers, they model for viewers how to participate as an audience. NBC's "Come Home to NBC" series from the 1980s, for instance, cast television as both entertaining and a determinedly reassuring domestic affair. The promos positioned NBC - the network, its programming and its audience - as warm, safe, familiar and supportive, a sustaining refuge from the cold outside. NBC and the domestic experience were presented as intimately entwined if not drawn as necessarily equivalent; the family constituted the television audience, NBC a sort of national household, and watching was a safe, entertaining, inter-generational experience.

But the network promo has been in decline in the US since at least the 1980s, when the watermark emerged as the principal strategy to remind viewers where content originated. While such a device hopes to narrow the disconnect between program brand and network brand, it doesn't resolve the pedagogical challenge of how to instruct viewers to engage with television, of how to participate as audiences. In markets such as Australia, which imports more content than it produces and supports a predominantly free-to-air broadcasting system, promos continue to describe a connection between programming and place, and viewership as an act of community participation. At the affiliate level, jingles and images position the station as the site where the local community comes into being, the place it's imagined constitution is realized. The television audience and the community are imagined as one and the same, the audience standing in for the local community and vice-versa; At the network level, promos have long proposed the nation as the community constructed, at times resulting in five visions of 'Australia' being drawn along demographic and taste lines on any one night. Within the US, these strategies are employed by local news services that promote themselves as, for, and of, the local community.

In the much more diversified US market, ideas of audience-as-community have

long disappeared (if indeed they ever took hold). And while US networks have some historical experience moving their content through distribution means they don't enjoy monopoly access or control over, they seem to be uneasily adjusting to their future status as tributaries feeding branded spaces rather than fonts viewers visit. Even as networks acknowledge the market opportunity of distributing content across multiple platforms and on-demand, their compulsion (especially in the online space) has been to impose the logics of scarcity and scheduling that characterize the broadcast era. As such, the challenge networks face seems definitional, as much as promotional - what does a television network look like in a post-broadcast era, and significantly, how do you engage with it?

ABC's "Start Here" campaign points to one way this question is being resolved. Positioning the network as a launching platform, ABC's campaign seizes-upon the notion of the mobile viewer, imploring them to commence their browsing for content on the network's own site. Describing television as multi-platform and an almost medium-agnostic form, ABC highlights the textual mobility of the current moment, pushing viewers outwards from the network rather than encouraging them to come remain with it. The promo constructs television as portable rather than fixed, and the network as providing the menu for the viewing experience rather than curating it.

This piece is perhaps a fair response to the changed contexts of consumption. Even as the domestic space remains the key site where most determined television consumption takes place, the domestic modes of consumption emphasized in NBC's 1980s campaigns no longer ring true for US network television. In responding to the reconfiguration of the television viewer as a 'user,' as an active driver of a television "experience," ABC seems to have cut them loose. Indeed, focusing on the network specifically as a site providing content, ABC constructs the television audience as semiotically self-determined, rather than necessarily a participant in a televised 'community.' And while the network maintains an ongoing claim to the content itself, imploring audiences to "Start Here" makes no suggestions about where they may end up.

ABC's strategy raises a number of interesting questions about how US networks might compete in a post-broadcast environment, not the least of which is what, in a semiotic free market, is the necessary compulsion for audiences to start with the network? It seems to offer a vision of television that might not quite cohere with ABC's own business practices, yet at the same time, tacitly acknowledges viewership is not the bound, single-medium experience television has been built around.