

## The State of American Network Television

### Alisa Perren

The decision to focus this call on the state of “network” television is itself a provocative one. What do we mean when we talk about network television, circa 2010? My default response, even to this day, is to think initially of broadcast networks. Yet my generation (X) is perhaps the last to think in these terms. Most advantages that the broadcast networks held in the past – larger audiences, greater CPMs, shows with bigger budgets and better production values, greater cultural cache – have diminished substantially (if not disappeared altogether) in the last decade. Since at least the late 1990s, the economic and cultural impact of cable networks has dramatically eclipsed that of the broadcast networks. Indeed, the relationship between cable and broadcast has now reached a point where broadcast networks are increasingly attempting to emulate cable networks in terms of content, programming, and scheduling.

During the course of this roundtable, I would like delve in part into precisely what distinctions remain between cable and broadcast. At a time when broadcast programs can move to cable (e.g., *Law & Order: CSI*, *Southland*), cable shows can command the same ad rates as broadcast shows (e.g. Conan O’Brien on TBS), and broadcast networks are demanding retransmission fees modeled after cable program services subscriber fees, how do we differentiate between the two media forms? And is there even any value of doing so, beyond observing their distinct historical trajectories?

I would like us to assess where the differences remain between broadcast and cable in terms of regulation, technology, business models, production practices and programming. Even more specifically, I hope we can move past the standard press and industry rhetoric about cable as a site for “quality television” (e.g., *Mad Men*, *The Wire*) to engage with how and why cable, especially entertainment-oriented basic cable networks such as USA, TNT, TBS and FX, have developed into such industry powerhouses and vital divisions for media conglomerates. This is clearly the “best of times” for several cable channels in terms of profits, profile and programming. Talent continues to be drawn to a wide range of different cable outlets due to promises of greater creative freedom, shorter seasons, and less executive interference. These lures are enough to compensate for frequently compressed shooting schedules, smaller writing staffs and tighter budgets. During the course of our session, I will draw in part on a series of interviews I conducted with writers of several hour-long cable series to illustrate the particular attractions that cable holds for many at present.

In addition, I would like to discuss how long these favorable conditions are likely to last, given the ongoing transformations in the media industries. Even though cable networks are presently the crown jewels of several different media conglomerates as well as the preferred outlets for a wide range of creative figures, their vitality over the long term is by no means guaranteed. Among the primary challengers for the time and money of consumers are over-the-top services delivered over wireless networks (e.g., Boxee, YouTube) and social networks (e.g. Facebook, Twitter). The question remains to what extent – and in what ways – both cable and broadcast will adapt to or exploit these newer types of networks. Whether these over-the-top services will challenge the hegemony of cable – or entities such as soon-to-merge Comcast-NBC Universal will be able to stave off their challenges – remains to be seen. Similarly, though social networks can draw people away from their television set, recent spikes in viewership of several sporting events as well the increased use of online sites to chat about shows such as *Top Chef* and *The Bachelor* as they air suggest that these outlets can sometimes help *increase* engagement

with broadcast and cable programming. Focusing on the variable meanings of “network,” then, provides one lens through which to consider both existing and emergent models for the television and broader media industries.