

It's Not History, It's HBO

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If the marketing of *Band of Brothers* (2001) and *The Pacific* (2010) is to be believed, HBO's role in the representation of history is to create miniseries which are 'events' rather than television. In both cases, promotional material emphasised unprecedented expense, prestigious connections to the film industry through Tom Hanks and Steven Spielberg and production values that rivalled *Saving Private Ryan*'s. Such marketing tropes may be considered business as usual for a channel known for branding its output as innovative and unique, but the subject matter of these two series in particular facilitated connections between HBO and moments of social, political and historical significance. As 'true' stories created with the stated intention of honouring the veterans of World War II, these two series have enabled HBO to enhance and extend its brand identity. *Band of Brothers* and *The Pacific* illustrate not only what HBO is doing for history, but also what history is doing for HBO.

It could be suggested that these series illustrate HBO's much-vaunted willingness to take creative risks. As semi-documentaries of a historical nature, their structure is unusual; complex narratives involving numerous characters, dense storylines and costly hypermediated battle sequences. They demand a particularly intense level of spectatorial engagement and presuppose a certain level of historical knowledge. Rather than pose a risk, however, this not only dovetails with HBO's brand identity of delivering quality television to a discerning and exclusive viewership, it also facilitates an extension of the life of the series into ancillary markets because the structure and content encourages and richly rewards repeat viewings. As television that not only represents history, but also lays claim to historical significance, both series are particularly suited for distribution in the sell-through and syndication markets, areas of increasing importance for HBO in the TVIII era.

Both negotiate the space between the personal memories of World War II veterans and a larger-than-life elegy to the actions of America's 'Greatest Generation' in this war. Despite focussing on the actions of American soldiers, the two are neatly aligned with an international preoccupation with memorialisation as the generation who directly experienced this war gradually passes away. The premieres of the series are therefore easily incorporated into commemorative events, such as the anniversary of D-Day in Normandy or special screenings at the White House. In providing the means for veterans to attend such events, HBO aligns itself with notions of public service, whilst the presence of the veterans at the premieres also serves to endorse the historical authenticity of the two series. The attendance of public luminaries and political figures at these events enhances the status not only of the shows, but also of HBO. The historical content of these shows thus enables HBO to bolster its brand identity on a national and international stage with those values inherent in processes of memorialisation.

Having inscribed the two series within processes of commemoration, it follows that the DVD and Blu-ray sets should be marketed as mementos of these events. With release dates all timed for on or near November 11th (Veteran's Day), the box sets are positioned as 'commemorative gift sets'. Drawing heavily on the faded aesthetic of photographs and documents dating from this period, the packaging of the sets encodes them as collectible historical artefacts. Effortlessly blending history in the form of archival images and memory as embodied by the veterans with the production history of the series themselves, the extra features of these sets situate the consumer not only as a connoisseur of quality product, but also as a curator of valuable historical information. As a result, ownership of the series is characterised as an important act of memorialisation,

effectively disguising HBO's commercial imperatives. These are not DVDs. They are HBO's DVDs - collector's items infused with the cultural weight of history.

In the syndication market, associations with commemoration almost guarantee annual slots for repeats as scheduling can be arranged around the numerous anniversaries of this global conflict. Channels which broadcast only historical content as well as public service broadcasters benefit from including these programs in their schedules, where they may be used to promote other original programming and to attract viewers. The cinematic production values of these series have also made them attractive to networks which normally specialise in films. In this way historical event status programming has the potential to enhance the brand identities of other networks, but it should not be overlooked that such transactions underscore the status of these products as authentic historical presentations of high quality and significantly increase HBO's capacity to reach beyond its subscriber pool to a larger audience.

The potential risks of investing in historical programming such as this are mitigated for HBO through the perceived cultural significance of these programs. Just as HBO makes history, history is also the making of HBO.