State of American Network Television
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"Channel Brand Television"

During the past decade the impact that timeshifting and placeshifting technologies and reception practices have had on the advertiser-supported U.S. television industry led commentators to label ours a post-network television era. No longer stand-alone entities, U.S. broadcast networks are owned by media conglomerates that view them as one brand in an interconnected portfolio of channels, each judged by its success at promoting the others and the media conglomerate brand more generally. This conglomerate view of the role of a broadcast networks coexists with the still-popular idea that the networks are the platforms on which advertisers' brand messages can reach the broadest spectrum of potential consumers. Most are still investing in scatter buys, indicating that the collective reach of the networks, although certainly diminished, has yet to be surpassed by some other platform. At the same time, multiplatform branded entertainment deals, content wraps, and product integration have all mushroomed in recent years as advertisers and the networks whose programming they support try to find ways to assure their return on investment despite declining ratings.

These practices along with the invasive network identity placement and promotional integration that encroach more and more on story space are mocked by NBC's *30 Rock*. Placing comic emphasis on or even building a humorous story segment or episode around the integration allows producers to include unremarked upon placements in the same or later episodes. *30 Rock*'s metacommentary on synergy serves to make it an effective promotional platform for NBC Universal and its advertisers without undercutting NBC's brand claim to be the home for smart comedy and drama for upscale viewers. More sincere than snarky, ABC's *Modern Family* might owe some of its features to FOX's *Arrested Development*, but its mockumentary mode is used to reaffirm rather than undercut the typical affirmational tone of the family sitcom and, in the process, align itself with the Disney brand. These sitcoms and the role they play in branding on their respective networks evidence how the U.S. television industry is currently characterized by channel portfolios rather than isolated broadcast and cable channels. This summer the media conglomerates offered combined broadcast and basic cable presentations during the Television Critics Association tour, signaling that each conceptualizes its cable and broadcast slates as a package and, consequently, often programs in complementary ways.

Broadcast networks still offer the most reach for media conglomerates and their advertising partners, but a closer look at the programming on each network reveals that the broadcast audience each is targeting is often a brand-inflected one. A comparison of NBC's Thursday *comedy night done right* and ABC's Wednesday *comedy starts here*, for example, indicates not only the cyclical nature of the broadcast programming (the sitcom, proclaimed dead, is back in the rotation), but also how much brand identity now plays in programming and development. When it concluded that its comedians were its most significant brand assets, NBC began to greenlight comedy programming, especially that featuring former *Saturday Night Live* cast members. This programming has not proven to be the sure thing that it was hoped to be, although it has been more successful than remaking series from the NBC archive, a decision that also privileges brand asset-based programming. ABC's comedy night is more subtly brand-centric with even its potentially sexy or ironic sitcom *Cougar Town* transformed into an affirmational friends-as-family sitcom, one which places more emphasis on mothering (of exes and friends as well as children) than sexual situations.

The current ABC comedy night image campaign—*Laugh on*—not only promotes upcoming original episodes, but also points to channel content available off-TV. Viewers "watching TV" off-TV have become particularly problematic for network metrics, especially if content is accessed via DVD or download, months, if not years, after the original series broadcast. Although sitcoms are better bets for networks than the long-arc serials of the 2000s because they are more likely to be watched on-air as they air and to be re-watched in reruns, they are also affected by timeshifted and placeshifted viewing practices. The open question in the industry is whether the millennial generation will ever watch television on TV as many do not do so now. It remains to be seen if such viewing is a generational or situational practice, that is a product of either their mobile lifestyles or of their desire to consume media on screens that they don't share with parents, siblings, or housemates. Given these and other changes in reception and distribution, the next decade should prove an interesting one for the broadcast networks. There are also the potential changes Comcast's ownership would bring to NBC Universal and Disney's divestment of ABC would bring to the broadcast network. For now Disney's ownership of ABC is still providing much to talk about, especially with the July 2010 promotion of Paul Lee from head of ABCFamily to President of the ABC Entertainment Group. Similar promotions at the other conglomerates make it worth considering more generally what it means for a former cable executive to be in charge of broadcast network. It is likely to be as rich a subject for critical commentary as what it meant in the last decade for a format packager to take charge of programming primetime and negotiating branded entertainment deals at NBC Universal.