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Roundtable: The *Mad Men* Effect? Original Scripted Series and Cable Network (Re)Branding

Paper Title: The Future of Science Fiction Programming on Network Television

This roundtable explores original programming and the rebranding that has occurred on cable channels over the last several years. For example, American Movie Classics (AMC) is now known best for a number of original programs including *Breaking Bad*, *The Killing*, and *The Walking Dead*. Most of AMC's programs have attracted dedicated niche audiences interested in programming that, arguably, would not be possible on the network channels (because of nudity, language, subject matter, etc.). Niche is the imperative word here. The expectations for ratings and viewers on cable are decidedly lower than on network television. While the spate of original programming on cable has been positive news for viewers looking for a wider variety of choices on television, this trend is concurrently redefining the types of programs that appear both on cable and on the networks. It is worth exploring what this shift towards niche dramas on cable channels means for the breadth of programming on the networks. Will the expense and potentially limited audiences of original, dramatic programming on cable channels like AMC continue to drive the networks towards cheaper options, such as reality programming.

In particular, the science fiction genre seems caught up in this programming shift. Programs including *Falling Skies* (TNT 2011-), *Battlestar Galactica* (Sci-Fi/SyFy 2004-09), and *The Walking Dead* (AMC 2010-) continue to find success and longevity on the cable channels. At the same time, the presence (and popularity) of science fiction programming on the networks (NBC, ABC, CBS, Fox) has diminished. Though the networks have been airing SciFi programs

since their earliest days, in recent years programs such as *Flash Forward* (ABC 2009-10), *Fringe* (Fox 2008-2012), *V* (ABC 2009-11), *The River* (ABC 2012), *Alcatraz* (Fox 2012), *The Event* (NBC 2010), and *Terra Nova* (Fox 2011) have failed to garner enough critical attention and ratings to sustain their production. Though multiple factors need to be explored—including low ratings, network impatience, and audience expectations—the early demise of many of these programs suggests a downturn in the viability of and a questionable future for science fiction programming on network television.

The popularity of science fiction on cable channels has usually been positively discussed—in that this genre has found specialized channels where it can thrive. However, the other side of this trend needs to be explored. Are science fiction dramas better suited to the narrowcast niche audiences of cable channels, or can they succeed again on the networks? If science fiction is considered a niche genre at this point, will it be fully relegated to cable channels? If these types of programs are no longer considered viable or profitable on the networks, what does this mean for the future of all types of programming on the networks?

Despite this bleak outlook for network science fiction, NBC premiered its newest drama *Revolution* in mid-September. While the program has been well received by critics and a burgeoning fan community, *Revolution*'s future is unclear. It has failed thus far to stand out as “the next *Lost*.” Perhaps this is the root of the problem with science fiction programming on the networks. The science fiction cycle is at a crossroads; networks, producers, and writers are attempting to revive and/or recreate a formula or model that worked in the past. The very definitions of television, programming, networks, cable, and seasons are all currently in flux. This shifting landscape calls into question the future success or viability of any dramatic programming on the networks.