

Although cable networks, once reliant on syndicated television shows and “event” programming (sports, miniseries, specials, etc.), combined with back catalog movies and documentaries, have begun to produce and exhibit their own critically acclaimed scripted series, reality shows are not going anywhere; that we can be sure of. These new original scripted programs may not supplant their reality based counterparts in the national television schedule; however, their role in network branding remains essential.

As top-tier cable networks such as FX, USA, and TNT, expanded their original series programming and built loyal audiences, specialty networks took notice. Although AMC and Syfy had both previously created their own scripted original series in the 1990s, it was not until the mid 2000s that original scripted programs became a significant and visible aspect of their lineup. To a large extent, these networks have developed a strategy in which a handful of original scripted series carry the brand image, supported by reality and syndicated programming.

While shows such as *Breaking Bad*, *Mad Men*, *Hell on Wheels*, and *The Walking Dead*, define the AMC brand and cultural image as purveyor of quality programming, the network has recently seen the addition of reality shows to its lineup. *Comic Book Men* and *The Pitch* are two reality show tie-in additions that seek to capitalize on and support the network’s scripted series. In addition to providing inexpensive programming hours, these reality shows reinforce the cultural importance of the original scripted shows through their implied connections to specific characteristics (*Mad Men*’s advertising agencies in *The Pitch*) or identities (*The Walking Dead*’s graphic novel source material in *Comic Book Men*). Although not a reality show in the traditional sense, *Talking Dead*, modeled after the *Teen Mom: After Show* on MTV in which SuChin Pak sits down with the teen moms and discusses the current episode in front of a studio audience, expressly reinforces *The Walking Dead*’s broad cultural connections.

Unlike AMC, which has only recently begun to explore the possibilities of programming reality shows, Syfy has been dedicated to fully exploiting and integrating its reality based programming with the network’s scripted original series for a decade. For Syfy executives, reality shows are not merely a way to capitalize on the success of a scripted series, but also a possible inspiration for the creation of original scripted content. Syfy’s successful slate of paranormal based reality shows – *Ghost Hunters*, *Ghost hunters: International* and *Destination Truth* – have led to the creation of *Warehouse 13*, a show in which two secret service agents are tasked with investigating paranormal and supernatural events and collecting objects for storage at the Warehouse. In the opposite direction, Syfy’s Saturday Action Movie, or “Syfy Original” as they are called, which I argue can be considered an original scripted series, have helped to generate an audience for *Face Off* and *Hot Set*, two reality competition shows about special effects make-up artists and set designers, respectively. As a result, Syfy has cohesively

integrated both its reality and scripted shows into a fully realized and complete brand, “Imagine Greater.”

For top-tier cable networks such as TNT, TBS, FX, or USA, reality programming has been, and remains, nonexistent on their daily schedules. However, for the more specialized cable networks such as AMC or Syfy, reality programming is an integral part of their schedules. For AMC, the transition from classic American movie exhibitor to a cable network in the vein of HBO would seem to negate the development of reality shows, yet, as we have seen, the opposite is true. The simple answer: network finances dictate the need, and desire, for low-cost programming, but, as one can see, a more complicated picture emerges since AMC only recently began to develop reality shows in stark contradiction to its current popular culture perception as cable’s “HBO.” This suggests the complementary nature of a network’s original scripted series with its reality fair. As an increasing number of networks continue to experiment with original scripted series audiences will likely find an assortment of new scripted programming across a wide range of cable networks. But to assume these shows are developed at the expense of reality shows seems premature and contradictory.